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Women's Education and Social Reform in India: Creating 'Angels in the House?'

Abstract

This article discusses the various aspects involved in the process of introducing women's education in India during the social reform period of the 19th century. It focuses on the developments with regard to women's education during this period both within the Hindu and the Muslim communities. Available literature on social reform is used to track the nuances of the approaches adopted by the reformers to introduce and strengthen women's education within the two major religious communities, i.e. Hindus and Muslims. The article further goes on to draw attention to the commonalities and differences in the manner in which the question of women's education within the two communities was addressed.

> "Education is necessary for women, no doubt,
> But let them be 'angels in the house,' not social gadabouts."

Some of the landmark events and discussions that took place in colonial India during the 19th century have been discussed by historians through the frame of "social reform" (Chakravarti, 1998; Bhattacharya et al., 2001; Sarkar & Sarkar, 2007). Social reform is a term used to refer to the wide range of efforts made during the 19th century within the Hindu as well as the Muslim communities to transform practices that were regarded as retrogressive during the period. Notably, almost all the issues taken up by the social reformers related to women. Of particular focus for the social reformers of the Hindu and Muslim communities for instance were the issues of child marriage, widow immolation, widow marriages, polygamy, women's education, wearing of veils by women and the rights of Muslim women to initiate divorce. With reference to all these subjects, the social reformers sought to *alter* the customs by reforming the patterns of understanding that were responsible for the widespread acceptance within the society of those specific social practices.

A significant feature of the reform period was that while the actual focus of the intended reform in all the instances was the home or the private realm, it was the *public* implication of how familial life was understood that was at the heart of the discussion and debate that took place. The period of reform was a unique moment in the history of India because the private and the public were being marked by the reformers in particular as distinct and yet connected. This article will elaborate on some of the critical features of the reform period by focussing on the subject of women's education, both within the Hindu and the Muslim communities. It draws on the available literature on social reform to track the nuances of the debates on women's education within the Hindu and Muslim communities and goes further to draw out the commonalities and differences in the nature of the discussions within the two communities.

The legacy of the debates around women's education and the resolution arrived at in the 19th century continue to shape the present understanding of the education of women and girls. Though the practices of child marriage, widow immolation and

polygamy are still prevalent, they are no longer regarded as the norm. However, in relation to women's education certain tensions, such as reconciling to the kind of education provided to girls/women with her role within the home for instance, are continuous with the concerns expressed in the 19th century. In other words, the threads of these contemporary articulations can be traced back to the manner in which the issue of women's education was configured in the 19th century.

Background

It is a well-established fact by now that viable indigenous systems of education existed even in the 17th and 18th centuries, i.e. prior to the introduction of a modern schooling system in India (Acharya, 1978; Dharampal, 2000). However, in-depth information regarding these indigenous systems of education across the different regions of the country is not available. The references made to the native educational system by the reformers in some cases, early reports by the British administration and biographies and autobiographies from the 19th century provide some insights into the educational system that existed in pre-colonial India. These references make it clear that education was largely available to the upper castes among the Hindus and to the elite among the Muslims.

Among the upper caste Hindus, boys were provided rudimentary education either at home or in "pathashalas" or "gurukuls." In some rare cases, Hindu girls were educated, but only till they were married off. On the other hand, education was more widespread among Muslims. Both boys and girls were taught the letters so that they could read the Holy Quran. After the first few years, however, the education of girls was stopped. The boys continued their education with different teachers. The indigenous system of education gradually died out due to a combination of reasons that included declining patronage from the local elites as well as the British government for that form of education, non-availability of teachers (especially women teachers), introduction of modern common schools and the greater lure of English education for boys.

An interesting aspect of the 19th century Indian situation is that the decline of the indigenous educational system led to a gradual but increasing focus on the education of girls and women (Forbes, 1998). Such an observation in turn raises a critical question: what in the circumstances of that particular period, i.e. the 19th century, led to the subject of women's education being pushed into the public domain, making it one of the most contentious issue of those times? An examination of the terms of the debate as they took place separately in the Muslim and Hindu communities provide a clue to understanding this issue better.

