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Trailblazers of Change: Women Reformers in Colonial India and the Quest for Women's Rights and Education

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Abstract:

Women's education in the modern times can be traced back to colonial times simultaneous with the efforts of reforms to eradicate social evils against women. Textbooks emphasize the role of male intelligentsia like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Ambedkar etc., completely forgetting the role of women reformers and educators. This paper is an attempt to trace the contributions of some women educators and activists who worked towards making the world more equal for women. The paper explains the role of Women reformers like Savitri Bai Phule, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, and Durgabai Deshmukh in changing perspectives around women's education in India. The paper underscores the pivotal role of these visionary women in steering India towards a more equitable and enlightened society, setting the stage for broader discussions on women's issues that continue to resonate with us today.

Keywords- *Women reformers, women educationist, colonial movements, Aspirations.*

INTRODUCTION

It is often said that in Vedic times, women had access to education. They enjoyed a high status in society, which deteriorated gradually. The growth of classes in society, which manifested itself as Varnas, the rise of private property and the decline of the position of women appear to have occurred simultaneously in the post-vedic period. During the Buddhist period also, very few women like nuns or Bhikkhunis had some knowledge of reading and writing and received some instruction in Buddhist doctrine. In Medieval India, women education was restricted much more than any other period due to the rise of 'Purdah' System and religious and political instability. Very few women from nobility had access to education as they could afford it at their home. The Bhakti movement produced some poetesses and saints like Meerabai, Muktabai and Ammaiyaar etc. But these few examples are just some exceptions and thus, do not provide a clear picture of the status of average women's education in India. Purdah, the Sati system, early marriage, and other ill-practices had worsened the situation of Indian women by the time of the Mughals' decline and the arrival of Europeans.

When colonial powers began to rule India, the Indian society was very conservative regarding women's rights. Villages had their own schools, such as pathshalas, tols, and madrasas, but girls were mostly not allowed to attend these. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, formal education for women began. Christian missionaries played a pivotal role in this process (Srivastva, 2000). Early in the 19th century, English philanthropists and missionaries launched a number of reformist movements in the field of female education. They established various schools for females and donated to other organizations, too. In addition to this, many Indian reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar started movements for the eradication of social evils like Sati and child marriage. Awareness campaigns were held to promote education for women (Shah, 2004). Simultaneously, male intelligentsia was working towards elimination of social evils and promotion of female education. Other than this, there were a number of women including Pandita Ramabai, Savitri Bai Phule, Kadambini Ganguly, Tarabai Shinde who were working for the cause of women education. All these interventions together created a fertile ground for paving the way for girls education in India.

In my opinion, the role of female reformers is more critical in the sense that they questioned their own socialization and belief systems, even though many of them were not well educated. Also, they worked hard for and demanded education for women because they themselves had been discriminated against. Those women, who were privileged to receive education such as Tarbai Shinde, Kamdambini Ganguly, Annie Besant, Vijayalaxmi Pandit etc., were determined to create an equitable society by demanding education for girls belonging to underprivileged caste and class backgrounds. Although women reformers struggled hard to make education accessible to girls, much of the credit in this regard is paid to male reformers. This paper is a small attempt to explore the role of female reformers and educationists whose works laid the groundwork for modern women's education in India. The paper specifically talks about the contributions of Savitri Bai Phule, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, and Durgabai Deshmukh.

1. SAVITRI BAI PHULE

Savitribai Phule, born on January 3, 1831, in Naigaon, Maharashtra, India, was a revolutionary figure in the 19th century who played a pivotal role in the fields of education, social reform, and women's empowerment. Her life's journey unfolded against the backdrop of a society entrenched in caste-based discrimination and rigid gender norms.

Early Life and Education

Savitribai's early life was marked by adversity. Coming from the Mali community, considered a lower caste in the hierarchical structure of Hindu society, she faced discrimination from a young age. In 1848, Savitribai and Jyotirao were married, marking the beginning of a partnership that would redefine the contours of social reform in India. Inspired by her husband's commitment to social justice, Savitribai pursued education despite societal norms that dictated otherwise for women, especially those from marginalized communities. Her dedication to learning was emblematic of her future endeavors, challenging prevailing norms that sought to keep certain sections of society in ignorance.

