

WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN COLONIAL INDIA

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Abstract: Before the British period, education in India was imparted by indigenous schools which were essentially religious in character with education restricted to the men of upper sections of society. Women received no formal instruction and whatever little domestic instruction they received, remained confined to the upper class families. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, women's education got a fillip and some of them assumed respectable roles of teachers and doctors. The main agents of women's education at that time were the missionaries, the Indian social reformers and philanthropic foreigners (mainly British) interested in the cause of women, the British government and some voluntary social organizations.

By the 1920's, a class of educated women emerged who were eager to espouse the cause of Indian women and the need for educating them. The leaders of the Indian national movement were also in favour of educating women. Women's education and amelioration got a great deal of impetus by the third decade of the twentieth century. This was facilitated by proliferation of a large number of educational institutions for girls opened by both the government and private philanthropists. However, it needs to be mentioned that women's education during the British period was by and large an urban phenomenon. Vital aspects of higher education and vocational training for women remained neglected.

Introduction: In order to comprehend the state of female education in colonial India, it is pertinent to examine the then existing educational set up. When the British obtained possession of India, education was imparted by indigenous schools which comprised of the pathshalas, madrasahs and gurukuls. These institutions were the source of traditional knowledge systems and therefore played a very significant role in the Indian traditional education. These indigenous schools were essentially religious in character and regarded knowledge as a means of spiritual and cultural growth. The official surveys of the indigenous

education conducted in different parts of India at the beginning of the nineteenth century throw some light on the state of education existing at that time. William Adams in his educational surveys observes that there existed about 1,00,000 village schools in Bengal and Bihar around the 1830s. Thomas Munroe observed in Madras that 'every village had a school'. The government of Madras Presidency completed a survey of Indian educational institutions in 1823-24. After that, it came to be known that despite poverty and ignorance, there were about 13,000 schools.

Table No. 1 : Literacy - A Comparison

	Adam's Figures	Census Figures –India		
Year	1835-38	1911	1921	1931
1. Total Population (lakhs)	4.97	3014	3029	3359
2. Literate adults (lakhs)	0.22	135	158	205
3. Percentage of 2 to 1	4.4	4.4	5.2	6.0
4. Total literate of age above 5 (lakhs)	0.29	159	190	235
5. Percentage of 4 to 1	5.8	5.3	6.3	7

Source: R. V. Parulekar and M. R. Paranjape, "Literacy in India in Pre-British Days" 1940, Reprinted in Shri R. V. Parulekar Felicitation Volume, Bombay 1956, pp. 212-45. Due to the caste system education was available only for the Brahmins or the priestly class, the Kashtriya or warrior class and the Vaishya or businessman class. The Shudra or the menial workers were a socially marginal section barred from accessing education. Thus, education was mostly limited to the twice born among the Hindus and the ruling elite among the Muslims.

One aspect that was neglected was the education of the girls. Thomas Munroe reported in 1822 that 5,480

girls attended the indigenous primary schools as against 1,78,630 boys. In Bombay, no girl attended the indigenous public schools between 1824 and 1829. In Bengal, William Adams reported in 1835 that parents did not favour the idea of giving education to their daughters. The general picture of the education of girls on the whole was most unsatisfactory because they received no formal instruction whatsoever except for the little domestic instruction that was available to the daughters of the upper class families. The custom of child marriage among the Hindus and purdah among the Muslims prevented the spread of education among girls.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, education was spreading among the Indians and by 1890, some 60,000 Indians had matriculated. Women's education too got a fillip. There were

educated women like Sarladevi Chaudhurani, Kamini Roy, Lady Abala Bose and Pandita Ramabai who assumed respectable roles of teachers and doctors.

Table No. 2 : Education of Girls and Women in Pre-Independent Period

Years	Percentage of literate women	Primary Schools	Middle Schools	Secondary Schools	Universities & Colleges	Other Institutions	Total
1881-82	0.2	124491	*	2054	6	515	127066
1901-02	0.7	345397	34386	10309	264	2812	393168
1921-22	1.8	1198550	92466	36698	1529	11599	1340842
1946-47	6.0	3475165	321508	280772	23207	56090	4156742

Source : Quinquennial Report-Ministry of Education and Culture publication, Delhi, 1946 – 1947.

*Included in secondary schools.

