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Gender Dynamics of Missionary Work in India and its Impact on Women's Education: Isabella Thoburn (1840- 1901)—A Case Study

By Dr. Marthal Nalini¹

Abstract

This article is a cross-cultural study of the work of the first North American single woman missionary educator Isabella Thoburn who was sent overseas by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. The objective of this article is to examine the motives of Isabella, her career in India, and the impact of her work on women's education. It also highlights the facts that Isabella was an extraordinary woman and carved spaces for herself as professional, administrator, mentor, and matriarchs, first in her parent society and then in cross-cultural contexts, for which there was no precedent. The early growth of the institution founded by Isabella enables one to remap the problematic issue of gender and culture. Isabella Thoburn College, one of the liberal Arts women's colleges in Asia, grew out of Isabella's class that began with six girls in 1870, and this institution still exists in India.

Keywords: Female Missionary, India, Women's Education

Introduction

Missions all over the world have contributed immensely to the development of society in various spheres. Foreign Missions as a coherent and continuous enterprise arose out of special religious conditions at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They have spread not only the word of God but also have enlightened the masses to lead an ethical and moral life to reach out to Godliness. This article is a cross-cultural study of the work of the first North American single woman missionary educator Isabella Thoburn who was sent overseas by the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church.² The objective of this article is to examine the motives of Isabella, her career in India, and the impact of her work on women's education. The western education she offered came to be widely perceived as superior and desirable in a cross-cultural context.

The early growth of the institution founded by Isabella enables one to remap the problematic issue of gender and culture. Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, one of the earliest liberal arts women's colleges in Asia, grew out of Isabella's class that began with six girls in 1870, and this institution still exists in India. Thus, the history of this institution provides a crucial context to understand the lifework of Isabella as well as the ways in which the institutions evolved in response to the changing social and cultural

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² W. C. Barclay, *History of the Methodist Missions*, The Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, New York, 1957, p.502.

attitudes in the receiving culture. Isabella Thoburn who was well-educated, whose degree equipped her for career in teaching, and who chose the overseas mission field, as the arena to practise her profession, was a single woman missionary. In that choice, she was defying socially accepted stereotypes of womanhood in her parent society.

Unlike missionary families, who tended to live as a community in mission compounds, Isabella lived on the campus of the institution she worked at. Her special locations significantly shaped both the ways in which she approached her missionary work as well as her relationships with others. Speaking local languages, Isabella lived in close proximity to her students, who were mostly Indian women. The status of Isabella, her position within missionary hierarchies, and her negotiations with patriarchies shed light on the processes by which Isabella asserted herself and became accepted as a professional, first in her parent society and then in a cross-cultural context. In many respects, Isabella created a new type of woman, which previously did not exist.

In the early decades of the twentieth century when higher education for women in India was no longer seen as an innovation, its supporters enjoyed recalling the story of a female missionary who suggested to a Brahman that she teach his wife to read. The Brahman responded with amused disbelief and scorn. "Women have no brains to learn," he sneered. "You can try to teach my wife, and if you succeed, I will bring round my cow and you may attempt to teach her."³ During the nineteenth century most of the Eastern world, as well as much of the West, shared the Brahman's view that women were not teachable. Trying to educate them would be a waste of time. Even worse, allowing women access to knowledge would upset a social order based on the superiority and dominance of males.

Isabella did not agree with the notion that it was useless to teach women. Convinced that God meant her to consecrate her life to educating the women of India, she laboured over thirty years to make her vision of the new Indian Christian women a reality. In the process of realising her vision, she founded Lucknow Women's College, the first Christian institution of higher education for women in Asia. Isabella herself chose the motto of Lucknow Women's College: "We receive to give."⁴ This was the ideal by which she lived and thus the one she modelled her students on inspiring them by example to seek ways of helping more women to become educated.

Isabella was born on 29 March 1840 at Clairsville, Ohio, U.S.A, to Matthew Thoburn and Jane Lyle. The parents emigrated from the North of Ireland to America and settled on a Sixty-acre farm near St.Clairsville, Ohio. Isabella possessed many of the characteristics of scotch ancestry. Her parents were persons of remarkable character. With parents intelligent and strong, making the Christian life real to their children and filled with missionary spirit, she received a rich inheritance of faith and added qualities of endurance and vision that equipped her for the pioneering work of her mature years.⁵ Isabella's parents demonstrated their faith to their children in the ways that went beyond

³James L. Barton, *Educational Missions*, Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, New York, 1913, p.107

⁴Carolyn De Swarte Gifford, "Isabella Thoburn (1840-1901)". In *Something More than Human* Ed. Charles E.Cole, United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry, Tennessee, Nashville, 1986, p.229.

⁵Clara A. Nelson, "Thoburn, Isabella,". *Isabella Mission Biographical Reference Files 1880-1969*, United Methodist Church –General Commission On Archives And History, Madison, New Jersey, p.2 See also Marjorie, A. Dimmit, *Isabelle Thoburn College – A Record from its Beginnings to its Diamond Jubilee*, World Outlook Press, Cincinnati, 1963, p.7

church attendance and prayer life. Such glimpses help us to understand how Isabella's parents reared the family. When asked why she had gone to India, Isabella said, "It was my mother. She made us feel we must help those who need us most".⁶

Biographical Background and her Fraternal Connection to India

Isabella received her early education in the district school about a mile from home. At the age of fourteen, Isabella entered the Wheeling Female Seminary in Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia). After completing the prescribed course, she taught briefly in an Ohio country school and then returned to the Seminary for further study she herself planned. She also studied Art at Cincinnati Academy of Design. After a year in New Castle, Isabella moved on to Western Reserve Seminary in West Farmington, Ohio, where she served as perceptress. This institution was a Methodist school for boys and girls that gave her greater opportunity to learn about education and the boarding school process.

Religiously Isabella's was not the customary course for a nineteenth century Methodist. She was baptised as an infant. She attended Sunday school regularly from an early age. But she joined the Church late at the age of nineteen. Though she never experienced a classic "conversion" moment, her brother James Thoburn said of this period in her life marked by her relation to Christ. "She did not doubt, but she was not able to fix a date for the great change."⁷ Unlike missionary women, who claimed to have experienced an "inner call" for doing "Christ's work in heathen lands", for Isabella it was a concrete suggestion from her brother that shaped her decision. In 1866 James Thoburn, among the earliest Methodist missionaries in India, wrote to his sister Isabella, in Ohio, describing the "difficult situation" in which girls were placed in India, and suggested the possibility of her joining him to establish a girl's boarding school, so that "light might gradually be diffused among all the homes of the future Christian community".⁸ This letter became the turning point in the life of Isabella.