Pioneering Women's Education

Savitribai Phule's most enduring contribution was her pioneering efforts in the realm of women's education. She is called as the "Mother of Modern Education"

for India (Kumar 2008, Wolf 2011). Recognizing the transformative power of education, she, along with Jyotirao Phule, founded the first school for girls in Pune in 1848 (Biswas, 2020). Savitribai became the head teacher. This initiative expanded rapidly, with the couple founding a total of 18 schools from 1848 to 1851. Savitribai emerged as the first woman teacher in India, advocating for education regardless of caste, creed, or religion (Wolf, 2011).

She sought to break the chains of illiteracy that bound women, particularly those from marginalized communities. The school provided a sanctuary for girls who had long been excluded from the realm of formal education. Savitribai herself served as a teacher, defying societal expectations that relegated women to domestic roles. The Phule couple faced severe opposition from orthodox forces, but their commitment to the cause of education remained unswerving.

The significance of this school went beyond the imparting of academic knowledge. It symbolized a radical shift in societal attitudes towards women's capabilities and rights. Savitribai Phule, through her educational initiatives, sowed the seeds of empowerment for generations of women to come (Sudhakar, 2018).

Advocacy for Women's Rights

Beyond education, Savitribai was a staunch advocate for women's rights. Alongside her husband, she fought against oppressive patriarchal structures and societal norms. The couple established Mahila Seva Mandal in 1852, campaigning against child marriage, widow exploitation, and oppression of women (Sudhakar, 2018). Savitribai, through her speeches and writings, challenged the prevailing mindset, encouraging women to break free from the chains of ignorance and societal oppression.

Contribution to Social Reform

Savitribai's impact extended to broader social reforms. In 1873, she and Jyotirao founded the Styashodhak Samaj, undertaking initiatives like registered marriages that sidestepped traditional religious rituals. The couple played a significant role in challenging regressive practices, including advocating for widow remarriage and protesting against the shaving of widows' heads. Savitribai's organization, Mahila Mandal, created awareness about women's rights, empowering women across caste lines.

Fighting Superstition

Rational and progressive, Savitribai vehemently opposed superstitions and religious dogma. Her poems and writings ridiculed blind beliefs and the worship of idols. She questioned practices like astrological beliefs and the mistreatment of widows, fostering a rational and enlightened mindset (Wolf, 2011).

Legacy

Savitribai Phule's legacy is immortal. Her pioneering efforts in women's education and social reform laid the foundation for a more inclusive and enlightened society. Her advocacy for women's rights, fight against superstitions, and commitment to education continue to inspire generations. In 1852, she was declared the best teacher by the British government, acknowledging her remarkable contributions (Biswas, 2020).

Savitribai Phule's life is a testament to the transformative power of education and the indomitable spirit required to challenge societal norms. Her legacy persists as a beacon of empowerment, urging us to continue the fight for equality, education, and social justice. Savitribai Phule's contributions remain etched in history, guiding us toward a more enlightened and egalitarian future.

2. BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, born around 1880 in Rangpur, Bengal (now Bangladesh), belonged to an affluent orthodox Muslim family. Her upbringing and ideas mirrored the tensions between traditional customs, the demands of cultural and political modernization, and the rise of nationalist and feminist movements globally. Recognized by Roushan Jahan as the "first and foremost feminist" of Bengali Muslim society, Rokeya was deeply committed to both national and humanist ideals during the Bengali literary renaissance (Roushan, 1988).

Early life

She faced restrictions on education due to the Islamic veil code in her family but pursued learning with her sister under the influence of her brother Ibrahim. Purdah observance, noted by Roushan Jahan (1988), was somewhat exclusive to the upper class, symbolizing status. Rokeya's family adhered strictly to purdah, even requiring her, as a young girl, to hide from female visitors. Despite this, her father, Mohammad Abu Ali Saber, educated his sons in various languages and sent them to St. Xavier's College in Calcutta. When Rokeya's older sister,

Karimunessa, secretly learned from her brothers, Saber initially supported it. Facing opposition from other male members of society, he arranged her marriage at fourteen into a more liberal family, which will allow her to pursue learning. Following suit, Rokeya, urged by her eldest brother Ibrahim Saber, married Syed Sakhawat Hossain in 1896 at about age sixteen. Despite the significant age gap, Sakhawat, a widower, encouraged her education and writing, even her outspokenly feminist views.

