

RABINDRA BHARATI PATRIKA



রবীন্দ্র ভারতী পত্রিকা

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DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES

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**WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN ANCIENT, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN INDIA: A STUDY OF ITS DEVELOPMENT AND CHALLENGES****Sharmila Poonia**

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Abstract:

Educational, from the very beginning of human kind[is perceived as the most significant and powerful weapon for proving full horizon to one's. Physical, mental, intellectual, spiritual growth. It connects one with the world. The beauty of the world as well and life can be understood and enjoyed only through proper education at the same time it. The research paper explores the evolution of women's education in India from ancient times to modern times, highlighting key developments and persistent challenges. Women were considered scholars in ancient India, but societal changes during the Vedic and medieval periods limited their educational opportunities. Colonial rule brought renewed focus on women's education, with social reformers and the establishment of formal educational institutions. Post-independence, policy measures like the Right to Education Act and gender equality initiatives advanced the cause. However, challenges like socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, and inadequate infrastructure persist. The study emphasizes the need for sustained efforts to empower women and foster an inclusive society.

Keywords: Women's Education, Ancient India, Medieval India, Modern India, Educational Development, Social Reform

Introduction:

Education is a crucial tool for social transformation and empowerment, also especially for women. The trajectory of women's education in India has evolved significantly from ancient times to the modern era, influenced by cultural, social, and economic factors³. Ancient India saw women's participation in education, but access was limited to specific social strata^{4,5}. The medieval period saw a decline in women's educational opportunities due to societal restrictions, invasions, and practices like purdah and child marriage^{1,2}.

The onset of colonial rule in India presented women's education with both opportunities and obstacles. Social reformers who challenged traditional conventions and established schools for girls, such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and at the same time Savitribai Phule, pushed for women's access to education³. These initiatives were reinforced in the years following independence, when the Indian Constitution established measures to address gender inequality and guaranteed the access to education as a basic right⁶.

Despite significant progress, challenges persist in achieving universal access to quality education for women in India. Issues such as gender-based discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, early marriage, and safety concerns continue to hinder women's educational attainment. This study aims to examine the historical development of women's education in India, tracing its evolution across ancient, medieval and modern period and analyzing the key challenges that have shaped its trajectory.

Objective of the Research:

- 1) To explore the evolution of women's education in India across three distinct historical periods: ancient, medieval, and modern.
- 2) To analyze the transformation of women's education from its prominence in ancient India, its decline during the medieval period, to its resurgence in the modern era, highlighting key events, figures and policies that influenced these changes.
- 3) To Investigate the socio-cultural, political and economic barriers that impeded women's access to education in different historical contexts and assess their continuing impact on contemporary educational systems.



- 4) To examine the contributions of reformers, movements and policies that played a pivotal role in advancing women's education, especially during the colonial and post-independence periods.
- 5) To provide a comparative analysis of how traditional attitudes toward women's education have evolved over time and how historical legacies continue to shape the current scenario.

Literature Review:

Bhat (2015) underscores the pivotal role of education in empowering women while addressing societal and economic barriers that hinder their participation¹. Bhuimali (2004) links education and employment as tools for empowerment, analyzing historical and socio-economic impacts². Chaube and Chaube (2005) provide a historical perspective on educational disparities and progress through comparative analysis³. Lokogandhar (2021) traces the evolution of women's education from ancient to modern times, highlighting socio-religious restrictions and reforms⁴. Bailey and Karen (2016) explore global gender disparities in education over a century with insights relevant to India⁵. Bhattacharya (1992) examines the Vedic period's societal expectations and women's access to education⁶. Aggarwal (2005) focuses on policies and reforms shaping modern women's education⁷. Prakashshravani (2024) details the historical milestones and persistent challenges in women's education⁸. Chauhan (2004) discusses post-independence educational progress and gender disparities⁹. Ravi (2011) offers a comprehensive review of inclusive policies for women's education¹⁰. The NIOS resource emphasizes historical developments and strategies to address educational inequities for women in India.

Research Methodology:

This study uses a historical and analytical research methodology to explore women's education in India from ancient to modern times. It uses a descriptive approach, examining socio-cultural, political, and economic factors influencing education. The research uses primary and secondary data sources, including texts, records, and government policies. The methodology includes literature reviews, document analysis, historical analysis, comparative analysis, and thematic analysis. The study contributes to the discourse on gender equality and educational development.

Women's Education in Ancient, Medieval and Modern Period: Development and Challenges

Political, religious and cultural shifts have impacted Indian women's educational history. In ancient times, the education system was primarily based on oral traditions and religious teachings, with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds having limited access. Early educational institutions, such as gurukuls, were predominantly male-centric, with women rarely attending these centers^{11,12}.

