

DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract: *The development of women's education in colonial India was not just a steady path to reform; rather, it became a fiercely contested battleground characterized by conflicting and contradictory agendas of colonial officials, social reformers, nationalist leaders and religious missionaries. This paper examines the complex history of female schooling, highlighting a system marked by clear contradictions, systemic exclusion and fragmented progress. While some official colonial statements supported women's education, their promises often fell short in reality. State funding only made up about 3.5% to 6.5% of total education spending, with private efforts covering most of the costs to set up and maintain girls' schools. The analysis shows that educational progress varied widely based on caste, class, religion, and geography. Rural communities, Dalit people, and Muslim women faced significant and consistent exclusion. Missionaries, motivated initially by conversion, began to found schools for the most destitute populations, while upper-caste reformers attempted to see women educated within prescribed boundaries that promoted domesticity and traditional gender roles. Examination of theoretical frameworks indicates that nationalist discourse encouraged simultaneously the education of women and the exploitation of such an agenda for larger political purposes -namely, to produce educated mothers who would raise nationalist sons -engendering an inherent tension arising from the conflict between reformist aspirations and conservative limitations. The curriculum itself became a battleground with the promotion of domestic science and needlework alternately to the establishment of subjects such as English, music, and dance in pioneering institutions such as Kanya Mahavidyalaya, provoking subversion against traditional boundaries. Despite some significant individual achievements and the emergence of women's organisations which explicitly linked educational demands to nationalist causes and female's liberation, the colonial period ended with a female literacy rate of only 6 percent in 1941, a stark reminder of the continued inequities that would make post-colonial educational challenges. Through review of archival documents, contemporary accounts, and analyses, this paper asserts women's education in colonial India cannot be seen as an aggregate progression but rather an accumulation of a fragmented system, the entrenched inequalities that it reflected and perpetuated being that expressed more generally in social hierarchy and colonial rule.*

Key Words: *Women's Education, Battleground, Arya Samaj, Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Hunter Commission.*

1. INTRODUCTION: A BATTLEGROUND OF AGENDAS

The Central Contradiction: Urban Focus and Social Exclusion:

The advancement of female schooling was predominantly urban in focus, neglecting the enormous majority of women in rural India. Upper-caste women face marginalization based on gender and class. Dalit and lower-caste women suffer from a triple burden of oppression based on caste, class, and gender. The syllabus was frequently fashioned to bolster conventional gender roles, such as domestic science and needlework, instead of cultivating scholarly capacity. MC Paul (1989) contends that the colonial administration offered only superficial endorsements to women's education; genuine advancement was realized via the determined endeavours of Indian activists, non-governmental organisations, and Christian missionaries.

Competing Historical Actors and Their Motives:

Female instruction in modern India has perpetually been a disputable subject, molded from the outset by numerous, frequently competing agendas: missionaries targeting impoverished and low-caste women for religious conversion; social reformers (mainly privileged Indian men) sought to tutor upper-caste, middle-class women to become appropriate companions for them and to counter Western censure of Indian society; and the colonial state, which demonstrated restricted dedication, depending on private capital, which established caste, class, and gender separations from an early stage. For example, tuition-based English institutions served upper-caste males, whereas free local-language schools were intended for lower-caste females (Sen, 2002).

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BATTLEGROUND THESIS

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya et al. (2001) introduce an analytical framework to understand discussions concerning female instruction, contending that it was a battleground molded by numerous dominance conflicts. Central to this framework was the twofold contention argument, which asserts that the debate was not solely regarding sex; rather, it was influenced by two intersecting struggles. Externally, it represented the clash between the imperial administration's objective to utilize schooling for doctrinal influence and the nationalist elite's advocacy for patriotic learning and cultural self-esteem. Internally, it represented the conflict inside Indian society between powerful factions (upper-caste and elites) aiming to maintain their supremacy and the disadvantaged factions (lower castes, women, and their supporters) disputing discriminatory entry to learning. Hence, it is clear that the subject of women's schooling must be viewed at the junction of these conflicts, not separately.

