

Women's Education and Social Reformers in Maharashtra

Ms. Pradhnya Meshram Prabhu

Ph.D. Research Scholar,

Department of History

School of Social Sciences, University of Hyderabad

1.0 Introduction:

One of the important social problems that attracted enlightened opinion was the need for a better deal for women in society. They found the liberation of women in abolition of the cruel rite of sati and infanticide, in the condemnation of child marriage and polygamy and popularization of widow remarriage in the abolition of Purdah in provision of education facilities for women and economic opening to make them self-supporting and finally an equal share for women in the political life of the country by enfranchisement.

The beginning of the social reform movement in India in 19th century was one of the outcome of coming into contact of Westemers. The introduction of modern education in India was primarily motivated by politico-administrative and economic needs of Britain in India, but as argued by Krishna Kumar "Colonial education produced political leaders, professional men and intellectuals, not just clerks" (Krishna Kumar, 2005). The new English educated classes were the pioneers of spreading and propagating western ideas and arousing social and political awakening. So the various socio-religious reform movements took place in India during the British rule. The present paper deals with the women's education and social reformers in Maharashtra and the discourse between reformists and nationalists.

2.0 Women emancipation Reforms in Maharashtra:

Like other regions in the country, Maharashtrian society during the 19th century, was dotted by caste restrictions, blind beliefs and various social evils. The social evils such as Child Marriage, *Purdah* System, Sati system, Prohibition of Widows remarriage were prevalent and restricted the overall development of the women in Maharashtrian society. Although, the eighteenth century was under the conservative ideas and practices, the nineteenth century Maharashtra experienced several trends of reform movements, which brought out awakening in the society.

The educated people of Maharashtra were influenced by the western education and the mass movement was carried by these leaders. Foremost among the reformers were Acharya Balshastri Jambhekar, Gopal Hari Deshmukh, Jotirao Govindrao Phule

Dondo Keshav Karve etc. These thinkers started reform movement against the evil social systems in Maharashtra. They aimed at upliftment of the status of women socially, economically, politically and educationally. The reformers thought that upliftment of the society depend on the women liberation or deliverance from outmoded practices. Under the concept of social well-being, society which was guided by patriarchal norms started talking of the women issues, her upliftment, emancipation etc. The customs and practices such as widow burning, child marriage and absolute illiteracy of Indian women intimidated women were considered as the custodians of any issue of societal virtues and “an index of the tradition itself” (Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, 1989). Any change in the existing state of women was naturally bringing strong repercussions in favour of and against it. Thus any issues related to the women emancipation challenged social reformers.

Not all reformers agreed that there was a need of social reforms for women's and their education particularly. A women's role was to look after the home where she could by her chastity and virtue devote herself to her husband and family. It was held that by offering women the opportunity for education ‘society would merely suffer’ (Aparna Basu, 2005). Moreover, there was a “practical orthodox apprehension that once girls started attending schools, they would become discontented with their traditional role in life, perhaps even with their husbands” (Aparna Basu, 2005). They praised their own culture's treatment of women or compared the condition of Indian women to those of European women and concluded that females in both countries suffered hardship. Those who accepted the idea that society's ills could be traced to the oppressed condition of women saw female education and female emancipation as the first step towards progress (Tandon, R. K, 1998).

3.0 Education as an important issue taken by social reformers in Maharashtra:

Education of women was considered as an instrument of change by contemporary reformers which, they believed would relieve women from the present status of ignorance and illiteracy. The reformers also realized that to defend their society against missionaries and colonial criticism and also for permanent reform, it was important the education be imparted not only to all sections of men but to women too. Indian **supported** the female education because they wanted social and religious reform, or social and financial mobility, or both (Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, 2007). In the case of female education, early supporters saw opportunities for social mobility as the demand for educated brides increased. They were also motivated by a desire for social reform, possible only if women as well as men were educated ((Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, 2007).

Thus, nineteenth century witnessed a redefinition of women's place in Indian society. The perception about women, formed out of the intimate interaction with the colonial state in the eighteenth century, assumed a clearer shape in the early years of nineteenth century and manifested through a number of reform movements. New forces, destined to transform ultimately every stratum of Indian society began to penetrate slowly into this country (Kalikinkar Datta, 1978). In the late nineteenth society, education for women received great support and encouragement from the reformers. They concluded that the ignorance of women was the root cause of social evils and attributed the low status of women to their illiteracy.