The medieval period saw significant social changes with the advent of Islamic rule in India, leading to the establishment of madrasas, where education was imparted in subjects like literature, science, and mathematics¹³. However, women's education during this period remained highly restricted, with a focus on domestic skills. Notable figures like Razia Sultana, the only female monarch in Indian history, were educated and held significant power whereas but the majority of women remained illiterate¹⁵.

In India, women's education saw a sea change during the modern era, which began with British colonial control. Women's education was not given priority by the British government at first, but reformers' and social activists' influence started to bring about important change¹⁴. The 19th century saw the establishment of girls' schools, and social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar promoted the idea of educating girls, particularly among lower-caste communities¹⁵.

Despite progress, women's education in India continues to face numerous challenges, including social and cultural attitudes that place the responsibility of household duties and child-rearing on women. Economic factors also play a significant role, with poverty preventing many families from sending girls to school in rural areas.

Women's Education in Ancient India:

Women had a comparatively high social standing during the Vedic era, and they made important contributions to intellectual, spiritual, and cultural life. This era saw the emergence of women scholars and



philosophers who were celebrated for their wisdom and insights. The *Rigveda* and the *Upanishads*, revered ancient texts, mention prominent female figures such as Gargi and Maitreyi, who participated in profound philosophical and theological debates. Gargi, for instance, challenged the sage Yajnavalkya in a renowned intellectual exchange on metaphysics, showcasing her deep understanding of complex spiritual concepts¹⁶.

Education in the Vedic period was imparted through gurukuls, traditional centers of learning where students, irrespective of gender, were taught by a guru. Women, especially from upper-caste families, had access to this system of education, although their participation was limited compared to men¹⁶. The curriculum was comprehensive, encompassing spiritual knowledge, philosophy, arts, literature, and early sciences like astronomy and medicine. Remarkably, the *Rigveda* contains hymns authored by women sages such as Lopamudra and Ghosha, underscoring their pivotal role in the religious and intellectual traditions of the time⁶.

However, as the society transitioned into the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods, there was a noticeable decline in women's educational rights. This decline was closely linked to the rise of patriarchal norms and the rigid formalization of the caste system, which relegated women to subordinate roles¹⁶. Education became predominantly a male prerogative, and women's access to learning was largely curtailed. Their roles were increasingly confined to domestic responsibilities, with societal expectations emphasizing their roles as caretakers and homemakers over intellectual pursuits⁶.

This regression in women's education reflects a broader societal shift during this period, where the influence of patriarchal structures grew stronger, and opportunities for women, particularly in formal learning, were systematically restricted. The diminished status of women in education also mirrored the entrenchment of caste-based divisions, further limiting the avenues for empowerment and equality for women from marginalized communities¹⁷.

The accomplishments of women during the Vedic era continue to provide witness to their intellectual and spiritual contributions in spite of these historical setbacks. These early instances are a compelling reminder of the potential and capacities of women when they are given equal access to education and opportunity to participate in the advancement of society.

Women's Education in Medieval India:

Due to a confluence of invasions, political unrest, and the solidification of orthodox socio-religious norms, women's educational possibilities in India significantly decreased during the mediaeval era. Practices such as purdah (the seclusion of women) and child marriage severely restricted women's mobility, preventing them from accessing formal education or participating in intellectual and social activities¹⁸. This era was marked by the prioritization of maintaining social order and political power, further marginalizing women from public and intellectual life.

As communities grew more insular to preserve their cultural and social integrity, the frequent invasions by other powers—including Muslim dynasties—exacerbated the difficulties faced by women¹⁹. Women's roles were mostly restricted to the home in such a setting, and their education was frequently restricted to religious instruction and skills seen to be essential for handling household duties²⁰.

Despite these widespread limitations, there were notable exceptions where women broke societal barriers and achieved intellectual and cultural prominence. Razia Sultana, the first and only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, stood as a testament to women's potential to lead and contribute to governance and public life when afforded the opportunity. Similarly, the Bhakti and Sufi movements provided rare platforms for women to engage in spiritual and intellectual pursuits²¹. These movements emphasized personal devotion and egalitarianism, which allowed women like Mirabai, the saint-poet known for her devotional songs, and Rabi'a al-Adawiyya, a Sufi mystic, to express their ideas and gain recognition for their contributions to religious and philosophical thought²².

But rather than being the rule, these instances were the exception. In mediaeval India, most women were not allowed to pursue formal education and were instead restricted to their customary



responsibilities in the home and in religious rituals. Their limited opportunities reflected the deeply entrenched gender inequalities of the time, which prioritized male education and empowerment²³.

The resilience of women like Razia Sultana, Mirabai, and Rabi'a al-Adawiyya highlights the ability of individuals to overcome societal barriers, but their stories also underscore the systemic educational challenges faced by most women during this period. The medieval era, thus, serves as a poignant reminder of the critical need for equal access to education to ensure holistic societal development.