The ideological battleground over female education was fundamentally characterized by polarization between the emancipatory challenges to patriarchal hegemony and the traditionalists who sought to preserve social hierarchies. Progressive critics constantly questioned the established order. Jyotirao Phule, in 1882, criticized the schooling system for systematically funding only the elite and advocated for basic instruction for the common people and for females, connecting education to independence and the dismantling of caste subjugation. Miss F. McDougall, in 1917, asserted strongly against a syllabus created by males that concentrated exclusively on developing capable spouses and parents. She demanded comprehensive intellectual development for women and female autonomy to determine their own instructional requirements. Conversely, there existed views that aimed to restrict women's learning to maintain social hierarchy. Raja Radhakanta Deb objected to institutional learning for elite women, worrying it would cause significant social misconduct by disrupting their traditional domestic seclusion. The Mahratta newspaper and figures like KBV Krishna Rao repeatedly maintained that instruction should not westernize females or generate distaste for our household duties. The syllabus should stress devotional ethics, purity, and home economics, bolstering the doctrine of domesticity.

Concurrently, the nationalist figures endorsed female education but frequently within a structure that benefited the nationalist agenda. Figures such as Dadabhai Naoroji backed women's schooling as a significant societal requirement but also characterized its purpose as creating educated mothers who would nurture educated sons for the country. This generated a contradiction, balancing reformist goals with the necessity to not estrange traditionalist supporters. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya et al. (2001) questions the notion that this nationalist compromise was a simple deadlock for female autonomy, referencing contemporary research indicating women discovered methods to employ this framework for their own ends.

The institutional access was violently uneven. The advancement of female instruction varied considerably among social categories. Official documents justified barring lower-caste girls to prevent hindering an institution's advancement. Schooling for the most marginalized groups (such as Panchamas) was predominantly entrusted to Christian missionaries. Consequently, enrollment figures differed significantly, revealing stark disparities. In the late 19th century, almost 100% of Parsi females and over 35% of Christian girls of school age were enrolled, contrasted with under 1% of Hindu and Muslim girls. Muslim involvement was especially limited, although a change in attitude started in the early 1900s, transitioning from a liking for secluded (zenana) teaching to endorsement for formal education (Bhattacharya et al., 2001).

3. THE COLONIAL ERA: PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT AND STAGNATION

From 1757 to 1819, the East India Company displayed initial indifference, showing no proactive concern. Early endeavours were undertaken by missionaries and a small number of progressive Indians and British persons. Institutions were scarce, concentrating on elementary reading and writing and domestic abilities.

Between 1813 and 1854, cautious and hesitant commencements occurred. The Charter Act of 1813 designated money for instruction, yet none was expended on females. The imperial administration employed traditionalist attitudes as a justification for inactivity, apprehensive of provoking disturbance.

J.E.D. Bethune founded an institution for girls in Calcutta in 1849, employing his personal income after official channels declined support. This illustrated that advancement was propelled by non-public enterprise. Advocacy from activists, including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, resulted in Wood's Despatch (1854), which formally voiced endorsement for female instruction but was not executed with sincere dedication (Paul, 1989).

The Rise of Socio-Religious Movements (1854-1892):

From 1854 to 1892, societal campaigns compelled transformation: socio-religious bodies such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj became instrumental. They founded institutions, issued periodicals, and advocated for female instruction as crucial for national advancement. Reformers, specifically Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar set up more than 40 schools for women between 1855-58, and Mahatma Phuley started schools for women and harijans (Paul, 1989).

Case Study: Kanya Mahavidyalaya (KMV) in Jalandhar: The Arya Samaj founded Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jalandhar, a groundbreaking establishment for women's schooling in Punjab during the 1890s. Lala Devraj was the central personality responsible. He authored many instructional books that saw widespread use, for instance, *Stri Dharma Niti*—a publication that systematized the Samaj's doctrine on women's place in the household and community. The syllabus and Panchal Pandita magazine acquainted pupils with valiant Indian figures such as Lakshmi Bai and Gargi, alongside Western exemplars (Florence Nightingale, Lucy Stone, etc.). This inspired girls to pursue scholarly and brave models. The contentious inclusion of music and dance, arts associated with courtesans and lower-caste women, provoked debate for upper-caste pupils. KMV rationalized them by referencing instances from ancient scriptures like the Mahabharata and personalities like Mirabai. English language was also taught. The accomplishment of KMV depended extensively on the enterprise and toil of women. Prominent individuals included Mai Bhagwati, Savitri Devi, and Lajjawati (Kishwar, 1986).

