

# Growth of Women Education in Colonial India

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## ABSTRACT

This study delves into the history of women's education and social reform in colonial India, shedding light on the influential figures, movements, and societal changes that shaped the status of women during this transformative period. It explores the early advocates of women's education and reform, such as Mahadev Govind Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar, and their contributions to the Prarthana Samaj movement. Widow remarriage, a pivotal social reform, is examined in detail, with a focus on Ranade's role in promoting it. The study also highlights the crucial roles played by women in these reform movements, including figures like Ramabai Ranade and Tarabai Shinde. Additionally, it delves into the evolution of women's education, challenges faced, and the changing attitudes toward women's rights. The study underscores the significant influence of nationalism on women's participation in the freedom struggle, with Mahatma Gandhi emerging as a champion of women's rights. It explores the emergence of feminist consciousness through women's journals and how education served as a catalyst for societal change. By examining these historical contexts, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the progression of women's education and empowerment in colonial India.

**Keywords :** Women's Education, Social Reform, Colonial India, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Prarthana Samaj, Widow Remarriage, Ramabai Ranade, Tarabai Shinde, Nationalism, Feminist Consciousness, Mahatma Gandhi, Women's Journals, Women's Rights

## Introduction

As the title implies, this study has been undertaken to trace the beginning and growth of women education in colonial era. The research paper will critically study three novels and books written by the women who were born in and lived through colonial India. The novels and books selected are; *My Life (Amar Jiban)* by Rassundari Devi (1809-1900), *The Scattered Leaves of My Life: An Indian Nationalist Remembers (Jibaner Jharapata)* by Saraladebi Chaudhurani (1872-1945) and *A Marathi Saga: The Story of Sir Moropant*

*and Lady Yashodabai Joshi (Amchi Jeevan Pravas)* by Yashodabai Joshi (1868-1948).

As Ania Loomba says, the word "colonialism" according to the Oxford English dictionary comes from the roman "colonia" which meant farm or settlement and referred to roman's who settled in other lands but still retained their citizenship.

So we can say colonialism is the control and conquest of land and goods of other country. Earlier colonialism meant merely an extraction of goods and wealth from the countries it conquered. Now the modern colonialism is

much more than that pre-capitalist colonialism as Ania Loomba says:

*"Modern colonialism did more than extract tribute, goods and wealth from the countries that it conquered- it restructured the economies of the latter, drawing them into a complex relationship with their own, so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonized and colonial countries. This flow worked in both directions- slaves and indentured labour as well as raw materials were transported to manufacture goods in the metropolis, or in other locations for metropolitan consumption, but the colonies also provided captive markets for European goods. Thus slaves were moved from Africa to the Americas, and in the west Indian plantations they produced sugar for consumption in Europe, and raw cotton was moved from India to be manufactured into cloth in England and then sold back to India whose own cloth production suffered as a result. In whichever direction human beings and material travelled, the profits always flowed back into the so-called "mother country".<sup>1</sup>*

In Modern colonialism the colonisers benefited and strengthened their economies through the colonized countries by exploiting their human and natural resources. It was a two ways process- first the raw material from the colonized countries was transported in large quantity to the mother (colonizer) country to manufacture goods. Then the manufactured goods were sold back in the colonized countries as they provided good market for the European goods. On the other hand, imperialism means creating an empire and expanding its dominance in the neighbouring as well as far off regions. Colonialism restructures the social, physical and economic condition of the conquered region. In colonialism we observe that people move to the colonies in large numbers and live as permanent settlers, though they still maintain allegiance to their mother country. On the other hand, imperialism is just exercising power over the conquered regions directly or indirectly. Differentiating the meaning of the two terms Ania Loomba writes:

*The economic (and social) ties of reliance and control provide both captive labor and markets for European industry and products, thus direct colonial authority is not required for imperialism in this sense. The terms "neo-imperialism" and "neo-colonialism" are often used to characterize these trends. Given that colonial dominance was crucial in the development of European industry and financial capital, imperialism (in this sense) might be seen as the last stage of colonialism. The contemporary world makes a clear distinction between imperialism as a global system and colonial nations as the seizure of land, material*

*resources, labor, and intrusion with political and cultural systems of another region or country.<sup>2</sup>*

Thus the imperial country is the "metropole" from which power flows, and the colony or neo-colony is the place which it penetrates and controls. Imperialism can function without formal colonies (as in United States imperialism today) but colonialism cannot. (12)

India being a colonial country was also under imperial rule. From times immemorial, India had commercial relations with the west. Until Europeans interfered, Arabs had the monopoly over Indian trade. European traders had no choice but to buy goods from the Arabs at relatively higher prices. In 1498, with the discovery of new route through Cape of Good Hope to India by Portuguese traveller Vasco-da-Gama, Europeans established direct trade relations with India. India's richness in natural resources and wealth attracted many European trading companies for trade. The fine quality of cotton and silk and abandoned resources of spices produced in India had a big market in Europe. Indian spices like pepper, cloves, cardamom and cinnamon too were in great demand. European trading companies could buy raw material at a cheaper price in India and carry them back to Europe to manufacture goods and sell them back to India at higher prices.

During the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there started a ferocious competition between various European trading companies in India. Ultimately, by the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the English had out done all others and established their monopoly in India. Gradually the British set their foot in India and established themselves as the dominant power. East India Company of Britain gradually acquired the political foot hold in India. From a trading company it became a ruling company and gained exclusive control over most parts of the country.

