

A short history of education for women in India

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The right to education has been recognised as an integral and essential part for every person irrespective of gender. Historically, education for men was promoted in all cultures, while women's education was not considered important or necessary. Gender discrimination at all levels and the perception that women need not be educated persisted even when men all over the world were being educated as doctors, engineers, lawyers etc. To overturn this social dogma, women have fought for their right to education for almost 200 years now. Through countless debates and endless movements all over the world, men and women fought the long battle for women's education. In June 1868, the University of London's Senate had voted to allow women to appear in the General Examination thus, becoming the world's first university to accept women. Women's higher education in London dates back to the 1840s, with the foundation of Bedford College. After initial resistance, the university allowed its first female student to sit for the new General Examination for Women in August 1868.

The history of Indian women is full of pioneers who have broken gender barriers and worked hard for their rights. As a result women today have made immense in the field of politics, arts, science, law and others. The first woman who spearheaded this change in the society was Savitribai Phule.

Savitribai Phule's husband, Jyotirao Phule, had studied the Hindu scriptures and believed that all humans were equal. He realized that education was the one tool that if provided to all humans, would get rid of all social inequalities. So he started the process from his home, by educating his wife- **Savitribai Phule**. Thereafter, she went on to work towards questioning and eradicating a lot of social evils. From adopting her son, Yashwant after her husband rescued a pregnant woman who was about to end her life, to setting up a delivery room for women with forced pregnancies named 'Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha', Savitribai fought zealously against ignorance and taboo. She is the one who broke the stereotypes against inter-caste marriages and performed the last rites of her husband, to name a few. Savitribai Phule was the first woman in India, about whom we know, who believed that educating women is the only tool for a better future. Born on January 3, 1831, she was India's first feminist who grew in a country ruled by the British Raj, where women rights were non-existent. She achieved the revolutionary act of establishing the first school for girls. Therefore, she is rightfully regarded as the first female teacher of India. Kavya Phule, Savitribai's first collection of poems, was published in 1854 that emphasizes the importance of English and Marathi education.

Other stalwarts, who have made immense contributions in this field are mentioned below.

Tarabai Shinde, was an associate of the Phule couple and their shared views of gender and caste oppression gave her a platform to fight for women's rights. Her first published work 'Stri Purush Tulana' in Marathi, in which she explores the disparities between men and women, is regarded as one of India's first modern feminist texts. Her ideas were not only focussed on the women of this country, rather she believed that women all over the world were similarly oppressed. She was the harbinger of a revolution, one of the few women who dared to speak out against religion at a time when zealots were many and dissenters were few.

Fatima Sheikh, was the first Muslim woman educator of India who used to teach Dalit children at the school run by the Phule couple. She helped Savitribai Phule to set up the first school called "Indigenous Library", in her own house, challenging the upper-caste Hindus as well as the Orthodox Muslims. She also used to spend hours counselling the parents who did not wish to send their girls to school.

Swarna Kumari Devi, the elder sister of the poet Rabindranath Tagore, was one of the first prominent women writers in Bengali Literature. Her writing spoke about Indian women. She was an active supporter of women's rights and she had also founded an organization called 'Sakhi Samiti' for women to provide education and shelter. Her fiction reflected her progressive ideas rejecting traditional Indian Hindu patriarchy and advocated for women's education and their financial independence.

Anne Besant, the educationist, had an immense contribution for the upliftment of the status of women and providing them with educational opportunities. She was the founder of Theosophical Society in India and along with Madan Mohan Malaviya she founded the Benares Hindu University in 1916.

We also have Helen Keller who even after having contracted an unknown illness which had left her blind and deaf at the early age of 19 months, had successfully completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Radcliff College at Harvard to become the first blind and deaf person to accomplish the feat. She delivered her speeches and lectures about her life through sign language, which inspired millions and gave encouragement to many. She campaigned for women's suffrage, labour rights, socialism, and women education. She herself was a living example of what a woman can achieve if she is determined to do so.

