

Women's Voices in Educational Reform: The Contribution of Female Reformers in Colonial India

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ABSTRACT

The nineteenth century marked an important phase in the development of women's education in colonial India. During this period, increasing efforts were made to promote female education through educational reforms and social initiatives. Alongside these developments, women gradually became active participants in the movement through their writings, speeches, and educational work. This paper examines the contribution of women reformers to the development of women's education during the nineteenth century. It discusses their views on women's education, the social barriers that restricted women's access to learning, and their efforts to promote female education. The paper also examines the schools and educational institutions established by women reformers to provide education for girls, widows, and Muslim women. Through these initiatives, women reformers not only advocated the importance of education but also helped expand educational opportunities for different sections of society. The study highlights their contribution to promoting women's education and their role in the growth of educational reform in colonial India.

Keywords: Women's education, Women reformers, Educational reform, Colonial India, Nineteenth century, Female education, Social reform, Women's empowerment.

INTRODUCTION

Among the earliest women's memoirs from nineteenth-century India is the autobiography of Rassundari Devi, who described her deep desire to learn to read despite the restrictions placed upon women. She secretly taught herself by stealing moments from household work and childcare. Remembering those years, she wrote that girls simply did not read, and that even seeing a piece of paper in a woman's hand was considered improper (Forbes, 2008). Her experience reflected the condition of many women in nineteenth-century India, where education was often denied because society believed that learning would make women neglect their domestic duties or even bring misfortune to their families.

The limited educational opportunities available to women were shaped by deeply rooted social beliefs and patriarchal customs. William Adam wrote in his report on the state of education in Bengal in 1836, that it was believed, an educated girl would soon become a widow. Such beliefs discouraged families from educating their daughters and kept female literacy extremely low.

Although the colonial government and Christian missionaries gradually introduced schools for girls, education for women continued to face strong resistance from society. By the middle of the nineteenth century, girls' schools had begun to appear in different provinces, yet the number of female students

remained small in comparison to the overall population. Social customs continued to outweigh educational opportunities, leaving most women outside the sphere of formal learning.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the growth of social reform movements that sought to improve women's condition. Historians such as Geraldine Forbes have shown that many male reformers supported women's education through social action, legislation, and public campaigns. However, their efforts generally aimed to make women better wives and mothers rather than to transform their position in society. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar argues that these reforms mainly sought to improve family life without fundamentally challenging the patriarchal order. Women were often treated as the subjects of reform rather than active participants in shaping it.

Yet Indian women were not as silent as they have often been portrayed. Women often expressed their own thoughts on importance of education, in uplifting women status in society, through their writings, speeches, and public works. Their experiences of child marriage, widowhood, domestic confinement, and social discrimination gave them a different perspective on education.

For them, education was not only a means of becoming better homemakers but also a way to gain knowledge, dignity, self-reliance, and the confidence to participate in public life. As Meera Kosambi points out, women's voices have frequently been overshadowed in histories that focus mainly on male reformers, despite the significant role women themselves played in the struggle for social change.

The present study will examine the educational ideas and initiatives of some of the leading women reformers of colonial India by incorporating primary and secondary sources. It will explore how women themselves advocated women's education, established educational institutions, and expanded educational opportunities through their writings and public engagement. By focusing on their own voices and contributions, the article highlights the important role women played in shaping the history of educational reform in colonial India.

The State of Women's Education in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India

Women's education in nineteenth-century colonial India was shaped by long-standing social customs and patriarchal beliefs that confined women to the domestic sphere. Formal education was considered unnecessary for girls, whose primary responsibilities were thought to be marriage, household work, and child-rearing. As a result, most women remained outside the sphere of organised learning, and female literacy was extremely low across different parts of the country.

Social attitudes further limited educational opportunities for women. Child marriage, purdah, restrictions on women's mobility, and the belief that education would make women neglect their family duties discouraged parents from sending their daughters to school. William Adam, in his Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836), recorded the widespread belief that a girl who learned to read and write would soon become a widow after her marriage. Such ideas reflected the deep-rooted fears surrounding female education and reinforced women's dependence on men.

The expansion of British rule gradually introduced new discussions on education. Christian missionaries were among the earliest to establish schools for girls, while the colonial government slowly began to recognise the importance of female education. Educational measures such as Wood's Despatch of 1854 encouraged the spread of schooling, and by the middle of the nineteenth century girls' schools had been established in several provinces. Even so, the number of girls receiving formal education remained limited. Schools often struggled to attract students because many families continued to view education as unsuitable for women.

During this period, debates on women's education became closely linked with the wider movement for social reform. Many reformers argued that educating women would improve family life and contribute to social progress. However, these efforts generally remained within the boundaries of traditional gender roles, where education was valued mainly for producing better wives and mothers.

Alongside these developments, women themselves began to participate more actively in discussions on education. They questioned prevailing social attitudes, demanded greater access to learning, and gradually moved beyond advocacy to establish schools, promote professional education, and create new opportunities for women. Their interventions marked an important shift in the history of women's education and laid the foundation for a broader movement that sought to redefine both the purpose and possibilities of female education in colonial India.