But after the revolt of 1857 everything changed. The rebellion of 1857 took place by the soldiers employed by the British East India Company. Though it was the first large scale revolt by the revolutionaries of India but eventually it failed due to lack of unity and equipments, organized plan and proper training, this rebellion was an utter failure. The rebellions were brutally suppressed and the British government took control of the company. In the aftermath, all power was transferred from the East India Company to the British crown.

K. N. Panikkar explaining the nature and strategy of British East India Company writes:

*It took over a century for the colonization to be completed, and it was only possible due to military conquest and diplomatic maneuvering. At least at first, the English East India Company's strategies of becoming a political force*

<sup>1</sup> Loomba, A. (2002). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Loomba, A. (2009). Race and the possibilities of comparative critique. *New Literary History*, 40(3), 501-522.

were designed to give the impression that it was still primarily a commercial enterprise. In order to achieve this goal, the corporation decided to involve its subsidiary companies in the ongoing war for control among the Indian princesses. The firm took advantage of the almost constant warfare between Indian kings during the entire eighteenth century in order to build up its military might and establish itself as the dominant force in Indian politics. For almost a century following, under the euphemistic and ultimately deceptive name "the British Raj," India was subjected to the horrors of colonialism.<sup>3</sup>

**Aim of the study:** This paper aims to trace the growth of education among women in colonial times. It investigates when and how women began to realise the need and importance of education in their lives.

### Historical Evolution and Socio-Political Context of Women's Education in Colonial India

Though women had not always been in the same oppressed condition and also enjoyed respectable position in society, but things changed with time. Women received education and also were independent in many ways, but that was long back in Vedic times. As Altekar says with the invasion of Mughals, there had been tremendous change in the social, political and economic condition of the country. Certainly, the feminist movement promoted the idea of women education. Education is power. It is a weapon. May be, that's why reformers and feminists advocated strongly for women education to improve the condition of women in society.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, which was the main hub for all political and social activities, the intelligentsia was busy adjusting with and understanding their own indigenous culture and the new wave of thought brought in as a consequence of the colonial rule. Undoubtedly, the nineteenth century Bengal intelligentsia was a fruit of Colonialism.

Renaissance in Bengal has started much earlier in the nineteenth century. It was a move from medieval to modern. It was a kind of social, political and religious revival and rejuvenation. As Subrata Das Gupta points out in his book *Awakening: the Story of the Bengal Renaissance* that, "the British in India needed brokers, agents, revenue collectors, contractors, lawyers and managers to help them in their transactions with Indian producers. They needed Indians as middleman, in other words. These middlemen in Bengal became the core of the Bengali *bhadralok*. In helping the British make money they too amassed fortunes; in turn, they turned financiers-money lenders- to British traders and investors".<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Panikkar, K. N. (1990). Culture and consciousness in modern India: A historical perspective. *Social Scientist*, 3-32.

<sup>4</sup> Dasgupta, S. (2011). *Awakening: The story of the Bengal*

These so called "middlemen" were part of the Bhadrakol, thus formed, inadvertently by the self interested issues of British Empire. Eventually, these people from Bhadrakol became astoundingly rich. Subrata Das Gupta says:

*"The Bhadrakol class was not, of course, restricted to the aristocracy, the abhijat. Below them in wealth and status, though not necessarily in education, were the middle class (maddhyabitta): officers in commercial houses, practitioners of "native" medicine (kavirajs), teachers, lawyers, writers, government bureaucrats, small traders, and the like. Though not as rich as the aristocratic bhadralok they were not poor. Rammohun Roy, Michael Madhusudan Datta, Bankimchandra. Chattopadhyay, Prafulla Chandra Ray, and Jagdish Bose, among the principal protagonists of the Bengal Renaissance, came from the maddhyabitta."*<sup>5</sup>

There was a lot more translations and printing done in literary field. Bible was being translated to the vernacular languages in India so that it could benefit the common people. William Carey, a Baptist minister of British government, did a lot in translation of books. He "completed his translation of Bible (for at least some part of it) into Bengali in 1796 but its publication was delayed for lack of resources till 1800" (Dasgupta 74).

Carey and Joshua Marshman gave much effort in translating Ramayana from original Sanskrit language to Bengali and brought it out in three volumes between 1806 and 1810. Also, there was a huge work done on grammar of various languages. Carey himself authored many grammar books of many languages like Bengali and Sanskrit. Also, "To add to the grammars of Bengali and Sanskrit, he went on to produce a grammar and a dictionary of Marathi (1895 and 1810 respectively), and Grammars of the Punjabi (1812), Telugu (1814), and Kannada (1814) languages" (Dasgupta 89).

Under the rule of imperial government India underwent innumerable changes in the religious, social, economic, political and cultural spheres. The British government took steps for the betterment of the common people and thus introduced various schemes to educate them.

Thomas Babington Macaulay played a major role in transforming the educational system in India. He gave priority to the English language and introduced it as the base language of the education system and medium of instruction, so that India could contribute in the progress of

renaissance, Random House India, p. [451]-475.

<sup>5</sup> Loomba, A. (2002). *Colonialism/postcolonialism*. Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Loomba, A. (2009). Race and the possibilities of comparative critique. *New Literary History*, 40(3), 501-522.

<sup>5</sup> Panikkar, K. N. (1990). Culture and consciousness in modern India: A historical perspective. *Social Scientist*, 3-32.