James Thoburn's offer to Isabella, however, sprang from a specific context. Like missionary men before him, who had long deplored their exclusion from having direct, easy access to women in India, and had found their wives to be useful adjuncts to work with local women, James Thoburn, had also experienced the gender boundaries in his interactions with local society. In 1868, during his task of overseeing mission schools in the Moradabad region, near Lucknow, he found that, "both teachers and students were kept in strict seclusion". He recounted with frustration, "All I could do by way of inspecting the schools, was to sit in front of a screen and ask questions, which were answered by invisible persons, who might have been pupils, and yet very probably were teachers or other older persons".⁹

Being a young widower, with domestic decisions on one hand, James was also faced with cultural questions, questions that concerned missionaries in many places. These concerned the changes that missionaries expected to see in their converts, changes not only in moral and spiritual life, but also in lifestyle. Apart from this, he also probably

⁶*Twenty-Fifth Anniversary-The Dedication of Thoburn Memorial Methodist Church, 1923-1948*, Pamphlet, Clairsville, Ohio, 1948

⁷Earl Kent Brown, "And Shall A Woman Speak?- Isabella Thoburn". In *Ohio Biographies Series - American Methodist Bicentennial Celebration 1784-1984*, United Methodist Church, Ohio, 1984, p.57
J.J.M. Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, Jennings &Pye, Cincinnati, 1903, p.34

⁹J.M.Thoburn, 1886. *My Missionary Apprenticeship*, Phillips and Hunt, New York, 1884, p.202

felt the gender-related limitations, even more acutely. In the absence of a wife, a sister, especially educated women with a teaching career already under way, seemed to be an astute choice as a helpmeet. He further pointed out that it was his own experiences that helped him realize “how very crippled missionary work must be when carried on by men alone”.¹⁰ The particular concern was that the women in *zenanas* (rooms in the homes of upper caste Hindus and most Muslims where the women were secluded for their whole lives) could not be reached by the preaching of the male Christians. Only women could enter these *zenana* rooms. In well-to-do household, these compartments for women might comprise several rooms and have many luxuries. In some households, the room might be very small with little light. Women were married young, sometimes at the age five or six, often at the age of ten or twelve and widows were not allowed to remarry. In some parts of India especially devout women followed the ancient practice of throwing themselves on the burning pyre with their dead husbands (which practice is called *sati* or *suti*, even now in practice in some parts of India). Education among Hindu women was limited, often nonexistent, except for training in their tasks as wives.¹¹

Although Isabella's response to join her brother was prompt and enthusiastic, her gender disqualified her. At that time the Church Board of Missions did not approve of sending unmarried women to the field and many of the Missionaries were not sure that they wanted a contingent of young women to be added to the work force in the field. In addition to the official opinion at the Methodist missionary headquarters, the missionaries at the front had also formed an unfavourable opinion on the subject. Under such circumstances, the recently founded Women's Union Missionary Society of New York was a possible sponsoring agency, but Isabella had a very special preference for her own church and preferred to remain connected with it.

Isabella's case of sponsorship for overseas missionary work is a model illustration of how some of the early women's foreign missionary societies were founded by enthusiastic churchwomen in North America, who, in turn, were inspired by the zeal of single-women volunteers, who offered their services to do mission work in “heathen lands”. Isabella's search for sponsorship coincided with the furlough of Dr. and Mrs. Parker, founders of the Methodist Episcopal Missions in India. The Parker's accounts of missionary experiences in India, stressing the need for women missionaries, were successful in inspiring Methodist churchwomen in Boston to convene a meeting on March 23, 1869 and the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Church was born.¹² The names of the eight women who were responsible for organising this society are engraved on a beautiful memorial window in Tremont Street Church, Boston.

As soon as its organisation took off, Isabella's offer, presented at the first public meeting of the society, was endorsed with zeal. But there was little money in the treasury. How could this be accomplished? Mrs. Porter one of the members of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society spoke up eagerly, “Shall we lose Miss. Thoburn because we have not the needed money in our hands to send her? No, rather let us walk the streets of Boston in our calico dresses and save the expense of more costly apparel. I move, then,

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.248

¹¹ Shakuntala Rao Sastri, *Women in the Sacred Laws*, Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1959, p.17

¹² Francis J. Baker, *The Story of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1869-1895*, Curts and Jennings, Cincinnati, 1898, p.19

the appointment of Miss. Thoburn as our missionary to India”.¹³ A second missionary was appointed at the same time, Dr. Clara A. Swain. James Thoburn noted that some opposition to her came from men because they did not really believe women should be practising medicine at all. A second concern was opposition in Indian society that was unfamiliar with professional women of any kind. Dr. Swain, however, also proved an important choice, leaving her own legacy.

This prompt action by the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, soon after its formation, made a favourable impression on the church, and inspired earnest friends of missions with a measure of new hope and confidence. The choice of the two candidates perceived as “capable, vigorous, practical and spiritual young women”, clearly convinced the church that the new direction of the movement was in the hands of “wise and capable managers”.¹⁴ The women of the society worked not only to raise money, but also to raise awareness of these new endeavours. The first money given to this society came from a lady whose daughter, when dying, said to her mother, “If I do not get well I would like to have papa give, as much money to the Missionaries every year as it requires to take care of me.”¹⁵ In honour of her memory, her mother gave the first offering made to the society for the support of a Bible Woman in Moradabad, India.

To celebrate these first women going forth under the new organization, they had farewell meetings in both Boston and New York. Men were neither interested in these projects nor willing to lend their efforts to preside at such gathering. However, Gilbert Haven noted for his just decision, finally agreed to preside. Thus marking the beginning of a “new era” in the history of the Methodist missions in foreign lands, Isabella and Clara A. Swain, sailed from New York on 3 November 1869, and reached Bareilly on 20 January 1870¹⁶ during the session of the Indian Mission Conference. On this occasion, resolutions were passed by the Conference, welcoming the two sisters to the needy field and assuring them of cordial support of their work. When the appointments were made, Dr. Swain remained at Bareilly and Isabella was sent to the great city of Lucknow,¹⁷ in Oudh because it would be a better place for the kind of work which she felt inclined to undertake where her brother James Thoburn had just been appointed presiding elder.

Since there was no precedent for a woman missionary to work independently, Isabella was initially under the guardianship of her older brother. An amusing incident from her biography narrates how James Thoburn asked her to copy letters for him when he was hard pressed for time. At first Isabella did them cheerfully. When she was asked to do the same for the second time, she gently reminded him that “a copyist would be a great assistance” to her as well. Isabella’s gentle reminder challenging her brother’s gendered, stereotypical assumptions about her time and her work was to have a lasting impression.

¹³ Mary Sparkes Wheeler, *First Decade of the Women’s Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church: With Sketches of Its Missionaries*, Phillips and Hunt, New York, 1881, p.46.

¹⁴ J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.54

¹⁵ Daniel Wise D. D, *Our Missionary Heroes and Heroines*, Phillips and Hunt, Cincinnati, 1884, p.239.

¹⁶ John N. Hollister, *The Centenary of the Methodist Church in Southern Asia*, The Lucknow Publishing House Of The Methodist Church in Southern Asia, Lucknow, 1956, p.71.

¹⁷ Maina Chawla Singh, *Gender, Religion and Heathen Lands- American Missionary Women in South Asia (1860s-1940)*, Garland Publishing, New York, 2000, p. 248.

Writing about the incident several years later, James Thoburn recalled how through Isabella's firm response he had come to recognize that he had been putting a "comparatively low estimate on all work which the missionaries were not doing", that "Woman's work was at a discount", and that "the ladies" sent out were also missionaries, whose work was "quite as important" as his own. The incident forced him "to reconsider the situation, and once and for all accept the fact that a Christian woman sent out into field was a Christian missionary and that her time was as precious, her work as important, and her rights as sacred as those of the more conventional missionaries of the other sex".¹⁸ Isabella's negotiations with her brother's gendered assumptions of women's work typify the ways in which single-women missionaries serving in overseas missions had to make spaces for themselves within the strongholds guarded by their missionary brethren.

Isabella wrote of her first days in Lucknow, as usual remembering the colours and smells that brought beauty to the place. In those first days, she worked at learning and using the language, discovered the challenges of housekeeping in a different society, and observed those around her in order to adjust to the new culture and customs. At first she had no responsibilities and could concentrate on making transition from rural Ohio to urban India. Isabella soon was joining the other missionary women in visits to the *zenanas*, reading the Bible to the women and teaching.

