

DASS, SHOSHI MUKHI (1868 - 1921), missionary, teacher and nurse

Name: Shoshi Mukhi Dass
Date of birth: 1868
Date of death: 1921
Parent: Mary Dass (née Grose)
Parent: Gour Charan Dass
Gender: Female
Occupation: missionary, teacher and nurse
Area of activity: Religion
Author: Rita Singer

Shoshi Mukhi Dass was born in 1868 in the city of Sylhet in India into a Christian family. Her mother was Mary Grose (d. 1903), who was raised in a missionary orphanage in India, and her father Gour Charan Dass (1839-1919). Gour Charan Dass had been a worker for the Welsh Mission in India before Shoshi's birth, but he fell out with William Pryse (1820-1869), the leading Welsh missionary in Sylhet, accusing him of drunkenness and harassing Mary. Dass subsequently left the Welsh Mission and joined the police, but remained supportive of their work. The Dass family eventually grew to seven children, including Shoshi's brother, Prem, and her younger sister, Shushila (1870-1924). The children were raised in a religious environment and with the aim they would eventually support the Calvinistic Methodists' missionary work.

In their teens, Shoshi and Shushila both already helped in a Christian girls' school and were involved in work with the Zenana movement of north-east India. Under this system, female missionaries would be paired with local Hindu and Muslim women to enter their gender-segregated homes with the aim of educating and converting them to Christianity. The Dass girls worked long hours, holding the women's classes at 6.30 in the morning ahead of their work in the school. In a public letter published in *Y Drysorfa* in 1891, Shoshi detailed her Zenanas work and the religious and subsequent cultural hurdles she encountered. That same year, she entered initial medical training in Kolkatta with the intention of using this training to support her future missionary work. In 1892, her father paid for her passage to Britain and further medical training in Glasgow for two years so she could return to India as a fully qualified 'medical missionary'. Shushila remained in India mourning the shocking execution of her fiancé without trial in 1891.

Shortly after Shoshi's arrival in Britain in summer 1892, she was interviewed by *William Davies (Mynorydd)*. He described her as a highly intelligent and bright woman with a certain resemblance to the then popular Indian opera singer Alice Gomez (fl. 1890s-1906), but with a darker complexion and of short stature. As would be noted in later newspaper reports of her lectures, Shoshi stressed that missionary work requires sensitivity and that her people were learned and cultured, but suffered much hardship owing to poverty, disease and a difficult climate.

Between August 1892 and September 1894, Shoshi's activities were not confined to her medical training. In Glasgow, she was actively involved with the Welsh National Union while further south, in Wales, she delivered several public lectures to Methodist audiences. Wearing a sari to demonstrate the typical dress of women in north-east India, she spoke in English about the history and culture of her country, her education and missionary work, and sang hymns in Bangla. During her second year in Britain, she frequently lectured together with Kate E. Williams, Pwllhell, to crowded audiences. These appearances were part of the qualification process for outgoing missionaries to India for the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church. Shoshi had been accepted by the General Assembly at Bootle by May 1893. The exotic draw of the Khasia mission was such for the Welsh Methodists that she was photographed as part of the Mission's fundraising efforts. Years later, her portrait was included in a set of thirteen photographs illustrating the work of missionaries and people in and from Khasia. On 22 September 1894, Shoshi and Kate Williams embarked from Liverpool on their two-month journey to India. Instead of returning to her parental home in Sylhet city, the Foreign Mission appointed her to the station in Karimganj. There, she shared a bungalow with the medical doctor and missionary Oswald Osborne Williams (1868-1926), his wife Emma, their daughter Mona, and a varying number of orphaned girls.

As a fully qualified medical missionary, Shoshi worked long and demanding hours. In January 1896, she opened her girls' school. From then on she spent the morning teaching the children, visited and taught the women of the Zenanas in the afternoon and provided medical care in the evening. Her medical services were particularly sought after and gained her access to new Zenanas that had previously been reluctant to allow her in. Like the other missionaries, she was expected to walk between her different workplaces and home.

In addition to the expected professional strain on a missionary, Shoshi suffered several personal tragedies. In 1896, she lost all her possessions and medical equipment, save her money, in a fire that destroyed the bungalow. In the aftermath of the fire, the Williamses found shelter in the Silchar Mission House. Shoshi and the two orphans stayed for a time with the missionaries in Sylhet. By the summer, two newly-built separate houses for the Williams family and for Shoshi and her orphans replaced the old shared quarters. Then in 1897, an earthquake struck Sylhet and Karimganj, resulting in the spread of malaria and cholera in the districts. When Shoshi came down with malaria, she was forced to close her girls' school. More than once, she was nursed back to health by her sister Shushila. In 1903, she lost her mother and spent a short time with her grieving father and sister Shushila in Sylhet. In some of her letters, Shoshi speaks of her loneliness and sense of isolation as a Christian in a non-Christian community. This was relieved to some extent between 1905 and 1907 when Shushila came to live with her and support the schoolwork. Despite all this hardship, Shoshi enjoyed gardening and planting flowers, although she was put out occasionally to discover them stolen and offered at Hindu shrines.

Owing to the strenuous work conditions and the damp, vermin-infested state of her house, Shoshi complained to the Mission Committee that she suffered from rheumatism and sought financial support to use a pony to help her in her travels. The Committee, however, refused on the grounds that this was incompatible with the requirements of her Zenanas work. Similarly, Shoshi questioned the amount of her annual salary when Welsh missionaries would earn more for the same work. In 1911, she defended herself against what she understood as meddling with her school by Oswald Williams. She felt patronised and questioned his authority. As a result of speaking up for herself, her fellow Welsh missionaries perceived her as a difficult person.

Due to her fatigue from work, chronic dysentery and her advancing rheumatism, she repeatedly requested a period of furlough in Britain to recover her health. As early as 1900, she requested a period of furlough which was rejected outright. In her later applications, she was supported by other medical missionaries, such as Peter Fraser (1864-1919) from Caernarfon and US-born Harriet Davies (1879-1952). Again, her initial requests were denied, even though a medical report was presented that stated she had also developed a heart condition. Shoshi's application was opposed by Oswald Williams in particular. He argued that it was too much to expect of a European organisation to pay for an Indian woman's passage to Britain and back. In addition, Williams claimed that Shoshi's character was indicative of 'the impossible, indeed virulent, spirit of "independence" that troubles Indian thought'. Despite these hostile statements, her request was eventually accepted, largely for fear of losing the support of other native Indian missionaries and supporters. In February 1913, Shoshi left India from Kolkatta and arrived two months later in Aberystwyth, having travelled via London and Abergelle. For the next two years, Oregon House in Powell Street became her home. Shoshi enjoyed walks along the seaside, but she also received further health treatments at the Royal Infirmary. When her health permitted, Shoshi also gave lectures about her missionary work across Wales, which proved just as successful and popular as her presentations nearly two decades earlier.

Back in India, Shoshi was not expected to return to Karimganj, partially due to the longstanding disagreement with Oswald Williams. She arrived in Sylhet in February 1915 and undertook her work from the mission house until September 1918. Her final home has a small bungalow that was built for her in 1918 near the newly-built chapel in Sheikhghat from where she continued her missionary work. By then, the illnesses from which she had suffered prior to her furlough in Britain had returned, eventually resulting in her premature death in August 1921.

Author

Rita Singer

Sources

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