Coming to another great story where at an early age, Maria Montessori broke gender expectations when she enrolled in classes at an all-boy technical school. She believed that children irrespective of their gender should be taught from a young age to learn and acquire skills for a better life wherein they can shape their own future. She developed a teaching method based on her philosophy and scientific pedagogy. Schools which used her method of teaching were called Montessori schools. Her method of education was based on self-directed activity, hands-on learning and collaborative play.

Though a foreigner, Sister Nivedita who was greatly influenced by Swami Vivekananda contributed significantly towards women education. She propagated that India could achieve development only if it freed itself from the grip of the British. She created awareness among

the people about women's education by going door to door. She even opened many model institutions for achieving her goal of imparting basic education to all the girls of the society.

We are aware of the rich cultural heritage of Bengal but Bengal is equally famous for its countless movements and the boldness that runs in the blood of its people. Where at one hand we have Chandramukhi Basu, a Bengali woman famous for becoming one of the first two female graduates of British Empire in 1883; at another hand we have Kamini Roy who defied all societal norms and continued with her education even after her marriage.

Chandramukhi Basu had ranked first in university entrance exam of 1876 but she was discriminated to enter university until 1878. After her graduation she became the first woman in British Empire to pass Masters Examination in 1884. She then became the Principal of Bethune College in 1888, thus becoming the first female head of an undergraduate academic institution in South Asia.

Kamini Roy became one of the first girls to attend school in British India from Bethune School in 1883. She was also India's first woman to graduate with honours and started teaching in the same college. She went on to be known for her social work in women's education and helped to advance feminism in the Indian subcontinent. She also helped Bengali women to win the right to vote in 1926.

Coming to Ashapura Devi, she was the first woman feminist writer of Bengal who hailed from an ultra-orthodox family of north Kolkata. She was not permitted to attend school so she lived a cloistered life, devoting herself to reading. Through her stories and novels she portrayed the emergence of quintessential middle class Bengali-women –their repression, angst, growing awareness, awakening of conscience and final revolt. Thus, the manifestation gave a severe jolt to male chauvinists and left them stunned.

Women's rights, education, and their health are the important factors for the general awakening of the society and Ramabai Ranade worked vigorously for it for 25 years of her life. She fought against the social evils which were directed towards women and built a women's institution named Seva Sadan in Bombay and Pune. This has now developed into an institution offering a number of facilities like hostel, training colleges, vocational centres and others. She had established a branch of Arya Mahila Samaj in Bombay and also established Hindu Ladies Social and Literary Club. She was illiterate to begin with but later learnt everything under the tutelage of her husband. She mastered the art of public speaking both in English and Marathi.

In an era where women hardly had the freedom to pursue what they wanted, Rukhma Bai (born in a Marathi Family) created history by becoming the first Indian woman to practice medicine. Not only did she set an example but also paved the way for more young girls to build a career in the field of medicine. Her actions and protests against sexual abuse of young girls led to the Age of Consent Act in 1891. She fought against the 'Purdah System' and through her writings she tried to bring before the society why it should be eliminated.

Importantly, there were many men too who played the role of protagonists for women's education. The history of women's education witnessed the fight by both men and women who worked together for the betterment of the society. Social reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Rabindranath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others fought tirelessly to improve the condition of women and give them their position in the society.

One of the greatest pioneers in this field is Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's works have conveyed feminism very strongly by putting women at the forefront of his works. He strongly believed in fighting for women's upliftment using his pen as a weapon. His writings campaigned for women's education, rights, dignity, freedom and equality. From Charulata of 'Nastanirh' to Bimala of 'Ghare Baire' all his female protagonists have expressed their free will, power and defied the age old customs of the society. In 'Chokher Bali', Tagore brings in the character of Binodini who is not only beautiful but also much educated. She was proficient in English which was a great matter of fact during the time the story was set. In his lyrical novel 'Shesher Kobita', he presents Labanya as a strong-willed, highly educated, free spirited woman who hails from a middle class family.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the key figures of India's Renaissance in the nineteenth century who whole-heartedly worked for women's empowerment and prosperity. He laid emphasis on education among women as that would be the key to get them out of the hardships of the social evils and malpractices. Dealing with education and its basic spirit at the root, Vidyasagar started his social movement from Bengal in both the fields- women's education and getting them out of the grip of the social oppressions. He initiated the provision of widow remarriage and fought against the evils of child marriage.