In a series of articles to the *Heathen Women's Friend* Isabella described various Indian women, especially Malika who was a rich Muslim woman with whom Isabella could speak English. Isabella wanted to convert Malika, "but Malika believed it was education and not Christianity, western enlightenment rather than religion that would bring about any change needed."¹⁹ She noted to her readers that Malika does not seem to realize that Christianity was responsible for education. In response to her perception of their ignorance, Isabella decided that what was most needed was to provide training and education for the women to be able to give leadership to others. Thus she wanted to establish a school for girls in a city that had scarcely ever considered the matter.

Missionary Work Begins

When Isabella began mission work in Lucknow, there were three girls' schools and eight Bengali homes open to *zenana* teaching.²⁰ Isabella soon found that an interesting and deeply important work had to be carried out among the secluded women. She used the opportunity offered by the *zenana* work to gain an insight into the character of the Indian family system, especially the character of the men as seen in their family relations. Her insights proved most valuable to her in later years. Isabella was, in fact, deeply drawn towards the community of Christian converts, most of all, the Christian women, whom she felt needed to become the focus of missionary endeavours. Calling the attention of the local preachers to this fact and said to them over and over again "No people ever rise higher, as a people, than the point to which they elevate their women."²¹

Isabella's commitment to women's education reflected a belief in the importance of education for social change- a conviction she shared with many American women

¹⁸. James Thoburn, 1886. *My Missionary Apprenticeship*, op.cit, pp.249-50

¹⁹. *Heathen Woman's Friend*, July 1870, p.21

²⁰. J.M. Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.76

²¹. Florence Hooper, *Isabella Thoburn-Creator of Ideals*, Woman's Division of Christian Church, Board of Mission, The Methodist Church, Cincinnati, 1953, p. 8.

who, like herself, were among the early beneficiaries of education for women in the United States. In her overseas missionary work, this commitment to female education was coupled with her concern to strengthen the community of Christians, who lived on the margins of mainstream society in India. Isabella felt that Indian Christians, “numerically so insignificant”, were neglected sometimes even by missionaries, who tended to concentrate on the Hindus and Muslims. She argued that Indian Christians ought to be an important focus of mission enterprise because, “the ratio of increase of converts to Christianity will not only depend upon the efforts of missionaries, but upon the converts, their work, their personal character and the training they receive.”²²

Similarly addressing the racial issues that created divisive sentiments among European Christians and their indigenous, newly converted brethren, she felt that Europeans who were permanently domiciled in India needed to “know and own the Christians who have come out of heathenism as brothers and sisters in Christ”.²³ In her assessment of what strategies were needed to strengthen the community of converts in heathen lands, Isabella identified the importance of reaching out to Christian women, especially those in rural areas. Isabella felt that those who were shut away from outside influences due to restricted social mobility should be accessed through missionary effort, and if such access was not widely possible, we may bring them to us in the persons of their daughters.²⁴

Isabella’s initial concern was to educate the daughters of Indian pastors and church leaders and to facilitate male, local Christian workers to find educated wives, so that in due course, the converted Christian community may have wives and mothers who could build homes and raise families on what were perceived to be Christian values. Her objective was dual- to educate girls to be teachers of literacy or a primary curriculum, and to train women who would build up Christian family lives of their homes... to aid in developing the spiritual life and work of the village Churches.²⁵

The goal to provide a first class education for the daughters of native Christians led to the starting of a school on 18 April 1870 with six pupils, in a mud-walled room in a *bazaar*²⁶ of Lucknow, which became the first girls’ school in North India. On that fair white morning, several visitors stopped by to wish them well including the mother-in law of Joel Janvier, an early convert, who brought her granddaughters to the school and her grandson to stand outside with a bamboo stick to guard against rowdy protests from those who opposed the idea of girls leaving the seclusion home to venture into the public world, or those who objected to missionary intervention into local cultural spaces.

With such protection, Isabella was finally experiencing the reality of the particulars of her call. It seemed a great mistake to start a school in such a place because it was one of the noisiest streets in the city. But the venture was made on the principle that the best thing possible was always the right thing to do. The activity of the *bazaar*—smells of food cooking, shouts of vendors, jostling of customers in a narrow street—did not draw out her own unique offering in the marketplace of Indian society: education and training for girls to become leaders. Within a few weeks they moved into a vacant room

²² . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.286

²³ . *Ibid*, p.289

²⁴ . *Ibid*, p.290

²⁵ . *Ibid*, p.291

²⁶ . *Market Place*

of Dr. Waugh's bungalow (one of the Methodist missionaries), and at the beginning of the rainy season to a rented house in Inayat Bagh.²⁷ Later a hostel and a dormitory were erected in the garden.

Isabella saw her dreams progressively come true when the school became an institution for Indian and Eurasian, Hindu, Mohamedan, and Christian alike, where no religious or racial pride or prejudice was to mar its peace and fellowship.²⁸ Of the first six girl students that came to her, two were Eurasians and it has seemed to her that part of her work in India must be to bring Eurasians, natives and English people together and encourage them to love each other. In his biography of her, James Thoburn recalled that "Many differences, some of them petty, some painful, grew out of race from time to time, and Isabella suffered more acutely in her feelings on this account than from any other one cause during her whole life in India.

After several makeshifts, Isabella purchased Lal Bagh- Ruby Gardena rather special piece of real estate- belonging to the treasurer of the last king of Oudh, for seven thousand dollars.²⁹ In November 1871 Isabella moved to the first purchase of the Women's Foreign Missionary Society's Lal Bagh.³⁰ Lal Bagh, which was to house Isabella's school for many years, was a special home for Methodist missionaries in North India. Though the issue of premises was resolved, the school faced other problems. There was dearth of textbooks, maps, charts and globes, and for quite some time Isabella was the only teacher.³¹ Miss. Jennie Tinsley, one of the missionaries became Isabella's co-worker. She was the first to share with Isabella home and school duties. They both together built strong traditions and scholarly work, all round personality development and spiritual depth.³²

At the close of the first year, the day school was converted into a girl's boarding school.³³ Isabella was also concerned about making the boarding arrangements so that Christian girls in more isolated and distant areas would have the opportunity for education. From the missionary point of view a boarding school is of more value than five day schools, for the simple reason that in the former the children are cut off from demoralization of heathenism and are steadily played upon by the forces that make for Christian culture. It was a real home for its inmates and the centre of much sympathetic Christian activity.

