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Trajectory of Women's Education in India: A Historical Inquiry

Swati Ranjan Choudhary¹ & Jyotika Elhance²

¹Associate Professor, Department of History, Vivekanand College, University of Delhi, Delhi (India) E-mail:<swatichoudhary532@gmail.com, swatiranjan@vivekanand.du.ac.in>

²Associate Professor, Department of English, Vivekanand College, University of Delhi, Delhi (India) E-mail:<elhancejyotika@gmail.com, jyotikaelhance@vivekanand.du.ac.in>

Abstract

"When you educate a man you educate an individual, when you educate a woman, you educate the whole family"¹ (Dadhich, 2022: 198). Women's education holds a key to the overall growth and wellbeing of a society. Only when women are educated, will they be able to make the strategic life choices that were earlier denied to them in the patriarchal world and gain control not only of their own lives but of the larger society as well. They'd be able to make a judicious use of the available socio-economic resources and participate in the decision-making process both within the four walls of the house and outside too. Since women comprise one half of the total population, it is the status that has been accorded to them that determines the strength and robustness of a society. Gender parity, education, economic empowerment eliminates disparity and pave way for a more egalitarian society. Since the wholesomeness of a family largely rests upon the status of women in a particular household, we would try to explore the various social factors that prevented womenfolk from claiming what had been their due in the first section. The second section will trace the gradual change that came over as social reformers and educationists attempted to educate women and the third would focus on the efforts of the British government in this direction. This paper will attempt to trace the development of women's education in India during the colonial period.

Keywords

Social prejudices, Social reformers, Co-education, Foreign invasions, Prejudices, Traditional beliefs, Cultural conservatism, Colonial period.

Centre For Studies of National Development, Meerut

Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9412200765

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1. Introduction

Women have been instrumental in shaping the social order since time immemorial. They were comparatively much more evolved in the Vedic period than in the subsequent ones, taking care of the 'oikos' as well as 'polis', and participating in all the decision-making processes. They were well-educated in various forms of art and culture, warfare, and spiritualism. As per The Rigveda, women used to participate in scholarly assemblies, public debates, rituals, and ceremonies even in the pre-Vedic period. They had equal right to receive education, boys and girls studied together, i.e., co-education was prevalent. Family was the primary centre of education as women were tutored by their fathers, husbands or family gurus in religion, literature, dance, music, poetry writing, debates, etc. They enjoyed the autonomy and freedom and were regarded as man's *sahdharmini* and *ardhangini*. In the post-Vedic period, several restrictions began to get imposed upon women's freedom which led to a gradual decline in their condition.

Gautam Buddha encouraged women to enter the Sangha, which gave a new dimension to their education. Buddhist and Jain literature reveal that women contributed hugely to the development of education and literature. Sanghamitra, Samrat Ashoka's daughter, was one such prominent figure. But in this period, by and large, the right to education was limited only to the males.

The condition and status of women suffered a set-back during the medieval period after the Muslim invasion of India. The arrival of the Mughals confined them within their houses, depriving them of their freedom. Women stopped going to schools and education got confined only to those belonging to the royal families and elite classes. Social evils like the *purdah* system, child marriage, *sati* system were adopted, due to which women found themselves trapped indoors, thereby becoming weak, dependent, and helpless.

The advent of the British colonial rule brought in several changes in the condition of women. They made several concerted

efforts to purge the Indian society of the social evils that had crept into it. They banned the girl-child slaughter, child marriage, sati system, polygamy etc. and formulated laws which encouraged widow remarriage and emphasized women's education. Apart from this, Indian social reformers including Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule, etc. worked tirelessly to free their people of superstitions, prejudices, and social evils that had become an integral part of their psyche and strove for women's education.

