

Women Education in Ancient and Medieval India just before pre-British period

SAMIK KUMAR KAHALI
M.Phil in Education
University of Calcutta

Abstract

The status of women in India has undergone many great changes over the past few millennia. Though women of India constitute half of the population of this country but they suffer a lot due to masculine principle imposed by the male-dominated society time to time. Generally, in Indian society, women do not get opportunities and importance as men. According to history, India was not different from the rest of the world in this matter at the initial stage. In the ancient to medieval times, there has been so many ups and downs in the status of the Indian women. The women of this country were fighting for the equal opportunities as men from very beginning. Later, various female reform movements took place in the history of India gradually. Naturally, their education was also influenced directly by their social status in this country time to time. Developmental history of women education according to their social status by many reformers in India has been eventful. In spite of some dark sides, ancient India was very rich in its culture and women were assigned some important tasks in the ancient days to perform because instances show that during that time some women were highly educated to accomplish their jobs. This article is aimed at to explore the various dimensions of the women education during ancient period.

Key words : Women education; ancient; medieval; pre-British period.

Women Education in Ancient and Medieval India just before pre-British period

Introduction:- India is recognized as an enriched country in the world since the inception of the civilization. The right of education to women is the fundamental right. It is evident from the various Indian literatures of all ages that the Indian women were deprived from the educational opportunities. But, exceptionally it is also true that educated Indian women discharged their assigned duties in every sphere of life. They were not inferior to men anyway. So, there was always a need to provide them proper education. In India, educational opportunities of women were very limited in scope in comparison to men. Educational opportunities were always limited to some exceptional women and also to the women belong to well-to-do families. Education can not be separated from the influence of the society, politics, economics, culture and so on. This seemed to be more relevant regarding education of the women. The present article is aimed at to know the various status of women education according to their social position in the respective ages. This article focuses on the status of Indian women education in various ages up to the pre-British period. Because, the British felt for the first time to introduce a proper state-sponsored educational system in India. Naturally, it includes women education also. In the pre-British period educational provision both males and females were not organized as it was partly in the British rule. There is no need to mention that women education was hampered more than that of education for the men. So, in the present article different ages of women education, i.e., Early-Vedic, Post-Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim period were taken into account.

Objectives :- This article has some specific objectives which are as follows:-

- I. To know the different periods with specific time span of Indian women education in the pre-British period.
- II. To know the social status of the Indian women in any particular age.
- III. To know the general characteristics of the Indian women education in the different ages.
- IV. To understand the problems of Indian women education in the different ages up to pre-British period.

Methodology :- This article is qualitative in nature. The information is collected from the secondary sources. Different books, literary materials and internet service are used herein for collecting relevant data for this article after verification of each source.

Analysis of all dimensions of women education according to their social status in different ages :-

As we know that the nature of imparting education to the Indian women is different for different periods. As a result, there is a need to focus on the nature, status, problems of the women education with all dimensions. Here qualitative aspects of Indian education have been taken into account to understand the actual position of the women before the pre-British period when educational provisions were not organized at all.

Women education in the early Vedic period (1500-1000 B.C)

In the early Vedic period women enjoyed almost equal status with men in all spheres of life. It is very difficult to understand the nature of extension of women education in this period. But *Upanayana* ritual was a common practice among the women. A certain amount of Vedic and literary education were mandatory for the women belonging to all classes. According to the works by ancient Indian grammarians, such as Patanjali and Katyayana, it is evident that women were educated in the early Vedic period.

Women education in the Vedic period(1500 B.C. – 500 B.C.)

All the Vedas and Upanishads also depict that women of that period held a high position in the society. They were honoured everywhere and they were given their due respect and importance. There are so many instances to show that some women of that period were eminent philosophers, politicians, teachers, administrators and saints. *Upanayana* ritual was prevalent in the Vedic society and it was also common to women.

Rigvedic verses also provide evidences that women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their own husbands through a ritual called '*Swayamvara*'. There was no compulsion on the women regarding their marriage. It was quite natural that an unmarried learned woman ought to be married to a bridegroom. Married and single both had the good command over the Vedic wisdom. Early marriage of women was not in practice. At the same time, custom of child marriage and enforced widowhood were also prohibited on those days. Scriptures, such as, the Rig Veda and Upanishads also give instances that there were several educated women sages and seers. Prophetess Gargi composed some Vedic hymns. Other Vedic hymns were attributed to Viswawara, Sikta, and others. Gargi also questioned the origin of all existence. Maitreyi was an educated woman who rejected half of her husband Yajnavalkay's property in favour of spiritual knowledge. Lopamudra, the highly educated wife of the sage Agastha, was famous for her philosophical conversation with her husband. The Rig Veda emphasizes on the leading role of the women in ruling the nation and their elevated social

position. According to the Rig Veda, the women had also the same right on the father's property. The view of the Rig Veda about women can be clearly understood through the following words:-

