

## **An Exploration into Women's Education and Leadership in the Pre-Colonial and Colonial Period**

**Dr. Sutapa Das**

Assistant Professor, Department of History  
Bharati College, University of Delhi

### **Abstract:**

Education empowers women by enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence. It is the most vital tool to liberate women from repression and subordination. An educated women is aware and well informed and can take rational decision. Education open up the opportunity to become economically independent and ensure greater participation on an equal level in the socio political life of the country. Women's education received special focus in the nineteenth century through colonial women missionaries. They intended to make education accessible to girls and women. However such activities were often restricted to poor and low caste women. Very soon the idea of female education began to gain respectability among the Indian intelligensia. The endeavour of constructing new age Indian women began first in Bengal, a hub of liberal thought at that time. Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and other intellectuals played the role of efficient male catalyst in this new project. The paper shows how India while struggling for national freedom against colonial misrule was also undergoing social reformation in which female education emerged as an important constituent. Highlighting the role and contribution of some prominent women educational leaders and freedom fighters, the paper also points out how social status and leadership capacities can be enhanced by extending educational facilities to the women. Drawing from such historical inputs, the paper argues that facilitating women's education can take the country to the path of liberation and progress.

Education is important in making one aware and informed. Women's education however was an extremely contentious issue in the early nineteenth century. The induction of women into formal institutionalised education was a highly challenging task. It was initiated by the women missionaries. They were the most important non official agency, and pioneers in advancing female education. However beside the educational objective they had proselytising zeal too and were targeting mostly the poor and low caste women.<sup>i</sup>The Bengali intellectuals like Raja Rammohan Ray and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was quick to realise the value of female education. They saw education as the panacea of all social evils and superstitious practices prevailing in the Indian society at that time. They believed women's education, if promoted, could be a primary agent of social change and modernity. The major obstacle here was the familial attitudes towards female education which considered that a woman if educated would become a widow. The prevailing customs and traditions had given a secluded status to women. Their mobility was confined within four walls of home. According to Manu, women should never be independent, in childhood she must be subjected to her father, in youth to her husband, in old age, after the death of her husband, to her son.<sup>ii</sup>Thus, since the ancient times, the status of women in Indian society at large and their own families was subservient to men. Uma Chakrabarty made a significant observation. While studying the historical consciousness in India during the nineteenth century, she finds that the focus has always remained on the upper class women.<sup>iii</sup> She finds relationship between caste and gender

as the central factor responsible for the subordination of women especially those belonging to the upper caste. According to her, purity of women was the central feature in the brahmanical patriarchy because caste purity depended upon it. She opines that the horror of polluting the ritual order came from the mixing of castes. Hence inter caste marriage became a danger. It was the upper caste women who protected the caste order hence they became an object of moral panic. Women's essential nature came to be identified with their sexuality and it is here power of patriarchy began to assert itself. Several ideologies and traditions were enforced upon them. Pativrata dharma, *pardah* system, dependency on the male of the family, class privileges, use of mental and physical chastisement who violates and or questions the existing norms, became essential tools to control chastity of women. In fact she noticed the 'king' or the 'state' became the ultimate agency by which women's sexuality was controlled. Thus Uma Chakravorty states that each of it i.e. class, caste and gender became means to maintain each other-this intersection was not accidental and it was built into the system. There was a progressive fall in the social condition of women in India since the Vedic period. There were few exceptional instances of women exercising power in the state like Suryamati, the royal consort of King Ananta of the Lohara dynasty of Kashmir that came into prominence following the invasion of Sultan Mahmud, is known to have assisted in the task of administration. Again appointment of ladies to the governorships of provinces and minor administrative divisions were a common phenomenon in the administrative structure of Chalukyas.<sup>iv</sup> However these are some stray references where women were in exalted position. In general, the Indian women had a secluded social status. It was considered dignified for the women belonging to upper classes and castes to remain confined within the inner walls of home. They hardly had any rights and independence. They were completely depended on male members of the family in every possible sense.