By 1875 forty girls were boarders and fifty-seven were day scholars. In 1876 the school was named as Lal Bagh Girls' School.³⁴ It was a glad day when this advance was made, for it meant that in her unceasing battle against apathy and determined opposition Isabella had won the victory for the education of Indian womanhood. With each year, the

²⁷ "The Lal Bagh Jubilee Book 1870-1920". *Our Goodly Heritage*, Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, 1920, P.10

²⁸ Isabella Thoburn, "1871 Conference Report". *The Chand Bagh Chronicle-Centenary Issue*, Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, 1970, p.8

²⁹ Isabella Thoburn, "The Lal Bagh Home". *Heathen Woman's Friend* Jan.1881, p.146

³⁰ Isabella Thoburn, "Lucknow College Day". *The Lal Bagh Review- First Quarter Century: 1870-1895*, Anniversary Series No.1, Vol.I, Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, 1920, p.36

³¹ Dimmitt Marjorie, op.cit, p.13

³² James Mudge, "The Lal Bagh Mission Home". *Heathen Woman's Friend*, June.1877, p.266

³³ Earl Kent Brown, "Isabella Thoburn". *The Journal of Methodist History*, Vol.XXII, 1948, p.215

³⁴ Nolan B. Harmon, *The Encyclopedia Of World Methodism*, Vol. II, The United Methodist Publishing House, Tennessee: Nashville, 1974, p. 2334 see also Cf.Stanley Thoburn, *North India Conference- A Brief History*, Methodist Publishing House, Lucknow, 1963, pp.31-32

Girls' Boarding School was growing in prominence and popularity. Though much of the teaching was in English, Urdu and Hindi were added as the students enrolment increased. The school recorded a further increase to sixty-five girls as boarders and fifty-one as day scholars, nearly one-third being Indians.³⁵ This school grew miraculously from a day school to a boarding school, to a High school, to a college for women, now the Isabella Thoburn College, which is one of the Seven Union Colleges of the Orient, called the "Seven Lamps of Asia".³⁶

Subjects such as English, Physiology and Geography were taught. The major subject was English- much desired in India in the nineteenth- century. Physiology was a subject they had looked forward to with the greatest reverence. Geography, then grammar, and finally history were added with each year of schooling. Once a week Isabella gave an "object and conversation" lesson. Students also had map drawing and singing lessons. Since there was no other school exclusively for women in Upper India that would provide a first-class education, many women were enrolled in the school irrespective of age; from the child of six to middle aged woman. In one case, a mother with two grown up daughters was also found in the school. There were many women who were sufficiently intelligent to appreciate the efforts of Isabella to empower them and train them, as leaders were also willing to join the school. As the enrolment of students increased, the staff members also increased.

After some time Isabella realised that a fee would encourage a greater commitment to schooling and would promote a sense of independence among the local community. She charged five rupees per month for board, laundry, and tuition. In 1881, the North India Missionary Conference³⁷ requested a special provision for pay waiver to the daughters of missionary employees in remote places who could not afford to bear the costs. Over the years, academic material and school equipment like microscopes, atlases, and a piano came as donations from America. Its development marked a new direction in missionary work, since with one option; there was no other such school in the whole of North India. While the school was central to all that Isabella did, it was not her only work. She continued her visits to *zenanas*, taught Sunday school, and wrote several articles for *Heathen Woman's Friend* and maintained her networks with donating societies and churchwomen in the United States and kept briefing about the gradual and definite expansion of the school.

The early years in the life of this institution were challenging for reasons that involved issues of gender and culture. Culturally, the responsibility of heading a girls' school in India was different from teaching in America. Academic and administrative functions were only a part of the total responsibility of the western woman missionary, working in a cross-cultural context. Apart from the Christian character of a missionary school, a considerable degree of sensitivity and cultural adaptability was required. The inner life of the school needed attention, apart from the organizational and logistic details. Since most of the families had no precedents of sending their daughters to school,

³⁵ . Marjorie A. Dimmit, op.cit, p.12

³⁶ . *Thoburn Family- Foundation Stones of Thoburn Memorial Methodist Church 1799-1961*, Pamphlet, Clairsville, Ohio, p.22

³⁶ . The North India Missionary Conference was a conference in which the Methodist missionaries from North India used to

³⁷ . Gather together annually to formulate policies and programs for the smooth running of their institutions in North India

they vested a special trust in the founder or the teacher. Personal supervision and care of the girls, that may have appeared burdensome in America, was almost a condition of success in Indian society, and Isabella realized that a “successful superintendent must know her pupils, and know them thoroughly. She must be able to win and keep their confidence, and must know what is going on amongst them.”³⁸ This role being a superintendent and matriarch was to become a tradition at missionary schools and colleges for women. When Isabella began to make a bid for women’s education, many missionaries seriously doubted whether investing in female education was in the best interests of the infant Christian community. Isabella was thus in a position where she needed to defend her cause.

Religion was both an intentional and an incidental part of the curriculum. Girls took courses in Bible and religion every term. The older girls went out with missionaries and Bible readers to the village and *zenana* schools as assistant teachers. Isabella was convinced that her students would become effective native missionaries. She was determined that “moral education must have a primary place”.³⁹ Without it she was sure that their efforts would neither help India nor the girls. For Isabella, the atmosphere of the school and the way that it furthered the Christian life was as important as the intellectual work done there, and she found Phoebe Rowe (one of the staff members from 1872 in Lal Bagh), an integral part of that ministry.

Lal Bagh became a place where racial prejudice was almost completely unknown. It was a miraculous achievement in those days, as her school expanded, opening its doors to girls across religions and communities, claiming to offer a real home environment to its inmates and began to carve a place for itself in local society. Isabella’s commitment to religion and her feminist assertions to enhance training and leadership opportunities for women was to remain deeply intertwined in her educational agenda. One good influence towards this was Henrietta Greene, an eighteen-year-old Eurasian pupil-teacher.⁴⁰ She was a pure and guileless girl of eighteen, with a moderate education; but had a noble purpose to serve God and make herself useful with the school as pupil-teacher, and became the pioneer of the large number of valuable workers, who, in later years, have been brought into connection with the missionary work through the agency of this well-known institution. Isabella was particularly impressed with the joy she found in Henrietta Green’s spiritual life. Two others who helped create the spirit of Lal Bagh were Phoebe and Harriet Singh, staff members for many years from 1872. Harriet Singh was a young Bengali widow who had been employed to teach the daughters of some advanced Bengali gentlemen who wished to have their wives and daughters educated. This young woman was a gifted speaker and writer, both in English and Bengali. When she joined the mission as a worker, her coming was the means of widening the field of usefulness, occupied both by the school and the *zenana* mission. Of Harriet Singh Isabella wrote that she was a Hindustani, who was educated in this school. She was a fine teacher, and her influence over the girls was of the best.

Another person Phoebe Rowe was a noble Christian worker who joined Isabella soon after the opening of the Lal Bagh Home. Miss. Rowe’s father was a devout

³⁸ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.275

³⁹ “One of the First Girls 1949-Our Oldest Sisters”. *Our Goodly Heritage: The Lal Bagh Jubilee Book 1870 -1920*, Op.cit, p.10

⁴⁰ . Isabella Thoburn, “Henrietta Green”. *Heathen Woman’s Friend*, Sept.1873, p.535

Scotchman, while her mother was Eurasian, and the daughter seemed to blend in her character the best qualities of both races. She was not sent to school, but was carefully taught by her father at home. She lost her mother when she was two years old. After her father's death, she was admitted to the Lal Bagh Home at the age of sixteen. Miss. Rowe's character was simplicity itself. She was gentle and tender, meek and lowly, timid and shrinking, but at the same time strong in very element of spiritual strength, and courageous to a great extent. She was in charge of some of the younger students and taught them the basics of reading in both English and Urdu. From her they also learned the multiplication tables, sewing and singing. Because of Miss Rowe almost every girl in the hostel came into a deep religious experience.⁴¹

After many years of devoted service in Lucknow, Rowe was sent out to occupy more responsible posts at various points in North India. In later years she became engaged in evangelistic work, made long tours both on the plains and among the mountains, rendered unspeakable service to the converts whom she found in remote villages and laid the foundation of evangelistic work among the scattered converts in North India. Miss. Rowe had a marvellous use of the Hindustani language, in both its chief dialects, and was also familiar with many simple, but very sweet native tunes, and she could adapt herself readily to any class or any caste among whom she chanced to go. She was also very useful in European circles, and did much good wherever she went. From the very first day a very strong attachment sprang up between Isabella and this young disciple, and this mutual confidence and love continued to increase until the death of Miss. Rowe. Isabella wrote the biography of this noble disciple in 1899. It was a vivid and moving account of Rowe who had rendered a yeoman service and the hallowed influence of her life and labour will be felt far and wide for long years to come.

