

**Women Education in India: Historical Perspective
(A Critical Analysis)**

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Abstract

Historically women have participated in all spheres of life with courage and gusto. Indian Higher Education system is no exception. Indian mythology is rich with stories of highly educated and evolved women. One can trace the historical evidence of ancient Indian Education to the 3rd century BC. Those days education was imparted orally and many women scholars participated in this. When Buddhism spread to India, some world famous educational institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshila were established. Research shows that a number of women were enrolled in these temples of learning. These universities flourished from about 5th century to 13th century.

Keynotes – Vedic Era, Buddhist Era, Islamic Era and British Era

Introduction

Education is a ladder of development. It dispels darkness and brings light. It is a base of all Human Resource Development, a stepping stone for the onward march of culture, the bedrock of all human progress. An ancient proverb lays down: If you are planning for one year, plant trees; If you are planning for five years, plant rice: If you are planning for the future, educate your children. **“Education of one boy is education of one person by education of a girl the education of the whole family”** --- Jawaharlal Nehru. This statement amply and to a great extent explains the importance of women education. In India, the condition of women education has always remained deplorable. Women’ education was badly neglected in the past. While her position in Vedic times or even the Upanishadic Era was good, there is no doubt that period after 1000 A.D. was a dark age for her. Whatever the historic reasons, her social position began to deteriorate during the period and had considerable repercussions on her education.

Women education in India has also been a major preoccupation of both the government and civil society as educated women can play a very important role in the development of the country. Education is milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to

the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life. So that we can't neglect the importance of education in reference to women empowerment India is poised to becoming superpower, a developed country by 2020. Women Education helps country to raise fast. Women Education has helped a lot to women to know their rights. Now, women have entered in every field and they are walking with men.

Vedic Era

Female education in India is not a gift of modern civilization; we have brilliant tradition of it in our country. At least 20 women composed Rigvedic hymns. Gargi and Matreyi were the leading philosophers of the time. Women in the Vedic era so excelled in the sphere of education that even the deity of learning was conceived of as a female popularly known as 'Saraswati'. Girls were allowed to enter in to Gurukuls along with boys. There are also instances of female 'rishis' such as Ghosa, Indrani, Urvashi etc. The women in ancient India were given significance and they held a prominent position in the Indian society during that time. Access to education was easy for the women in ancient times. Through the massive Women Education in Ancient India several women seers and thinkers originated in ancient times such as Gargi and Maitreyi. Women enjoyed the tremendous right to education and teaching. In Vedic times, there was no discrimination of sex in the field of studies. A particular mantra was prescribed to beget a learned daughter in Brihadaranyaka upanishad. In the same upanishad, we find Gargi and Maitreyi distinguishing themselves in Brahmailydia, the highest knowledge. In the grihyasutras are found several mantras to be recited by women and the commentary on Gobhilagrihyasutras, states that the female-folk should be taught, for without such studies they cannot perform agnihotra sacrifice. Both Panini and Patanjali refer to women admitted to Vedic study. Thus a woman-student of the Katha school was called a Kathi, and the Rigvedic Bahvricha school, Bahvrichi. Female students were also admitted to the study of *mimamsa* and the one who studied *mimamsa-sutra* of the sage Kasakritsna is called Kasakritsna. There were chhatri (lady students) and Upadhyayi (Lady teachers).

This trend of liberal female education declined in the period that followed. The right of women for initiation to Vedic studies by way of upanayana seems to have receded slowly, though we find mention of learned women in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. By the time of the *smritis*, their education came to be limited to domestic and vocational studies only, by which they could become good housewives. However, the study of the fine arts like dance, music,

painting and practice of innumerable crafts continued. Vatsyayana enumerates duties of a housewife which included planting in her garden, rows of trees, flower and fruit plants and medicinal herbs, cooking, spinning, pounding, grinding, knowledge of wages of servants and their disbursement, the care and welfare of cattle, knowledge of constructing conveyances, looking after domestic pets, reckoning of daily income and expenditure and careful supervision of purchases and sales. Vatsyayana also lists sixty-four arts which were to be mastered by women which included besides those given above, reading of books (pustaka-vachanam), preparing medicines, recitation of difficult slokas (durvachakayoga), knowledge of dramas and stories (natakakhyanaka - darsanam), knowledge of languages of different countries (desabhasha-vijnanam) and knowledge of science of physical exercise and development of body (vyayamikanam vidyanam jnanam).

