

Women's Education in India: An Historical Overview

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1.0 Introduction:

The modernization involves the process of social, economic and political change in the underdeveloped and traditional societies. The term modernization in Indian context is used to the process through which a traditional society transforms into a modern society. The process of modernization in the initial stages in Indian history began with a Colonial heritage which meant the encounter of a traditional society with the modernizing west which led to the primarily transformation of agricultural societies into the industrial economy (Anitha Sharma, 1990:9). This transformation did not remain confined to the economic and industrial areas, but also lead to the social transformation. Simultaneously, the social aspects of modernization helped in the process of economic modernization (M. S. Gore, 1982:7). The social transformation or modernization had many social aspects such as education which is a factor as well as an indicator of social change. The education had played a vital role in modernizing the state. Alca Myrdal in his work, 'Power of Education' says that, "education embraces a multiprocess, by which, on the one hand culture and values are transmitted and on the other, it equally helps to bring about a rationalization of attitudes, values and habits etc" (Myrdal Alva, 1965:132). Another scholar M. S. Gore, looked at the education as one of the 'major agencies of

socialization' (M. S. Gore, 1982:1). However, the present paper provides an overview of the women's education in Ancient and Medieval India.

2.0 An overview of Women's Education

The subject of educational status of women has a link between the social conditions of women. Since the present subject is very wide and comprehensive one, the best way to begin is to study the condition of women's education before and after the British arrival which will help to disclose the condition, growth and changes occurred in women education over the period. According to Minna G. Cowan, there are three ideals of womanhood dominated Indian society at different epochs to the education of women of India includes, Vedic, the Muslim, and the Christian or Western (Minna G. Cowan, 1912:29). The condition of women's education in these periods is discussed below:

2.1 Women Education in Ancient Period

There were different stages of rise and fall in the status of women education in India. The history of women education can be traced back to the Ancient society. In the Vedic period, women participated in all the fields like men and took active part in every sphere of human life. There was no sati (A. S. Altekar, 1987:343), widow could remarry to the younger brother of the husband (M. A. Indira, 1955:105; A. S. Altekar, 1987:145; Thomas, 1964:49), girls married at their adulthood thus there was no child marriages (A. L. Basham, 1954:166). Wife was the real companion in weal and woe, the mistress of the household, and a real partner in all his activities- temporal or spiritual. A woman was highly responsible and carried out the responsibility of whole family on her shoulder. They were allowed to attend the assemblies and social gatherings as well (S. R. Shashri,

1960:20). They were active participants in the work of agriculture and they co-operated with men in the manufacture of bows, arrows, cloths and other articles of public utility (A. S. Altekar, 1987:179).

The condition of women's education also developed like their social status. Women were allowed to be part of education system. They were educated and acquired high position in the society. Like the son, daughters were also involved in the Vedic studies and had to lead life for learning and discipline (A. S. Altekar, 1987:10). In the ancient period, boy and girls began their education with *Upanayana* ceremony which was performed by about eight year and introduced them into the home of the preceptor. Women attended *Gurukula* to receive education and married only after getting educated. The curriculum included the study of religious texts, all branches of culture and knowledge (Y. B. Mathur, 1973:1). Many women became Vedic scholars, debaters, poets and teachers etc. Some were even unmarried for a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and were known as *Brahmanavadinis* (A. S. Altekar, 1987:34). Ladies of culture composed hymns and performed sacrifices as men did. Some even had their share of the paternal property (Minna G. Cowan, 1912:29-30). In ancient India, particularly in Vedic age, there were the women intellectuals such as Gargi, Maitreyi who composed the hymns (A. S. Altekar, 1987:10-30).

With the spread of Buddhism spread in India, education became available to everyone and this led to the establishment of some world famous educational institutions such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshashila. These educational institutes arose from the Buddhist monasteries. 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). The admission of women in the Buddhist order lead to the female education for example, Sanghmitra, Subha, Anupama and Sumedha were educated from the Buddhist order. During Buddhist era a large number of women had joined the order of nuns and became lifelong student of the Buddhist religion and philosophy (A. S. Altekar, 1987:10-30). The *therigatha*, were composed by Buddhist nuns. According to Altekar, there was a Hindu reaction produced in society by women joining the Buddhist and the Jain order, without the permission of the elders. To counteract this trend and as part of the revitalization of Hindu tradition, a new emphasis was laid on early childhood marriage. In this process of laying down norms for women, education for women was neglected (A. S. Altekar, 1987:10-30).

Thus, Women occupied a better (high) position in society. There was no seclusion of women and they used to move about freely in society (H. C. Upadhyay, 1991: 2). Considerable evidence available that the women of the upper classes could often read and write. Though the perusal of the sacred literature was denied, they certainly read and memorized the great popular epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which embody many Indian traditions and ideals (Minna G. Cowan, 1912: 31). It would appear, in fact, that girls had an opportunity to get educated in the society. It is due to these reasons R. S. Tripathi, says that, their status then was actually “one of honour” (R. S. Tripathi, 1960: 32; A. S. Altekar, 1987: 337).