"The entire world of noble people bows to the glory of the glorious woman so that she enlightens us with knowledge and foresight. She is the leader of society and provides knowledge to everyone. She is symbol of prosperity and daughter of brilliance. May we respect her so that she destroys the tendencies of evil and hatred from the society"

The outlook of the Atharva Veda about the women can be expressed through the following words:-

"Women should be valiant, scholarly, prosperous, intelligent and knowledgeable; they should take part in the legislative chambers and be the protectors of family and society."

Yajur Veda states:- *"The scholarly woman purifies our lives with her intellect. Through her knowledge and action, she promotes virtue and efficient management of society."*

There were two types of scholarly women in the society. Firstly, *Brahmavadinis*, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives and secondly, *Sadgodvahas* who studied the Vedas till they married. In Harismriti, the word '*Brahmavadinis*' is also found.

In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (a part of Yajur Veda), Gargi and Maitreyi distinguished themselves in *Brahmavidya*, the highest philosophical knowledge. These types of women were called *Brahmavadinis*. They also composed some of the Vedic hymns.

This Brihadaranyaka Upanishad also provides an account of philosophical congress organized by the king Janak of Videha. The previously mentioned Gargi challenged the sage Yajnavalkya with a question regarding soul as a participant and this act confounded Yajnavalkya very much. She also recognized in the society besides other men, such as, Uddalaka Arni. The same Upanishad mentions about the spiritual teaching imparted by Yajnavalkya to Maitreyi. Besides all the afore said names, Ghosa, Apala, Urvasi, Lilabati, Saswati, Kshana, Sulabha, Lilabati, Indrani, Romasha, etc., were the prominent women in the field of education. In addition to this, Kathi, Kalpa and Bahvici were also regarded as noteworthy women scholars of that age.

In later times, Khana was also a notable poetess and astrologer of that age. There was a rumour about her that she had been victim of domestic violence though historians are in dark about her personal life. But, according to some historians, he was originally from the South Bengal. Her writings on household sayings are still relevant in the present age even after years.

In our famous epic Mahabharata, women occupied a prestigious position in the society. The author of Mahabharata, Veda Vyasa, depicts the persuasion of Draupadi on her husbands which resulted in overthrow of Kauravas lastly in the great battlefield of Kurukhestra. It may be experienced through the words of noble prince Vishma Pitamaha. He proclaims very promptly, *"The teachers who teaches true knowledge is more important than ten instructors. The father is more important than ten such fathers. There is no guru than mother."*

Another great epic Ramayana by Valmiki also shows immense influence of Sita who indirectly compelled her husband, Ramachandra, to wiping out of Ravana. However, there is no detailed information available regarding the education of the general women in the Mahabharata as well as in the Ramayana though the some women belonging to royal families had proficiencies in various arts including defensive training for the benefit of their families and their countries.

In Vedic times, the women did not experience any discrimination of sex in the field of education. On that time, education system was mostly Veda oriented and emphasis was given on all the Vedas and also six Vedangas. Students were taught about the performance of sacrifice, correct pronunciation of the hymns, knowledge of prosody, etymology, grammar and *jyotisha* or the science of calendar. Female students also had the right to get Vedic education. There were no formal educational institutions but in later times co-educational institutes were seen. Provision of co-educational institutes were extended up to the higher education level. As for example, according to Malatimadhava written by Bhavabhuti in the 8th century A.D., a nun named Kamandaki was educated along with Bhurivasu and Devabrata at a famous centre of education. In the 'Uttara- Rama-Charit' (written by the same author), we find Atreyi was receiving her education along with Kusu and Lava. It should be noted that time education was not patronized by the state. Women held prominent and authoritative position due to proficiencies in the various fields. They enjoyed equal opportunity in case of getting education as men. It will not be exaggeration to say that sometimes Indian women of the ancient period were superior to men. They also participated in the philosophical debates with erudite men. There was a tradition to wear sacred thread among the women and they were taught the holy *mantras* of Vedas. There was a particular prescribed mantra to beget a learned daughter in Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. In the Grihyasutras, several mantras may be found to be recited by women and the commentary on Gobhiliagrihyasutras. It states that the female-folk should be taught because without such studies they can not perform *agnihotra* sacrifice. Women had an easy access to education. According to Panini and Patanjali, women were admitted to Vedic study. A woman-student of the Katha school was called a '*Kathi*' and the female-student of Rigvedic Bahvricha school was known as '*Bahvrichi*'. Female students had the right of admission to the study of *mimamsa* and after completion of studying *mimamsa-sutra* of the sage Kasakritsna she was called Kasakritsna. There was also existence of *chhatri* (lady students) and *Upadhyayi* (Lady teachers) during the Vedic period. Katyana mentioned female teachers as Upadhyaya. Panini made a distinction between *acharya* (a preceptor) and *acharyani* (a lady teacher or preceptor's wife) in a very clear way. Panini also refers to boarding houses for lady students, *chhatrisalas* and these probably were under the direct supervision of the lady teachers. At that time, there was no existence of '*Purdah*' custom in the Hindu society. This custom came into existence in the Hindu society down to 12th century and for this reason it became difficult for the women in taking teaching as a profession. Massive women education also helped women to involve themselves in the teaching profession. It can be easily said that women were not only merely students of Vedic studies but they were also regarded as qualified teachers for their proficiencies in the concerned fields.

