International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Debating Women's Medical Education in Late 19th Century Through Vernacular Newspapers in Colonial United Province

Sakshi Pandey

Research Scholar, Department of Medieval and Modern History, University of Lucknow

Abstract:
This paper explores the evolving discourse on women's medical education in the late 19th century through the lens of vernacular newspapers in colonial United Provinces. As colonial reforms—particularly under the Countess of Dufferin's Fund—sought to institutionalize female medical training, local newspapers became vital platforms for public debate. While many editorials supported the initiative as a necessary response to the healthcare needs of purdah-observing women, others raised concerns about missionary influence, language barriers in instruction, inadequate training, and social resistance to co-education and boarding requirements. Through these varied perspectives, the paper reveals how vernacular newspapers not only mirrored societal tensions around gender, modernity, and colonial intervention, but also actively shaped public opinion on women's participation in medicine. The study underscores the role of regional media in mediating between state-driven policies and indigenous socio-cultural expectations, making it a crucial space for negotiating women's education and empowerment in colonial India.

Keywords: women, education, healthcare, United Province, vernacular newspaper

INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, most of the newspapers of the United Provinces and Punjab published various issues related to women from time to time and provided them a platform for public discourse so that the opinion of the general public could also be taken on them. In the newspapers of that time, the marriage of girls at a young age, the unfathomable extravagance done in the marriages, the remarriage of widows and their status in society, the question of the residence of prostitutes, the increasing influence of missionary women, and many questions related to the age of consent got prominent. But one issue that was widely discussed in the newspapers was the question of women's education and health. There were many questions hidden in the articles related to women's education, such as which women should be given education, for how many years education should be given, what should be the medium of education, should they be given education along with men or should there be a provision for separate education, and what subjects should be given education to women or what should be the purpose of education given to women? On many such questions, the newspapers gave their opinions from time to time.

Some of them published articles in favour of women's education and some against it. From time to time, the capabilities of women were tested on various criteria and questions were put on it. In some articles, women's education was propagated as the only way to make India an ancient glorious Aryan land, while in some articles, the spread of education among women was proved to be fatal for the unity and culture of

Indian society.

The article in Khair Khwah-I-Alam of 1st February 1883 reflects a clear attempt to compromise women's capabilities by portraying them as inherently less competent than men for public service roles. It dismisses the idea of employing women in the Postal Department on the grounds of their supposed physical weakness, domestic responsibilities, and biological functions, despite acknowledging that work could be found for them in traditionally gendered roles like midwifery or caregiving. The article undermines women's potential by confining them to roles deemed suitable by societal norms rather than individual merit.

In contrast, an article in Nyay Sudha (Harda), of 20th August 1884, supports the idea of women's education by expressing satisfaction for a girls' high school in Poona but expresses concern over its practical success due to social barriers like child marriage and male control. It criticizes the use of English as the medium of instruction and argues against providing higher education to girls, suggesting instead a focus on domestic skills—thus reinforcing the idea that women's education should be limited to household roles.

During the colonial period, many efforts were made by the Britishers to improve the condition of women in Indian society. Seeing that, steps were taken for the upliftment of women among Indians as well. One of these steps was to draw attention to the improvement of women's health. During this time, many articles were published to provide medical facilities and medical education to women.

Since ancient times, a medical method called Ayurveda was prevalent in India for the treatment of diseases, for which there were Hindu physicians called Vaidya. In colonial-era Even after spending many centuries, these physicians were able to maintain their presence in the common man's mind. Hindu women were also comfortable in front of these Vaidyas as compared to English male doctors. Therefore, many newspapers published articles to promote this, like The Prayag Samachar of 28th May 1883, states that as Vaidyak, or Hindu system of medicine, is well suited to the physical constitution of natives, Government should do something to encourage it. Even if a comparatively small sum of money were devoted to its encouragement, the people will largely benefit by it.

Several vernacular newspapers raised concerns about the state of medical practice in colonial India, particularly focusing on the native system of medicine (Vaidyak). These voices called for institutional reforms to improve medical education and safeguard public health.

The Bharat Bandhu (Aligarh) of 29th June 1883, criticized the unchecked practice of Vaidyak by unqualified individuals and urged the government to establish proper training schools and enforce licensing through examinations. Similarly, the Municipal Guide (Agra) of 15th July 1883, highlighted the incompetence of many native physicians and the sale of substandard drugs by native druggists, calling for formal medical education in the indigenous system. The Naiyar-i-Azim (Moradabad) of 27th August 1883, questioned the effectiveness of charitable dispensaries, noting the poor competence of native doctors and the unsuitability of English medicines for Indian patients. These views reflect a strong demand for structured, standardized medical education and regulation to improve both native healthcare practices and public health outcomes.