The scenario did not change much in the medieval period although we do find many women at the helm of affairs of the state during the medieval period. Thus in the history of Delhi Sultanate we find that Firuz, the successor of Illutmish who died in 1236, was guided by her mother Shah Turkman.<sup>v</sup> Mother and son was ousted by Raziyya, who dominated the people abandoning the dress of a woman, rode in public and held open court. In the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a lady of the kakatiya dynasty of Warangal in the eastern Deccan by the name Rudramba ruled the kingdom with considerable success.<sup>vi</sup> The Venetian traveller Marco Polo, who visited the Kingdom in 1293 A. D., has left a glowing account of her administration.<sup>vii</sup> Similarly in the Bahamani kingdom, Makhduman Jahan ruled on behalf of her minor son Nizam Shah. We also have example of Chand Bibi who defended the city of Ahmednagar with great courage against the army of Akbar but ultimately had to submit in 1595 A.D. Akbar himself was much influenced by his mother Hamida Banu and foster mother Maham Anga during the early years of his reign and instituted what has been called "petticoat government" from 1560 to 1564. Again Nur Jahan, wife of Jahangir elevated her father and brother to the highest offices of the state. But Nurjahan's inordinate ambitions soon proved detrimental to a larger interest of the State. She came in open conflict with Prince Khurram in the struggle for succession to the throne and later retired from public life and spend her last 18 years of her life in Lucknow, passing away on 1646. Though there are numerous such instances in the contemporary records of Mughal king, it is interesting to note that with the exception of Nur Jahan and Shah Jahan's wife Mumtaz Mahal, the first lady of the realm was not

Empress but the emperor's mother or the emperor's sister. However, in general, the ladies of the royal family were highly educated. Few Muslim ladies were writers of distinction and administrators of rare merit. Gulbadan Begum, the author of the Humayun-nama, and Jahan Ara, the biographer of Shiblyah and Munisal Arwah hold an enviable position among the literary figures of that age. Mira Bai, Salima Sultana, Nur Jahan, Sit-un-Nisa, the tutoress of Jahan Ara and Zib-un-Nisa, the eldest daughter of Aurangzeb were poetesses of distinction.

In the Rajput history, the women fully demonstrated their chivalry and sense of dignity and honour. Tarabai promised to marry the youth who would recover her father's dominion Todah from the hands of the Pathans.<sup>viii</sup> Padmavati entered the flames with all the women of Chittor to save herself from dishonour at the hands of the invading army of Ala-ud-din Khalji. The performance of this rite of Jauhar was the last resort of Rajput women to save their honour. The heroic resistance was put up by Rani Durgavati, the queen of Gondwana against the troop sent by Emperor Akbar.<sup>ix</sup> When defeated, she committed suicide. Maratha history offers us similarly the striking examples of Tarabai, the wife of Raja Ram, who was the centre of the Maratha war of resistance against Aurangzeb and Ahalya Bai, who administered the Holkar state successfully in the eighteenth century.<sup>x</sup> In Maharashtra Aka Bai and Kena Bai, disciples of Ramdas Swami, were considered important literary figures.

In spite of such striking instances of women making their mark in the world, the birth of a daughter in the family was unwelcome in Rajput family.<sup>xi</sup> A woman who gives birth to girls in succession was despised and even sometimes divorced.<sup>xii</sup> Girls received lessons usually from their parents. The rich people used to appoint home tutors to teach their daughters. Due to such prevailing practice many daughters of Rajput chiefs and so also some Bengali zamindars were mostly able to read and write. However, the contents of their education were usually a limited education mostly pertaining to religious texts. Muslim princesses received special in-house training to read Quran.<sup>xiii</sup> The regular studies of women came to an end with their marriage which usually took place at an early age in India.