<sup>5</sup> Dasgupta, S. (2011). *Awakening: The story of the Bengal renaissance*, Random House India, p. [451]-475.

so called mother country. He was the one who gave the British Empire a profound moral mission to civilize the natives. In his book *Colonialism, Culture, and Resistance* K. N. Panikkar asserts:

*"The civilizing mission British undertook after the conquest marked the beginning of a new stage in colonization where the natives were brought under administrative control, presumably for improving their moral and material conditions. The opportunity for liberating the "natives" from the "unhappy system of oppression" of oriental despotism was considered sufficient justification for conquest."*<sup>6</sup>

In his famous minute of 1835 he presented his proposals on education in India. Under Macaulay a large number of elementary and secondary schools were opened and these schools typically had only male students. But many Indians including Gandhiji didn't welcome the Macaulay's idea of introducing English as the base language. In his famous book *Hind Swaraj* Gandhiji writes, "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them. The foundation that Macaulay laid of education has enslaved us. I do not suggest that he has any such intention, but that has been the result. Is it not a sad commentary that we should have to speak of home rule in a foreign tongue?" (78).

Christian missionaries also played a major role in the education of India as they opened their own schools in which they taught Christianity. One is cognizant of the fact that eighteenth and twentieth century were set in juxtaposition. To reach the beginning of women education we need to form an understanding of the contemporary political and social scenario of the colonial times. The reform movement in Bengal got its major motivation from its western ideas. When men got educated and learnt the various ideas of equality, fraternity and more they became active to introduce these words into their society. Illustrating the effects of western ideas on high class Hindus of middle class and marking the beginning of reform movement Bharati Ray in her book *Early /s of Colonial India* writes:

*The educated Hindu middle class, on the defensive and eager to forge a new identity, defended a "glorious" Indian past in which they portrayed women as having held prominent roles. In keeping with this, a deliberate reconstruction of the "glorious" ladies of the past was constructed, praising the "traditional" traits (that are, of course, subjective) of women from a "pristine" classical Hindu era. The "glorious" ladies were the upper-caste Aryan women, and the illustrious past was seen as the time of the Aryans. Another, seemingly conflicting result also occurred. The English-educated middle class in India*

*developed a strong desire for "improvement" and "modernization" in response to the civilized criticism of India, and with it came a desire to end some of the horrific acts against women that appeared to represent the degradation of the whole community. The result was the social reform movement of the nineteenth century."*<sup>7</sup>

With the expansion and strengthening of British rule, the government began to recruit English educated young Indians to the bureaucracy at clerical or lower levels. Not only the British government took efforts but also the missionaries and many enlightened Indians played a crucial role in spreading modern education. For a long time the debate continued on the question of the type of education that should be given to the Indians that to be adopted in the educational Institutions. But then, as Bipan Chandra in his book *History of Modern India* writes:

*In 1835, the Indian government resolved the two debates by deciding to use its little resources to promote the study of Western sciences and literature via the medium of English. The Law Member of the Governor-General's Privy Council, Lord Macaulay, famously argued in a minute that Indian languages weren't evolved enough for the job, and that "Oriental learning was completely inferior to European learning."*<sup>8</sup>

On February 2, 1835 Macaulay gave his famous "Minute on Education" in which he advocated English language and renounced vernacular languages of India. He argued that Indian should be taught in English. "There was also the practical advantage that it was the language of the "ruling class", the tongue known to the "higher classes of natives", and likely to be the "language of commerce" in Asia". Elaborating the emergence of Bhadraklok and describing how Macaulay laid foundation of education in India, Subrata Dasgupta writes:

*Macaulay pointed out that the "natives" themselves wished to be taught in English; that they did not wish to be taught in Sanskrit or Arabic. But he also agreed with the Orientalist faction, whose opinion s he otherwise opposed, that it would be impossible to educate "the body of the people". Rather, a new class had to be created who would serve as intermediaries and interpreters between the rulers and the "millions whom we govern". This new class would be, he said in the most infamous passage in the "Minute": "...a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." It would be this class's task to refine the vernacular languages, introduce new terms of science taken from Western vocabulary, and eventually make these tongues "fit vehicles" for carrying the knowledge of the West to the "great mass*

<sup>6</sup> Panikkar, K. N. (2007). *Colonialism, culture, and resistance*. Oxford univ. press.

<sup>7</sup> Ray, B. (Ed.). (2005). *Women of India: colonial and post-colonial periods*. Sage.

<sup>8</sup> Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., & Mahajan, S. (2016). *India's struggle for independence*. Penguin UK.



of the population." This new class was already in place in Bengal: they werethe bhadralok.<sup>9</sup>

### Women's Education and Reform Movements in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Raja Ram Mohan Roy was himself married 3 times till he reached age nine. He advocated English language and western ideas. But he never forsook Bengali. He translated several texts from Sanskrit into Bengali like Upanishad and Vedanta. He fought for women's rights all his life. He not only strongly opposed *sati pratha* but also advocated education and inheritance law for women. Describing the Renaissanceman, Ram Mohan Roy, Bipan Chandra writes:

*"Rammohun Roy represented a synresearch paper of the thought of East and West. He was a scholar who knew over a dozen languages including Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. As a young man he had studied Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy at Varanasi and the Quran and the Persian and Arabic literature at Patna. He was also well-acquainted with Jainism and other religious movements and sects of India. Later he made an intensive study of Western thought and culture."*<sup>10</sup>

He was one of the earliest propagators of modern education which he looked upon as a major instrument for the spread of modern ideas in the country. Bipan Chandra states, "He was a stout champion of women's rights. He condemned the subjugation of women and opposed the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men in intellect or in a moral sense. He attacked polygamy and the degraded state to which widows were often reduced. To raise the status of women he demanded that they be given the right of inheritance to property"<sup>11</sup>

It was Raja Rammohun Roy who defined femininity differently. Instead of propelling the women to raise their voices against the injustice done to them, he pleaded the men to change their attitude towards women. Malavika Karlekar in her book *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* writes, "Man internalized Victorian attitudes towards women vital for the development of the right kind of Bhadramahila or Bengali gentlewomen. Such a woman was to be a "helpmate" and an intelligent companion to her husband, who was caught up in the stormy days of social and occupational change".