Before beginning to explore the social reform period vis-à-vis the subject of women's education, some specific features of the reform age that made discussion and dissemination of ideas possible may be highlighted: The introduction of print media in the form of newspapers, magazines, novels, tracts, manuals, letters to the editor as also the new practice of forming associations of a modern kind, (various kinds of *anjuman* and *samaj* were founded during this phase) enabled the shaping of a public sphere and public discussions (Devji, 2007; Seth, 2007). Importantly, women too participated in the use of these new modes of communication and association.

Another aspect of the reform period too needs to be noted, especially since it tends to get lost in most accounts of the period. The point is that the positions in relation to reform in general, and to women's education in particular, were contradictory and fractured. There were no neat lines of continuity even among all those who supported education or the group that opposed education. Each victory was provisional and hard won for groups on either side of the divide. Women's education then was a highly contentious issue when it was first raised, with strategic shifts and alliances marking its development.

Education for Muslim women

Historical studies of the late 18th century and the early 19th century have mentioned the names of some accomplished Muslim women of letters who were well acquainted with Arabic, Persian and Urdu (Minault, 1998; Naim, 2007). Azizunnissa Begum (1780 – 1857), the mother of the social reformer Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the Begums of Bhopal -- Sikandar Begum (1819 – 68), Shah Jahan Begum (1838 – 1901) and Sultan Jahan Begum (1858 - 1930), Abadi Banu Begum (1852 – 1924) and Ashrafunnissa Begum (1840 – 1903) are among them.

Later reformers such as Nazir Ahmed Dehlavi, Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali and Mumtaz Ali, who were all influenced by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's ideas on education, however, went much further than him in advocating the importance of education for women. The genre chosen by these reformers was fictional narratives. Their ideas on women's education were best expressed through novels that enjoyed wide readership. Nazir Ahmad's *Mirat ul-Arus* (The Bride's Mirror) and Hali's *Majalis un-Nissa* (Assemblies of Women) helped considerably to introduce the idea that Nazir Ahmad in particular propagated the greater need of education for women than for men. According to Nazir Ahmad, men and women possessed equal intelligence. He argued that men were capable of gaining knowledge through their participation in the outside world but women could acquire knowledge only through reading and education. Education for women moreover was essential so that they could be better managers of the house, good companions to their husbands, educators of their children and good Muslims as well.

Reformers such as Mumtaz Ali and Nazir Ahmad were quick to recognize the fact that though they were advocating for women's education, material that could be used for women's education itself was scarce. They emphasised the need to produce literature that could be used for the education of *Muslim women* since the form and content of education had to adhere to the Islamic faith. They wrote fictional accounts and novels with a view to use them for pedagogic purposes. As a result, for the first time, there was material that addressed the benefits of women being educated. Moreover, these materials were widely circulated and read. Interestingly too, for the first time again, fictional role models were being produced for Muslim women.

The Muslim reformer-writer was in fact responding to a question that dominated his time. *The question was about whether there was a need to differentiate the education of men from the education of women*. This was a key issue that had to be sorted out in relation to women's education. The resolution of the issue was in terms of accepting that since the division of roles between men and women was different their education too should necessarily be different. This approach is most marked in Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi's work *Bihishti Zevar* (The Ornaments of Paradise). This book, which was a guide for Muslim women, became a compulsory part of the gifts given to a newly wedded bride. There were other writers though who held a different opinion. Mumtaz Ali who wrote *Huquq un-Niswan* (Women's Rights) and went on to found the weekly newspaper, *Tahzib un-Niswan* (The Women's Reformer) with his second wife, Muhammadi Begum, was one such reformer. In his book, Mumtaz Ali argued for broad based and socially useful education for women as against a narrow household centric education.