In 1885, the Annual Educational Report of the British Government in India remarked "Lal Bagh took the highest place among the native girls' school of Upper India. One student was sent up for matriculation in the Calcutta University, and passed. Two others were sent up for first Arts, and passed. If the school continues to pass such candidates, it will have to be classed as a college"⁴². Though the government was in favour of upgrading the Lal Bagh Girl's School to a college, Isabella never thought that it was possible to indulge in immediate action. But no mention and no hint of this appeared in any of her early school reports.⁴³

In 1884 two senior students of Isabella's school decided to prepare for the entrance examination of the University of Calcutta. In 1886 one of the students-Shorat Chukerbutty who had completed the course of study wished to study medicine, and wished first to pass First Arts examination, without which she could not get a degree. Both these factors paved way for institutional expansion at Lal Bagh. During this time, the University nearest to Lucknow was the University of Calcutta, and the only women's college in India was also in Calcutta, some six hundred miles away. More over most parents were reluctant to send their daughters to distant metropolis without proper family support. Missionaries themselves had reservations in sending their students to the women's college in Calcutta, a secular government institution.

⁴¹ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, pp304-305

⁴² . J.M. Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.181 see also "Gleanings". *Heathen Woman's Friend*, July 1885, p.19

⁴³ . *Ibid*, pp. 180-81

By 1886 three students had completed their high school. One of the students Ethel Raphael later on called, as Lilavati Singh was the most unpromising pupil. It was Isabella who came forward to aid her by granting scholarship to complete her studies.⁴⁴ The other girl was Shorat Chakerbutty (variously spelled). The third advanced student was Shorat's mother Mrs. Komal Chakerbutty, a Bengali widow of marked character who became a Christian when she was thirty years of age. She was a native of the sacred city of Benaras, and her family belonged to what might be called "the straightest sect" of orthodox Hindus. From childhood she had been thoughtful, and her father had allowed her a much larger measure of religious freedom.

When the *zenana* missionaries began their work in Benaras, Mrs. Komal Chakerbutty was influenced by the *zenana* missionaries and began to read the Bible, but failed to comprehend its teachings. As time passed, she became more earnest and began to offer her life to the true God, but could not find him. Later on she decided to become a Christian. Her father was a kind-hearted man, and when he heard of her purpose to become a Christian, he tried to divert her mind by taking her with him on a series of pilgrimages. But this failed to change her purpose. Finally, he consented to the baptism of his daughter. Early in the eighties this lady and her daughter came to Lucknow, and both entered the Lal Bagh School as students. The mother was at that time about thirty-five years of age, and became known as Mrs. Chuckerbutty. Both succeeded in passing the "entrance" examination, and the daughter wished to go on with her studies. This precipitated the question of a Christian College for women.

Isabella's Writings: Women's Education

Isabella, a regular contributor to the women's missionary journal the *Heathen Woman's Friend* took up the issue of women's higher education in India, presenting Shorat's case to churchwomen in North America in an article in 1886. This was the first presentation of the case to the American public.⁴⁵ It contained her initial appeal for funds to begin the first Christian women's college in India. In the articles she reviewed the current situation in Indian education and described her inability to place her students in institutions of higher education with strong Christian ideals and influence.⁴⁶ She also informed her readers that the only other Christian school in Calcutta could not be upgraded to college level, for lack of funds from the supporting society. Isabella explained how the only other women's institution available was non-Christian with strong Brahmo Samaj influence. This was the famous Bethune College, which missionaries were not favoured due to its policy of eliminating all religious teaching from the curriculum. Referring to one of her Kanpore graduates, who had apparently attended the school, Isabella wrote of how, by the time the student left the institution, "her Christian faith was so unsettled that she was only saved from Brahmo Samaj errors by the faithful and timely care of an elder sister".⁴⁷

Isabella's writings were vivid and anecdotal at one level; firm and persuasive at another. In one of the leaflets Isabella wrote that "The need of India today is leadership

⁴⁴ . Mrs. J. H. Knowles, "Lilavati Singh". *The Harvest Field- A Magazine Devoted to the interests of Missionary work in the Indian Empire*, Vol. XXXI No.7, July 1909, Wesleyan Mission Press, Mysore, 1909, p. 275

⁴⁵ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.185

⁴⁶ . Isabella Thoburn, "A Woman's College For India". *Heathen Woman's Friend*, Mar.1886, p.210

⁴⁷ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.186

from among her own people; leadership, not of impulsive enthusiasm, or of prejudice, but of matured judgement and conscientious conviction. Part of our work as missionaries is to educate and train the character that can lead, and it is to accomplish this that we formed our first Women's College in the eastern world. The question is whether we shall lead in higher education for women in India, or whether we shall follow the lead of those who will give the education without making it Christian".⁴⁸ Evoking a Christian sense of duty to "heathen lands", echoing missionary discourses, Isabella challenged mission enthusiasts at home, asking if, after the progress made by missionary high schools, could they "let others take the work out of our hands and put on the headstone where we have laid the foundation".⁴⁹

Isabella's new project was actually the culmination of nearly two decades of struggle to persuade both Indian society and the mission community, as the women's education was an effort worth the investment of personnel, time, and money. She found herself in a position where she had to project her vision of educated Indian womanhood to churchwomen and missionary societies alike. Referring to women's changing roles in India where "to grind or spin, or to sit in jewel-bedecked idleness, was no longer the limit for a woman, and as more women were accepted "to come up and out into a busy world's work". Isabella argued that educated Indian women were needed "as teachers, inspectors, examiners, and superintendents of schools and school systems". Regarding gender bias that questioned higher education for women as an unnecessary investment of mission funds in non-Christian societies, she was of the opinion that in many countries, especially in China and India, missionary societies were supplementing the work of the governments by establishing colleges for young men, both Christian and those "who are still idolaters".⁵⁰ She also firmly advocated that a Christian influence was to be a crucial component of that higher education imparted to women.