The **Parsi community** took interest in promoting commerce and industry, educational and social, political reforms in western India. The Parsis maintained their religious customs but some of the leader took special interest in social reforms and raising social women's status. As a result, in 1849, **women's education** was discussed in the Student's Literacy and scientific society established by Dadabhai Naoroji and Shankarshet. Parsis felt the need for girls education. But giving English education to the girl was a more difficult issue. Framji Cowasjee Banajee set an example by giving English education to his own daughter. Banajee's leadership inspired the students Literary and Scientific society to start morning classes for the girls (Jamuna Nag, 1998, p.80). Shankarshet founded a girls' school in his own house, and was a founder of the elocution encouragement society started in 1867. He supported the vernacular as medium of instruction. Women's education was one of the initial topics discusses (Jamuna Nag, 1998, p.85).

The **reformist** group led by M.G. Ranade, R.G. Bhandarkar, G. K. Gokhale insisted that education alone could bring about a change in the position of women. Gokhale emphasized that 'women in India had been deliberately kept in a degraded state of ignorance and darkness' (*Mahratta*, 24 February 1907). Ranade was of the views that, women education is necessary for changing society which will help to bring all-round development of a national life, as a nation could not have a politically advanced system while it was economically and socially backward (D.R. Jatava, 1987). Therefore, women's education in all branches of knowledge was needed. Hence he refused to discriminate between men and women about the kind of education to be imparted (P.J. Jagirdar, M.G. Ranade, 1971). Gokhale was not prepared to make any concession as he claimed an equal position for women, and supported the introduction of co-education in Fergusson College (Y. D. Phadke).

Therefore to improve the status of women, the reformers encouraged and advocated the education. But the question raised was more difficult what **kind of education** for women? Initially, differences existed among the votaries of women's education on the nature of **curriculum**. Some suggested mere elementary education

while, some others favoured vocational education to make women confident, self-reliant and self-assertive. "As the education of boys was related to employment, girls' education had no economic function. The purely domestic role of girls fostered the belief that education of girls was a waste since it could not be put to any financial use. The cost of education in terms of fees, cost of materials, and so on, as well as the temporary loss of a helper in the household were additional deterrents reinforcing social taboos" (Apama Basu, 2005). Some felt the women education should be similar for men and women. The liberal like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar felt the vocational and employment purpose education should be imparted to the women. Whereas some others felt that separate curriculum for women should be prepared and courses such as hygiene, embroidery, sewing etc. This indicates the education for women was not to create a literate women but efficient home-makers.

Gokhale propagated secular education whereas Tilak attacked Gokhale for insisting on secular education for women, and eliminating moral and religious instruction, which would guide women's duties regarding family and society (*Mahratta*, 27 October 1901). Viewed from Tilak's patriarchal orthodox position, women were not to be educated at all, as they, along with the Shudras, were traditionally denied the knowledge of sacred literature (*Kesari*, 26 August 1884). Due to various social evils, many girls received no education and they remained illiterate. There was a strange idea about female education in the country. It was commonly believed that if a girl was taught to read and write she was sure to become a widow (William Adam, 1983 & Radha Krishna Sharma, 1981). Women had an extra infringement on their right to be literate by a cleverly used superstition, which stated that a literate woman would become a widow; hence, education was to be shunned as if it was a sin (Mani Karmarkar). Regarding the women education, Tilak came up with the argument that, educated women will become corrupt and immoral (*Maratha*, September 7, 1884). Bal Gangadhar Tilak stated that the virtues of the ideal Hindu wife were "Obedience to her husband and contentment with her lot in life." He went on to say that: "all the education implied by the B.A. degree would not compensate a Hindu woman for the absence of these qualities (S. A. Wolpert, Tilak and Gokhale, 1962)."