The efforts of these writers resulted in an expansion of the market for textbook literature and by the end of the 19th century many textbooks were produced in Urdu. Among the more widely used textbooks were those written by women as well, such as *Tahzib un-Niswan wa Tarbiyat al-Insan* (The Cultivation of Women and the Instruction of Humanity) by Shah Jahan Begum. As part of the effort to promote women's education, a number of women's magazines in Urdu too were started towards the end of the 19th century. The first of these was *Akhbar un-Nisa* (Women's News) founded by Syed Ahmed Dehlavi in Delhi in 1887. Around the same time, *Mu'allim-i-Niswan* (The

Women's Teacher) was started in Hyderabad by Maulvi Muhibb-i-Husain. While *Akhbar un-Nissa* had to close down after a short time due to the resistance it faced from within the community, *Mu'allim-i-Niswan* appeared every month for fourteen years. The other notable publication that addressed women's issues was *Tahzib un-Niswan* (The Women's Reformer) started by Mumtaz Ali and Muhammadi Begum in Lahore in 1898. This newspaper, which was a strong supporter of women's education, had a long and influential life until the time it closed down in 1950.

Two other magazines/journals in Urdu that were widely appreciated during the reform period were the *Khatun* (Lady/ Gentlewoman) and *Ismat* (Modesty/ Chastity/Honour). The former was started by Shaikh Abdullah and Wahid Jahan Begum in 1904 as the monthly journal of the Women's Education Section of the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference of Aligarh. *Ismat*, on the other hand was a literary journal founded by Rashidul Khairi in Delhi in 1908. Many women writers contributed to these magazines and debated on a range of topics including the education of women, veiling, the responsibilities of a Muslim woman as a wife and a mother, etc. Discussion of political matters was missing from these journals that focussed only on social issues. These early efforts at bringing out journals however, inspired a later generation of women to edit their own journals. In Hyderabad for instance, Sughra Humayun Mirza began the monthly *An-Nisa* in 1919 and Sayeda Begum Khwishgi editted *Hamjoli* starting from 1930.

While the content of education was an important point in the discussions, there were many other issues that were debated as well. For instance, the question about how *zenana* education (education that simulated the conditions of veiling) could be ensured was a critical one that recurred ever so often in the many writings of the period. The question emerged in the wake of an earlier practice when girls were educated within the sheltered environs of their house. Given the fact of a changing time wherein *ustanis* (female teachers) were not available and the economics of educating girls was becoming prohibitive, the dilemma was whether one could provide *zenana* like conditions in common schools where a number of girls could be educated at once. The issue about the strict adherence to veiling practices was necessarily about women from the elite strata of the society. In fact, it is a striking feature of this phase that debates about education revolved almost entirely around education for girls from *ashraf* ("respectable/ cultivated") backgrounds.

The earliest schools set up were primarily for girls from "respectable" families. The discussions about women's education took place initially in those metropolitan sites where there was a substantial Muslim population. Aligarh, Lahore, Delhi, Hyderabad and Bhopal were among the major centres from which the reformers initiated their work. Shaikh Abdullah and Wahad Jahan Begum set up the first common school for Muslim girls in Aligarh in 1906, Syed Karamat Hussain set up a school exclusively for Muslim girls in Lucknow in 1912, and Abdul Haq Abbas established the *Madrasat ul-Banat* (Muslim Girls' School) in Jalandhar. Rokeya Sakhavat Husain, who was the other key reformer during this period, started the Sakhavat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta in 1911. All these reformers faced stiff resistance from their orthodox detractors who felt that women's education would harm the existing social order.

To an extent, resistance to girls' education was not as severe in Hyderabad. The Hunter Commission noted in the early 1880s that there were 11 girls' schools with 519 students in Hyderabad. In 1881, Dr. Aghornath Chattopadhyay started a school open to upper-class girls from all religious communities. About 26 Muslim girls joined this school. Patronage for girls' education was also provided by Salar Jung's daughter, Nurunnissa Begum and by Syed Hussain

Bilgrami's wife, Sayyida, and his sister Begum Shujaat Ali. Encouraged by the support of the social elites, two schools for girls were established in Hyderabad: the vernacular-medium Nampally Girls' School (founded in 1890), which in the 1920s became the Women's College of Osmania University, and the English medium Mahbubiya Girls' School (founded in 1907). Both the schools were open to students from all religious communities.