Sanskrit emerged as one of the popular language in the South. A Malayalam writing Chandrosavan mentions how Sakumtalam, Malavikagnimitram and Sanskrit dramas became part of general reading of the educated women in the South.<sup>xiv</sup> A well known literary writing Mahilamriduvani provides a list of no less than 35 of important poetesses.<sup>xv</sup> Ramabhadramba, the author of Raghunathabhyudayam, Madhuravani, translator in verse of Andhra-Ramayana, Tirumalamba, author of Varadambikaparinayam, and Mohanangi, author of the love poem Marichiparinayam are well-known Sanskrit poetesses of the period. Hati Vidyalkankara mentions how special emphasis was laid on the education of widows some of whom became teachers later.

However this does not mean ordinary women enjoyed greater status in the South. Sati was greatly prevalent like North India. Foreign traveller Manucci gives graphic details of several restrictions imposed on widowed women who refused to commit Sati. He mentions how these women weren't allowed to wear their hair long or put on ornaments. They were ill treated even by their parents and hated and despised by even their family as being afraid to death.<sup>xvi</sup> Girls were married early, Dowry was demanded and paid.<sup>xvii</sup> There was no provision of widow remarriage in Hindu society, except among low castes. Badauni also noticed restrictions on the mobility of Women. Wearing of veils from head to foot had to be strongly followed by Muslims. Female

members of a royal or nobleman's family generally moved in covered palanquins surrounded on all sides by servants. Similarly Hindus continued with *purdah* system in which female had to cover their head with a sheet or dupatta as a protective measure to save the women folk from disgrace and to preserve the purity of their social order.<sup>xviii</sup> Women belonging to the peasantry and working class were free from such bondage of *purdah*.

The Indian social system started experiencing transition in case of the position of its women in the colonial period. But it was quite a herculean task initially to educate women in confrontation of prevailing social norms and practices. William Adam on this Report on the state of education in Bengal (1836) made a significant observation that a superstitious feeling was existing in the majority of Hindu families that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow.<sup>xix</sup>

Following the rule of minimum interference, the British government maintained the policy of social and religious neutrality. They felt since the Indian people were prejudiced against the education of women therefore an initiative in that direction will disturb the socio –religious milieu.<sup>xx</sup> Thus they mostly promoted education which could fulfil their need of English educated Indian men for subordinate posts in the administrative jobs.<sup>xxi</sup>

The missionaries however played a very formidable role. In the colonial period, they emerged as the most important non-official agency, and pioneers of female education. They provided education at the elementary level and through *zenana* system of teaching or domestic education.<sup>xxii</sup> Middle and High class families were very keen to educate their female in western manner and etiquette and thus widely availed such system of education. The pioneer women educational leaders of that time were Miss Isabella Thoburn and her disciple Lilavati Singh. Associated with the Methodist Episcopal Women's Foreign Missionary Society, Miss Isabella Thoburn, laid the foundation of the first Christian college for women in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. It was the first of a kind in whole of Asia at that time. After her death, her work of welfare and education of Indian women were carried forward by her disciple Lilavati Singh. She participated in the World student Christian Federation at Oxford in 1909 by officially represented the Indian branch of Young Women's Christian Association at the.<sup>xxiii</sup> She was her ardent desire to witness Indian women participating equally with men in making the country progress.

The twentieth century saw women representation in many social reform organisations, women's associations, educational organisations and freedom movement. Though these women mostly belonged to the upper class or elite political family, they worked with great zeal in promoting and extending women's education and also engaged themselves in various welfare activities towards needy women. The most active women leaders and freedom fighters were Rameshwari Nehru, Mridula Sarabhai, Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, Laxmi Menon, Renuka Roy, Hansa Mehata, Aruna Asaf Ali, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Lila Munshi, Hazira Begum, Susma Sengupta etc.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Pandita Ramabai, Cornelia Sorabji, Vidyagauri Nilkanth, Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Anindita Devi Swarna kumara Devi, Sultan Shah Jaha Begum, Annie Besant were some of the prominent women educational leaders of the time.<sup>xxv</sup> Annie Besant founded the Central Hindu College at Benaras in 1898 which was later integrated with Benaras Hindu University in 1921. Begum Waheed Jahan with her husband laid the foundation of Women's