Feminist writings and women's movement

Her husband played a pivotal role in her linguistic development, encouraging her to write and publish. Rokeya's literary works, including "Sultanar Swapna (Sultana's Dream)," "Padmarag," and "Abarodhbasini," focused on the oppression of women, depicting feminist utopias and urging societal change. After her husband's death in 1909, she used the bequest he left to establish a school for Muslim women. Despite family disapproval, she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School in Calcutta in 1911, which stands today. She tirelessly advocated for girls' education, even running a slum literacy program in Kolkata. Rokeya's leadership style mirrored transformative feminism, urging women to prepare themselves for claiming their rights. Recognizing the significance of women's economic independence, Rokeya established the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam in 1916, a pioneering organization advocating for women's education, employment, legal, and political rights (Amin, 1989).

Rokeya was a prolific writer, educator, organizer, and political essayist from 1903 until her sudden death in 1932. Her linguistic skills allowed her to publish translations into Bangla of important works. Her early two novels "Niriho Bangali" and "Gyanphol", reflected her opposition to the 1905 partition and British colonial rule. Rokeya's commitment to women's emancipation extended to her writings, where she voiced concerns and envisioned the liberation of Bengali Muslim women. The famous "Sultana's Dream" (1908) is one of the earliest examples of feminist utopian fiction, presenting a reversal of roles with men in seclusion. Her works, including novels like Padmaraga (1924) and The Secluded Ones (1928), address women's independence. She talked of issues like the misinterpretation of Islam and entrenched patriarchal norms that confined women and deprived them

of their rights. Rokeya, fluent in multiple languages, preferred Bengali for her writings, with limited works translated into English (Bonner, 1992).

Legacy

Rokeya's educational and political philosophy blended feminism, nationalism, tradition, and modernism. She aimed to liberate women from dependency and subordination while preserving Muslim religion and culture. Rokeya advocated for state-supported compulsory education but not co-education, emphasizing sex-segregated, Islamic education for Muslim girls. Beyond her time, Begum Rokeya's progressive thinking set her apart from her contemporaries, showcasing a deep understanding of the historical context and societal challenges. Until her last days, she remained dedicated to her writings, activism, and social work. Her enduring impact on women's lives in undivided India makes her a towering figure in the women's movement, and her words remain relevant in guiding women against intolerance and bigotry, serving as a beacon for aspiring leaders.

3. PANDITA RAMABAI

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922) stands out as a remarkable woman leader in the 19th-century women's emancipation movement in Maharashtra. In a society dominated by patriarchal institutions and ideology, particularly affecting high-caste women, Ramabai's distinctiveness is equally attributed to her solitary leadership as a woman and her significant contributions to the women's cause. However, her legacy has been overshadowed by controversies related to her conversion to Christianity, leading to her neglect by mainstream Hindu society.

Early life

Ramabai was born in a Brahman family in 19th century Maharashtra. Her mother was only nine years old when she was married to a widower of forty four. The unusual marriage was not so unusual in 19th century India, about which Pandita Ramabai discusses in her book "The High Caste Hindu Women". Her father was an 'orthodox reformer' (Charkravarti, 2007) in the sense that, though he followed all the customs and rituals of Brahmans very religiously, still he was against prohibiting women from learning Sanskrit and sacred texts. To teach his wife and daughters (the couple had three children- two daughters and a son, Ramabai being the youngest) and in search of mukti, he settled down in forest of Karnataka, where the family faced economic hardships. The struggle for Ramabai multifold

when she loses her father, then mother and sister, within a span of few months. She describes the losses suffered as the primary reason for her gradual loss of faith in traditions and customary practices of Hinduism (Testimony, p 16 quoted in Chakravarti, 2007). Her lifelong quest for finding a religion for herself but never blindly follow the rules of any religion be it Hinduism or Christianity, can be understood as the result of the upbringing she had from a non-conformist yet conservative man. Ramabai embraced Christianity, finding in it a source of inspiration for her advocacy of social reform. She was, however, critical of missionary practices that did not align with her vision of empowering women intellectually and socially (Chakravarti, 2007).