When Shorat's mother, Mrs. Chuckerbutty, heard of Isabella's plan to begin collegiate classes, she offered the first donation of five hundred rupees to begin the institution.⁵¹ Mrs. Komal Chuckerbutty was determined that her daughter should be under Christian influence. Thus citing local munificence, Isabella appealed with renewed vigour to the rich American friends to follow the example of her student. She urged "Many of you can spare \$5,000 as easily as your Indian sister can her five hundred rupees, and I send my plea to you with strong hope that you will appreciate at its true value this new project, and send over money to help us".⁵² Thus the Lucknow Women's College like the Bethune College (Calcutta) came into existence on 12 July 1886⁵³ at the request of three students, the first of its kind in all Asia.⁵⁴

The first collegiate class consisting of Mrs. Komal Chakerbutty, Shorat Chakerbutty and Ethel Rafael began with Miss. H. V. Mansell as Principal and another

⁴⁸. Lilavati Singh (1904) "Miss Thoburn's Girls". *Our Goodly Heritage*, Op. cit, p.16

⁴⁹. J.M. Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.188

⁵⁰. *Ibid*, p.190

⁵¹. Isabella Thoburn, "A Woman's College for India". *The Lal Bagh Review*, Vol. I, Op. cit, p.3 see also Helen Barrett Montgomery, *Western Women in Eastern Lands- An Outline Study Of fifty Years of Woman's Work in Foreign Missions*, Macmillan Company: New York, 1910, P.172

⁵². J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p.188

⁵³. Esther De Vine, "The Lucknow Woman's College, India, *Heathen Woman's Friend*, July 1890, p.1

⁵⁴. Isabella Thoburn, "The Lucknow Woman's College". *Heathen Woman's Friend*, Aug.1888, p. 38

faculty, an Indian gentleman, Bishumbhar Dayal.⁵⁵ It was soon affiliated with Calcutta University, 600 miles away from Lucknow. His Excellency Lord Dufferin, Viceroy of India, sanctioned the affiliation for First Arts. The University had its seal on the work of the Lucknow Women's College. It had to fit in with the government scheme of affiliating colleges with a university, which set the curriculum, conduct the examinations, and award certificates and degrees: FA (First Arts) at the close of the second year, BA (Bachelor of Arts) after the fourth year and MA (Master of Arts) after the sixth year of study.

New students were admitted in to the College with full privileges in a Portal Ceremony after undergoing two weeks of intensive study on the Ideals of the College-Health, Honesty, Dependability, Scholarliness, Broadmindedness, Courtesy, Poise, Spirituality, Loyalty and Service. Board and tuition for each student by then cost Rs.9 per month.⁵⁶ Instruction was given entirely in English. Much of the preparation was done through individual tutoring. Subjects and departments were gradually added to cater to the needs of the individual students who wished to take university-level examinations. During Isabella's absence, the Administration of the institution fell to several different women, but none of Isabella's stature.

Leaves of Absence

Having been granted leave of absence, early in 1886, Isabella left for America, and lobbied aggressively for her institution through public presentations and leaflets, advocating the cause of Indian women's higher education. In her speeches and writings at this time, Isabella described the picture of a changing India, in which education would be the instrument of social transformation and emancipation of Indian women. While championing the cause of gender issues, Isabella stated that "If India is to be saved; its women must be emancipated from their thralldom of ignorance and superstition. The key to this lay in the hands of those who are already free-the Christians".⁵⁷ According to Isabella Christianity was necessary to temper freedom in any secular form, and the training and education of Christian women was, thus crucial because they are the agents in carrying forward all missionary enterprise. Thus education was key to Isabella's perception of women's emancipation.

Having carved a domain for herself as an educator, professional, and administrator, she was autonomous, even within the overseas male-dominated missionary structures. The nature of her work had enabled her to make independent forays into local society, which would further enhance her status in the eyes of her missionary brother James Thoburn. Isabella's authoritative voice, addressed her American audience with an ease and confidence that not many of her sisters at home could claim.

The second furlough of Isabella was taken after the project for Lucknow Women's College became fully developed and the raising of funds for it prompted a visit to America on its behalf. During Isabella's absence, Miss. H.V. Mansell took up her work with energy and completed the task of affiliation with the Calcutta University. In addition to her class work, she organised a literary society for the Entrance and College girls, called the 'Nava Ratna' ("Nine Jewels"). But the years 1888, 1889 and 1890 likewise,

⁵⁵ . Edith Den, *Great Women of Christian Faith*, Harper & Brothers, New York, 1959, p.402

⁵⁶ H.V. Mansell, "Lucknow Woman's College 1886". *The Lal Bagh Review*, Vol.I, Op. cit, p. 32

⁵⁷ . *Ibid*, p.189

brought no new enrolments, though in 1889 Mrs. Chakerbutty passed her Intermediate examinations, which she had not been ready to take with her daughter and Lilavati Singh the previous spring. One critic said that the people in America sent you a microscope to see only the college with”⁵⁸

Some questioned whether the opening of the college had been untimely. As Isabella explained, this was because very few schools reached up to college standards and many girls dropped out after school. “I can not take them faster than they are made”, she wrote.⁵⁹ Not many care to go for higher studies than the entrance or high school. Our own school has never had an entrance class (senior year of high school) of more than eight, and I think few schools send up half as many. Of those who pass, not many study further. They neither marry nor go to work to help educate the younger children...Another adverse influence has arisen. The Church of England schools have begun to educate for the F. A; and a collegiate school (Woodstock) has also been opened in Missouri...so the field is not all ours as it was in the beginning”⁶⁰. Since enrolments were not steady, the collegiate department, for all practical purposes, continued as a part of the school with faculty and resources being shared.

By the mid of 1890s, as enrolments for college-level courses rose, it was obvious that a new college building would be needed. Despite the sixty thousand dollars raised by the Women’s Foreign Missionary Society in America, Isabella had to incur a debt that became a source of personal anguish to her. Although the concern over fund-raising was shared by the college family, a Sunday was set apart for special prayer on the part of teachers and students in 1896 that God would raise up friends to help or in some way provide for the payment of the debt. No financial assistance was available to relieve this burden.

In spite of all the difficulties, the motto of the college “we receive to give” was proving to be true in her own time. In 1896 she reported 28 former students were teaching in schools. It has been 26 years since the opening of the little primary school in the bazaar, the first Lal Bagh student to receive the bachelor’s degree, in 1896, was the daughter of an old student of the school.⁶¹ In recognition of the development of high standard of education during a decade, the college was granted a Charter by the British government in India in 1896. That same year the first B.A. candidate was ready to take exams given at the University of Allahabad, the institution to which Isabella’s college was affiliated.

A Teacher Training Program and Financial Burdens

One of Isabella’s significant contributions was founding of the institute of a teacher’s training program at Lal Bagh, the first of its kind in India, in June 1898.⁶² The class begun with nine students providing kindergarten training was another manifestation of Isabella’s commitment to provide training and leadership opportunities for women. This was to grow into a full-fledged organization called the Teachers’ Conference

⁵⁸ . Marjorie A. Dimmitt, op.cit, p21

⁵⁹ .Ibid, pp.22-23

⁶⁰ . Ibid

⁶¹ Nichols, “Lucknow Harriet Warren College”. *The Lal Bagh Review - Second Quarter Century: 1896 - 1920*, Anniversary Series No.2, Vol.II, p.2

⁶² . Isabella Thoburn, “The Harriet Warren Memorial” *Lal Bagh Review- Second Quarter Century: 1896- Second Quarter Century: 1896- 1920*, p.14

holding its own annual conferences usually in July during the summer vacation. Over the years, professional educators-both men and women from missionary schools met at this conference, presenting papers and exchanging teaching experiences from different regions. A special feature of this conference was the presentation of model lessons, which essentially sought to exchange and share the pedagogical techniques. As Lal Bagh began sending out trained teachers, Isabella initiated an associational network of teachers, working in the region. It paved way for maintaining link with its alumnae, to offer them a space for renewing old associations and would provide a valuable sense of affiliation. As professional in their own right, the teachers disseminated the influence and reputation of the institution more effectively.

Debt and the constant shortage of money for current expenses shadowed Isabella almost to the end of her life. Finally the college's shaky financial situation led the North India Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in January to send Isabella to her homeland to represent the claims of the institution.⁶³ Isabella undertook the task of being a one-person fundraising mission, sailing from Bombay for New York on March 11, 1899. This was to be her last trip to the United States. Isabella found that the American church greatly needed her message, for in 1900 its interest in missions was at very low ebb. Yet, Isabella's personality and her profile did much to re-stimulate philanthropy among the local churchwomen of her denomination. Her popular image in Methodist circles was that of a veteran missionary who had returned from the missionary front with thirty years of experience. A college education, she told the churches, at that time cost seven dollars per month for room, board and tuition. Her special theme was the College but her wider plea was for the Church to make Christ known to the nations.