The main agents of women's, as of men's formal education, working at that time were the missionaries, the Indian social reformers who worked either through associations or independently and philanthropic foreigners (mainly British) interested in the cause of women, the British Government and some voluntary social welfare organizations.

Women's education was promoted in the initial stages by the missionaries. The Juvenile School Society founded in 1819 by Baptists missionaries in Calcutta was the first to take up the cause of female education. It resulted in the foundation of thirty schools for girls. Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840s and were assigned to work with women and children. The earliest modern schools for girls were started under the auspices of missions for the instruction of the children of the Christian converts only. Encouraged by the success of their attempts in this direction, the missionaries set up institutions for the education of non-Christian girls in Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Due to the age old prejudice against mixed classes, even for children, convents and Protestant missions started zenana schools, staffed by lady teachers to which only girls were admitted.

Later on, some British and other foreigners and Indian social reformers also joined and made significant contributions towards education. Among the British and foreigners, noteworthy are J.E.D.Bethune, David Hare, Margaret Cousins, Mary Carpenter and Annie Besant. The noteworthy Indian social reformers who worked in the field of education were: Raja Rammohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, Mahatma Phule, Maharishi Karve, M.G.Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekanand, and Mahatma Gandhi.

If we were to look upon women's education from the societal viewpoint and relate it to the motivation of those who introduced it, it seems that the demand for

women's education arose as a concomitant of social reform movement. The social reformers reasoned that reform in the social position of women would reform the society. They viewed women as being an integral part of family and society. It was for this reason that, while they propagated the cause of women's education, they also promoted the idea of the reinforcement of their traditional role through school curricula. Thus, the objective of women's education was formulated within the context of their social roles. Another objective of the social reformers was to meet the challenge posed by Christian missionaries who were proselytizing while imparting education. Although the Christian missionaries were concerned about the moral and intellectual uplift of Indians, their main aim in educating girls, as of all Indians, was to proselytize. Therefore, the response of Indians to these schools, although enthusiastic in the beginning became lukewarm later on.

With passage of time, Indians became suspicious of the aims of the missionaries and were afraid that their daughters would be influenced and would want to convert to Christianity. The reformist and revivalist sects like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj intensified their efforts at promoting education for girls. Voluntary social-welfare organizations like Seva Sadan Society, the Arya Samaj, the Dev Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj and the Chief Khalsa Diwan did invaluable work in creating favourable public opinion. This helped in changing the views of parents towards the education of their daughters. Various Mohammadan educational associations, Hindu associations and backward and depressed classes associations had become active in the field of education by 1920's.

Another fact was that educated men came to prefer educated girls as brides. This further reinforced the concept of education and motivated their parents to send their daughters to schools. Schools run by voluntary organizations like the Seva Sadan at Poona imparted music lessons, home science, first-aid, nursing, midwifery, etc. apart from the teaching of

languages to girls. However, the sphere of life of "the average woman was restricted to her home and her social status was one of subjugation with a few exceptions... illustrious women who, inspite of such adverse social conditions made their mark; as statesmen, rulers, soldiers or saints, appeared in all parts of the country from time to time and were honoured by men and women alike. But even such exceptions do not reduce the gloom of the general picture of the subjection of women who were denied opportunities for education."

Now, it is important to look into the colonial policy vis a vis education. When it was decided in 1813 that the colonial government was to undertake some responsibility for educating its Indian subjects, and again in 1835, when it was decided that this education was to be education in western knowledge, the authorities had only their male subjects in mind. The education of women was not high on their agenda in Britain at that time, and the small resources to be devoted to educating England's Indian subjects were not to be wasted on the lower classes or on women. It was the Wood's Despatch of 1854 that made a special reference, for the first time, to the education of Indian women, which observed that, "the importance of female education in India cannot be over-rated; and we have observed with pleasure the evidence which is now afforded of an increased desire on the part of many of the natives to give a good education to their daughters. By this means, a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the education and moral tone of the people than by the education of men." Thus, the Indian government declared support for female education, though no financial commitments had been made so far. It was perceived by the colonial administrators that the influence of women as educated mothers and wives would have a beneficial impact on the general spread of European knowledge.

