

Woman in Modern India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2456.4370.201806>

Abstract

The first historical account of Indian woman dates from the nineteenth century and is a product of the colonial experience. These accounts tell of an ancient time when woman were held in high esteem followed by a long period when their status declined. Then Europeans came into the scene. The foreign rulers, according to these narratives, introduced new ideas about woman's roles and capabilities and these ideas were adopted by enlightened Indians. It was slow but progressive march towards "modernity" following a long period of stagnation and decline. Both British missionaries and those Indian reformers who welcomed the opportunity to put forth a critique of their own society hypothesized a "golden age" followed by centuries of corruption and betrayal.

Keywords: Feminist, Female education, Women, Religions, Culture, Society

Introduction

The Indian text they cited shared a belief in a unique female nature. Indian texts essentialized woman as devoted and self-sacrificing, texts on religion, law, politics and education carried different pronouncements for men depending on caste, class, age, and religious sect. In contrast, women's differences were overshadowed by their biological characteristics and the subordinate, supportive roles they were destined to play. Historians were equally essentialist in their portrayal of Indian women. Topics that were intimately interwoven with woman's lives – household and agricultural technology; religious rituals and sentiments; fertility and family size; furnishing, jewelry and clothing; inheritance and property rights; and marriage and divorce – were largely overlooked.

In the 1970's the United Nations focused world attention on the status of women. As India and other countries set up commissions to study the status of women, the UN declared 1975 International Women's Year and 1975-85 Women's Decade.

Soon after the systematic study of women's past began, students of history recognized they were witnessing a revolution. Gerda Lerner an American pioneer in the field

of woman's history and the first person to hold a chair in woman's history, said: "Woman has a history; women are in History." Her words became a manifesto.

The newer challenge to the task of writing women's history comes from the subaltern school, originating in Calcutta, and from historians interested in resistance in everyday life. The first volume of subaltern studies appeared in 1982, heralding a new school of history focusing on all non-elite colonial subjects. It was the subaltern project that led Gayatri Spivak to write her challenging article: "Can the subaltern speak?" In this article she states the problem of writing the history of colonial women: "as object of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."

There are other ways of writing about gender, especially focusing on the colonial structures that controlled women's lives and analyzing the documents that determined the construction of women in the dominant discourse. At the dawn of women's history as it is now written, Miriam Schneir, in a book entitled *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (1972), stated: No feminist works emerged from

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How to cite this article: Pusphalata C. Woman in Modern India. *J Adv Res Eng & Edu* 2018; 3(2): 1-4.

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behind the Hindu purdah or out of Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression.”

Efforts to Modernize Woman's Roles

In the nineteenth century, the “women question” loomed large. This was not a question of “what do women want?” but rather “how can they be modernized?” It became the central question in nineteenth century British India because the Foreign rules had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. Enamored with their “civilizing mission,” influential British writers condemned Indian religions, culture, society for their rules and customs regarding women.

Rassundari Devi Bengali women wrote a story of her life, *Amar jiban* (“my life”) that was published in 1876. This detailed memoir revolves around her day to day experiences as a house wife and mother. Obsessed with a desire to read, she stole a page from a book and sheet of paper from her son and kept them hidden in the kitchen where she furtively pursued her education. “This is the first autobiography written in Bengali and it is rich in its details of the period when reformers were attempting to change the lives of women. When Rassundari Devi was finally able to write about her own struggle to master simply reading, commented: “These days parents of a single girl takes so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that”

Dr. Vina Mazumdar, one of contemporary India's well-known feminist scholars, recalls that one of her great grandmothers performed sati (cremated herself on her husband's funeral pyre) after this custom had been prohibited. Family history records this as a voluntary decision opposed by the women's sons and grandsons. One granddaughter-in-law refused to accept the blessing of the woman about to become sati. It is this woman the rebel who has been remembered by Vina Mazumdar's family as having a strong and vibrant personality.