Before leaving India, Isabella had a desire to take Miss. Lilavati Singh with her, believing that the presence of a cultured graduate of the college would help her in presenting the claims of the institution, and was also hoping that Miss. Singh might be able to give assistance to some extent on the platform. She accordingly wrote to the authorities in America for permission to take her; but failing to receive an answer in time, she was obliged to leave her at her post in the college. After reaching America, the request was renewed.

Isabella cabled Singh to join her. The appearance of Singh before the religious public in America attracted much attention. She was a product of the system of education which she advocated, and represented the cause in a noble and successful manner. Miss. Singh had never addressed a large audience, and seldom spoke in public even in India earlier. Her first public address before a mixed audience was delivered in the city of Detroit. There were three hundred ministers present for the meeting including thousand other intelligent hearers. Miss. Singh appeared in her graceful Indian costume to make her plea for higher education for the women of India. The audience listened to her with undisguised amazement. She spoke of English literature with an intelligent familiarity, which surprised them beyond measure. The address was dignified, but simple; forcible, but modest; and exceedingly strong, without being in the slightest degree pretentious. In short, it was a model address, adapted to the occasion, and in perfect keeping with the position of the speaker and the nature of her mission.

Miss. Singh was undoubtedly a symbol and a great witness of the work itself-Missionary Education for Women in Non-Christian Societies, for which the fundraising

⁶³ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op. cit, p.312

was being done. Singh symbolized not only possibilities for missionary work but also served as a model of its success for audiences eager for such tales of missionary triumph. A missionary who was present on this occasion, wrote to a friend who had advised against putting Miss. Singh on the platform before the general public, as follows: “ I heard her speak before the Detroit Conference, with a great crowd of intelligent people present, and they listened to her with undisguised pleasure and amazement. The only criticism I could make upon her effort would be, that she is apt to get beyond the depth of the average Methodist preacher”.⁶⁴

The Woman's Missionary Friend reported that pledges amounting to nearly \$5,000 for Lucknow College followed her address at Appleton, Wisconsin. She spoke in several Eastern Colleges; every audience was impressed by her radiance. The climatic opportunity for both Isabella and her young colleague was at the great Ecumenical Missionary Conference in New York in April 1900. Both had been invited to speak, or read papers. On that memorable occasion, Isabella read three papers, one on the higher education of women, the other on literature in mission fields and the last one was on the power of educated womanhood.⁶⁵ It was after listening to Miss. Singh's paper that ex-president of U.S.A Benjamin Harrison remarked, “ If I had given a million dollars to foreign missions, I should count it wisely invested if it had led only to the conversion of that one woman”.⁶⁶

The mission of Isabella and Miss. Singh's visit to America served a dual purpose. It was not only a symbolic call to missionary service, inspiring ideas of duty and responsibility among many young women, some of whom were already in the field, while others were preparing for future service but also fundraising. Both impressed many thousands of thoughtful minds that conversion of a nation meant the elevation of a nation. The personal presence of such a representative of the traditional India made a profound impression upon the representative audience, which the great Conference had brought together.

With the adjournment of the Ecumenical conference, Isabella and Singh returned to India in May 1900, with the assurance that the money to pay the school's debts was in hand. Her good health and energetic work prevented others from anticipating her death. Isabella died due to cholera quite suddenly on 1 September 1901. She was dead within eighteen hours of the onset of the disease and buried, as was the custom, within another eighteen hours.⁶⁷ There was sorrow, almost despair, for a time. But it was long before all were aware of the good foundations she had laid. After Isabella's sudden death, Mrs. Parker, a friend and a close associate of the school and the college for many years, stepped in. The following year (1902) the Women's Foreign Missionary Society Executive Committee renamed the college as Isabella Thoburn College. In 1919, it became a Union College.⁶⁸ As a tribute, a statue of Isabella was dedicated on All Saints Day in 1966 at Washington Cathedral.

⁶⁴ . *Ibid*, pp. 320-321

⁶⁵ . Isabella Thoburn, *The Power of Educated Womanhood*, Ecumenical Missionary Conference, Op. cit, pp.132-133

⁶⁶ . J.M Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn*, op.cit, p. 322

⁶⁷ . “Letter from India by Miss Lilavati Singh”, *Woman's Missionary Friend*, Nov.1901, p.386

⁶⁸ . A. J. Brown, *One Hundred Years - A History Of The Foreign Missions Of The Presbyterian Church in the U S*, Fleming H. Revell .Co, New York, p.619

Isabella's Death and Legacy

Her death was considered as an irreparable loss to the work in India, but she had laid its foundations too deep to be shaken, even by her own withdrawal. People wondered how the college could go on without Isabella. And yet, as the years passed by people could see large buildings erected, the attendance steadily rose, more students passing in and out the college gate, and a great number of alumnae devoting themselves to the service of their country. The College came into prominence in local society, missionary circles, and within officialdom. It occupied a unique position not only in Lucknow, but also throughout the Provinces, and in the wider field of India. The relationship of the College to the Government of United Provinces, the Lucknow University, and the city authorities was most cordial. The Director of Public Instruction commented that the success of the college was "remarkable".⁶⁹

Isabella Thoburn College was one of the two first grade colleges for women in the whole of India and the only first grade college for women under mission management. The alumnae of Isabella Thoburn College took on a variety of different roles. Although many became wives and mothers and were not engaged in any paid work outside the home, some remained single and pursued careers as educators, administrators, politicians, or full time social workers. Even among the former, many were involved in community service organizations, and most were engaged in associational activities, which had some dimension of philanthropic fundraising for social causes. A striking proportion among those who had stayed home initially, to raise families, came forward for active voluntary works.

Isabella left a mark in India, where her influence is felt in many a home whose mother was one of her girls; and many are today carrying the torch, left behind by her, to their countrywomen. But perhaps her most conspicuous success is found in the teachers whom she prepared. In looking over the list of those who have gone out from this college to educational work, the words written by Isabella in an article some years ago still fit so well, "Our first three students who enrolled brought honour through their academic achievements as well as their character and public service. The effort made to help them was not useless".⁷⁰

Hundreds of young women of India identified with the life of Isabella Thoburn. Her graduates would include the first Islamic woman doctor in India and probably in the world, the first woman dentist in India, the first Woman agriculturist –Mirabile Dictu-the first woman in India to run a government Boys' High School, the first woman to receive her M.A in North India, the first woman B.A. and the first Normal school graduate from Rajputana, the first Mohammedan woman to take her F.A. examination from the Central Province, the first Arya Samaj B. A. graduate, the first F. A. student to take her examination in purdah and the first woman Lilavati Singh from the orient to serve on a world's Committee.⁷¹

The most significant legacy, from the a devout Christian perspective, which can be left to a church, a mission, or a community, is that of a pure life, filled with a full

⁶⁹. Miss. Florence H. Nichols, "Lucknow Woman's College - In Memory". *The Harvest Field*, Nov.1901, Op. cit, P.451

⁷⁰. Ruth E. Robinson, "Miss. Isabella Thoburn As a Trainer of Teachers", *The Christian Advocate*, 13 June, 1907, New York, p.932

⁷¹. *Our Goodly Heritage*, op.cit, p.22 see also Earl Kent Brown, *Ohio Biographical Series*, Op.cit, P.68

measure of Christ-like labour. Her followers believe that this legacy is now the priceless possession of the church, as was stated at a memorial meeting. Her ideals were lofty, but she attained to them by introducing a new role model that of professional women achieving economic independence outside marriage and the family. Thus the possibility that women could choose between marriage and career, or choose both, has gradually become a reality, at least partly as a consequence of the advent of Isabella. It was the mission of Isabella that precipitated Indian interest in women's education. In her endeavour she laid the foundation for a new society. The coming of Isabella to India further strengthened the relationship between America and India and paved the way for others to come and render their valuable services for the transformation of Indian Society.