Women's Education Advocate

One of Ramabai's foundational contributions was in the field of education. She worked with Justice Ranade and his wife Ramabai and they set up Arya Mahila Sabhas, where women meet and discuss on women issues. She also worked with Prathna Samajitis (Chakravarti, 2007). She established the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune in 1881, which aimed to provide education to women, a radical initiative in those times. Pandita Ramabai linked the status of women in India to the broader condition of the nation. She argued that keeping women in a state of dependence and ignorance had contributed to the degradation of the Hindu nation. Ramabai highlighted the impact of the mother's mental and physical well-being during pregnancy, emphasizing that the seclusion, dependence, and ignorance forced upon women were detrimental to the mental and physical health of men in society (Kosambi, 1988).

During her testimony before the Hunter's Education Commission in 1882, Ramabai, reflecting her personal struggles for advocating female education, asserted her lifelong commitment to maintaining this cause and advocating for the proper position of women in society. She emphasized the necessity of female teachers from respectable families and the appointment of female inspectors for girls' schools, as male inspectors were often opposed to female education. Additionally, she advocated for the training of women as medical doctors, pointing out that the absence of female doctors led many women to avoid seeking medical help, contributing to premature deaths (Koshambi, 1988).

Fight Against Social Evils

Ramabai was not just an educationist; she was a fervent social reformer. She criticized the prevailing orthodox Hindu practices that subjugated women. Her book "The High Caste Hindu Woman" exposed the harsh realities faced by women due to societal norms. Through her writings and speeches, she advocated for the eradication of child marriage, caste discrimination, and the ill-treatment of widows.

In 1889, Ramabai established the Mukti Mission, a refuge for young widows and women escaping oppressive situations. The Mukti Mission not only provided a sanctuary but also focused on imparting practical skills and education.

Legacy and Impact

Pandita Ramabai's legacy endures in various forms. The institutions she founded, including Mukti Mission and Sharada Sadan, continue their work. Her writings remain influential as her unrelenting fight against societal norms paved the way for subsequent generations of women to question and challenge oppressive practices. Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati stands as a beacon of women's empowerment in India. Her multifaceted contributions, from education to social reform, have left an indelible mark on the narrative of women's liberation in the country. Her life exemplifies resilience, courage, and an unwavering commitment to justice, making her a crucial figure in the journey towards gender equality in India.

4. ANNIE BESANT

Annie Besant, a prominent figure in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a multifaceted personality whose life was dedicated to causes spanning from spirituality to social reform, from women's rights to Indian nationalism.

Early life

Born on October 1, 1847, in London, Annie came from an unconventional background. Her father died when she was five, leaving her mother to raise her with limited resources. Besant's journey began with her involvement in spiritual and philosophical movements (Chandra 2001). In 1889, she became a prominent member of the Theosophical Society, a spiritual organization focused on exploring the mystical and esoteric aspects of life. Theosophy was not just a spiritual pursuit for Besant; it became a platform for her to advocate for social justice, education, and the rights of women.

Role in the Indian Nationalist Movement

Annie Besant's connection with India was a turning point in her life and in the history of Indian nationalism. In 1893, she moved to India and became deeply involved in its political and social milieu. She emerged as a prominent leader in the Indian National Congress, the political party that played a crucial role in the fight for India's independence (Chandra 2001). Besant's oratory skills and her ability to connect with people across various strata of society made her a significant figure in the Indian nationalist movement. She advocated for self-rule and home rule galvanizing support for the cause of independence while she worked alongside other stalwarts like Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi. One of her landmark contributions was her role in the Home Rule Movement (Bakshi, 1990). In 1916, Besant, along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak, launched the All India Home Rule League, demanding self-government for India. The movement gained immense popularity, and Besant's efforts were instrumental in bringing the demand for home rule to the forefront of the national agenda. Her newspaper, "New India," became a powerful medium for disseminating nationalist ideas (Singh, 2019). However in 1917, she got arrested for her role in the Home Rule Movement, a testament to her unwavering commitment to the cause.