As the eighteenth century women started to question their existence in the patriarchal world, we can say, they became

conscious of their femininity. Malavika Karlekar further adds:

*Clearly, the educational system was not only creating good wives and mothers who would adjust well to the new type of urban family collectively but also encouraged the expression of determination and independence of mind. Such women questioned not only traditional oppression but also the new ideology which continued to assign women a position where they were hardly allowed to face life on their own terms and in their own way. Education facilitated the growth of individuality, a degree of enquiry and of self-expression where it was least expected."*<sup>12</sup>

In rejecting the Indian mother tongue, Macaulay was articulating the views of an influential section of rulers who felt that India should develop into a scientific, modern society. The Anglicist lobby soon overtook the well-intentioned orientalist whose faith in native institutions was regarded as naïve and clearly out of keeping with the times. (32)

Ram Mohun Roy (1772-1833) was the most important among the earlier reformists who worked for women emancipation. But contrastingly the man who is still famous for his work to save women's rights himself had three wives. Ram Mohun strongly criticized *sati pratha* and worked hard to ban it. In those days, it was usual for a man to marry several times to the little girls of a younger age may be seven or eight. The age difference was exceedingly large that after the death of husbands, little girls would be left behind as widows and condemned to a life of hardship and humiliation. With shaven heads, forbidden to eat spicy and tasty food and colour clothes and jewellery, these little girls had to live a painful life of exploitation. It would not be astonishing if a widow commits sati under such circumstances. Malavika has also illustrated Rammohun's views on women and giving equal opportunities to them. She writes:

*As early as 1820, he argued that despite being "in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy", women were in no way intellectually inferior to them: in fact, he pointed out that "as to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did you afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity?" Women were generally "kept devoid of education and requirements". (Voices 35-36)"*<sup>13</sup>

With Rammohun Roy's efforts the government declared sati illegal in 1829. Raja Rammohun Roy laid foundation of Brahmo Samaj by synthesizing the ideals of Hinduism and Christianity. He was the propagator of a new and modern society that gave equal opportunities to women. After Raja Rammohun Roy, his Brahmo Samaj was led by

<sup>9</sup> Dasgupta, S. (2011). *Awakening: The story of the Bengal renaissance*, Random House India, p. [451]-475.

<sup>10</sup> Chandra, B. (2000). *India after independence: 1947-2000*. Penguin UK.

<sup>11</sup> Chandra, B. (2000). *India after independence: 1947-2000*. Penguin UK.

<sup>12</sup> Karlekar, M. (2004). A note on the empowerment of women. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(2), 145-155.

<sup>13</sup> Karlekar, M. (2004). A note on the empowerment of women. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(2), 145-155.

Devendranath Tagore. To propagate the ideas of Rammohun Roy he found Tatvabodhini Sabha.

The Tatvabodhini Sabha and its organ the Tatvabodhini Patrika promoted a systematic study of India's past in the Bengali language. It also helped spread a rational outlook among the intellectuals of Bengal. In 1843 Debendranath Tagore reorganised the Brahmo Samaj and put new life into it. The Samaj actively supported the movement for widow remarriage, abolition of polygamy, women's education, improvement of the ryot's condition and temperance. (Chandra 135)

Another prominent reformer was Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-31) who was of Eurasian parentage or an Anglo Indian. Bipan Chandra describing this eminent personality states:

*"Derozio possessed a dazzling intellect and followed the most radical views of the time drawing his inspiration from the great French Revolution. He was a brilliant teacher who, in spite of his youth, attached to himself a host of bright and adoring students. He inspired his students to think rationally and freely, to question all authority, to love liberty, equality and freedom, and to worship truth. Derozio and his famous followers, known as the Derozians and Young Bengal, were fiery patriots."*<sup>14</sup>

Also, he wanted people to reason everything and become aware of the hollow ideas of the orthodox society. But the wave of rationalism ended with his early death. Another reformist is Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91) who was a great scholar, and can be called a feminist. Subrata Das Gupta asserts, "he was not just a "supporter of women" but a passionate advocate of women's rights, an activist especially in the cause of female education, opposition to child marriage, and kulin polygamy and, most of all, on behalf of widow remarriage". He strongly advocated widow remarriage and for that he searched almost every text or shastra of Hindus. He got his answers and found that no shastra denies remarriage to a widow. He wrote extensively in favour of widow remarriage so that people could comprehend his motive behind the remarriage. And finally in 1856 the Hindu widow remarriage act was passed.