Women's Voices in Educational Reform

The nineteenth century marked an important turning point in the history of women's education in colonial India. Until this period, discussions on female education were largely shaped by male social reformers, who generally viewed education as a means of preparing women to become better wives, mothers, and companions. Although these efforts contributed to the spread of girls' education, women themselves had little role in defining its purpose. Gradually, educated women began to enter this debate. Drawing upon their own experiences of discrimination, child marriage, widowhood, domestic confinement, and limited educational opportunities, they offered a different perspective on education. Through their writings, speeches, and educational work, they argued that women should not merely receive education but should also participate in shaping its aims and direction.

The earliest organised challenge to the exclusion of girls from education came from Savitribai Phule (1831–1897), a teacher and social reformer from Maharashtra. Having herself received an education after marriage, she understood both the value of learning and the barriers that prevented girls from attending school. Her educational work reflected the belief that girls deserved the same opportunity to learn as boys, irrespective of caste or social background. This understanding was also evident in the curriculum adopted in the schools established by the Phule couple, where girls studied mathematics, science, and social studies instead of receiving instruction limited to household duties. At a time when female education was widely opposed, Savitribai's work questioned prevailing assumptions about women's intellectual abilities and demonstrated that girls could successfully pursue formal education.

The movement gained further strength through Fatima Sheikh, one of the earliest Muslim women teachers in India. After Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule were forced to leave their family home because of social opposition, Fatima Sheikh and her brother Usman Sheikh welcomed them into their house and supported their educational mission. Fatima later completed teacher training and joined Savitribai in teaching girls. Although fewer written sources survive about her ideas, her participation itself carried significance. It reflected the growing involvement of women from different communities in promoting girls' education and demonstrated that educational reform was becoming a shared effort rather than the work of a few isolated individuals.

While Savitribai and Fatima focused on expanding access to schooling, Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) widened the discussion by redefining the purpose of women's education. A Sanskrit scholar and social reformer, Ramabai believed that education should enable women to become self-reliant and participate more actively in society. In *Stri Dharma Niti* (1882), she encouraged women to take responsibility for their own lives instead of remaining entirely dependent on others. Her evidence before the Hunter Commission

further revealed the practical importance of women's education. By stressing the need for women teachers and women doctors, she argued that education should prepare women for professions that addressed the needs of other women. Referring to the absence of female doctors, she observed that it had resulted in the premature deaths of "hundreds of thousands of women." Ramabai thus broadened educational reform beyond literacy by linking it with professional training and economic independence. Pandita Ramabai wrote in *High Caste Hindu Women* that "Three things are needed to alleviate the condition of women: first, self-reliance; second, education; third, to provide native women teachers in educational institutions". The growing discussion on women's education was accompanied by a criticism of the social values that prevented women from learning. This intellectual challenge was most clearly expressed by Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910). A member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, she questioned the patriarchal attitudes that justified women's subordinate position in society. In *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882), she exposed the double standards applied to men and women and criticised the inequalities that denied women equal opportunities. Although her work was not exclusively concerned with education, it challenged the social assumptions that restricted women's access to knowledge and intellectual development.

The meaning of women's education was expanded even further by Anandibai Joshi (1865–1887), whose pursuit of medical education introduced the idea of professional learning for women. Motivated by the lack of medical care available to Indian women, she became the first Indian woman to receive a medical degree in the United States. Anandibai regarded education as a means of serving society rather than simply achieving personal success. Writing to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, she explained that the purpose of her education was to provide medical care to her "poor suffering countrywomen," who often refused treatment from male physicians. Her example demonstrated that women were capable of entering professions previously considered beyond their reach and that higher education could address important social needs.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) offered one of the broadest visions of women's education. Through her essays, she argued that educated women could contribute not only to family life but also to society as a whole. This vision found its fullest expression in *Sultana's Dream* (1905), where she imagined the fictional world of Ladyland. In this imagined society, women studied in universities, engaged in scientific research, worked in laboratories, and contributed to technological advancement, while early marriage no longer interrupted girls' education. Ladyland was not a description of colonial India but an imaginative critique of the restrictions imposed on women in her own time. By contrasting an ideal educational society with contemporary realities, Rokeya demonstrated what women might achieve if equal educational opportunities were made available.

Although these reformers differed in their backgrounds, methods, and priorities, they shared the conviction that education was essential for improving women's position in society. Their ideas challenged the belief that education should remain confined to the domestic sphere and instead emphasized intellectual growth, professional learning, and social participation. More importantly, their educational philosophy did not remain limited to speeches and writings. Many of them translated these ideas into practice by establishing schools, designing new curricula, promoting vocational education, and creating institutions for girls and widows. It was through these practical initiatives that their vision of women's education acquired a lasting social impact.

From Ideas to Institutions: Schools Established by Women Reformers

The educational ideas of nineteenth-century women reformers were not confined to speeches and writings. They were translated into practice through the establishment of schools and educational institutions that created opportunities for girls and women who had long remained excluded from formal learning. These institutions differed in their objectives and the communities they served, but they shared a common purpose of making education more accessible to women. Among the earliest initiatives were the schools established by Savitribai Phule, while later efforts by Pandita Ramabai and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain expanded educational opportunities for widows, destitute women, and Muslim girls.