Unfortunately, the position of women started to decline and got a severe setback from the Later Vedic period. Her status was worsened considerably. Women were restricted to the relative freedom which they enjoyed in the Vedic period. During this time women completely dependent on man and subjected her to the authority of a father, wife and mother. To quote Altekar, “thus, for nearly 2000 years from 20 B.C. to A.D. 1800, the position of women steadily deteriorated though she was fondled by parents, loved by her husband and revered by her children. The revival of sati, the prohibition of remarriage, the spread of purdah and the great prevalence of polygamy made her position very bad. Custom of sati, child marriages and prohibition of widow remarriages were widely prevalent”. This period was described as one of the progressive deterioration in the status of women (A. S. Altekar, 1987:90). In the words of Neera Desai, “ideologically women was considered a completely inferior species, inferior to the male, having no significance, no personality, socially, she was kept in a state of *utter* subjection, denied any rights, suppressed and oppressed” (Neera Desai, 1957: 23).

The women education disappeared almost completely due to the social changes that took place in later years. The status of women was economically, socially, politically declined. The effect of this decline was visible on the education of women too as she became inferior to the men not only socially, culturally but educationally. The prejudice ideologies against women’s education became strong within society. The possibility of education was closed by the exclusion of girls from the initiatory caste rites, which served as a prelude to the education of boys (Minna G. Cowan, 1912: 30). They were first denied the right to study the sacred texts. Later on, the *Upanayana* ceremony came

to be prescribed for boys only and ultimately, the right to all education was denied to women (Y. B. Mathur, 1973: 2).

However, women with literacy talents existed from time to time. Though there is evidence that there were well educated women in ancient period, but the organized education for girls during those days cannot be said to be available to girls due to the lack of availability of records. A regular school system for girls of all classes probably did not exist during this period.

2.2 Women Education in Medieval Period

The position of women during medieval period had undergone with some changes. With the Moslem conquests came the Purdah system with its withering influence (Minna G. Cowan, 1912: 33). The views about the use and necessity of purdah for women Minna Cowan mentions in her book, “devised by Mohammed, according to modern Moslem historians, for the protection of women in wild and lawless times, it has inculcated distrust of their character and capacities. In spite of the fact that many Indian women to-day look upon the Purdah as a sign of prestige and of their value in their husbands’ eyes, the thoughtful observer must reckon it, in its ultimate social influence, as a symbol of distrust” (Minna G. Cowan, 1912: 33). But this confinement precluded the freedom for education, at least of organized education outside of the home for the upper classes. “The Purdah system stood in the way of girls beyond a certain age being sent to schools, though very young girls has some schooling where possible” (S. P. Agrawal and J. C. Aggarwal, 1994: 20). Education was theoretically a must for every man and women

in the Muslim society. There were separate schools for the Muslim girls (N. N. Law, 1916: 200).

The Muslim rulers encouraged the education including women's education during their rule. They founded libraries and literary societies (S. M. Jaffer, 1972: 75). Babur started promoting the education for people by establishing public work department - *Shuhrat-i-Am* (N. N. Law, 1916: 126-27). Not only for the boys but also, Muslim rulers in India took interest in establishing educational institutions for girls. Akbar kept separate chambers in Fatehpur Sikri for girls' school. The Purdah system did not effect on the aristocratic Muslim women education in zenana. The girls belonging to the royal families were educated privately in their homes. Sultana Razziya, Gulbadan Begam, the daughter of Babar and author of *Humayun-Namah*, NurJahan, the celebrated wife of Jahangir, Mumtaz Mahal, the wife of Shah Jahan, Jahanara Begum, the eldest daughter of Shah Jahan, Zibunnisa Begam, the eldest daughter of Aurangzeb were among them (Krishnalal Ray, 1984: 86-87). Sultana Razziya who ascended the throne of Delhi was an educated princess. Mughal emperors provided liberal education to the princesses (S. P. Agrawal and J. C. Aggarwal, 1994: 20). The daughters of Rajput Chiefs were also able to read and write though there were prejudices against education of girls was in the society (S. P. Agrawal and J. C. Aggarwal, 1994: 20).

With the advent of the Muslim period, another system of education was imported in India. The traditional methods of education increasingly came under Islamic influence. There were two types of institutions namely the *Madarasa* and the *Maktab*. These were generally attached to the mosques with the objective of teaching boys and girls to read

and write the *Holy Koran* (Y. B. Mathur, 1973: 3). Though the education being imparted to women during this period was primarily to enable them to read sacred literature and at times a little more knowledge was given to ‘enable to manage their estate accounts, in the absence of their husbands’(Madhu Kishwar, 1986: 159). Thus emphasis was given more on the sacred literature.

During the ancient period, educational institutions run and conducted by the Hindus, Jains and Buddhists were religion based and imparted religious education. Even during the medieval period the education was imparted to have a full-fledged knowledge of *HolyKoran*. Thus the ‘religious atmosphere’ (Mitali Chatterjee, 1999: 150) can be seen in the educational institutions where the students were given religious teachings as education in India in its traditional form was closely related to religion.

3.0 Conclusion:

The study of historical development of women education and their status in the Indian society shows that women enjoyed a higher status in ancient India. But after the Vedic period the status of women started to decline. It reached its all-time low under the Islamic rule. As H. C. Upadhyay rightly said, it started to change for the better slowly with the advent of the British education system (H. C. Upadhyay, 1991: 24). But there is no doubt to say that, India being a land of education since ancient and medieval periods flourished with famous educational institutions and spread the love for education even before the Britishers and gave support to the women education.

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