Like the women belonging to rich and well-to-do families and ordinary women, many female ascetics and mendicants used to learn some Sanskrit and were conversant with the popular religious poems.

The dancing girls (*devdasis*) of the south India were involved in performing dance and music before the gods and goddess in temples. So, they were also imparted some education, especially related to performing arts, such as, dancing, music, etc. According to the Arthashastra by Kautilya also depicts the educational provisions meant for the prostitutes.

Ancient India was not conservative regarding education of the women. Emphasis was given on the moral and cultural aspects besides general education.

Women education in the post-Vedic period (1000 – 500 B.C.)

Vol. 1, Issue 3 (December 2015)

Page 110

Dr. Siddhartha Sharma
Editor-in-Chief

In the later Vedic period, major changes were noticed. In approximately 500 B.C., the status of women began to decline. *Upanayana* ritual was prohibited gradually for the women around 500 B.C., women were declared unfit for reciting Vedic hymns and performing Vedic sacrifices. View of the Brahmanical society became very rigid and conservative regarding the education of the women. Thus, they lost their prestigious position and right of education due to excessive religious rigidity. It can be easily understood through the words of Manu's Code or Manusanghita or Manusmriti written in 200 A.D., where he states "By a girl, by a young woman, or even an aged one, nothing must be done independently". He further adds, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons". In the later Vedic period, early marriage of girls became a common practice in the society. In the Vedic period, early marriage of the girls was not seen apparently but in the later Vedic period it was seen in the society very prominently. In the Vedic period, girls were married at the age of 16 or 17, whereas, in the later Vedic period (from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D.), the age of marriage for a young girl was fixed at the age of 8 or 9. It created a great set back in the field of women education during that period. Women belonging to the rich, aristocratic, and royal families were given good literary education but they were also deprived of getting chance of studying Vedic literature. The outlook of the society was that activities of the women should be limited to the household activities only. So, women belonging to ordinary families were given only domestic type of education (such as, looking after their children, keeping everything neat and clean, preparing food for the family members, etc.) for performing day-to-day household responsibilities accurately. Although reform movements such as Buddhism and Jainism allowed women to be admitted to religious orders and their right to get education but a large number of women in India faced confinement and restrictions. For this reason, their scope of getting education was also limited. But, it may be noted that there are very few texts specifically dealing with the role of women.

Women education during Buddhism and Jainism (1000 B.C. – 600 B.C.)

In Buddhism, restrictions were imposed on women in entering in the Buddhist *Sanghas* for getting education. Later, with the earnest appeal of Mata Gautami and Ananda (the first and favorite disciple of Buddha), women were allowed in the Buddhist *Sanghas* for the purpose of imparting education. A good number of instances are available to show that the Lord Buddha had the low opinion about the women like Manu. He primarily rejected the appeal of her aunt Mahaprajapati in joining Buddhist Sangha. But, he changed his outlook regarding education of the women in the Buddhist Sanghas. It should be noted that 13 eminent female disciples(bhikshunis) of Buddha were sent to modern Ceylon (Srilanka) and to the other foreign countries for the propagation and expansion of Buddhism. Rani Kshema, Sujata, Shuva, Anupama, Sumedha, etc. were the notable disciples of the Lord Buddha. It cannot be denied that system of women education under Buddhism was very rigid and strict since very earlier. A *vikshuk* or monk was appointed to impart education to the vikshunis under the supervision of another *vikshuk*. *Vikshunis* had to stay in the Buddhist *Sangha* as apprentices for two years and then they were given 'Diksha' or a religious custom. At the initial stage Buddhist education was limited to only 'vikshus' and 'vikshuni's. But, in the later periods common people including women were

allowed in the Buddhist *Sangha* for the expansion of the Buddhism. So, Buddhist nuns were very small in numbers in comparison with the Buddhist monks. At the same time, it is also true that Buddhist nuns were very skillful in composing hymns. They were also efficient in writing Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts.