Women's Education in Modern India:

In India, women's education underwent significant change in the 18th and 19th centuries, mostly as a result of social reform movements and British colonial policy. The introduction of modern education systems by the British laid the groundwork for the formal education of women, which was previously limited to informal or religious teachings. Missionary initiatives played a pioneering role in establishing schools for girls, especially in urban centers²⁴. These schools were among the first to offer structured learning opportunities to women, setting the stage for broader educational reforms.

Social reformers who promoted women's education as a way to improve their social standing made important contributions during the 19th century. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotirao Phule, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy were among the visionaries who saw the transforming power of education in opposing oppressive customs like purdah, sati, and child marriage²⁶. Because of their efforts, schools like Bethune College in Kolkata were established in 1849, marking a significant milestone in women's formal education by giving them access to thorough and structured instruction^{25,27}.

The significance of women's education in the context of nation-building was further highlighted by the Indian independence struggle. Women's education was promoted by leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Mahatma Gandhi as a necessary first step towards social transformation and empowerment. Education was viewed as a way for women to make significant contributions to society and the fight for freedom, in addition to being a tool for personal growth²⁴.

Following India's 1947 declaration of independence, national development strategies began to place a strong emphasis on women's education. The National Policy on school (1986) specified steps to increase girls' access to school in recognition of the gender gaps that already exist²⁶. These included giving away free textbooks, offering scholarships, and encouraging families to send their daughters to school. By establishing education as a fundamental right for all children between the ages of 6 and 14, the Right to Education Act of 2009 further bolstered these initiatives and guaranteed free and compulsory education for girls, particularly those living in rural and marginalised regions^{28,29}.

Even with these noteworthy developments, there are still obstacles in the way of attaining gender parity in education. Progress is nonetheless hampered by problems including the gender gap in secondary and higher education, cultural perceptions that devalue girls' education, financial limitations, and poor infrastructure in rural areas. Girls' dropout rates are significantly influenced by cultural norms and early marriage, particularly in secondary education.

The development of women's education in contemporary India is evidence of the country's growing dedication to educational empowerment and gender equality. Even if there has been a lot of progress, the necessity of carrying on with this vital job is shown by the continuous attempts to solve systemic issues and establish an inclusive learning environment. The attainment of more general objectives of social justice, economic growth and a more equal society still heavily depends on women's education.

Challenges to Women's Education in Contemporary India:

Despite significant progress in increasing access to education for women in India, several challenges persist. These include socio-cultural norms, economic conditions, infrastructural deficiencies, and gaps in policy implementation³⁰.

Socio-cultural barriers include traditional gender roles and expectations, which prioritize domestic duties over formal schooling. Early marriage, social stigmas, and practices like purdah limit women's



mobility and make it difficult for them to attend schools outside their homes³¹. Economic constraints, such as poverty, also pose a significant challenge to women's education. In low-income families, the financial burden of education is a significant concern, with families often prioritizing boys' education due to the perceived future earning potential and support for the family³². Girls are often seen as future homemakers, and their education may be deemed less important. This discrimination is particularly acute in rural areas where resources are scarce, and families may struggle to afford school fees, uniforms or transportation costs.

Infrastructural issues in rural areas hinder access to education, with many schools under-resourced and lacking basic amenities, particularly for girls. When females approach puberty, the lack of separate sanitary facilities in schools frequently deters them from going to school. Additionally, the lack of safe and reliable transportation options further limits girls' ability to attend school, especially in remote areas^{30,33}.

Policy gaps in implementation, such as corruption, poor governance and lack of proper monitoring mechanisms, hinder the effectiveness of educational initiatives. Government policies exist on paper but fail to translate into meaningful change due to a lack of accountability and insufficient resources. Low awareness among marginalized communities prevents many families from taking full advantage of available opportunities³⁴.

To achieve gender equality in education in contemporary India, continued efforts from the government, civil society organizations, and communities are crucial. A holistic approach, including educational reforms, community engagement, and targeted support for girls in marginalized communities, will be key to overcoming these barriers and ensuring every girl in India has the opportunity to access quality education^{35,36}.

Conclusion:

In India women's education has evolved significantly over time, from inclusive to restricted opportunities. However, the rise of patriarchal structures and conservative socio-cultural practices during the medieval era further diminished opportunities. Despite progress, women's education still faces challenges such as socio-cultural barriers, economic constraints, inadequate infrastructure and policy implementation gaps. In addition to being morally required, empowering women via education is also practically essential for India's overall development. Educated women contribute to economic growth, social stability and overall progress, benefiting both their families and society. Recommendations for improvement include community awareness programs, financial support, improved infrastructure and policy reforms. Awareness campaigns can challenge traditional gender roles, financial support can alleviate financial burdens and improved infrastructure should be built safe and accessible, especially in rural areas. Policy reforms can strengthen existing policies related to women's education and ensure their effective implementation. A key component of India's growth is guaranteeing women's equal access to education, opening the door for a day when women's education is viewed as a potent instrument for social change.

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