Other major reformers from Marathi region were Mahadev Govind Ranade, Jyotiba Phule, Bal Shastri Jambhedkar, Dadabhai Naoroji, Ambedkar etc. In Marathi region, Bal Shastri was the one who opposed orthodox society and tried to revitalise Hinduism. As Bipan Chandra says, "The Paramahansa Mandali was founded in Maharashtra. Its founders believed in one God and were primarily interested in breaking caste rules. At its meetings, members took food cooked by low low-caste people. They also believed in permitting widow remarriage and in education of women".

Jotiba Phule (1827-1890) and his wife Savitri Bai Phule (1831-1897) played a crucial role in promoting women education. Jotirao Phule was a social activist and reformer from Maharashtra. He and his wife started girls' school at Poona. Economically the upper caste was more dependent as compared to women of labour class. Even the great social reformer Jyotiba Phule, categorized the upper class women with lower class men and women because there was not much difference in the status of upper class women and the lower caste of society. Women's lives were strictly monitored by men.

Phule shared a different opinion regarding the emancipation of women as compared to the other reformers of his times. He strongly advocated education for women and believed that only knowledge could liberate women from the shackles of patriarchy. He opened first school for girls in 1848 in Poona for untouchable girls. Moreover, he believed that society can progress only when its women are educated. He fearlessly challenged society overtly by opening school for girls and publicly a defending the opinions of Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde.

Jotiba phule explored the past extensively to explain the present scenario and also because he regarded that Brahmins" were basically misinterpreted and manipulated. He started home for pregnant upper-caste widows so that they could give birth to their kids at secure places, as widows often back then were most neglected. He was a visionary and prudent social activist who formed Satya Shodhak Samaj in 1873 to protect the rights of women and the depressed groups. It organized widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. Savitribai along with her husband played a significant role in women education. She was taught by her husband Jotirao Phule at home. She completed her education and started a teaching career. She was an educationist and a writer. Savitribai used to teach at the school opened at Poona.

Jotirao Phule was pioneer of the widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra. Vishnu Shastri Pundit founded the Widow remarriage Association in the 1850s.

The Swadeshi movement was produced great impact of developing of educational institutions. To affect the British, Indian leaders led the boycott of every foreign element. This led to the opening of various educational institutions. Also, a large number of women participated in it. It helped them in gaining self confidence and determination and most importantly the decisive power.

Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to carry on humanitarian relief and social work.

*"In 1897, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to carry on humanitarian relief and social work. The Mission had many branches in different parts of the country and carried on social service by opening schools, hospitals and dispensaries, orphanages, libraries, etc. It thus*

<sup>14</sup> Chandra, B. (2008). *India since independence*. Penguin UK.

*laid emphasis not on personal salvation but on social good or social service.*<sup>15</sup>

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was a well known scholar and feminists and also honoured the title “Pandita”. She worked immensely for women uplift. She started Sharda Sadan for widows. After her husband’s death, she devoted her life to women education. Pandita Ramabai was a legendary woman of her time. Her father Ananta Shastri Dongre was a great supporter of women education and even educated her mother. Her mother in turn took care of the education of her daughter and used to teach them. The family environment had a great impact on her intellectual. Her family used to read *Puranas* in temple and other places, so undoubtedly she had a deep knowledge about the ancient texts.

After the loss of her parents and sister in famine she went to Calcutta. There she became sensational after having long conversation and arguments with great scholars in Sanskrit. Since then she was honoured with “*Pandita*”. Ramabai Ranade was a fearless, revolutionary social activist and staunch supporter of women’s rights. Her life was shaped by her father’s experiences with orthodox Brahmins and his life as a wanderer from place to place. Her father was a learned Brahmin who educated his child bride, resulting into their ostracism. After her parents’ death in 1877 famine, she continued with her father’s profession of lecturing and reciting *purans* attempts.

She learnt Sanskrit from her mother and some things she picked up from her father while listening to him, giving lectures. Her fame spread everywhere and pundits of Calcutta invited her to see it for themselves, the women scholar, and brilliant in Sanskrit. She was the founder of Arya Mahila Samaj in Poona. She converted to Christianity and founded a home for widows, which was the first of its kind in Maharashtra. She declined almost every rule of patriarchy. She married a low caste Bengali man, Bipin Behari Madhuri. Her husband died an early death leaving behind a widowed Ramabai.

Kamaldevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1990) was born at the dawn of 20<sup>th</sup> century when nationalist feelings were raising high in the country. She was born 1903 in the Saraswat Brahmin community of Mangalore. She was widowed early after her first marriage as a child. Her second marriage was to Harindranath Chattopadhyay who was Sarojini Naidu’s brother. After her second marriage, she filed a divorce which caused sensation among the orthodox Brahmins. She was greatly influenced by the Gandhian ideologies and his concept of non violence. Her mother and maternal grandmother played a great role of instilling the nationalist feelings in her and the courage to challenge the

orthodox society. In 1926, she became the first women to run in elections in Mangalore, lost only by a narrow margin. She participated actively in civil disobedience movement and got arrested several times. She was the founding member of the all India women’s conference in 1926. She was a great lady who guided and volunteered women in the congress sessions. She was admired by American women for her courage and traditional values. She was regarded a good wife by the patriarchal society. While she was advocating Indian culture including child marriage in America, another revolutionary woman Rakhma Bai was fighting orthodoxy because she declined to accept forced conjugal relationship.