Among the earliest efforts to establish schools for girls was that of Savitribai Phule. At the time of her marriage, she was not educated. Recognising the importance of education, her husband Jyotirao Phule first taught her to read and write at home before enrolling her in two teacher training programmes. During the same period, Fatima Sheikh, the sister of Usman Sheikh, also received teacher training, and both women completed their training together. After completing their training, Savitribai became one of the earliest Indian women teachers, while Fatima Sheikh is regarded as one of the first Muslim women teachers in India.

On 1 January 1848, Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule established their own school for girls, Bhide School in Pune. Here Savitribai Phule started teaching to girl students. Unlike the limited education generally available to girls during this period, the curriculum of Bhide School included mathematics, science, and social studies. The school welcomed girls from different social backgrounds, including those belonging to the lower castes. However, these efforts were met with strong opposition. While walking to school, Savitribai was often abused, and people threw stones and dung at her. To continue her work, she started carrying an extra sari. Opposition also came from sections of the Shudra community, who believed that education was not meant for them. In 1849, the Phule couple left the house of Jyotirao's father and took shelter in the home of Usman Sheikh. It was there that Savitribai and Fatima Sheikh continued their educational work together. By the end of 1851, the Phules were running three schools in Pune with around 150 girl students. Their teaching methods were regarded as superior to those followed in government schools, and the enrolment of girls in their schools was reported to be higher than that of boys in government schools.

Educational institutions acquired a broader social purpose through the efforts of Pandita Ramabai. She first established the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune, where she worked with other reformers to promote women's education. In 1889, she founded Sharada Sadan in Bombay as a home for widows. Besides providing shelter, the institution offered formal school education and vocational training. Although society remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives and twenty-five girls withdrew from Sharada Sadan by 1893, the institution gradually expanded its work. By 1900, nearly eighty women had completed their education and were earning their livelihood through teaching or nursing. Ramabai later established Mukti Sadan. at Kedgaon, which developed into a much larger institution. By 1900, around 2,000 women and children were receiving education there while also participating in industrial production. The curriculum included literature that emphasized moral values, botany and physiology to help students understand their own bodies, along with industrial training in printing, carpentry, tailoring, weaving, needlework, farming, and gardening.

The educational needs of Muslim girls were addressed through the efforts of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. After the death of her husband in 1909, who had left a substantial sum of money for the establishment of a girl's school, Rokeya first opened a school at Bhagalpur. However, her efforts suffered a setback when her orthodox stepson persuaded her to close the school. She later moved to Calcutta, where

she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911. Urdu was the medium of instruction, and the curriculum included literacy subjects together with handicrafts, home science, gardening, and physical fitness training. Through this institution, Rokeya sought to encourage Muslim girls to receive formal education while responding to the educational needs of her community.

Unlike Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, and Begum Rokeya, Anandibai Joshi and Tarabai Shinde did not establish schools or educational institutions. Nevertheless, their contributions complemented these institutional efforts. Anandibai's achievement as the first Indian woman to obtain a medical degree abroad encouraged women to pursue higher and professional education, particularly in medicine. Similarly, Tarabai Shinde, through her association with the Satyashodhak Samaj and her writings, challenged the social attitudes that restricted women's education and strengthened the broader movement for educational reform.

Together, these institutions demonstrate that women reformers did more than advocate the importance of education. By establishing schools, homes for widows, vocational institutions, and educational spaces for Muslim girls, they transformed educational reform into a practical programme that expanded opportunities for women from different social and religious backgrounds. Their efforts laid an important foundation for the growth of women's education in colonial India.

Conclusion

The nineteenth century marked a significant phase in the history of women's education in colonial India. Although the introduction of modern education and the efforts of male social reformers created opportunities for change, women were no longer passive beneficiaries of these reforms. They emerged as active participants who questioned existing social practices, expressed their concerns through writings and speeches, and worked to make education accessible to women from different sections of society. Their voices shifted the debate on women's education from one led largely by men to one in which women themselves articulated their needs and aspirations.

The contributions of Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Anandibai Joshi, Tarabai Shinde, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain demonstrate that women's educational reform took multiple forms. Some challenged patriarchal values through their writings, while others established schools and educational institutions or encouraged women to pursue higher and professional education. Despite differences in their backgrounds and approaches, they shared a common belief that education was essential for improving the condition of women and enabling them to participate more actively in society.

Their efforts also broadened the meaning of women's education. It was no longer viewed merely as a means of making women better wives or mothers, as many contemporary reformers had suggested. Instead, education came to be associated with intellectual development, economic independence, professional opportunities, and social equality. Through schools, vocational training, public advocacy, and literary interventions, these women challenged the social barriers that had long restricted women's access to knowledge.

The legacy of these women reformers extends beyond the nineteenth century. Their Initiatives laid the foundation for the continued expansion of women's education in India and inspired later generations to demand equal educational opportunities. More importantly, they demonstrated that women were not simply the subjects of reform but were themselves agents of change who played a central role in shaping the history of education in colonial India.

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