2. Social Barriers

Women and girls were adversely affected by the strict patriarchal norms that were practiced in medieval India. These social practices included gender-based violence, child marriage, sati system, forced renunciation for widows, devadasi pratha, killing of girl-child and discrimination of sexes. There was an unequal access to education and an absence of equal economic opportunities for women of both the communities - Hindus as well as Muslims. The practice of purdah system made it impossible for women of either section to attend school after a certain age as their education was considered useless and unnecessary by society. They were under complete control of the menfolk, who dictated all life's decisions to them. This discriminatory mindset disproportionately affected women's status turning them into marionettes.

As we move from the medieval period to the British period, the situation started changing for the better. Primary education improved in the latter half of the 19th century. In 1882, the total number of girl-students receiving education was 1,27,066, out of which 1,24,491 were in primary schools. This was an ample proof of girls' education gradually gaining recognition although it was limited only to primary education. The secondary and higher education had still not found favour with the patriarchal minded masses.

The first training schools were built by the missionaries. People from the higher classes and elite families were not in favour of sending their girls to missionary training schools. The lack of government initiatives and the short-sightedness of people in this direction, resulted in scarcity of well-educated women in Indian society who could become teachers. There were only 515 female teachers for the girl students. The British government also accepted in its proposal related to education that the social customs and

conservatism is responsible for the lack of education amongst Indian women.

The Indian society went through many upheavals, uprisings, and downfalls through the ages but the situation did not change much even in the twentieth century as the impediments that were detrimental to women's overall wellbeing persisted. McGarth also believed that "Most of these obstacles such as, prejudices, traditional beliefs, cultural conservatism, biases etc. exist only in the minds of people"² (Oak, 1988: 40). Despite various laws formulated by the government and the efforts put in by social reformers, the change was minimal. Only a small percentage of women belonging to the upper middle class, received some kind of schooling which made their position marginally better than others. Rural and urban conservative families were of the belief that educating girls was unnecessary as it would only instigate them to aspire for independence and lead them astray. They felt that an educated, intelligent woman would refuse a submissive role, thereby disrupting family life³ (Oak, 1988: 41). This outlook of the society rendered the efforts of social thinkers ineffective and resulted in widespread illiteracy, child marriage, lack of higher education, low percentage of work participation, lack of special training and skills, wage discrimination etc. that affected the progress of women adversely in the early twentieth century. But despite various hindrances, unfavourable mind-sets and social polemics, the status of women was undergoing a slow and steady transformation. Although the battle for their primary education was over by the 1930s, many ideological battles continued to be fought over the appropriateness of curriculum, co-education, and vocational education for girls. *Dayan Prakash* newspaper, which was a mouth-piece of the 'The Servants of India Society', had an enlightened outlook on women's education. An excerpt from it reads, "Education is a powerful instrument of social change...and it is essential to implement and execute the rights that have been provided to the people by the law and the constitution"⁴ (Oak, 1988: 42).

Wrangler Paranjape, the first High Commissioner to Australia, in his speech at the stone-laying ceremony of a new secondary school building of Sawa Sadan, stated, "Secondary education has become imperative for girls in 1941, whereas 50 years earlier, the young widows, the pupils of those days had to come to school in the early hours before sunrise, to avoid public ridicule"⁵ (Oak, 1988: 42). These newspaper reports prove that there was no opposition to girls'

education, at least publicly, in urban areas. These journals and newspapers focussed largely on the upper and the elite class and did not pay much attention to the problems of rural women, who mostly remained disadvantaged and illiterate until the end of the fifth decade of the twentieth century.

3. Role of Social Reformers and Women's Education

With the spread of English education, a new awakening dawned on the Indian horizon. Under the influence of liberal western education system, a class of Indian intellectuals and social reformers emerged who believed that improving the social status of women would lead to the betterment of society. Since women are very much an integral part of the family, and “family is the basic unit of social organization in India, the stability of the family and through it the contribution of women to society is important”⁶ (Chanana, 1988: 100). Apart from this, the role of women was central in giving an all-round upbringing to children, initiating them into social life and managing the household efficiently. The women belonging to the upper caste and elite families were the ones most bound by constrictive traditions and customs. The focus of these young social reformers, influenced by Western education and culture, was not the traditional joint family but the nuclear family. “To play the role of a modern woman, it was necessary for the wife to be educated”⁷(Joshi, 2006: 74). The purpose of education was to make family compatible with the changing environment, gradually moulding women into a new role of educated, cultured wives and mothers. This generated widespread debates and discussions amongst the masses and was hugely opposed by the conservatives as it was a revolutionary step.