Activism and Official Neglect: The Hunter Commission (1882):

The imperial government started concentrating on male schooling, culminating in the Indian Education Commission of 1882. This commission received statements from Indian female activists, most remarkably Pandita Ramabai. She argued for: feminine administration of female schools and more qualified women teachers; professional medical instruction for women to tackle mother and child death rates, coinciding with the objectives of the Lady Dufferin Fund. Ramabai created vital establishments: 1. Sharada Sadan (1889, Bombay)—a school and sanctuary for high-caste Hindu widows. 2. Mukti Mission (Kedgaon)—an extensive facility offering charitable aid and occupational training to women and orphans of every caste (Tschurennev, 2018).

Elementary schools for girls grew from 626 in 1854 to 2,600 in 1882. Nonetheless, the disparity stayed enormous. For every 1,000 boys enrolled, there were merely 46 girls. The Hunter Commission (1882) recognized the deficient condition of women's education and proposed measures (financial aids, residential facilities, tailored syllabi), but the authorities disregarded them, initiating an era of monetary constraints that stifled improvement (Paul, 1989, p. 7).

Fiscal Asymmetry and Limited Progress (1881-1947):

Quantitative analysis of 1881-1882 fiscal allocations exposes a chasm in state expenditure. Across the board, yearly spending never surpassed 0.022 rupees per female. In major areas like Bengal and the United Provinces, it was a meagre 0.004 to 0.006 rupees. Expenditure on women's schooling represented just 3.5% to 6.5% of the entire education fund. On average, 57.5% of financing for girls' institutions originated from non-state sources—philanthropic foundations, private donations, missionary establishments, and voluntary associations (Bhattacharya et al., 2001, p. xii-xiii).

From 1892 to 1947, a period of awakening and constrained access emerged, as instruction remained mostly confined to metropolitan and wealthy households. Rural females were nearly completely left out. Slow and irregular expansion in enrollment occurred; the number of girls in elementary schools increased from approximately 119,000 in 1881-82 to 913,000 by 1915-16. Tertiary learning commenced with significant difficulty, as universities initially prohibited women. The transition to advanced tiers was minimal; in 1896-97, the ratio of primary to secondary pupils was strikingly low (e.g., 1:20 in Bombay and Bengal). That same year, merely 87 women in the entire nation were pursuing a university degree. However, the provincial government's share rose significantly after the 1919 GOI Act. By 1921, government sources contributed 48.4% (Bhattacharya et al., 2002, p. xv-xviii). The Sadler Commission (1917) recommended a

segregated, communal system of education, including purdah schools based on religion. This, M. C. Paul (1989) argues, fragmented the potential for a unified secular educational movement and helped in educational balkanization.

In response to this institutional fragmentation, marginalized communities pioneered localised frameworks of agency and resistance. For Muslim females, trailblazers like Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain created schools operating in segregated settings, instructing in Urdu and domestic science. She founded the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial School for Muslim girls in 1911 and initiated the Bengal branch of Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, a Muslim women's philanthropic society (Bagchi, 2009). Concurrently, the emergence of women's groups (Women's Indian Association, All India Women's Conference) and their involvement in the independence movement directly connected educational demands to nationalist causes and female liberation. Nevertheless, these measures and frameworks by internal actors could not overcome the fiscal neglect of the state and ultimately, female literacy remained at just 6% in 1941, compared to 22.6% for males, underscoring a pronounced gap (Paul, 1989).

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development of women's education in colonial India was a deeply contested "battleground," shaped by intersecting conflicts between colonial authorities, social reformers, and nationalist agendas. Progress was not a state-led initiative but was driven primarily by private enterprise, religious organisations, and the determined efforts of Indian activists and reformers. The analysis reveals that this path was marked by systemic exclusion and inequality. Education remained overwhelmingly urban, neglecting rural populations, and was stratified by caste and religion, disproportionately disadvantaging Dalit and Muslim women. Furthermore, the curriculum itself was a site of struggle, often reinforcing traditional gender roles rather than fostering intellectual independence. Despite the emergence of women's organisations and pioneering institutions, the colonial era ended with a profound educational deficit for women, as starkly illustrated by the 1941 female literacy rate of just 6%. The legacy was not one of unified progress, but of a fragmented system whose entrenched inequalities would define the challenges of the post-colonial period.

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