Dayanand Saraswati believed that mothers have greater contribution in a child's life than the teachers. So to make the future of the nation educated and responsible, he wanted all women to be educated. He believed that without education, no person or society can prosper because education alone leads to human growth and prosperity. He said that as the education of boys at Gurukulas is considered an important aspect of the society likewise girls should get the same education. He believed that for a healthy household both the husband and wife needed to be educated.

Swami Vivekananda also believed that freedom and equality of women are important for the better functioning of home and society. He believed in the philosophy of education enabling one to make their informed choices. He also believed that development of knowledge with intelligence can help women uphold their social disposition.

Dhondo Keshav Karve, a name often missed in the pages of history was greatly influenced by the thoughts and works of the social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Phule. Thus, Karve dedicated his life in uplifting the status of women in the country and he understood it could be only done through education. He established the Widow Re-marriage Association in 1893 and set up India's first school for widows at

Hingane Village (near Poona). He also opened a Mahila Vidyalaya, a residential school for girls that trained them for jobs. He even developed a parallel matriculation course for girls.

Bethune College of Calcutta (now Kolkata) started on 4th March, 1879 by Joan Bethune, was the only women's college under the British Empire that was outside Britain. It is the oldest and first women's college in Asia. Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thakersey (SNDT) was India's first University for women, established by Dhondo Keshav Karve with the help of Vithaldas Thakersey. This historic institution was built in an era where little attention was paid to women's education.

Being the first woman to receive Sahitya Akademi Fellowship, Smt Mahadevi Verma was widely regarded as the 'modern Meera' who dominated Hindi literature for a long period of time. She assumed the roles of teacher and headmistress to educate girls. At a time when women were denied any opportunities, she not only completed her education but also went on to teach. Her essays, stories and poems touch on the subject of physical and mental abuse that women experience.

Another woman who played a very important role in elevating the condition of women was Rukmini Arundale. She was a radical who is best known for her visionary work in the fields of dance, culture, and education that catalysed a renaissance in Indian Classical dance forms. Honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 1956, she didn't just want to revive a dying Indian dance form but wanted to reverse the social and negative stereotypes that were associated with Bharatnatyam. She was the brave force who brought 'devadasis' and their dance form to a socially acceptable place where women from all classes could learn and perform Bharatnatyam. Based on the principles of ancient Indian Gurukul system, she founded the Kalakshetra Foundation which included a high school, secondary school and an arts academy where music and dance were taught to both men and women.

Since 1947 the Indian government has tried to provide incentives for girls' school attendance through programs for midday meals, free books, and uniforms. In 1986 the National Policy on Education decided to restructure education in tune with the social framework of each state, and with larger national goals. The new policy aimed at social change through revised texts, curricula, increased funding for schools, expansion in the numbers of schools, and policy improvements. In a recent study, named Project Drawdown which compared the effectiveness of different measures to curb climate change has shown that educating girls and securing women's voluntary rights to high-quality family planning together could reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide by 103 giga tonnes, making this the most powerful solution to climate change.¹

Since 1986, many important changes and a new approach to education especially in terms of early childhood and primary schooling have been brought. The new education policy of 2020, pledges to break the gender barriers and make education available to all. The higher education system has been fragmented and has recommended adopting a more holistic approach to address the 21st century goals. We hope this will now build an overarching

¹ See, <https://whatsyour2040.com/educating-girls/>

structure allowing more flexibility and integration in learning. Where at one hand the new policy recommends studying science in regional languages on the other hand the policy is trying to make online education a natural part of the system to make it more robust. We have happily arrived at a juncture today where education is regarded as a basic human right. However, we are still a long way from ensuring that this right is available and implemented to every single person in our ever developing world.