Initially, there was no available mechanism or system in place which could mould women into ideal wives and mothers. The socially enlightened menfolk began educating their spouses despite all opposition meted out to them by the other women of their joint family. Amongst these, some of the first generation educated wives were Kashibai Kantikar, Anandibai Joshi, and Ramabai Ranade whose early married life was full of struggle and insecurity. The purpose of their struggle was not to carve out an independent life and identity for themselves but to acquire modern education as per the aspirations of their husbands. In his article, *The Women Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Sumit Sarkar, writes about the efforts made by English-educated upper caste social reformers in Bengal for

women's upliftment that "these efforts were not influenced by liberal ideology of the west but were largely the result of the difficulties in adjustment within the family between a husband influenced by western civilization and a wife brought up in conservative tradition environment"⁸ (Joshi, 2006: 74-75). Like Maharashtra, in Bengal too, education was used as a tool to overcome this disadvantage between varying ideologies. Post the 1850s, women education received a considerable impetus during the British rule and things started changing for the better.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati supported the education of girls. He was also of the opinion that an ignorant wife is ill-equipped to participate fully in her husband's religious rituals and social ceremonies. Absence of sound education would adversely affect the development of women's abilities and lead to rifts and tension in the household if the husband was educated and the wife uneducated. Raja Ram Mohan Roy set up the Brahma Samaj 1828 to eradicate the social ills that had become rampant in the Indian society. The members of Brahma Samaj led the movement that promoted women's education and gender-equality between the sexes, and also crusaded for widow remarriage, attacking the dogmas and superstitions of caste and untouchability. Madhusudan Das, who is considered the father of modern Odisha, inspired the setting up of the first widow training centre and girls' school in Cuttack. The Patna branch of Brahma Samaj also made significant contribution in the field of women's education. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh of Darbhanga in Bihar (1858-1898) promoted modern education for girls, opened Anglo-vernacular schools, and provided financial aid to educational institutions but he had to face a lot of opposition at the hands of conservatives.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam (1848-1919), the father of Telugu Renaissance movement, also known as the Ishwar Chandra Vidya-sagar of Andhra, supported women's education, and arranged for schools for women during the day, schools for labourers and Harijans at night. He educated his wife who later taught in a widow's home.

Anne Beasant (1847-1933), the founder of 'the Theosophical Society' endorsed women's education. She proclaimed vociferously that "in ancient times Hindu women were educated and moved freely in society, urging a return to this golden age"⁹ (Forbes, 1998: 43). She cautioned that India's destiny would get sealed if women were not educated.

Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Theosophical Society and Ramakrishna Mission started their own social reform programs in Karnataka. The first Kannada girls' school was opened in 1840. Women's education was promoted during the reign of Chamaraja Wadiyar who established a girls' high school in the very first year of his rule. By the year 1915, the number of these schools had increased to 530. Teacher training schools and adult education centres were also set up to encourage women to pursue higher education and their salaries also were 25 percent higher than that of others.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1827-1880), the founder of Satya-shodhak Samaj, and his wife Savitri Bai played a pioneering role in promoting women's education and uplifting of Dalits. In 1848, Phule opened his first teaching institute for them in Pune. When he could not find any female teacher to teach the girls, he worked there himself for a few days, and then appointed his wife Savitri Bai to that post after training her. Savitri Bai became the first female teacher of India's first women's school. Phule paid a special attention to the condition of poor and Dalit women and worked towards the upliftment of widows. He opened three girls' schools. The focus of Indian social reformers was more geared towards the elite upper-class women. The marginalized section did not benefit much from their training institutes.