Undoubtedly, the scope of women education was limited. There are numerous references available in the Buddhist literatures to establish the fact that a good number of Buddhist women or nuns were able to attain higher level of intellectual knowledge during that period. They were honoured and respected as teachers and scholars due to their multifarious talent in their respective fields.

Ancient king Ashoka, who embraced Buddhism, sent his daughter Sanghamitra for preaching Buddhism.

From the Jain texts, we can know about the Kousambi princess Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy.

Women education during Muslim period (8th – 18th century)

Indian women's position in society further deteriorated during the medieval period, when child marriage and a ban on remarriage by widows became part of social life in some communities in India. The Muslim rulers conquest the Indian sub-continent and the brought *Purdah* custom to Indian society. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the *Jauhar* was practiced. In some parts of India, some of *devdasis* were sexually exploited. Polygamy was practiced among Hindu *Kshatriya* rulers for some political reasons. In many Muslim families, women were restricted to *Zenana* areas of the house.

In spite of these conditions, women often became prominent in the fields of politics, literature, education and religion. Razia Sultana became the only woman monarch to have ever ruled Delhi. In these circumstances education of the women had faced a major setback . In spite of all these social obstacles, there were Razia Begam, Gulbadan, Noor Jehan, Jahanara, Zebunnisa, Multa Bai, Jija Bai, etc. were able to acquire higher education.

The Mughal princesses Jahanara and Zebunnissa were well-known poets, and also influenced the ruling powers.

Conclusion and findings:-

While we have thought that natural place of the ladies may be in the homes, their position thereby has not been belittled. Since time immemorial India ranks very high in the educational field and educated women are regarded as the co-sharers in the cultural and religious life of men. This article provides a brief outline about the prevalence of the women education in different ages before the British rule in India. From the above discussion, it is also clear that the educational provisions for the women during pre-British period can be further classified into several sub-periods and different characteristics of women education can be experienced in each period. The major findings of the study as follows:-

1. The women education in the pre-British period experienced ups and downs continuously. Education of the women was very enriched in the pre-Vedic period and also in the Vedic

period. But, in the later Vedic period the educational opportunities for the women were limited to some extent and in the Muslim period position of women education was negatively influenced.

2. The education of the women was directly related to the social surroundings of the women in each age.
3. The nature of women education during pre-British period was mostly influenced with the religions of the particular age concerned.
4. The education system, including women education, of that age (pre-British period) was not formal as it is nowadays. Total education system was based on oral instruction mostly. It was not properly patronized by the state.
5. Women were given education related to household activities, value oriented besides literary education in most cases.
6. Apparently, society was not entirely liberal about the women education. Exceptionally women education was at the pick during early Vedic period and in the Vedic period. But this was not ever lasted.

References

A.S. Altekar : *Education in Ancient India*. Beneras, Gyan Publishing House, 1944.

Brishti Guha : *Ancient India's Liberated Women: In Classical Times India was more egalitarian than the West – at least in women's education*, July 13th, 2015.

B. F. Popal : *Women Education in India*, S.N.D.T University.

G. Bhadra and P. Chattopadhyay : *Nimnonger Itihas* (Ed.) . Kolkata, Ananda Pulishers,2001.

Margaret Alva, 1988, *Women in India*, Manorama year book.

N.Jayapalan : *History Of Education In India*.New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2005.

N. R. Roy : *Bharat Parichaya*. Kolkata, Allied Book Agency,1992.

R.C.Mishra : *History Of Education Administration*. New Delhi, APH Publishing Corporation, 2009.

S.C. Sarkar : *Educational Ideas and Institutions in Ancient India*. Patna, Patna College, 1928.

S.K. Kochhar : *Pivotal Issues in Indian Education*. New Delhi, Sterling Publishing Limited, 1981.

http://www.indianetzone.com/39/women_education_ancient_india.htm

<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/education/womens-education/womens-education-in-ancient-india/63492/>