

Temperance, Children, and Colonial Governance in Bengal (1880–1909):A Case Study

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Abstract: *This article analyses the temperance movement in Bengal between the 1880s and 1909, with special reference to Calcutta, highlighting the interaction between voluntary associations and colonial governance. Influenced by temperance campaigns in the United States of America and England, organised reform in Calcutta took shape through the Calcutta Temperance Federation, which coordinated bodies such as the Drink Problem Committee and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. The article foregrounds children as central subjects of reform through the Band of Hope, school instruction, essay competitions, and vernacular literature. It also examines liquor trafficking investigations, revealing patterns of consumption across caste, class, gender, and religion. Finally, it situates temperance activism within legislative debates culminating in the Bengal Excise Act, 1909, arguing that temperance functioned as a moral, social, and regulatory project in late colonial Bengal.*

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Introduction

Religion has always played a more significant role in keeping the country sober in India. However, Christian missionaries and British philanthropists were influenced to conduct temperance campaigns in the nineteenth century. The temperance movement in India was the shadow of the British Temperance movement. The temperance movement started in England during the reign of Queen Victoria, sometime in the 1830s. The movement was represented by Livsey, Preston and five others who signed the temperance pledges. It had two sections; one

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favoured moderate drinking, and the other demanded total prohibition except for medicinal use. The *Laissez-faire* policies of the countries help to spread the temperance movement globally. In 1851, America totally banned liquor consumption. British temperance workers formed the 'United Kingdom Alliance' in the same decade. The main motto of this society was to suppress the trafficking of all intoxicating liquors. Sir Wilfrid Lawson was a representative of this association in the British Parliament.¹

In the 1880s, the second wave of the temperance movement greatly impacted England. From the United States of America, the General Temperance or Blue-Ribbon movement spread to England with the efforts of Richard Booth. At the end of the nineteenth century, thirteen general societies, five juvenile associations, seventeen religious societies, and eight women's organisations were established in England to promote temperance programs. Thousands of people signed a temperance pledge to abstain from liquor; many unmarried women signed a pledge that they would only marry a sober person. The Band of Hope was established to protect children, and its members pledged to abstain from liquor in adulthood.²

The Calcutta Temperance Federation was established with the effort of AITA. The first inaugural meeting of the Calcutta Temperance Federation was held on 24th February 1904 at the Y.M.C.A. building in Chowranghee. In a welcoming speech, Rev. Fawcett Shaw argued that members of the federation work together on state affairs. The best men were selected from all the societies in the federation. The federation will raise the subject of drink traffic to the government and temperance works among the people. The Federation supported the work of the Drink Problem Committee, investigated the drink population in Calcutta, and appreciated the cooperation between Indians and Europeans. The Federation chairman proposed establishing mills around Calcutta due to the increase in the industrial working class.³ Mr. Harold Mann, President of the Federation, argued that the temperance workers aimed to abstain from liquor among the maximum number of people and close liquor shops. Mr. Mann claimed that the rise of counter-attraction against liquor among the Indians and Europeans was a boring aspect for the newcomers, and few were addicted to drink. The Federation declared that the main agenda was a demand for Local Options and banned the right to sell liquor to women and children under the age of sixteen.⁴ For the betterment of the federation, the president divided the volunteers' work into four sections: literature, vigilance, Children, and intelligence.

In the manifesto, the council urged the societies to work according to their strengths and demanded regular meetings. The council was more concerned about the boys' growing

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temperance habit. It was proclaimed that Bands of Hope was the backbone of the temperance causes; the temperance work is incomplete without including children's subjects. The duty of preparing literature in Bengali, English, and Hindi and distributing it was given to the Temperance Federation. The council stood for local control and demanded that local residents serve as consultants for granting or renewing licenses. The Council stood for the prohibition of the right of liquor sales to children and women under the age of sixteen. Also, it demanded a shortening of the sale hours at European hotels and a ban on the sale of ardent spirits.⁵

The lack of volunteers was the main problem for the programme's continuity. The Taltollah Temperance Fraternity was established on the 19th of March, 1864, and had only ten members at the beginning. They organised their meeting at private houses and later moved to Useful Art's School, with the permission of its proprietor, Revd. Dall. The society wished to work for children because they were the torchbearers of civilisation. The temperance problem could be solved only if the younger generation were prohibited from intoxication and took an active part in the temperance campaign. The fraternity raised the question about the existing education system because it sharpens the intellect but is unable to develop character.⁶