The sustained efforts by the reformers resulted in women's education becoming acceptable among a wider cross-section of people. The reformers emphasised the need for educating Muslim women as a way of weeding out the corrupt practices that had crept into the Muslim community. These Muslim reformers were on a stronger footing by invoking the Holy Quran, which underscored the need for both men and women to access knowledge. They argued that education for women was essential so that they could be good companions for their educated husbands, good mothers for their sons and good Muslims by being able to differentiate between true Islamic injunctions and superstitious or wasteful customs. Support for women's education came from *ulemas* as well as liberals from the professional classes.

Education for Hindu women

Prior to the 19th century, education for Hindu girls was virtually non-existent. There was instead a strong feeling within the community that any girl who was taught to read and write would turn into a widow soon after her marriage. Getting educated therefore was regarded as an evil sign that consigned women to lifelong suffering. Together with this extreme belief regarding how fate was being tempted through education of women, there was also the more practical apprehension that a woman who could read and write would become involved in intrigue and bring dishonour to her family. The Hindu social reformers therefore faced an uphill task in battling these two dominant conceptions of the time before they could successfully popularise the notion of education for women (Forbes, 1998; Sarkar, 1999).

It was the missionaries who first attempted to educate adult women from Hindu families. They approached the landed elite families that had acquired English education and offered to teach the womenfolk of their families. Having themselves been exposed to a western liberal education, some of these families recruited women from the missionaries to provide *zenana* education to their women. This practice however didn't continue for long and the missionaries later started common schools for the education of girls. These missionary schools were most successful in South India. For instance, by the mid-nineteenth century, nearly 8000 girls were being instructed in day schools and boarding schools set up by the missionaries. However, girls from upper caste families did not attend these schools both because it entailed their having to step out of the purdah that they customarily observed outside the house and because of the fear of being converted to Christianity. It was mainly girls from lower caste and poor families who accessed the missionary schools (Forbes, 1998).

The primary effort of the social reformers on the other hand was to make education a respectable option for girls from upper cast families in particular. The support for setting up schools for girls from "respectable" families came from different groups in different parts of the country. In and around Calcutta for instance, the initiative of the Calcutta School Society formed by Radha Kant Deb as well as the efforts of the Brahmo Samaj leader Keshab Chandra Sen were important. Later in the century, the Prarthana Samaj too played an important role in promoting the cause of female education. In the north, especially in Punjab, the Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati was a vocal supporter of women's education (Kishwar, 2007). Vireshlingam was a key figure in promoting the education of girls in the coastal Andhra

region of the Madras Presidency (Leonard & Leonard, 2007). The Theosophical Society too was among the catalysts in South India while influential figures such as Jotiba and Savitribai Phule, M. G. Ranade, Pandita Ramabai and D. K. Karve provided the impetus for campaigns supporting the education of girls in the western part of the country (Chakravarti, 1998; Forbes, 1998; Bhattacharya et al. 2001).

The earliest initiatives in terms of setting up schools for the education of girls came from Calcutta where the male reformers had support from the local British administration as well. The Hindu Balika Vidyalaya, which was among the most important schools for girls opened in Calcutta in 1849 by J.E. Drinkwater Bethune who was the President of the Council of Education. Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was appointed as the School Secretary. Later, as the Assistant Inspector of Schools, Vidyasagar started 40 girls' schools between 1857 and 1858 in villages around Calcutta (Sarkar, 2007).