Buddhist Era

Women of **Buddhist** and **Jaina** faiths had comparatively more freedom to pursue the path of knowledge because womanhood was no bar to salvation as per their respective precepts. From Ashokan times we find women becoming preceptors and nuns and even going outside India for teaching Buddhism. Among the women authors of the Therigatha (stories of nuns) 32 were unmarried women and 18 were married ones. When so large a number of women were leading a life of celibacy, in pursuit of religion and philosophy, it is but natural that the average level of intelligence and education among them must have been fairly high according to Dr. Altekar. Hiuen Tsang has observed that Rajyasri, the sister of Harshavardhana was of great intelligence and distinguished for her knowledge of Sammatiya school of Buddhism. She sat along with the king and seemed to appreciate the learned discourse of Hiuen Tsang on the Mahayana doctrine.

Buddhism rose as an anti-thesis to the all pervasive Brahmanical influence. The Buddhist Order gave a definite place to women, namely that of bhikkhunis (nuns) and Upasikas (lay female devotees) in their four fold society as female counterparts of bhikkhus (priests) and upasaks (lay male devotees). However, it is to be noted that the Buddha consented to allow women to enter the order after great persuasion and due to the persistent efforts of Gautami and other women of Buddha's own family and at the intervention of Ananda. But once women entered the order it was a duty incumbent on them to study the Tripitaka and devote their attention to moral and religious training directed towards spiritual advancement. Once admitted into the Buddhist Order, women found opportunity to engage in educational, religious and social enterprises. We have seen this

ambivalence about women in all the world religions. Nuns of both religions were placed under the authority of men and suffered the same kind of second class citizenship even while being pronounced “spiritual equals”. While in the land of its birth, Buddhism was eclipsed by strong Hindu Brahmanical forces, the spread of Buddhism among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka and resultant impact on the education and status of women needs to be taken note of.

We hear of a number of women in **Jaina** texts who distinguished themselves as teachers and preachers. We also come across women who dressed in men's attire, putting on armour, equipped with weapons, arms, shields etc. It is interesting to know that in the 14th century, in Gujarat, the university of Tapogaccha conferred various degrees on women like, Ganini, Pravartini, Mahattara etc. These titles or degrees mean a leader of a Gana, a worker, and a great lady respectively. The names of the women on whom the above degrees were conferred are also mentioned in the work.

Islamic Era

Dr. S.M. AD-DARSH (1997) endorses that, “In the area of knowledge there is no discrimination between male and female”. The well-established hadith, ‘seeking knowledge is incumbent on every Muslim’ includes the females too. From a juristic point of view, the male gender in such a sentence construction includes females because both are addressed by Shariah injunctions. From a theoretical point of view, in Islam, what is good for men is, generally, good for women. Men and women were the recipients of the guidance of Allah and His revelations at the hands of the Prophet. After establishment of the faith and the teaching of Islamic way of life with full strength, women were present in the mosque of the Prophet along with men. In India, the Turkish Queen Razia Sultana, other Muslim Queens and princesses like Noor Jehan, Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara wielded political and military power. However the colonial period and industrial revolution showed a marked downtrend in the status of Muslim women but their status dipped after the Wars.

"The pursuit of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim, man and woman", said the Prophet (swa). With this instruction it became a religious duty of Muslims to educate themselves, their families, and their societies. Education and learning became a religious duty; no Muslim could prevent another human being from the pursuit of knowledge. Gender or race, culture or tradition could not become the cause for prohibiting a person from educating one's self. Pursuit of

knowledge became a religious law, therefore necessary to attain. With such instruction, the Prophet (swa) not only created an equal right to education, but also opened the door to a better understanding.

The rise of Muslims to the zenith of civilization in a period of four decades was based on Islam's emphasis on learning. This is obvious when one takes a look at the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (s), which are filled with references to learning, education, observation, and the use of reason. In Islam, for imparting education, the role of parents and teachers has been defined, with a belief that a child learns his first lesson from his mother only.

The Holy Prophet (Sallallaahu Alayhi Wasallam) said, 'The searching of knowledge is incumbent for every Muslim (male and female).' Every boy or girl, man or woman should pursue his/her education as far as it is possible. In the history of Islam you will find that there were women who were narrators of Hadith, mystics, scholars, writers, poets and teachers, in their own right. They utilised their knowledge within certain precepts of Islam.

Education had always been important to the Muslim community, not as a distributor of life chances but for the propagation of Islamic values. Therefore we come across such events which substantiate the significance and importance received by the women's education during the Muslim period. It was not neglected during the Sultanate period too; women at the higher echelons of society were educated while common boys and girls received education at Maktabas. Ibn Batuta reported about the existence of thirteen Madrasas , exclusively for girls in the Muslim state of Hannur of the West Coast of India in as early as 1333 A.D.(Saimuddin 1997) .