Gyanendra Basak published a handbook on temperance named 'Surapan ba Bispan', which dealt with the criticism of the abkari policies and provisions for eradicating inebriation from society. The author criticised government policies on income through excise revenue; it ruined the economic condition of the people who indulged in it.⁷ Basak, against intemperance, suggested four kinds of solutions: personal, domestic, social, and political. For the first method, the author recommended five suggestions: 1) sign the pledges, 2) attend temperance meetings, 3) condemn liquor drinking, 4) abstain from the consumption of ganja, opium and tobacco, 5) read the book on the ill effects of drinking, and 6) distance oneself from a prostitute. The author gave provisions for a home to keep domestic space free from intemperance, such as 1) raising awareness of the children and women of the bad effects of alcohol, 2) not bringing liquor into the home, 3) singing the temperance song at home, and 4) offering the book to read on temperance.⁸

The Children's Committee carried out the work of the Band of Hope and promoted temperance teaching in schools and colleges. To develop this committee, the Children's Committee organised a conference of the volunteers of the Band of Hope and Juvenile Temperance Society in May 1905. Rev. Fawcett Shaw was invited to preside over the discussion. The president decided at the conference to offer medals for arranging a contest of recitations and essays.⁹ The Metropolitan Temperance and Purity Association, Drink Problem Committee, Good

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Templar Lodges and Women's Christian Temperance Union conjointly submitted memorials to Legislative Councils to demand 'Local Options' to check drinking habits. The associations urged the government to prohibit the sale of liquor and drugs to children, cancel licences for selling to drunken persons, close all side and back doors of grog shops, fix the standard quality of liquor, and limit the powers of the Board of Revenue.¹⁰

The Drink Investigation Committee inquired about liquor traffic and the materials used in manufacture in Calcutta. The first meeting of the DIC was held on 13th April 1904 at Union Chapel in Calcutta, presided by Rev. Herbert Anderson. The committee decided to enquire about drink traffic, ward by ward, rather than at individual grog shops. The committee enquired about the percentage of liquor consumed on licensed premises and off the premises by Hindus, Muhammadans, and Eurasians. The following information was gathered from different wards by the Committee. The two volunteers observed the different classes of consumers, in one shop, consumers were Biharis, gari wallas, Kahars and Moochis, No Brahmins and Mahommedans visited the shop; in other shop after 31 hours of surveillance, they observed that 3 higher caste Hindu men, 14 low caste Hindus, 66 Mahommedans, 2 high caste children, 4 European sailors, 5 Eurasian children, 2 women and 3 Japanese and Burmese women frequently visited the shop. The Committee concluded that all classes of people near the liquor shop indulged in liquor. Women who visited these places were from the ayah or servant class and purchased mainly liquor. The Committee was anxious about the heavy consumption of alcohol among the Mahommedans, who are known for sobriety. They recommended that the Government reduce the number of shops and keep them away from the roadside to ensure proper enforcement of excise rules.¹¹

The W.C.T.U had many sections to the success of the campaign, such as literature, newspaper, temperance teaching in schools, social purity, mothers' meetings, drawing-room and tea meetings, public meetings in English and vernacular languages, Sunday School and Band of Hope, hospital visiting, refreshment tents on volunteer campgrounds, homes for inebriates, communion wine, non-alcoholic medication, food reform, cigarette smoking. The idea of temperance teaching in schools came from the United States of America. The student and the teacher both had to pass the temperance examination at school. The Temperance Council urged the Indian Government to conduct elementary work on Physiology in which the evil effects of ganja, alcohol, tobacco and opium were discussed, as in American schools. Many unions of the W.C.T.U. published a temperance catechism in the vernacular language for the schools. The

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temperance reformers advocated curfew laws for children under 16 or 17 in British states. It dealt with the ban on children in the streets after 8 p.m. in winter and 9 p.m. in summer without parents. The idea was to safeguard the children against intemperance.¹²

Every temperance association's main agenda was to protect children from intemperance. Several societies demanded that the government raise the legal age of liquor sales to fourteen. The Select Committee of the Bengal Excise Bill of 1904 agreed to the prohibition of liquor sales under the age of fourteen. There was a risk of rebellion due to the enactment of such rigid policies, so the Committee decided after consulting with the GOI. In India, among the aboriginals, the buying of liquor was accustomed to women and children. The making of new laws affected tradition, so the Bengal government sought the GOI's consent.¹³

