



# The Evolution of Women's Education in 19th Century India: Social Reforms Amidst Resistance

Dr. I.Sandhya Jyosthna

Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, GDC Chevella, Telangana, India.

## Abstract:

This paper explores the evolution of women's education in 19th century India, focusing on the rise of social reform movements that advocated for this cause despite considerable resistance from traditionalists and constraints imposed by the colonial government. Key reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule played pivotal roles in this transformation. The study examines the socio-cultural challenges they faced, the impact of their educational reforms, and the gradual shift in societal attitudes towards women's education. This historical analysis underscores the significance of these reforms in paving the way for future advancements in gender equality in education.

**Keywords:** Women's education, Social reform movements, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Gender equality.

## Introduction:

The state of women's education in India before the 19th century was starkly deficient, characterized by a pervasive lack of access to formal learning. Traditional customs and entrenched social practices, such as child marriage and the ritual of sati, further impeded educational opportunities for women. However, the 19th century heralded a significant shift, marked by the emergence of social reform movements that championed the cause of women's education. These movements, spearheaded by visionary reformers, faced substantial opposition from traditionalists and navigated the limitations imposed by the colonial government. Nevertheless, their persistent efforts laid the groundwork for a transformative period in the educational landscape of India.

## Objectives:

1. To examine the state of women's education in India before the 19th century.
2. To identify and analyze the key social reform movements that advocated for women's education in the 19th century.
3. To explore the challenges faced by these reformers in their efforts to promote women's education.
4. To assess the impact of educational reforms on women's literacy rates and societal attitudes towards educated women.
5. To highlight the legacy of 19th-century educational reforms and their significance in the broader context of gender equality.

## Methodology:

The research methodology for this study includes a historical analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consist of contemporary writings, letters, and official documents from the 19th century, while secondary sources include scholarly articles, books, and biographies of key reformers. The study adopts a qualitative approach, focusing on the socio-cultural context and the contributions of individual reformers. Comparative analysis is employed to contrast the pre-reform and post-reform scenarios regarding women's education.

## Review of Literature:

The literature on women's education in 19th century India reveals a complex interplay of social, cultural, and political factors. Geraldine Forbes' "Women in Modern India" provides a comprehensive overview of the challenges and advancements in women's education during this period. Lata Mani's "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India" delves into the broader context of social reforms and the opposition faced by reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy. "Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai" by Uma Chakravarti examines the contributions of individual women reformers and their impact on women's education.

In addition, works such as "Educating Seeta: The Anglicization of the Indian Woman" by Shoma Chatterji and "The Social History of Education in India" by Suresh Chandra Ghosh provide valuable insights into the educational policies of the colonial government and their implications for women's education. These sources collectively underscore the significance of the 19th century as a transformative period for women's education in India.

## The Plight of Women in Pre-Colonial India:

In pre-colonial India, women were largely excluded from the domain of formal education. The prevailing social norms relegated women to domestic roles, emphasizing their duties as wives and mothers over intellectual development. Educational opportunities, if any, were confined to the wealthy and elite families,

and even then, they were rudimentary and limited to religious instruction. The practice of child marriage, which was widespread, further curtailed the scope for education, as girls were married off at a very young age and their education was deemed unnecessary. Additionally, the ritual of sati, which forced widows to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, exemplified the extreme suppression of women's rights and autonomy, including their right to education.

### **Rise of Social Reform Movements:**

The 19th century witnessed the rise of several social reform movements that challenged the existing societal norms and advocated for women's education. Prominent among these reformers were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, known as the father of the Indian Renaissance, was a staunch opponent of sati and a fervent advocate for women's education. He believed that education was essential for women to achieve social and economic independence.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a crucial role in promoting women's education in Bengal. His efforts led to the establishment of numerous schools for girls, and he campaigned vigorously against child marriage. Vidyasagar's commitment to the cause was reflected in his work, "Barnaparichay," which was widely used to teach children, including girls.

Jyotirao Phule, another key figure, focused on the education of women and the lower castes. Along with his wife, Savitribai Phule, he established the first school for girls in Pune. Their pioneering efforts provided an educational foundation for many girls who had been previously denied this basic right.

Organizations such as the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj also played a pivotal role in promoting women's education. The Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, advocated for social reforms, including women's education. The Arya Samaj, established by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, emphasized the importance of education for all, regardless of gender.

### **Challenges Faced by Reformers:**

The reformers faced significant challenges in their mission to promote women's education. The orthodox sections of society were vehemently opposed to the idea, viewing it as a threat to traditional values and the existing social order. Educated women were often stigmatized, and their families faced social ostracism. Moreover, the colonial government's educational policies were primarily focused on anglicization and did not prioritize women's education. The emphasis was on creating a class of English-educated Indians who could serve the colonial administration, rather than on broad-based educational reforms that included women.

### **The Impact of Educational Reforms:**

Despite these obstacles, the efforts of the social reformers began to bear fruit. Schools for girls were established in various parts of the country, and the literacy rates among women started to improve gradually. The establishment of institutions such as the Bethune College in Calcutta, the first women's college in India, marked a significant milestone in the journey towards women's education. These educational reforms also

contributed to a slow but perceptible change in societal attitudes. As more women received education, they began to participate in social and political activities, challenging the traditional roles assigned to them and advocating for their rights.

## Conclusion:

The 19th century was a transformative period for women's education in India, driven by the tireless efforts of social reformers who envisioned a more equitable society. Despite facing resistance from traditionalists and the limitations imposed by the colonial government, these reformers succeeded in laying the foundations for women's education. Their legacy is evident in the gradual increase in literacy rates among women and the changing societal attitudes towards women's education. While significant progress was made, the journey was far from complete, highlighting the need for continued efforts to achieve full gender equality in education. The educational reforms of the 19th century were a crucial step towards empowering women and fostering a more inclusive and progressive society.

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