In North India, the Arya Samaj started its first school for girls, the Arya Kanya Pathshala in 1890 and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya (the high school) in 1892 in Jullundar through the efforts of Lala Devraj and Lala Munshi Ram. The Arya Samaj's emphasis on women's education was part of their larger effort to purge Hinduism of its distortions and return it to the pristine state of the Vedic times as it was envisaged by the Arya Samajis. Women were regarded as an important component of this project since the responsibility of producing healthy progeny lay with them, as did the task of nurturing the next generation in a manner appropriate to the task of building a vital and virile Hindu nation. The argument therefore was that without proper education, women would not be fit to take on such an onerous task. The Arya Samaj regarded the establishment of schools as important also in order to counter the activities of the missionaries and in order to produce women teachers who could teach subsequent generations of school going girls. In fact, by 1910, the Kanya Mahavidyalaya had produced 50 *adhyapikas* or female teachers who were working in different schools in the province (Kishwar, 2007).

The approach of the social reformers prominent in the field of women's education, most of who were men, was primarily instrumentalist. Women's education was deemed important because it furthered other causes such as of reviving Hinduism or because education held the potential of transforming women into good mothers and wives. It was rarely the case that a woman was seen as an individual for whom education may be beneficial to deal with her life circumstances. It is precisely for this reason that Pandita Ramabai (1858 – 1922) stands out as an extraordinary figure in an appraisal of the reform period (Chakravarti, 1998; Vishwanathan, 2007). She was a remarkable person who championed the cause of women's education in order to secure women her rights as a human being in a society that was constituted by the twin hierarchies of gender and caste. In her work *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1888), she presented an incisive analysis of this society and articulated her vision in bold and powerful terms in order to bring about a change in the situation of Hindu women.

Born into a Brahmin family, Ramabai's early life was unconventional in the sense that she received education in Sanskrit from her father and also remained unmarried until the age of 22. In her early year Ramabai led an itinerant life along with her parents and her brother. After the death of her parents and her brother, she married Bipin Behari Medhavi, a lower caste, but was widowed soon after the marriage. She subsequently converted to Christianity, but was opposed to the dogmatic stance of the institutionalised Church too. In 1889, Ramabai founded the *Sharada Sadan* (Home of Wisdom), a school for widows, where comprehensive training was provided to the students in literature, morals, physiology, botany and industrial work such as printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood-cutting, weaving, needle work etc. By 1900, about 80 women had

been trained in Sharada Sadan to earn their own living through teaching or nursing.

In 1897, Ramabai established *Mukti*, her second school near Poona in Khedgaon, meant once again for widows. Ramabai's work was pathbreaking in that through her activities she addressed in radical ways some of the most important issues of the time, i.e. of women's education and the untenable plight of widows. Unlike the reformer D.K. Karve, who adopted a paternalistic and protectionist attitude towards widows and whose schools were meant only for the upper caste widows, Ramabai regarded widows as important members of the society who were entitled to a life of honour and dignity. She admitted women across castes into her school. Ramabai's iconoclasm paralleled that of Jotiba Phule who was a powerful critic of Brahminism and of gender inequalities. Phule was also exceptional in that he was the only one among the pantheon of reformers who established a school exclusively for low-caste untouchable girls in Poona in 1848. On the whole therefore, the initiatives of the reformers resulted in transforming the Hindu community's stance in relation to women's education.

Education of Hindu and Muslim Women: Overlapping Features

The initiatives taken up and the efforts made within the social reform period are often discussed separately for the Muslim and the Hindu communities. It is indeed true that the efforts made during the reform period were distinct for each community and were restricted to the particular community from which the social reformer hailed. The mode of address too was defined by the priorities of each community and what they regarded as the subject of reform. Among the Muslims for instance, the many aspects surrounding the issue of veiling had to be consistently addressed throughout the reform period whereas within the Hindu community, the extent of latitude that was permissible for widows was a regular point of contention, including within debates on women's education.

Notwithstanding the different priorities of each of the communities, it needs to be emphasised that there were several significant points of overlap too in the approach adopted by the two communities, especially at the structural level. Since the reform efforts in both the communities vis-à-vis women's education took place in the colonial period, they were influenced not only by the colonial discourse about the native civilisation, but the positions taken up by the Hindu and Muslim reformers were also shaped by each other's activities and initiatives.