Like the newly educated generation of men like Gopalrao, she was demanding suitable companion for marriage. She rejected the widely accepted role of a suffering woman in the hands of men. Her husband filed case against her demanding restitution of conjugal rights. When judges ordered her to either live with her husband or face six months imprisonment, she replied defiantly that she would rather prefer imprisonment. The case caused sensation in the society and drew criticism from the patriarchs. Finally she appealed to Queen Victoria and her marriage was dissolved.

Uma Chakravarti points out that, “the female world had conventionally been limited to the household, which was the focal point of female reproduction, domestic labour and of kinship relations of upper-caste women in Maharashtra as in other parts of the country” (*Rewriting History* 201).

### **Emergence of Feminist Consciousness and Women's Social Empowerment**

In the later part of the nineteenth century, the mission to educate the young wives became necessary for every husband. The English educated new generation men were dissatisfied with the existing marriage institutions and the lack of option in choosing a compatible wife for them. Uma Chakravarti asserts:

*“The frustrations arising from these institutions were transferred upon the young wife as in the case of Govindrao Kanitkar, Kashibai’s husband, who was disappointed at being “saddled” with a woman regarded as unattractive. She was not the kind of woman who was the object of attention of an English-educated male sensibility. Further, the non-consensual marriage combined with pre-pubertal marriage for girls meant that men old enough to be fathers could be husbands as in the case of Ramabai Ranade and Anandibai Joshi. A companionate marriage, at least in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was virtually impossibility.”*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., & Mahajan, S. (2016). *India's struggle for independence*. Penguin UK.

<sup>16</sup> Chakravarti, U. (2014). *Rewriting history: The life and times of Pandita Ramabai*. Zubaan.

Anandibai Joshi, first woman doctor of India was a legendary figure in western India. She was married at nine, to a widower Gopalrao Joshi, who was much senior to her in age. Their relationship was full of violence due to Gopalrao's eccentricity for her education. Though he wanted her to be educated and become a doctor, his methods of teaching his wife were violent. He was a progressive thinker but he could not or did not ignore the trends of practicing marital rights according to traditions.

Anandibai gave birth to her first and only child when she was just fourteen. Unfortunately the child could not survive. Anandibai went to America for medical studies and during her stay she still practiced Hindu religion and even advocated Indian culture. She graduated with a degree in western medicine in USA in the year 1886. Sadly she could not start practicing as her death struck early in 1887.

Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) was one of the prominent Indian social reformer justice, scholar, author and also a founder member of Indian National Congress Party. Mahadev Govind Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar gave new height to the Prarthana Samaj which was founded by the Atmarang Pandurang in 1867. Prarthana Samaj was established primarily to reform Hindu Religion and orthodox culture. It helped us in improving condition of women and raised voice against child marriage. It provided educational opportunities to women and initiated widow remarriage. Prarthana Samaj was deeply influenced by the principles of Brahmo Samaj. As Bipan Chandra states:

*"Prarthana Samaj was started with the aim of reforming hindu religious thoughts and practice in the light of modern knowledge. It preached the worship of one God and tried to free religion of caste orthodoxy and priestly domination. Two of its great leaders were R.G. Bhandarkar, the famous Sanskrit scholar and historian, and Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901). It was powerfully influenced by the Brahmo samaj. Its activities also spread to south India as a result of the efforts of the Telugu reformer, Viresalingam."*<sup>17</sup>

Mahadev G. Ranade was an Indian reformer, judge and scholar. He was one of the sturdy supporters of widow remarriage in Maharashtra. Although under family pressure he married a girl of 11, after his first wife's death. Uma Chakravarti points out that "following the ceremony, Ranade retreated without partaking even of the ceremonial dinner and locked himself in his room".

This one step let down his reformer mates and afterwards his every effort was judged by this one failure to his ideas. After his remarriage to Ramabai, he began teaching her. But he could not provide much time to it, so he appointed a teacher for her.

Ramabai Ranade (1863-1924) used to accompany Ranade on his tours, where she used to look after his personal needs like cooking, writing letters for him and massaging his feet at night. Ramabai always found a divine power and godliness in him and this would not be an exaggeration to say that she regarded him as God.

Uma Chakravarti writes that "in Ramabai Ranade's example the reformers found the model of the new Indian womanhood, schooled so perfectly by her husband that she could reproduce the male voice exactly and was thereby representative of the type of womanhood who could be "modern" without losing the traditional Indian wife's virtues" (*Rewriting History* 224).

Mahadev Govind Ranade was in favour of women education but he abstained from any public appearance of women. He opposed participation of women delegates in congress but with efforts of Pandita Ramabai his trends began with participation of a few women in Congress session in Bombay in 1883. Though, Ramabai stayed away from politics following her husband's framework strictly. After M.G. Ranade's death Ramabai founded Seva Sadan in Pune for rehabilitation of oppressed women Tarabai Shinde (1850-1910) was also a great feminist and activist. She attacked the orthodox society in her work *Stri Purush Tulna* written in Marathi. One of the radical feminist that emerged in Maharashtra was Tarabai Shinde who attacked orthodox Brahmins in her critical text *Stri Purush Tulana* in 1882. This is the only written work by her and the language used by Tarabai was comparatively shrill and harsh and created a lot of controversy in the traditional Brahminical society.

Education enlightened the intellect and gradually women from every caste began to raise voice against the orthodox patriarchal society. Also the reformers aroused the consciousness among lower caste regarding human rights. The social activists began to oppose the evil social practices. Mahatma Gandhi strongly condemned "untouchability". B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) himself from a lower caste fought all his life for the rights of lower caste.