Due to the evil practice of purdah system in Indian society, women were dependent on very limited medical facilities not only outside the home but also inside the home. Even in the event of urgent needs like childbirth, women often had to depend on untrained women called Daai (midwives). Newspapers published many articles emphasizing the deteriorating women's health and the need for female doctors in the country. As an example The Nyay Sudha, of 3rd January 1883, emphasized the urgent need for female doctors, especially for upper-class women who preferred death over exposing themselves to male

physicians. It urged the government to bring qualified women doctors from England to treat patients and train Indian women in medicine, despite the financial cost. Similarly, the Victorian Paper (Sialkot), of 13th February 1884 supported the establishment of female medical classes across provinces, noting the deep discomfort women faced in being treated by male doctors, particularly in sensitive cases like sexual assault. These articles highlighted the critical shortage of female medical professionals and called for systemic reforms to make healthcare accessible and respectful for women.

In the 1880s, growing awareness of women's healthcare needs in colonial India led to calls for the training of native female doctors. Newspapers argued that Indian women were more familiar with the problems of their sisters than the doctors imported from England and would be more effective than them in the future. Newspapers emphasized both the social necessity and practical benefits of female medical education, especially in a society where women lived in seclusion.

The Mashir-I-Qaisar(Lucknow), of 27th February 1883, supported the importation of English female doctors but argued it was insufficient for India's vast needs. It urged the government to train native girls in medicine, acknowledging initial challenges but expressing confidence in long-term success. Similarly, the Oudh Akhbar of 5th September 1883, recognized the demand for female doctors, particularly due to purdah restrictions, and criticized the lack of local initiatives in Oudh. It suggested that wealthy locals, especially talukdars, should fund a female medical school in Lucknow and employ qualified lady doctors as instructors.

The establishment of the Lady Dufferin Fund in 1885 was seen in most newspapers as a commendable effort by the Queen's Government towards the medical education of women, for the benefit of Indian women. At that time, it would not be difficult to guess the state of education of women in the report published in India, such as The Kavi Vachan Sudha (Benaras), of 5th January 1885, states that it appears from the education reports that 92 percent of the population in the United Province, which amounts to 44,000,000, are quite illiterate, and that, as regards female education, only one girl in 350 girls receives instructions.

Newspapers welcomed the Lady Dufferin Fund with great fanfare. The initiative was widely welcomed in the vernacular press as a timely and compassionate response to the challenges faced by women living under strict social norms. The Oudh Akhbar of 25th July 1885, praised Lady Dufferin's initiative to train native female doctors, highlighting the severe hardships faced by women due to the lack of female medical professionals. It called for generous support from wealthy individuals.

While Lady Dufferin's Fund was widely praised for addressing the urgent need for female medical aid in colonial India, several vernacular newspapers expressed deep concerns about the fund's association with Christian missionaries.

The Hindustani of 20th September 1885, cautioned that although Lady Dufferin's Fund showed sympathy for native women, its suspected link to Christian missionaries could undermine its success, given the religious sensitivities of the Indian populace. Similarly, The Azad of 3rd November 1885, acknowledged the need for female medical aid but doubted the participation of respectable families due to social taboos, illiteracy among lower-class women, and concerns that Christian women would dominate the program and enter native households under religious pretences. The Rozanah of 27th January 1886, praised newly opened female dispensaries but criticized the practice of reading religious texts to patients, which discouraged broader acceptance. Lastly, The Hindi Pradip of February 1886, reported that while some Hindu leaders publicly praised the initiative, the Hindu community largely viewed the movement with suspicion, recalling prior missionary efforts to convert women under the guise of medical help.

These critiques reflect broader anxieties around religious interference, cultural autonomy, and the limits of trust in colonial-led reform efforts.

While the fund was established to improve healthcare access for native women, especially the middle class, some newspapers questioned whether it truly served its intended beneficiaries. The Oudh Punch of 16th January 1890, expressed disappointment that the Lady Dufferin Fund had failed to benefit native communities as expected. While European and Eurasian families had ready access to trained nurses and midwives, native families—even wealthy ones—were often left with undertrained, low-caste nurses. The paper reminded readers that the fund was meant for natives, who were also its main contributors. Again, on 20th November 1890, Oudh Punch noted that middle-class native women, the primary target of the fund, still lacked access to European lady doctors due to high fees and social constraints that prevented them from staying in female hospitals. The paper called on native members of hospital committees to take practical steps to make the fund more useful for the communities it was intended to serve.

As efforts to train native women in medicine gained momentum in colonial India, societal anxieties around gender segregation and morality emerged alongside the push for educational reform. Concerns about maintaining women safety and protecting the "honor" of female students affected both institutional arrangements and public discourse.

The Nasim-I-Agra of 3rd January 1884, welcomed the success of female medical education in Bombay and Agra but insisted that female students be taught in separate spaces to avoid scandal. By 1888, it criticized co-education at Agra Medical School, where male and female students were separated only by a screen during lectures, and called for female-only professors to prevent suspected impropriety.