4. Women's Education under the British Rule

The British too did not pay much attention to the education and upliftment of women in the second half of the 18th century, but when some enlightened Indians, who had come in close contact with the western system of education, tried to improve their situation, the government swung into action. They established the Calcutta Madrasa in 1780 AD, and then the Banaras Sanskrit College in the year 1791, followed by Fort William College in 1800 to educate the Indians. Initially, the task of educating the women was taken up by the Christian missionaries. Mrs. Campbell opened an orphanage for women in Madras in 1787 and Dr. Andrew Bell opened a children's home. They set-up several charitable schools in Madras, Bombay and Bengal, and were later joined by other British and Indian social reformers who made significant contributions.

4.1 Period from 1854 to 1882

In the 19th century, the British colonists set up several commissions to promote education in India. In 1854, the first 'Wood's

Declaration' stated that "female education should be encouraged and promoted through generous donations and monetary aid"¹⁰ (Kadam, 2016: 135). The people who contributed money for promoting women's education deserved a special mention in the declaration.

In 1882, Hunter Commission or Indian Education Commission stated, "women education is still in a very backward state. Hence it is necessary that it should be nurtured by every possible means"¹¹ (Singh, 1999: 29). They recommended that public cooperation should be sought in promoting education for women, and that there should be separate curriculum for girls. It recommended provision for free education, grants-in-aid, scholarships, hostel facilities, teacher-training centres, and appointment of female teachers and school inspectors. Arrangements for home-schooling should be made for those women who live in purdah. There was a significant change and progress that was witnessed in women education at the primary level from 1882 to 1902 post these recommendations of the commission. The number of women seeking admission in colleges also went up significantly.

4.2 Period from 1882 to 1902

The period between 1882 and 1902, recorded slow but steady progress in women's education. "The most important achievement of this period was the admission of women to universities and the passing of the first two Indian women graduates from Bethune College, Calcutta in 1883"¹² (Thackersey, 1970:10). There was a gradual increase in the number of women seeking admission in Indian universities. There were merely 6 women in the year 1881-82, but by 1901-02, it had gone up to 264. This resulted in two very important developments, firstly, the Indian society accepted and embraced the fact that college-education should be extended for girls and secondly, it recognized the need to open separate colleges for them. By 1901-1902, twelve separate colleges were set up for women.

The number of women in the field of secondary education also witnessed a sharp upsurge during this period from 1882 to 1902. 41,582 girls were attending secondary schools in 1902 as against only 2054 in 1882. Similarly, 1,24,491 girls were attending primary schools in 1882, which increased to 3,48,510 in 1902. In 1881, one out of every three girls were studying in a co-ed school; and by 1901-1902, this ratio had become 1:1, i.e., one girl to one boy. This was a positive development as social disapproval towards co-education in primary education had begun to

wane. Different syllabus and curriculum were introduced for boys and girls. Instead of mathematics, geography and history, girls were taught music, painting, sewing and embroidery. Social reformers like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a big role in changing the perception of their conservative and traditional-minded Hindu brethren.

The progress in the field of vocational education, however, was rather slow. "In 1901-02, there were only 1412 female students in a training school, 40 in the art school, 166 in the medical school, 468 in the technical or industrial school, 26 in the commercial school, and 695 in other schools"¹³ (Thackersey, 1970:11).

4.3 Period from 1902 to 1921

The period from 1902 to 1921 witnessed certain significant changes like, a more active role of the government, provision of larger funds, vigorous efforts towards qualitative improvement in education, unprecedented opening of different branches of education, etc. It was during this phase that the feelings of nationalism had begun to take active roots amongst the people of India. In 1913, the government formulated an important education policy that focussed primarily on the social aspect of the problems faced by the Indian society and various ways of eliminating them. According to them, the existing system of education lacked proper practical training and application and was unable to cater to the social needs of women.