Education emerged out of feminism when women realised that they should be given equal rights with men. They fought for legal rights. Even women had no proprietary rights either in their father's property or their husband's property. And wherever rights were given, they were not fulfilled. But women's property right has always been a widely debated question as stated in the chapter "Turmeric Land: women's Property rights in Tamil Society since Early Medieval Times" by Kanakalatha Mukund as follows:

*"As with many questions relating to the status of women in Indian (and specifically Hindu) society, the simple question, "What rights did women have to property?" becomes an extremely complex one with no uniform*

<sup>17</sup> Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., & Mahajan, S. (2016). *India's struggle for independence*. Penguin UK.



answers which are valid for all regions, castes or classes. To begin with there is no unanimity on this question even among the various Smritis and texts of jurisprudence.”<sup>18</sup>

In this regard, Srabashi Gosh in her article “Birds in a Cage: Changes in Bengali Social Life as recoded in Autobiographies by women” also states that, “women did not have any right on their husband’s property, even husband’s home. They could neither inherit their paternal property. After the death of the husband they were often driven out of the husband’s home. They had to take the shelter of their brothers. But there also they were unwanted. Often their conditions were no better than maid servants” (WS-90).

What old Hindu texts and scriptures say about the women’s right to property is as follows:

*“In the ancient Smritis and Dharmasastras ( for the most part dating back to 200 BC- AD 400), which were the first systematic treatment of Hindu law, the question of property rights and inheritance formed one of the important aspects of civil law, with the more controversial question of women’s rights also being discussed. Even the Manusmriti recognised women’s property or stridhan, and the right of unmarried daughters to a share of the father’s property.”*<sup>19</sup>

The spread of education brought a revivalism in the whole social system and played a significant role in sheltering the walls of caste in the Hindu Society. Moreover, the growth of national movement provided women enough freedom to flourish. In this zealous wave of reform movements and nationalism, women got ample opportunities for self expression, to educate them and to show inner potentials. National movement united everyone irrespective of caste, religion or gender. Whether it was Swadeshi movement, Congress sessions, Gandhiji’s Satyagraha women participated extensively. In the chapter, “Contentious Traditions: the Debate on Sati in Colonial India”, Lata Mani writes:

*“Indeed, as the nineteenth century progresses, at a symbolic level, the fate of women and the fate of the emerging nation became inextricably intertwined. Debates on women, whether, in context of sati, widow remarriage or Zenanas (seclusion of women), were not merely about women, but also instances in which the moral challenge of colonial rule was confronted and negotiated. In this process women came to represent “tradition” for all participants: whether viewed as the weak, deluded creatures who must be reformed through legislation and education, or the valiant*

*keepers of tradition who must be protected from the first and be permitted only certain kinds of instruction. For the British, rescuing women becomes part of the civilizing mission.”*<sup>20</sup>

Feminist conscious emerged through women education which in turn spread awareness to raise women issues. Vir Bharat Talwar in his paper on “Feminist Consciousness in women’s Journals in Hindi, 1910-20” states that women found organisations for women welfare and started to publish their writings in various journals.

The male members if the family played a significant role in imparting education to women. As Malavika states:

*Ultimately as women were dependent on menfolk, their chances of being educated were limited as husbands and fathers were reluctant to expose them to unknown dangers. In her characteristic manner, Kailashbasini Debio contested these positions by arguing that as the Shastras had also ordained that women had to be fitting partners of their husbands in all respects, how could education be ignored? Men did not appear to respond to this paradox but instead used the old argument that formal learning for men was essential as it was needed for employment, while a woman’s home-oriented function did not require education.”*<sup>21</sup>

But later with the expeditious progress of the society, husbands and fathers learnt that education is mandatory for modern women. “While the need for educated daughters may indeed have been a dictate of the changing marriage market, a few fathers were genuinely convinced of the necessity to give to their daughters the same kind of education as they gave their sons, at least till the school stage” (Karlekar 62).

Encouraging women for education was a big task as they lived under strict rules. Women were restricted to inner most part of the house and lived only there. The area inhabited by women was named Anatahpur or Zenana. As Malavika says:

*By contrast, women’s quarters were smaller, where “light and air are deficient”. For the colonial rulers, the rigid physical distribution of space between men and women was a novelty, and in many cases, deserving of criticism. Quotations from a health officer’s report indicated that the higher female mortality rate was, in part attributed to the deadly effect of depriving them of fresh air and light by confining them in the Zenana, which is always most insanitary part of the house. Another missionary commented on the “collection of dirty courtyards, dark corners, break-neck staircases, filthy outhouses” of the Zenana she has visited. While generally more sympathetic*

<sup>18</sup> Mukund, K. (1992). Turmeric land: Women's property rights in Tamil society since early medieval Times. *Economic and political Weekly*, WS2-WS6.

<sup>19</sup> Mukund, K. (1992). Turmeric land: Women's property rights in Tamil society since early medieval Times. *Economic and political Weekly*, WS2-WS6.

<sup>20</sup> Mani, L. (1990). Multiple mediations: Feminist scholarship in the age of multinational reception. *Feminist Review*, 35(1), 24-41.

<sup>21</sup> Karlekar, M. (2004). A note on the empowerment of women. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(2), 145-155.

towards what she saw, journalist Mary Frances Billington, nonetheless, observed that in a home "the bighar or women's home" was "architecturally and artistically, its meanest part".<sup>22</sup>

Radha Kumar in her book *The History of Doing: Illustrated Account for Movements for Women's rights and Feminists in India, 1800-1990*, has rightly said that, "the nineteenth century could well be called an age for women all over the world, their rights and wrongs, their "nature" capacities and potential were the subjects of heated discussion" (7).