Alongside administrative and access-related concerns, vernacular newspapers also highlighted language barriers and curriculum flaws within medical education for women. These criticisms pointed to systemic shortcomings that hindered the very goal of empowering native women through healthcare training.

The Nasim-I-Agra of 15th May 1888, reported poor examination results at the Agra Medical School, with only 13 out of 28 female students passing. It attributed this to the use of Hindi textbooks overloaded with unfamiliar Arabic and English terms, making comprehension difficult for the girls. Later, in its 30th December 1888 issue, Nasim-I-Agra recommended replacing these with simpler Sanskrit terms and adding explanatory footnotes where necessary. It emphasized that effective learning is impossible if students cannot fully understand the language of instruction, thereby urging reform in the medium and content of female medical education.

After the start of medical education for women in the medical college of Bombay, the newspaper also raised the demand for the establishment of medical colleges for women in cities like Agra, Oudh, Allahabad, Banaras, Cawnpore, Bijnor etc. Vernacular newspapers documented the growing momentum behind these efforts, reflecting both community engagement and administrative support.

The Kavi Vachan Sudha (Benaras) of 14th September 1885, reported the formation of provincial associations supporting the Dufferin Fund, noting that scholarships of Rs. 10 were offered to women enrolling at the Agra Medical School. It emphasized basic educational requirements and advocated for establishing a similar training school in Benaras. The Alam-I-Taswir (Cawnpore) of 5th November 1889, described a public meeting that marked the opening of a new Lady Dufferin hospital in Cawnpore's old Kotwali building, with an estimated monthly cost of Rs. 200. The Mihir-I-Nimroz (Bijnor) of 21st November 1889, praised Magistrate F.S. Bullock for enhancing the local female hospital by constructing a new facility and appointing a trusted Hindu female assistant, Bibi Harkumari, trained at Agra Medical

School. Her appointment boosted public trust compared to her Christian predecessor, and the paper urged further steps to train midwives and female compounders for rural dispensaries.

Amid the institutional efforts of the Dufferin Fund and the expansion of female medical education in India, the story of Anandi Bai Joshi emerged as a symbol of individual achievement and national aspiration. Her journey inspired hope for women's advancement, while her early death evoked a collective sense of loss.

The Koh-i-Nur (Lahore) of 11th September 1886 celebrated the achievements of Anandibai Joshi, the first Indian woman to earn a medical degree abroad, drawing parallels with learned women from ancient India like Gargi and Lilawati. It argued that proper support for women's education could restore such legacies and was essential for both social reform and national progress. Following her death, Nyay Sudha (Harda) of 2nd March 1887 and Subodh Sindhu (Khandwa) mourned her as a national loss. At just 22, Joshi had studied rigorously abroad with the intent of serving native women. Her life and death underscored both the potential and fragility of early efforts in female medical empowerment.

Despite the growing institutional support for women's medical education and practice, concerns about the effectiveness and competence of newly trained female doctors persisted. Vernacular newspapers reflected public hesitation and called for continued oversight to ensure quality care for native women.

The Nasir-I-Agra of 15th December 1887, noted that the new lady doctor and her female pupils at the Agra female hospital had not yet earned public trust. It recommended that assistant surgeons be assigned to supervise their work to ensure proper care. Again in its 30th December 1888 issue, The Nasir-I-Agra expressed concern that professors had delegated all patient care to the inexperienced lady doctor and her untrained pupils. It emphasized the need for senior medical staff to oversee diagnosis and treatment, especially since the lady doctor was unfamiliar with the specific needs and temperaments of native women. These articles highlight the early challenges of professional credibility in women's medical practice and the call for guided transition.

Public appeals for financial support played a crucial role in sustaining female medical education and services under initiatives like the Lady Dufferin Funds. By the second half of the 19th century, Lady Dufferin's scheme gradually began to run out of funds. Vernacular newspapers often acted as intermediaries, encouraging local elites and the public to contribute to these charitable efforts.

The Oudh Akhbar of 3rd April 1889, published an Urdu translation of a letter by Colonel Erskine, Commissioner of Lucknow and President of the Lady Lyall School Committee, urging Deputy Commissioners in Oudh to help raise funds. The paper expressed hope that sympathetic and charitable individuals would support the school, which aimed to improve female medical aid for native women. Similarly, the Mufid-I-Agra of 1st April 1889, praised the humanitarian goals of Lady Dufferin's Fund but lamented the absence of local contributions in Agra during 1887–88. It called on the district's nobility and gentry to respond positively to the Collector's appeal, underlining the critical role of local patronage in the success of women's healthcare initiatives.

Due to many revolutionary social reformers in the late 19th century, women had started entering educational institutions, but this change was not sudden and widespread, but was continuous and limited. Vernacular newspapers played a very commendable role in challenging the practice of confining women within the four walls of their homes in the name of respect and safety that began for the past several centuries. Women entering the medical field was a slow process, but it was a step towards creating a new identity by stepping out of their homes, which also contributed to changing the future of India.

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