Education had become a transferred subject under the Montagu-Chelmsford Constitution in 1919. Thereafter Dyarchy was introduced in 1921 and education came under dual charge. Education of women came to be a public issue by the early 1920s. This permitted greater Indian initiative in educational policy and facilitated its implementation. The slogan of Indian leaders and social reformers by this time had come to be,

"Educating a girl means educating a family." This had become possible because the 1920's were a period of immense social and political awakening in India followed by intense reformist efforts made by social reformers with or without organized support. Thus, the issue of women become the focus of social reform.

The Hartog Committee (1929) also emphasized on the education of women and observed that, "we

believe that difficulties in the way of women's education are beginning to lose their force and the opportunity has arrived for a great new advance. We are definitely of the opinion that... priority should be given to the claims of girls' education in every scheme of examination."

By the 1920s, a class of educated women had emerged. This miniscule section of women was concerned with the current position of women and the need for educating them. As women received education they became conscious of their problems and social status and sought amelioration of their situation.

"Women in India, through educational and other associations and through managing and advisory bodies are now taking a very real part in the endeavour which is being made on all sides to bring the education of girls in India up to at least the level which has been reached in the education of boys.... the public demand for the education of girls and of women is organized and vocal. This demand is being made not only by the women themselves but also by some men of the country".

The 1920s also saw leaders of the stature of Mahatma Gandhi and Annie Besant, supporting the women's cause by opposing purdah, and by opposing the ban on widow remarriage and supporting a ban on prostitution, etc. Mahatma Gandhi also stressed the need for educating women. His call to women to join the political movement brought them out of their homes in large numbers from varied backgrounds and from all parts of India. The impression that had gained currency all over India was that Mahatma Gandhi was not only a social reformer but a reformer who had a special message for women. Clearly, women's education and their amelioration had received a great deal of impetus by the third decade of the twentieth century.

However, higher education for women and vocational and technical training were neglected, as is borne out by the table below.

Table No. 3 : Number of girls under various types of Instructions

Schools for	No. of girls
Teaching	3,903
Art	32
Medicine	334
Technical and Industrial Careers	2,744
Commercial careers	308
Agriculture	79
Other careers	4,199
Total	11,599

Source : Quinquennial Report-Ministry of Education and Culture, Manager of publications, Delhi 1902 – 1922

Several trends are discernible from the statistics relating to women's education during the colonial period. These may be summarized as follows:

(a) First, there was an increase in the number of institutions from 1921-22 until 1939 – 40 but this number declined thereafter. This trend continued until 1946-47 as is evident from the table given below.

Table No. 4 : Institutions for Girls (All Types)

Year	Number
1921-22	23,517
1926-27	27,756
1931-32	33,969
1936-37	33,989
1939-40	34,564
1946-47	28,196

Sources: 1. Progress of Education in India, 1932-37, vol.I, Manager of publications, Delhi, p. 149

2. Progress Of Education in India, 1937-47, vol.2, Manager of publications, Delhi, p. 355

This should not be taken to mean that there was an actual sliding down of women's education. The explanation for this decline probably lies in the fact that during this period many inefficient institutions (mostly primary schools) were closed down while many more girls were studying in co-educational institutions than had been the case earlier.

(b) The number of girls enrolled in various institutions increased steadily. This increase occurred despite a decline in the number of institutions for girls.

Table No. 5 : Number of Boys and Girls enrolled in various institutions

Year	Boys	Girls
1922	69,62,928	14,24,422
1927	93,15,144	18,42,352
1932	1,02,73,-888	24,92,649
1937	1,10,07,683	31,38,357
1942	1,22,66,311	37,26,876
1947	1,39,48,979	42,97,785

Sources:

1. Progress of Education in India, 1932-37, vol.I, Manager of publications, Delhi, p.149

2. Progress Of Education in India, 1937-47, vol.2, Manager of publications, Delhi, p. 26

(c) The enrolment of girls in co-educational institutions rose steadily, rising from 35 per cent in 1921-22 to 54.6 per cent in 1946-1947, proportionately more girls were studying in co-educational colleges than at secondary school level, presumably because the number of girls' colleges was not particularly large. For instance, in 1946-47 while 9,042 girls were enrolled in girls' colleges of Arts, 11,262 were in boys' colleges. While, out of a total of 2,80,772 girls enrolled in high schools, 2,22,574 were studying in girls' schools. At the primary level the number of girls enrolled in co-educational schools was higher (19,80,393) than those studying in girls' schools (14,94,772). On the other hand their enrolment in special, technical and vocational schools was higher in separate schools (41,638) than in co-educational institutions (17, 355).