The Lodhi era, she notes was remarkable. Sikandar Lodhi was noted for the general patronage of education and knowledge. The ruler of Malwa, Ghiasuddin had appointed school mistresses for the royal women. But education as an institution did not percolate to the common women though indoor education of Muslim girls through lady tutor or aged Imams remained in vogue for the women of upper strata of society. Just after the uprising of 1857, the general Muslim desperation caused a serious setback to Muslim women's education, and women's isolation in education became complete.

The introduction of new political and economic institutions under the British rule in India made traditional education and learning redundant. Muslim education got a further set back due to loss of political power in 1857 and later the partition of the country affected Muslim education as

whole very adversely due to exodus educated middle class Muslims to the new state of Pakistan causing a vacuum of leadership. Bulk of those who stayed on belonged to occupational groups of artisans who did not see much use of English/western modern education for their children who were inducted early in the family occupations and household industries.

British Era

At the beginning of the 19th century educational facilities for women in the indigenous system of learning (in Tols, Pathshalas, Maktabas and Madrassahs) were virtually non-existent according to official surveys. The social status of women was low and women of the middle and upper classes led a life of seclusion under the dominance of family males and interaction with non-family males was prohibited. Among certain Hindu communities, there existed a superstition that a girl if taught to read and write would soon after marriage become a widow.

Later when the British arrived in India, English education came into being. European missionaries came and established many schools. These missionaries promoted schooling for girls from the early part of 19th century. These schools were mostly attended by girls from poor families. By the end of the 19th century, women were graduating from colleges and universities in a sizeable number. (In 1882 there were 2,700 schools and colleges for girls with 127,000 students) The social reform movement of the 19th century (that originated within the Indian intelligentsia and later spread to sections of the middle classes) had a major role in this upsurge of education amongst women, but this movement was largely an urban phenomenon. This period coincided with several other reforms such as child marriage, Sati pratha, Purdah system etc.

Modern education began for men with the passing of the East India Company Act of 1813. But the conservative officials of the Company refused to take any direct action in the case of women's education on account of the strict policy of social and religious neutrality and for not wanting to create any commotion by flaunting the existing norms of strict privacy and segregation of women. The company officials restricted their activities only to education of men and even refused financial assistance to special private girls schools. The void created by absence of a state effort in female education was filled by private effort of the Western missionaries and progress during the 19th century. The earliest modern schools for girls were opened by the Christian Missions for the children of the Christian converts but later this opportunity was extended to non-Christians who hesitatingly accepted this offer. However, conversions of some Hindu girls caused

a great furore and many parents began withdrawing their female wards from these schools. It was soon evident that missionary education by its very nature would not be an effective agency for the spread of education among Indian Women. Education of women picked up on account of the ‘splendid lead’ given by some liberal English men like J.A.D. Bethune and Professor Elphinstone. Bethune opened mission schools for girls in which religious instruction was excluded. His schools could be termed as the first secular schools for girls in India. The lead given by these English men was followed by some Indians who could not remain untouched by this gesture. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar were the earliest to take concrete steps for improving the educational (and social) status of women. Till 1854, education of girls expanded only on account of non-official effort. (Report of the National Committee on Women’s Education – NCWE, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, 1959)

Even after the 1854, Dispatch had enjoined on the officials to pay special attention to the education of girls, the progress was rather slow till 1870. In the meanwhile, Department of Public Instruction had been established in all provinces in 1868 to develop an integrated system of education for primary and secondary education in the country. The establishment of municipalities, local fund cess in mofussil areas and local funds committees for rural areas led to a large expansion of female education between 1871 and 1882. The insistent recommendation of Mary Carpenter, an English social reformer, for setting up training colleges for women was put into practice in 1870 onward. All conventions were set aside and admissions were open to all adult women “who had no qualifications except the desire to teach” (NCWE 1959). This gave the necessary impetus to girls education and also opened “a very useful career to several women who were in need of some remunerative vocation to give a meaning and purpose to their lives.

According to the 1881 Census Returns, however, for every 1000 boys in schools, the number of girls under instruction was 46, and while one adult male out of 16 could read and write, only one adult women in 434 could do so. Education of girls as we have noted earlier was spreading largely on account of private effort and only 616 out of 2,697 girls institutions were conducted by the Department in 1882. Also till then, the progress was limited to primary education of girls. The Indian Education Commission (1882) suggested adoption of pupil teacher system, payment of liberal grants-in-aid to private institutions for girls, offering of liberal inducements to the wives of school masters, training of widows as teachers, liberal prizes to girls willing to train as teachers

and special assistance to residential girls, schools. This bore some fruit. The number of girls institutions rose from 2,697 in 1881-81 to 5,801 in 1901. Collegiate education was only availed by European, Anglo-Indian, Indian Christians and Paris women till then. Among Hindus and Muslims, education of women was confined to primary stage only and 10 Hindus and 4 Muslims women were literate in English for every 1 million of population. At the turn of the century, 3,982 girls schools out of total of 5,305 at the primary stage, 356 of 422 secondary schools and 32 of 45 training schools and 1 out of 12 colleges for women, were conducted by private effort (NCWE, 1959). The lead given by the Christian missionaries for setting up the first institutions for female education was followed by a large scale effort on the part of the Social reformers who gave overriding priority to female education as the drive arm of social regeneration and freedom from alien rule and obscurantism.