In 1886 when Isabella the founder of Isabella Thoburn College, conceived of opening the first college classes, even that far back she was thinking of education as training for democracy. The goal of education as she conceived it was to build integrity in the human spirit and to develop leadership qualities in the young student. The goals of the founder are as relevant now as they were then. Nothing is more desperately needed in India today as persons of integrity who will lead its people in national development. The spirit of comradeship in work and play and the spirit of the founder were firmly rooted in the great citadel of learning.⁷²

As the institution began to carve a place for itself, more Indian families began to support higher education for their daughters. There were significant changes in the composition of the student body. The student Government Association, a vital feature of the college organization, is an organ of democracy through which students learn the meaning of responsible government in a democratic society. Keeping in view the above ideal the college has stood for freedom, creativity, and leadership throughout its history.

As many non-Christians began to be attracted to the college, the institution fully dedicated to fulfilling its primary obligation to train Christian girls- the ideal being that each graduate should minister to her own people in her own land. Even though academic courses were being added in rather an ad hoc fashion in the early pending on student demand and faculty availability, a certain culture that sought to shape the lives of the women who passed through its portals defined the identity of the institution.

By the early 1900s, the college offered a range of extracurricular activities obviously modelled after western institutions. Class Day was an annual event, which includes Drills, Recitation, Debate and Songs.⁷³ The programme was carried out unannounced and without a break. Elocution contests and essay-writing competitions were held regularly, and weekly guest lectures became a tradition. Founder's Day and the Christmas Programme was the other annual event. Tree planting and the passing of lights from older to younger students, were regular features that reinforced bonds of continuity and kinship among the student body.

During the second decade of the twentieth century, there were other signs of change. World War I disrupted life at Isabella Thoburn College, as elsewhere. Enrolment fell, staffs were reduced and results were poor. As prices rose and the college faced a serious financial crunch, the Bachelor of Arts programme of the college came under threat of closure. A further challenge was posed around this time due to the changes in

⁷² . Dr. Miss. Eva I. Shipstone, College Day Report-1961-1962, *The Chand Bagh Chronicle*, op. cit, p.47

⁷³ . Roxanna Oldroyd, "Class Day At Isabella Thoburn College", *Woman's Missionary Friend*, Vol. XLII.NO.6, June 1910

the colonial policy on education. In a bid to standardize higher education, the colonial Department of Education imposed certain nationwide stipulations for collegiate education. As a result, college departments were required to be separated and relocated at a site away from the school. Because of efforts of the Central Committee of the Women's Board of Foreign Mission, the school and the college were separated physically and administratively. For the new premises, which were to house the college, the colonial government bore half the cost, while the other half was borne by the missionary society.

Isabella Thoburn College in many respects served as a trendsetter, leading the way in providing facilities, introducing activities, and firmly pushing at the gendered boundaries that curtailed social spaces for women. The college continued its commitment to free women from seclusion. While education was to be the major instrument of empowerment, missionary women were always concerned about the acceptability of women in social gatherings alongside men and were persistent in their initiatives towards this end. Even parents who actively desired their daughters to be well educated curtailed the social life of their daughters. This involved issues of respectability, reputation, and protection for the college.

There were other issues of a cross-cultural nature. The introduction of physical education was one such cultural challenge. This modest attempt grew over the years to establish a tradition of annual sports contests for which girls would come in large numbers from other schools. The other issue was regarding public performances. Even though the college plays and pageants open to the public were widely attended, they were not free from criticism and comment about the undesirability of girls being "so exposed" by performance.⁷⁴

By the middle of the twentieth century substantial legislative progress had been made in the field of higher education of women. It was owing to the change in the attitude of private and reformist-minded Indians, number of women's colleges sprang up in and around Lucknow that provided competition to Isabella Thoburn College. In spite of it, the institution attracted much crowd because of its glorious record of value-based education, which helps to convert the student into both an excellent human being and a dedicated and competent professional. The college has the worldwide reputation for its high academic standards and the students who have studied here can be proud of their association with this great centre of learning.

Education at Isabella Thoburn College is holistic, of which academics and extra-curricular activities are the essential components. Moral and religious education was pervasive in the institutional ambience, and the instilling of values remained a priority. These values ranged from personal integrity to institutional loyalty and on a wider level, community service. There was much stress on community service, and a sense of responsibility to those less fortunate was inculcated by involving students in volunteer activities. The ideals of social service and spirit of passionate sacrifice for others formed a strong tradition in this institution.

Isabella Thoburn College serves as a model of how liberal arts colleges run by missionary women created a special institutional ambience, which distinguished them from both colonial institutions and those founded by private Indian enterprise. Today the College occupies a unique status in Indian society, being patronized by middle and upper class, urban Indian families, who desired their daughters to obtain an English education.

⁷⁴ . Marjorie A. Dimmitt, *op.cit.*, p. 84

The basic Christian foundations of the college, the dedication of the teachers to their task and the devotion to serve India through education remains unchanged. But, most of all, the goals and aims of the college also remain basically the same to train the students to think through issues with wisdom and concern; to learn to choose; to respect all individuals as persons and to learn the meaning and nobility of service.

As many of the teachers in the state of Uttar Pradesh were Isabella Thoburn College alumnae, the bonds with the institution grew from being academic to being professional. A sense of college family, however, stretched beyond class and hierarchy to include faculty, office staff, and the many workers, including cleaners, kitchen staff, and *dhobis* (washermen), who usually lived with their families in a section of the college campus. The faculty, who had many single women, are expected to live on campus and be involved in student activities well beyond the teaching hours. The bonds that developed on campus, both among the girls and with their resident teachers, seemed to leave lasting impressions on most students. It tended to remove prejudice and misconception and contribute better understanding among teachers and students. From the beginning Isabella herself maintained a high degree of accessibility as mother and mentor. She also presided over the college family, both administratively and in the day-to-day functioning of the institution.

Many of the college traditions continue even now as before. One of the activities of the college- “the college plays” was quite the talk-of –the town among the westernised elite of Lucknow in the early 1960s. Physical education programmes for Isabella Thoburn College students grew to become interschool tournaments in the region, and teachers’ conferences begun at Isabella’s initiative to promote a sense of community among teachers developed into institutionalised professional net works, with workshops and seminars hosted by the college.

Catering essentially to the needs of Indian women, Isabella Thoburn College has continued to maintain strong cross-cultural, international links, attracting both funding and faculty from abroad. Over the years the college had dynamic principals for long tenures, bringing in the stability of continued traditions. Regular events in the college calendar, together with certain ongoing traditions, helped to strengthen the institutional culture, the foundations of which had been laid by Isabella. No doubt today students and graduates of Isabella Thoburn College are giving their time and talents to other less fortunate section of society than themselves.

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