Women's education was taken up as one of the essential issues ever since Ranade started to work for social reforms. When William Wedderburn became Collector of Poona in 1882, he appreciated Ranade's wisdom and made a donation of Rs. 1000/- to start the initiative work. In 1882 Ranade called a meeting of sympathizers who supported women's education, and made a proposal to start a high school for girls. Those who helped him were active workers. The school started to

function from September 1882 as Huzur Paga School (Jamuna Nag, 1988) for girls. There was a strong retaliation from Tilak's *Kesari* too.

Agarkar, reacting to Tilak's opposition to the girl's high school declared that, "it is plain foolishness to assume that women will become immoral and irreverent because of education... it is our firm belief that all education will have equal benefit for both men and women and that the more women like Gargi and Maitreyi that we have... will this country on the path of freedom (B.R. Nanda, 1974)."

Gradually the leading families of Poona accepted the girls High School with enthusiasm. Ramabai took keen interest in popularizing the school. Since the Nationalist did not possess the required power to stop the functioning of the girl's high school, and since the reformers began to send their daughters and sisters to the high school, efforts were directed towards controlling what was being taught there (Parimala V. Rao, 2008). The nationalists used twin arguments to oppose women's education. First, women were weak, and hence 'should not be taxed with subjects which are beyond their powers to understand' (*Mahratta*, 31 August 1884), and 'waste their energies in cramming up like students studying for the Matriculation examination'. They argued that teaching English to girls interfered in the natural aspect of a woman's life' (*Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p.6). The second argument against women's education was that, educated women would become immoral (*Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p.6). Tilak declared that 'English education had dewomanising impact on women, which denied them a happy worldly life' (*Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p.7).

In his editorial, Tilak warns the founders of female education to re-examine their objectives and to make appropriate changes in their curriculum. He also raises the question as to why people and government should spend money on such schools which are of doubtful use. He writes in *Kesari* that "like boys' schools, girls' schools are already well settled. There is a scope for reform in these schools, but that does not mean there is a need to open new schools" (*Kesari*, 11 October 1887).

Family was seen as the basic unit of social organization in India and the reformers were careful to install the new educated women in the family without disrupting the basic unit of society. While delivering the presidential address of the fourth anniversary meeting of the Madras Hindu Social Reform Association on 28th November, 1896, N.G. Chandavarkar opined thus: "the education they are given fits them more to be the guardian angels of their homes. The biographies of great women, whether of India or of foreign countries, the art of domestic economic, sewing and housekeeping, ought to form the special features of female education (C. Yajnesvara Chintamani, ed, 1901)." As women were considered integral part of the family, the reformers emphasized education to fit them to the family.

Tilak opposed imparting English education to women, as he felt it would enable them to not only question patriarchal constraints, but also gain the confidence to intervene in public spaces. He insisted that the position of the woman within the family was that of a subservient daughter-in-law, with no independence in respect of her relations to anyone, including her husband and children. As late as 1920, that is, even after 40 years of public life, Tilak was still opposed to the proposal of making elementary education compulsory to girls. When the reformers in the Poona municipality decided to make primary education compulsory for both boys and girls, he wanted this only for boys alone on the pretext that otherwise, it would enhance the financial burden on the municipality. The reformers opposed the move. They argued that they were willing to accept 'compulsion for both or compulsion for girls alone but never for compulsion for boys alone' (*Mahratta*, August 17, 1919, p.394). The *Maratha* criticized the reformers 'frenzied zeal' for women's education and called it 'strange that people should refuse to educate boys because education for girls then and there is not made compulsory' (*Maratha*, 17 August 1919, p.392). The next year when the reformers brought the proposal, the nationalists shot it down again (*Maratha*, 22 February 1920, p. 87). N.C. Kelkar criticized 'the moderates for playing devil's advocate' and opposed 'the moderate's contention that the nationalists were opposed to women's education as a gross falsehood' by stating that Tilak, Kelkar have educated their daughters (*Mahratta*, 29 February 1920, p. 102).

In spite of such consistent attacks on women's education by the nationalists, the reformers proposed to establish a women's university in Bombay presidency. Dondho Keshav Karve was a radical social reformer who devoted his entire life for the cause of women. He married a widow and established a home for the widows and a girls' high school, Mahila Vidyalyaya, in 1907 (Karve, D. K, 1936). In 1915 he proposed for the establishment of a women's university in India at the annual secession of the Social Conference at Bombay, and together with liberal Congressman M. K. Gadgil, began to collect donations (Paranjpe, R.P, 1915). Tilak's response to Karve's proposal for the establishment of a women's university only confirmed his earlier opposition to women's education.