The Band of Hope's involvement in temperance work was scaled back in the late nineteenth century. Pundit Siva Nath Sastri advised the students at Albert Hall on 15th September 1904 for the revival of the Band of Hope. The Society of Theists organised the meeting. He addressed the Band's role in the success of the temperance programme in previous years and appealed to the students to join the Band of Hope. After his address speech, many of the audience signed the Pledge of Temperance.¹⁴

The Calcutta Temperance Federation regularly arranged a temperance essay contest to encourage the involvement of children in temperance work. The competition winner was awarded a silver medal to encourage active participation among the schoolboys. Also, in the competitions, another programme included a recitation of Bengali-translated writings. The essay competition was held on the 15th and 19th of July 1905. The boys under 14 in the competition wrote essays on 'Why I am abstainer'. The essays were evaluated by Babu Khudiram Bose, Principal of the Central College, Babu Krishna Kumar Mitra, Superintendent of the City College, Professor J. R. Banorji, and the Metropolitan Institution. Ganendra Nath Mitra of the City College Band of Hope was awarded the first prize. The second prize was awarded to Dwijendra Kumar Ghose, a member of the Excelsior Juvenile Temple, and Satva Nanda Sinha Roy, of The Brahmo Band of Hope. The recitation contest was held on 5th August at the City College. Miss Ewing presided and was appointed as evaluator at the competition. Twenty-seven boys took part in the recitation programme. Profulla K. Ghosh and Ambica Charan Seal were ranked first and second. Miss Ewing handed the first prize, the silver medal, to the winner of the essay and recitation contest. The second-rank holder is awarded books.¹⁵

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M.N. Auddy and his colleagues at City College played a crucial role in developing temperance habits among the children. The Federation's lecturer, S.C. Banerji, continued the temperance programme at Bengali schools in Calcutta. Subsequently, temperance work progressed among European schools under the Federation's guidance. The Federation adopted the measure of distributing books to juvenile temperance volunteers to promote sobriety among future men and women.¹⁶

The Faridpore Band of Hope was established in 1888 and advocated for the check of tobacco smoking among schoolboys. The society argued that liquor consumption was not a significant problem among the schoolboys at Faridpur. The society's annual meeting was held on 17th January 1905 at Melah Hall, presided by Dr. Mead of the Australian Mission. The meeting passed a resolution in response to the demand to introduce 'Local Option'.¹⁷

In India, there were twenty-five temples. Excelsior was the second Temple established in Calcutta. The other temple was established for the English children at Fort William. Every Saturday afternoon, the weekly meeting was held, where boys, apart from their four vows, learnt the lesson of the honest observance of duties and respect for parents and teachers. In every quarter, a social was conducted to make the session interesting. The phonographic songs and music were performed, and boys were awarded prizes for their duties and regular attendance. The boys visited destitute homes and entertained the residents with funds from the temple.¹⁸

Dr. Asutosh Mukhopadhyay criticised the paradoxical approaches of the British Government in selling intoxicants to children. In 1901, the British Government in England passed a law to prevent the sale of intoxicating liquor to children. He argued that if the British Government in England had passed such laws in 1901, we could have waited another ten years. However, earlier, the British Parliament enacted laws in 1872 and 1886 that fixed the age at which children could consume liquor on premises at 16 and 14, respectively. The present act provided that selling and consuming intoxicant liquor at premises or other places was an offence. The earlier laws in England imposed fines on sellers, but new laws enacted penalties for children to protect them. However, in British India, no such laws were passed.¹⁹

Deba Prasad Sarvadhikary argued for the prohibition of the employment of children in drink and drug shops on consumption premises. However, the rule was not imposed in the case of grocery shops where the drug was sold but not consumed. Radha Chandra Pal demanded that the minimum age for employment at liquor shops be raised from 14 to 18 in the Bill. He argued that maturity developed in eighteen years among the men and could resist the demoralising