Education of women was meant to improve the functioning of women in their traditional roles within the family or for raising their status within the family and no other roles in the wider social context were envisaged or catered for. The absence of any economic or broader social motive than family's well being is recognized as the main cause for the slow development of women's education in India. The social reform movement in India besides waging a war against social evils like Sati, child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, dowry and the like, give an impetus to women's education. A large number of secular and non-Christian denominational institutions for girls came up due to individual and group efforts. The Arya Samaj, Dev Samaj, Sanathan Dharam Sabha, the Khalsa Diwan, Ram Krishna Mission and a host of other religious organizations funded female education and created an atmosphere favourable to education of girls and the major hurdle of the fear of conversion receded.

In 1857, three universities were established in three presidencies- Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Acquiring higher education presented a personal challenge to middle class girls, but the participation of Christian and Parsi women was much higher than that of Hindu women, and it was the lowest among Muslims. Around the beginning of the 20th century the new emphasis on education for women was not just to make them better housewives and mothers but to help them educate their children and so contribute to nation-building. In 1906, Sarojini Naidu said in a speech to Indian Social Conference in Calcutta, "Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for, as I have said, it is we, and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of

progress all your Congresses and Conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is as true today as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world”.

At this time only 2% of Indian women had any education, so one can imagine the meager number of women who got ‘higher’ education. Nevertheless education was increasingly being viewed as a means to enhance the social presence of Indian women and enable them to adapt to a changing external situation. Indian National Congress played a major role in emancipating women. Within a year of its formation in 1885, a Ladies Association was formed. By 1890s more and more highly educated women were visible in public sphere. Later prominent Indian women like Ramabai Ranade, Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Rameshwari Nehru, Rajkumari Amrit kaur, Aruna Asif Ali, Sucheta Kriplani, Usha Mehta, and Vilasini Devi Shenai played an important political and social role.

By the 1920s different rationales were being presented to provide quality higher education to women. According to one view women should be highly educated because of their useful role as a mother. According to the other group women having the same needs, desires and capacities as men should be given same opportunities for higher studies. This period also saw a shift in consciousness of and about working class women. Once women were recognized as an integral part of the work force, higher education became a necessary stepping stone. However the development of educational opportunities for girls was held back because of child marriage and Purdah. Not only that, but Women's education was not smooth as several traditional and orthodox forces came in the way. For instance, Sardar Dayal Singh, speaking on behalf of the Indian Association of Punjab, stated "the object of female education in this country is not to make sound scholars but to make better mothers, sisters and wives". “Girls should be taught suitable subjects and not be made to swallow history and geography indiscriminately”, opined Lahore Arya Samaj. Many universities were established during this period. Banaras Hindu University in 1916, Aligarh Muslim University in 1920, and Delhi University in 1922, became new hubs of women’s liberation. At this stage many enlightened national leaders took much interest in this area and strove hard to bring about a change in the mindset of the people.

The Calcutta University Commission (1917-19) felt that Purdah Schools should be organized for Hindu and Muslim girls where parents were willing to extend their education up to 15-16 years and among others “Special attention was to be paid to women’s education”. Simon Commission (1930) reiterated the earlier view about the importance of education of girls and women in any scheme of national organization.The whole texture and strength of the national life are largely dependent on the contribution which women make to it --- Alike for the training and instruction of the young and for the readjustment of the Indian social system, the Indian woman is pivotal. It is manifest that the best teacher for girls and small children in a village school is a woman --- but the difficulties of establishing a service of such teachers in country places are very great, and the supply is very small.” The Post War Education Development Plan 1944 stated that India would need forty years to universalise primary education and that what was good for boys was equally so for girls and hence no separate provisions were necessary.

Conclusion

This brief study shows that women took in their stride the changing circumstances and adjusted themselves. In the Vedic age, they were equals of men. In Middle Ages their education became circumscribed; still those in the higher strata took advantage of education available. Now in modern times with facilities of co-education in all fields they have been doing as well as, if not better than men, provided they get equal opportunity to learn.

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