Nearly 50 percent of all schools for girls were private institutions, aided or unaided. For example, in 1946-47, of a total of 24,852 recognized institutions for girls, 11,863 were aided and 1772 unaided institutions. The remaining institutions were run by the government, district and municipal boards, the proportion of private institutions was still higher in 1937-38.

Table No. 6 : Institutions for Girls by Management 1946-47

Province	Recognized Institutes			Aided Private Bodies	Unaided Private Bodies	Total Recognized Institutions	Unrecognized Institutions
	Govt.	Dist. Boards	Municipal Boards				
Bengal	37	75	144	5,595	1,159	7,010	74
Bihar	11	178	151	1569	101	2110	106
Bombay	19	903	658	741	73	2,394	20
Madras	140	2147	471	1776	13	4547	1
NWFP	2	113	28	71	6	219	63
Punjab	149	1812	343	522	67	2893	2640
U.P.	115	1174	308	718	42	2357	124

Source: Progress of Education in India, 1946-47, Manager of publications, Delhi, p.43

Certain broad conclusions can be drawn regarding female education in colonial India

One thing is clear that women's education made a rapid start during the colonial period. Women came to receive education in large numbers, though this development was confined to urban areas because women's education was more in private hands and the activities of private organizations were restricted to urban areas. Lack of resources inhibited the government from taking it to the rural areas, a trend which, continued in the post-independence period. It was only after Mahatma Gandhi's call for universal primary education that social activity spread to rural areas.

While women's education registered a definite expansion, still they were far behind boys. For every 100 boys in 1946-47 there were only 36 girls in primary schools, 22 in middle, and 14 in high schools, 7 in colleges of professional education and 12 in the colleges of general education. On an average there were 30 girls per 100 boys in all educational institutions.

One comes across regional variations. For instance, during 1927-32 Madras had the highest percentage of

girls under instruction as well as a much higher percentage of girls reading in boys' schools, than in the other provinces. The low percentage of girls in co-educational schools in Bengal could be attributed to a large percentage of girl students enrolled in girls' schools. In 1932 more than half the girls' primary schools in British India were in Bengal. This may be due to early start of educational activity in this province.

Among the British provinces, Madras and Bombay stand out in terms of enrolment of girls in all institutions, expenditure by the Government on girls' education, the proportion of trained to untrained teachers, the highest enrolment in coeducational institutions and in the number of government run institutions. The Report on the Progress of Education in India, 1927-32 mentions that Madras has long been a pioneer in girl's education and Bombay was a close second. The provinces like the Punjab, U.P., Bihar and Orissa and NWFP were backward as far as the spread of female education is concerned. In 1946-47, there were 256 institutions for girls run by the government, district and municipal boards and Girls attending College.

Table No. 7: Enrolment of Girls in All-Institutions

Province	1927	1932	1937	1942	1947
Madras	539351	742536	921536	1214438	1435617
Bombay	223317	292658	326571	490337	581333
Bengal	425152	559712	4733389	822742	890944
Bihar	119030	126453	119236	162189	164432
Punjab	128880	213287	246059	304320	369768
NWFP	7905	13551	16956	22204 ¹	32171
U.P.	124236	167011	224688	275313	310784

Source : Progress of Education In India, 1927-47, Manager of publications, Delhi, p.33

Table No. 8 : Number of Girl students in Co-educational Institutions and Institutions for Girls

	1932		1937		1942		1947	
Province	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2
Madras	379434	363102	550788	370701	794220	474466	931959	
Bombay	105876	186780	129530	197041	227663	262674	268249	313084
Bengal	97926	461786	181327	552062	395932	426810	503154	
Bihar	23,880	168053	26432	219627	36267	268053	29579	
Punjab	57947	72506	50922	68314	73940	88249	77593	
NWFP	793	12758	1588	15368	1827	20377	2567	
UP.	59873	107138	55656	139129	102083	173230	104666	206118

Note : 1 Number of girls enrolled in Co-educational Institutions

2 Number of girls enrolled in Girls Institutions

Source : Progress of Education In India, 1932-47, Manager of publications, Delhi, p.22

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