Historically, women experienced these rules and prescription differently depending on religion, caste, class, age, place in the family hierarchy, and an element of serendipity. There were women who lived up to the ideal, but there were also women who rebelled against these prescriptions. The historical record confirms that women found an escape from conventional roles in religion and scholarship, and occasionally through political action.

Changing the Life of Woman

In 1828 eight years old Iswar Chandra Vidyasager (1820-1891) walked, with his father, from the village of Birsingha in Midnapur District to Calcutta to seek admission in an English Language institution. The fees at Hindu college were

too high for his father to pay so Iswar Chandra was enrolled in Sanskrit college. While studying in Calcutta he lived at the home of a friend whose sister was a child widow. This was Iswar Chandra's first experience of the hardships this custom imposed on women. Sometime later his old guru decided to marry a young girl. Iswar Chandra vowed then to devote his life to improving the status of Hindu widows and encouraging remarriage.

Iswar Chandra also became an impassioned supporter of female education and an opponent of polygyny. Iswar Chandra also became an impassioned supporter of female education and an opponent of polygyny. And on other side the remarriage Act did not change the status of widow. Frequently blamed for the husband's death, the high-caste widow was required to relinquish her jewelry and subsist on simple food. Young widows were preyed upon by men who would make them their mistresses or carry them away to urban brothels.

Kandukuri Virasalingam pantulu (1848-1919) was born in Rajahmundry, the capital of Godavari District, in a Telugu-speaking district of Andhra Pradesh. Virasalingam, a Brahmin trained in classical Telugu, spent his life involved in movements to promote this language for modern education and communication. Later Virasalingam made widow remarriage and female education the key points of his program for social change. In 1878 organized a society for social reform and in 1891 a widow Remarriage Association was formed. Virasalingam had a significant impact on female education.

These reformers viewed women as their subject – to be changed as a consequence of persuasive arguments, social action, education, and legislation. The historian Sumit Sarkar has argued that these reformers were concerned primarily with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only “limited and controlled emancipation” of their womenfolk. Women also experienced increased opportunities for the expression of their individuality. Formal education and particularly the development of publications intended for and written by women gave women a voice.

Saraladevi Chaudhurani (1872-1954), a Bengali woman from the famous Tagore family, is an excellent example of the “new woman”.

The agenda of modernization, to which both colonialist and nationalist discourse laid claim, did not, indeed could not, include the wider transformation of Indian society. Never the less, the steps taken by these respectable and well-educated Indian men linked improving women's status with the modernization agenda. Their campaign set in motion further attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders.

The opening of Hindu College in 1816 was closely followed by the foundation of the Calcutta school society to promote female education. Radha Kanta Dep, the secretary of this society, became a patron of female education and assisted in the formation of the Calcutta Female Juvenile society (founded in 1819 by Baptists). One of the most important school for girls was the Hindu Balika Vidyalaya opened in 1849 in Calcutta by J.E. Drinkwater Bethune, legal Council of Education.

Indian supported female education because they wanted social and religious reforms, or social and financial mobility, or both. The founders of Hindu College and other early school for boys wanted to advance the opportunities of their own class. In the case of female education, early supporters saw opportunities for social mobility as the demand educated brides increased. The concern here was not with women as individual, but with their development as companion to men, as “scientific” nurturers, and as member of civil society.

The story of women’s education in the period following the Hunter Commissioner and the end of the century can be told through the work of three pioneer educationalists –Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, founder of the sharada sadan in Bombay and puna (1889), Mataji Tapaswini who began the Mahakali Pathshala of Calcutta (1893), and D.K. Karve who began a school for widows in pune (1896). These three examples are particularly significant because they represent efforts to build female school distinct from those of the religious reform organizations. The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. Through their efforts to develop institutions women learned the limits of their power. The boundaries of the early nineteenth century had been stretched considerably by the early twentieth century.