Both the Muslim and the Hindu social reformers of the 19th century were responding to the cultural critique launched by the British regarding the backwardness and moral collapse of the Indian civilisation. Moreover, since the British critique mounted itself on the observable evidence of women's low status in society, the Hindu and Muslim reformers too internalised the rationale that women would be the catalysts of change. And hence, among the various efforts made to improve the situation of women, education of women too was given a lot of importance.

The colonial critique in fact fed into the production of internal narratives and explanations within both communities about their decline from a golden age of triumph: while the Muslim community attributed their extant "backwardness" to profligacy and impiety together with the political overthrow of Muslim rule by the British, the Hindu community over a period of time began to believe that Muslim rule had led to their downfall. Common to the thinking in both the communities, however, was the faith in the regeneration of the community as a whole by working for the reform of women. Additionally, since many of the reformers were becoming familiar with a western liberal framework and were in fact professionally placed within such frameworks, they sought to bring about greater harmony between their personal and professional lives by

seeking to transform certain social practices and relationships. This manner of thinking had a definite impact on their decision to support women's education.

Another interesting point of similarity between the Muslim and the Hindu reformers was with regard to the importance both gave to the scriptural sanction that was available for women's education. From Nazir Ahmad onwards, who may be regarded as the first strong proponent of Muslim women's education, every reformer who supported the cause of Muslim women's education quoted from the Holy Quran that "It is a duty incumbent on every Muslim man and every Muslim woman to acquire knowledge" (Minault, 1998). Similarly, when promoting the cause of women's education, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was not satisfied with just providing humanitarian arguments, but cited the scriptures to demonstrate that women's education had the highest sanction within Hinduism (Sarkar, 2007).

The turn to scriptures for securing consensus within the community can be explained partly in terms of the growing legitimacy that British rulers gave to the written text over oral narratives or local customs. Perhaps the move was also addressed to the manner in which the orthodoxy was consolidating itself by citing the scriptures and therefore the need to refute them on their own terms. Also, it is not easy to classify the reformers as being either traditionalists or western educated modernists. They were a complex mix of both and hence it might have been important for their own convictions to find support from the scriptures.

Common again to the manner in which women's education was discussed within both the communities is the fact that class and caste considerations were central to how the issue was configured. The focus of most social reformers was entirely in relation to upper or middle class and upper caste women. The number of upper caste/ class families who were convinced by their arguments seemed to provide a measure of the success of their efforts at every turn. More strikingly, the reformers in fact sought to create a distance and distinction between women of the upper and lower classes through the kind of education that was imparted to them. Apart from the school established by Jotiba Phule, the missionary schools were the only ones that welcomed students from lower classes and castes, but the reformers did not deem it important to engage with their efforts.

Finally, judged from the vantage point of the present, we find that though hugely significant for its time, the social reformers from both the communities were functioning within limited frameworks. They wanted women to be educated and yet dependent on the men in their family; education was not envisaged as an instrument of freedom for women. However, we do find that even in a period that predominantly held such views, there was a radical break by a few individuals from the established mode of understanding the issue of women's education. Pandita Ramabai and Jotiba Phule among the Hindus and Rokeya Sakhavat Husain among the Muslims are representative of counter-hegemonic approaches. All three of them sought to broadbase education so that it was available to all women, irrespective of their class and caste. They also consistently fought against the imposition of restrictions on women in their pursuit of education as well as in their life choices and decisions.

The limitation of the reform period in relation to women's education apart, the beginning made for the education of girls and women in this period have been immensely significant. The paths forged by Ramabai and Rokeya provide important instances of alternate thinking in relation to women's education. It is by traversing these paths established during the reform period that many women leaders emerged who could even petition the government and the nationalists for women's rights on a range of subjects. The social reform period therefore opened out new vistas for women and enabled a new world of women's political activism in the years that followed.

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