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influences. The Society for the Protection of Children in India and the Calcutta Corporation also recommended 18 as the age. The Collector of Midnapore argued that children employed in the liquor shops were mainly from lower-class backgrounds. They were uneducated and immature, so they were quickly tempted to be intoxicated by the vice atmosphere. So, it was the most essential duty of the government to raise the employable age for the general well-being of the people.²⁰

Macpherson objected to these amendments. He argued that when the 1903 Excise Bill was introduced in Council, the prohibition was applied only to public rooms of premises, but the Select Committee edited to any part of the premises in which liquor is consumed. Secondly, it was unnecessary to prohibit children, in the case of Tari and Ganja, from selling at grocery shops. The Protection Children's Protection Act was passed in England in 1908, which prohibits children under the age of 14 from entering licensed premises during any hour of the day at open time. Macpherson argued that in England, the new act applies only to a bar. He objected to the Select Committee's approach to consider the whole courtyard where country liquor was sold as a bar. So, he urged the Select Committee to amend it.²¹ Charles Allen said that the prohibition of children from selling liquor was unethical. Liquor sales are a legitimate trade, and such regulations could affect vendors. Due to the age restriction, the vendors could not employ their sons to assist in business.²²

Earlier, the Report of the Indian Excise Committee of 1905-06 recommended that there was no need for any prohibition on women's rights to sell liquor. However, it suggested banning the sale of children among a particular class in particular areas. Earlier, the ban on sale was imposed for children only in cases of outstill liquor and opium. The 'Excise Committee of 1905-06' extended the ban to all liquor and drugs under the age of 14.²³ The Commissioner of Tirhut and Orissa, the Collector of Hooghly and Howrah, and the Calcutta Corporation all supported prohibiting women and children from all excise shops.²⁴

E. Geake, the Excise Commissioner of Bengal in 1908, recommended that there be no rights to the sale of liquor and drugs to those below the age of 16. The government was the guardian of the people, so it was the government's right to protect women and children. The government's role has nothing to do with checking intemperance among the men because a government can hardly influence discretion. On the other hand, the parents and governments are to a greater extent the controlling authorities for children and women. So, many European officers were against women's involvement in liquor selling and believed it was a male space.²⁵

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The native reformers complained of increasing drunkenness among the schoolboys in 1881. An enquiry committee was made the same year to examine the validity of the allegation. The Committee was comprised of the Director of Public Instruction, twenty experienced educational officers and eleven district committees of public instruction. One of the eminent members of the commission was Babu Krishna Behari Sen. The Commission found the allegation groundless. The schoolboys in Bengal were not habitual drinkers. Only in Behar did a few children drink regularly, and those families were accustomed to drinking. The Commission found that the young boys in the Chota Nagpore and Behar region visited the shops to bring liquor for their parents and masters. However, they had never even attended primary school.²⁶

The 'Excise Committee of 1905' surveyed the American system, which included several measures to check drunkenness, such as banning the sale to children and habitual drunkards and closing sales on Sundays and holidays (Christmas, Memorial Day). Based on such policies, the Bengal Excise Law of 1909 was enacted.²⁷ The Excise Law of 1909 was the cornerstone of the abkari system in the post-Victorian and post-colonial periods. The law was the outcome of the public agitation. However, the act did not repeal the Calcutta Police Act of 1866, the Sea Customs Act of 1878, the Cantonments Act of 1889, and the Indian Tariff Act of 1894, to safeguard revenue and maintain peace and protect its people. Under this act, the Local Government could prohibit importing, exporting, and transporting any excisable article. The duty was remitted for excise articles that had already paid duties under the Sea Customs Act of 1878 and the Indian Tariff Act of 1894. Section 14 of this act dealt with the right of toddy tapping without a license for manufacturing gur or molasses. Section 25 of the act provides penalties of five hundred rupees to the licensee for allowing the employment of women and children below the age of fourteen during business hours.²⁸

The temperance movement in late colonial Bengal emerged as a powerful moral and social reform project that linked voluntary activism with colonial regulation. Organisations such as the Calcutta Temperance Federation and the Band of Hope mobilised adults and children through education, literature, and public campaigns. Their efforts influenced investigations into liquor traffic and shaped legislative debates that culminated in the Bengal Excise Act, 1909. Although constrained by colonial revenue priorities and social resistance, temperance activism fostered new ideas of child protection, social discipline, and civic responsibility, leaving a lasting imprint on public health discourse and reformist politics in Bengal.

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Notes and References

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