The Women’s Organizations Founded by Women

Women began to define their interest, propose solution, and take action only after they formed their own associations. Women’s association, called by various titles, sprang up all over India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most were geographically limited but they shared the goal of bringing women together to discuss Women’s issues. Saraladevi Chaudhurani, critical of the women’s meetings held in conjunction with the Indian National Social Conference, called for a permanent association of Indian Women.

The Barat Stree Mahamandel planned to open branches in all parts of India to promote female education. It developed branches in Lahore, Allahabad, Delhi, Karachi, Amritsar, Hyderabad, Kanpur, Bankura, Hazaribagh, Midnapur, and Calcutta to bring together “Women of every race, Class and

party....on the basis of their common interest in the moral and material progress of the Women of India.” Many of the Indian Women already belonged to the Tamil Madras Sangam (Tamil Ladies’ Association) and had joined with the British women in forming the National Indian Association to promote female education, particularly English Language instruction, and the teaching of Crafts. And it represented Women of all races, cultures, and religions. Each branch was to chart its own course of work in four main areas: religion, education, politics, and philanthropy.

The WIA had been political active from the beginning when they sent a delegation to meet with secretary of state Montagu in 1917 to request the franchise for Women. Stri Dharma, published in English but including articles in both Hindi and Tamil, carried news of events of interest to women, reports from the branches, and articles on Women’s condition. The competed for Women’s attention with the self-respect movement. The self-respect movement had a larger agenda than women’s rights; its goal was to establish a society free from the domination of the priestly caste, with justice and equality for all human beings.

The National Council of Women in India (NCWI) was the next all-India Women’s organization established. By 1925 woman of Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras had utilized the network developed doing war work to link their various clubs and association into a new council. The International Council of Women convened its First meeting in Washington D.C. in 1888 to advance women’s social, economic, and political rights. Members of the NCWI had not followed Lady Tata’s advice to visit the slums but there a few women who had. One of these was Maniben Kara (1905-79), a social worker who became a leading trade unionist.

Women’s organizations developed their interest in women factory workers in response to the royal Commission inquiries and ILO initiatives. Until they were stimulated by an external force, these woman focused attention on issues stimulated by an external force, these woman focused attention on issues significant to them, namely civil rights, education, and the social environment. They argued that these concerns were shared by all Indian Women because they assumed that Women, except for the most unfortunate, were economic dependents. Most Women belonging to Women’s organizations seemed unaware that a significant percentage of women support themselves and their families. Even the Women’s organization called on government to pass legislation and made efforts to “get in touch with women and child labourers.” And one of the first steps taken by the leaders of this movement was to break the silence: to expose the “various categories of humiliation, atrocities, tortures and individual and mass assault to which they (women). Were subjected.”

Rape was the only issue that galvanized the contemporary

women's movement. "Dowry murders," the term used to refer to the deaths by burning of young married woman by their in-laws, emerged as a new phenomenon in the late 1970s. As the campaign against these deaths escalated, politicians hastened to condemn the practice and blame it on non-compliance with the Dowry prohibition Act of 1961. Unfortunately, hard question about the deeper causes of this violence and the ability of the Law to remedy the situation were rarely asked. The result has been a decade of extraordinary legislation and subsequent despair because these laws have meant so little in practice. Even as questions of violence against woman have brought a new and significant focus to the women's movement other issues have fragmented this new solidarity. The gravest challenges have come from a revitalized and gendered communalism as illustrated by the Shah Bano case and the dispute over the mosque at Ayodha.

Conclusion

There would have been no women's movements in India if Indian men in the nineteenth century had not been concerned with modernizing women's roles. They focused their attention on certain issues: sati, child marriage, widow remarriage, and most important of all, female education. The decision made by these men meant that women, whether they wanted to or not, would become part of the new society.

Indian women at the end of the twentieth century would argue that they still have a long way to go to attain gender justice. The issues of the moment and the unsolved problems must not be allowed to negate the victories of the past. It is important to temper the interpretation of the present with an appreciation of the enormous sacrifices Indian women have made to bring about change.

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Date of Submission: 2018-06-26

Date of Acceptance: 2018-07-05

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