The higher education also witnessed a significant progress. The data of 1921-22 shows that there were 1263 women studying in arts colleges. Women had begun to break the age-old myth of inferiority. Secondary education saw a surge in the number of girl students. In the year, 1921-22, there were 36,698 women in high schools and 92,466 in middle schools and 11,98,550 in the primary schools. A total of 266 female students were studying in professional colleges, out of which 197 were in medical college, 67 in teaching college and 02 in commerce college. The number of female students in vocational schools also increased significantly. There were 334 female students in the school of medicine, 3903 in the teaching school, 32 in the school of Arts, 2744 in technical and industrial fields, 308 in the field of commerce, 79 in agricultural schools and 3170 in other careers. There was a total of 10,570 female students in this field. The total number of female students in vocational colleges and vocational schools was 10,836. This figure reveals that girls were being attracted towards new careers.¹⁴ (Thackersey, 1970: 14).

4.4 Period from 1921 to 1937

The raising of the age of marriage for women, and their socio-political awakening especially after the All-India Women's Conference in 1926 under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi contributed significantly towards women's education from 1921 to 1937. But still, merely 2.38% of the total women's population was educated. 'The Hertogh Committee of 1929', also called 'The Indian Universities Committee', formed by the British government to assess the status of education in colonial India, also stated that "education is not the privilege of one sex only but it is the right of both sexes equally. It was felt that women's education should be given the highest priority in every scheme of expansion which would lead to the advancement of education in India"¹⁵ (Thackersey, 1970:14-15).

4.5 Period from 1937 to 1947

This period witnessed a rapid improvement in higher education of women. As the employment opportunities increased, more and more women came forward to embrace a career outside the domain designated for them by the social practices. The society, albeit reluctantly, began to accept this new change. If we look at the status of women's education in 1946-47, 17,648 girl students were studying in 59 institutions of science and arts colleges under general education. 1,78,341 girl students were studying in 576 institutions of high school, 1,77,784 girl students were studying in 1187 institutions of middle school and 28,33,096 girl students were studying in 14,330 institutions of primary school.

If we talk about special education, 1768 girls were studying in 3 institutions of professional and technical colleges, 660 girls were studying in 11 institutions of training colleges, 10,483 girls were studying in 188 institutions of training schools, 27,864 girls were studying in 594 institutions of other special schools and 46,604 girls were studying in 537 institutions which were non-recognised institutions. Thus, the total number of girl students in 17,485 institutions was 34,94,248. These figures only refer to Indian Union.

The credit for this remarkable change must go to the Indian social reformers and British administration who were able to mould the public opinion favourably towards imparting education to women as well. Another feature of this period was the growing demand for mixed schools, which made co-education popular. By the time India attained independence, women's education had improved both

quantitatively and qualitatively, although the pace was still slow. In India, the education of boys was also comparatively backward vis-à-vis that of other countries of the world.

The focus of women's education also was largely confined to urban areas since schools were mostly under private management. Education remained out of bounds for the rural areas, with practically no schools and no teachers, thereby making them backward. Lack of funds and resources for opening of schools, reluctance of teachers to relocate to villages and general apathy of people towards the plight of the marginalized rural population all were jointly responsible for the pitiable situation.

5. Conclusion

Looking at women's education from a social perspective, it is evident that the demand for women's education arose through the social reform movement. Social reformers believed that improving the social status of women would lead to the betterment of society. Since women are an integral part of every family, their contribution towards the over-all well-being of the society is undeniable. They keep the family members together, provide the required stability, manage the home and the hearth, nurture the children, and initiate them into socialization. As such, it becomes increasingly imperative for the entire society to abandon the age-old patriarchal mind-set and embrace gender-parity, paving way to make our women, well-schooled and literate. Since women's education is directly proportionate to the economic wellbeing of a nation, the curriculum and syllabus should be so designed as to serve their best interests as an equal stake holder.

Mahatma Gandhi strongly advocated gender equality when he said, "I am not compromising on the rights of women. In my opinion, they should not labour under any legal disability. I believe daughters and sons should be treated equally"¹⁶ (Thackersey, 1970:16).

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