College at Aligarh Muslim University.<sup>xxvi</sup>

In conclusion, India in the colonial period not only struggled for national freedom but also underwent social reformation. Though initially, colonial rulers were interested in educating Indian people to the extent that could serve their need in the administrative requirement in the lower position, missionaries in the process of spread of Christianity were engaged in providing English education both to the poor women and through *zenana* education to the women belonging to the upper class elite families. Later, colonial rulers and Indian social reformers jointly worked towards upliftment of women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Behramji Malabari, Govind Ranade took legislative actions against many social evils like widow burning (Sati), widow celibacy, child marriage, etc. The Indian male intelligentsia was deeply influenced by the views expressed in western literature in favour of female equality and their rights. They made constructive criticism of the superstitious practice that made women suffer in the Indian society and promoted women's education. Later Indian women themselves actively took part in political educational and other activities leading to the emergence of many women leaders in India.

---

<sup>i</sup> Sarkar, Sumit & Sarkar, Tanika. *Women's Social Reforms in Modern India: A Reader*, Indiana Press, Bloomington, 2008, pp. 59-60.

<sup>ii</sup> Kosambi, Meera. 'Women Emancipation and Equality: Pandita Ramabai's Contribution to Women's Cause', *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, 1988, p.WS38.

<sup>iii</sup> Chakravarty, Uma 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past.' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds) *Recasting Women : Essays in Colonial History*, Kali for Women, 1989.

<sup>iv</sup> Ghosal, U. N. 'Political Theory and Administrative Organisation' in R. C Majumdar (ed.) *History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. V, Bombay, 1957, p.230.

<sup>v</sup> Guha, Nikhiles. 'Women in Medieval India', *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*, Vol. LI, Nos. 1&2, 2011, p. 65.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>viii</sup> Tod, Col. James. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*, W. Cookes (ed.), Vol. I, p. 441, Vol. II, Oxford, 1920, pp.1-2

<sup>ix</sup> Guha, 2011, op. cit, p.68

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Tod, Vol. II, op. cit, pp.739-40.

<sup>xii</sup> Akbar Namah, Part-III, p. 58.

<sup>xiii</sup> Elliot and Dawson, *The History of India by its own Historians*, Vol.VII, London, 1876, p. 162.

<sup>xiv</sup> Guha, 2011, op. cit, p. 69.

<sup>xv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xvi</sup> Manucci, *Storia Do Mogor* translated by William Irvine, Vol.II, London, 1908,p.60.



<sup>xvii</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>xviii</sup> For details see, Badaoni, *Muntakhab-ul-Tawarikh* translated into English by H. Blochmann, Vol. II, Calcutta, 1884.

<sup>xix</sup> Quoted in Sarkar, Sumit & Sarkar, Tanika. 2008, op cit, pp.59-60.

<sup>xx</sup> Srivastava, Gauri. *Women's Higher Education in 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Concept Publishing Company, 2000, p. 64.

<sup>xxi</sup> Spear, Percival. *Bentick and Education*, Cambridge Historical Journal 6, 1938, p. 90.

<sup>xxii</sup> Srivastava, Gauri . 2000, op. cit, p.47.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Nichols, L. Florence. 'Students' Christian Federation Conference in Japan', in *Lilavati Singh: A Sketch*, The Tudor Press, Boston, 1909.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Thomas, P.J. *Indian Women through the Ages*, Bombay, 1964.

<sup>xxv</sup> Roy, Bharati & Basu, Aparna. *From Independence towards Freedom: Indian Women since 1947*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Kazim, Lubna. A Woman of Substance: *The memoirs of Begum Khurshid Mirza, 1918-1989*, Zubaan, New Delhi, PP.79-80.