4.0 Conclusion:

This paper presents the women's education and social reformers in Maharashtra with emphasis on discourse between reformists and nationalists. The social reformers advocated and worked for women's education for the purpose of imparting education differed from time to time and from one reformer to another. But, what is especially interesting about these nineteenth century reformers is their activism. Their ideas on gender were rooted in personal experience; during their lives they attempted to

change those with whom they lived and worked. They were not simply reacting to the British pressure-these issues were real and they responded to them with passion. The questions such as: did the reformers ever think of women what kind of reforms do they need? And what kind of education do the women need? are needs further exploration in the area of contributions of social reformers towards women education.

References:

1. Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, Sage Publication, New Delhi, 2005, p. 25.
2. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi, Kali for women, 1989, p. 118.
3. Aparna Basu, *A century and Half's Journey: Women's education in India, 1850 to 2000 in women of India: colonial and post-colonial Periods* (Ed), Bharati Ray, Sage Publication, New Delhi 2005, p. 184.
4. Tandon, R. K. *Women in Modern India*, Delhi, Indian Publishers, 1998, p. 6.
5. Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, ed., *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*, Vol. II, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, p. 90.
6. Kalikinkar Datta, *Survey of India's Social Life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century 1707-1813*, New Delhi, Munshilal Manoharlal, 1978, p. 51.
7. Jamuna Nag, *Social reform movement in nineteenth century India*, RBSA publication, Jaipur, 1988, p.80 - 85.
8. Mr Gokhale at Lucknow, *Mahratta*, 24 February 1907, p. 96.
9. D.R. Jatava, *Evolution of Indian Social Thought* (Jaipur, 1987), p. 200.
10. P.J. Jagirdar, M.G. Ranade (New Delhi, 1971), p. 185
11. Y. D. Phadke, *Social Reformers*, p. 40.
12. *Mahratta*, 27 October 1901, p. 1.
13. *Kesari*, 26 August 1884: 'Misunderstanding'.
14. William Adam, *The State of Education in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1835, G. H.Hattamann, Bengal Military Orphan press, p. 64.
15. Radha Krishna Sharma, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian women*, Patna, 1981, p.19.
16. Mani Karmarkar, 'Education of Women', in S.P. Sen (ed.), *Social and Religious Reform*, p. 314.
17. *Maratha*, September 7, 1884.
18. S. A. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale: Reform and Revolution in the Making of Modern India*, (California 1962). p. 36.

19. B.R. Nanda, *Gokhale, Gandhi and Nehru* (London, 1974), p. 45.
20. Parimala V. Rao. 'Educating Women and Non- Brahmins as "Loss of Nationality"- Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Nationalist Agenda in Maharashtra', New Delhi, Centre for Women Development Studies, 2008, p.13.
21. *Mahratta*, 31 August 1884, p. 6: 'Female Higher Education
22. *Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p. 6: 'Higher Female Education'.
23. *Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p. 6: 'Higher Female School'.
24. *Mahratta*, 7 September 1884, p. 7: 'Bombay Gossip'.
25. *Kesari*, 11 October 1887
26. C. Yajnesvara Chintamani, ed., *Indian Social Reform. Being a Collection of Essays, Addresses, Speeches. Vol. 1* (Madras: Thompson and Company, 1901). p. 336.
27. 'Free and Compulsory Education in Poona', *Mahratta*, August 17, 1919, p. 394.
28. 'Extremists in Female Education in Poona CM. [City Municipality]', *Maratha*, 17 August 1919, p. 392
29. 'Compulsory Education Controversy in Poona', *Maratha*, 22 February 1920, p. 87.
30. 'Lies and Misrepresentations', *Mahratta*, 29 February 1920, p. 102.
31. Karve, D. K. *Looking Back*. Poona: Hindu Widows Association, 1936, pg. 81-84.
32. Paranjpe, R.P. *Dhando Keshav Karve*. Poona: Arya Bhushan Press, 1915, p. 44.