In Europe, French Revolution was the turning point for the women of Europe. It was the time when women gained consciousness of their own self and the need for their emancipation after they participated in the revolution.

Gradually towards the mid of the nineteenth century, the feminist consciousness had spread almost in every part of the world. At the same time in India many reformers turned up in Bengal and Maharashtra for improving the deplorable condition of women. Since these two states were in relation with the British from the early colonial times they were advance in development.

He was deeply influenced by the status of women in other countries. His father wanted him to become the barrister and so he got enrolled in one of the schools at London. He lived there for almost three years and had a scrupulous observation of the British culture and especially the freedom British women enjoyed. When he left for India he resolved to introduce some ideas in the country. He grabbed the best ideas from the Western culture and used them in combination with Brahmo culture.

In the childhood, Rabindranath went to the Himalayas. There he explored himself and the meaning of freedom. He was never bound in chains. He believed in freedom of mind and body. This psychological framework of mind formed and shaped his thoughts about women and their freedom.

In 1915, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) and his wife found Sabarmati ashram in Gujarat. It was joined by many men and women. Mahatma Gandhi believed that women have been suppressed under custom and law. He strongly advocated for the rights of women and that is why his every movement is joined by a large number of women. And when he summoned women to join National movement, all the women from every caste and place joined the movement. Gandhiji encouraged use of Swadeshi and promoted handicraft industries. He strongly opposed child marriage, *purdah*, dowry and sati. He was of the view that a wife is husband's companion, his better half and not a slave.

By the end of the nineteenth century women began to write essays, poetry, fiction and more importantly about

their own lives. And till then the attitude of men towards women education had began to change, though for various reasons. As Malavika writes, "In many instances, writing about one's life became a convenient escape mechanism in a segregated and hierarchical society emphasizing feminine compliance" (*Voices From within* 3). With the introduction of western education in India, attending schools and colleges became popular among boys and they had only one aim of acquiring govt jobs in future. But due to old orthodox belief that education would cast widowhood upon women, women were secluded from learning at initial stage. It was only mid nineteenth century that the notion of school education for girls was accepted. Before it either they were taught by tutors or guardians at home.

With the westernization of elite families, the trend of English home governess residents became popular. They not only educated the girls but also taught them various etiquettes and manners. In the nineteenth century, also known as Victorian era in British history, women were confined to the domestic sphere with their sole duty was to clean the house, feed the family and raise the children. Indian men too acquired the Victorian traits and their attitude towards women became the same.

Men realised that women need to be educated only to the extent so that they could become better wives and mother and become presentable in public life. Thus the domestic sphere that belonged to women now became their learning zone.

The inner house or the *antahpur* was the place where education of women began. It was the place that secluded women from the men's world and the fresh air of freedom. This was the women's world comprising all the activities from fasting rituals to preparing numerous food items under the surveillance of a high authority senior woman, often the mother-in-law.

Manas Dutta also illustrates about medical education for women in his review of Sujata Mukherjee's book, *Gender, Medicine, and Society in Colonial India: Women's Health Care in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Bengal* that, "therefore, the admission of women into medical education, the reformers thought, would help solve these problems as women themselves would become doctors and address issues like surgery, pregnancy, childbirth, and women related diseases" (33).

As Bipan Chandra illustrates regarding education policy:

*"The wood's dispatch (the document dispatched from the court of Directors and popularly named after Sir Charles Wood, President of the Board of Control) of 1854 was another important step in the development of education in India. The dispatch asked the Government of India to assume responsibility for the education of the masses. It thus repudiated the "downward filtration" theory, at least on*

<sup>22</sup> Karlekar, M. (2004). A note on the empowerment of women. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 11(2), 145-155.

paper. In practice, the government did little to spread education and spent very little on it. As a result of the directions given by the Dispatch, Departments of Education were instituted in all provinces and affiliating universities were set up in 1857 at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the famous Bengali novelist, became in 1858 one of the first two graduates of Calcutta University. This was indeed the same school where Saraladebi got educated.”<sup>23</sup>

The question of women education is indigenous and universal. This study traces the beginning of women education and the challenges undertaken by the reformers as well as the women to attain their rights and helps us compare the conditions of women education in past and present scenarios. The study provides an insight into the orthodox world of tradition in colonial India and the treatment and experience of women in that sphere

### Conclusion

The study reveals the dynamic landscape of women's education and social reform in colonial India, characterized by the relentless efforts of reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar to challenge orthodox norms and advocate for widow remarriage, women's education, and gender equality. The pivotal role played by women activists, such as Ramabai Ranade and Tarabai Shinde, is underscored, emphasizing their contributions to the transformation of societal attitudes. The influence of the nationalist movement, epitomized by Mahatma Gandhi, further propelled the cause of women's rights, leading to their active participation in the struggle for independence. The study also highlights the emergence of feminist consciousness through women's journals and the transformative power of education in reshaping traditional roles. Overall, it offers a comprehensive historical perspective on the progression of women's education and empowerment in colonial India, shedding light on the challenges faced and the remarkable achievements made in the pursuit of gender equality and social reform.

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<sup>23</sup> Chandra, B. (2000). *India after independence: 1947-2000*. Penguin UK.