Women's Rights and Education

Besant's commitment to women's rights was not limited to the West or India; it was a global endeavor. She was an ardent advocate for feminism at a time when the concept was still evolving. Her efforts in this realm were not just theoretical; she actively participated in and supported movements that sought to uplift women. She was a strong supporter of women's education and was actively involved in promoting opportunities for women to pursue higher education. In 1890, she established the Central Hindu College in Benares (now Varanasi), aimed at promoting secular and Hindu education (Kumar, 2000). Her efforts in this sphere were crucial in laying the groundwork for later educational reforms in India (Chaganti, 1996). Besant believed in the transformative power of education to uplift individuals and societies, irrespective of their background (Singh 2019). Besant also addressed issues of child marriage and the lack of property rights for women. Her stance on these issues, considered radical at the time, contributed to the broader discourse on gender equality in India (Singh, 2019). Internationally,

Besant was associated with the birth control movement and worked with figures like Margaret Sanger (Taylor, 1992). Her progressive views on reproductive rights and family planning were ahead of the prevailing norms of her time. She wrote extensively on issues such as marriage laws, women's suffrage, and birth control. In 1877, she published "The Laws of Population," a treatise advocating for women's right to control their reproductive choices—an idea far ahead of its time. In 1888, she supported the matchgirls' strike in London, which brought attention to the appalling working conditions in match factories and led to improvements in labor laws (Taylor, 1992).

Legacy and Recognition

Annie Besant's contributions to the freedom struggle and women's movements left an indelible mark on history. The Central Hindu College that she founded eventually became part of the Banaras Hindu University (Kumar, 2000), one of the largest residential universities in Asia. Besant's work in India and her tireless efforts for the cause of independence earned her respect and admiration. Her role in the Theosophical Society and her contributions to Indian education and nationalism are remembered and celebrated.

5. DURGABAI DESHMUKH

Durgabai Deshmukh, born on July 15, 1909, in a small village in Rajahmundry, Andhra Pradesh, became a notable figure in Indian history. She belonged to a Gummidithala Brahmin family and grew up to be a respected lawyer, a devoted social worker, and a freedom fighter.

Early Challenges and Activism

In a time when early marriages were common, Durgabai got married at just 8 years old (Chandrababu and Thilagavathi, 2009). Surprisingly, she decided to end the marriage and focus on studies, and her family supported this decision. Joining the Indian freedom movement early, she left school at 12 to protest against English becoming the main language of teaching. Later, she started a school named "Balika Hindi Pathshala" to promote Hindi education for girls. Her courage showed up early. Volunteering in the 1923 Indian National Congress Conference, she didn't allow even Jawaharlal Nehru to enter without a ticket until one was bought.

Contributions to Freedom Movement

Living a simple life, avoiding fancy things, Durgabai called herself a satyagrahi, someone committed to truth, and supported swadeshi. Actively involved in the Salt Satyagraha, she played a big part in getting women involved. She went to jail three times between 1930 and 1933. After that, she studied English, got her B.A. and M.A. in Political Science, and studied law.

Champion of Social Change

Durgabai comprehended the challenges confronted by Indian women and girls, the societal bias, and their constraints. She aimed to empower women towards self-reliance. In 1936, she initiated Andhra Mahila Sabha to support young Telugu girls in Madras, providing education, healthcare, and vocational training for their Matriculation examination conducted by Banaras Hindu University. Durgabai also established and edited a Telugu journal named Andhra Mahila.

She served as the president of the Blind Relief Organisation, establishing schools, hostels, and workshops on light engineering for the visually impaired. Indira Gandhi honored her with the title "Mother of Social Work in India" (Hindu Post, 2022).

Leadership in National Assemblies

Being part of the Constituent Assembly, she helped make important social welfare laws. Later, she played a key role in starting the Central Social Welfare Board, becoming its Chairperson and starting various programs for women, kids, and disabled people.

She suggested having separate Family Courts and proposed 'Hindustani' (Hindi + Urdu) as the national language (Hindu Post, 2022). She was the first chairperson of the National Council on Women's Education and represented Bharat at the World Food Congress in 1963.

Awards and Legacy

Durgabai received awards, including the Nehru Literary Award in 1971 and the Padma Vibhushan in 1975. She wrote a book called "The Stone that Speaks" and her autobiography, "Chintaman and I," saw publication a year prior to her passing in 1981. She also received "The UNESCO Award" for her outstanding literary skills.

An inspiring figure, Durgabai broke norms in a time when powerful women faced doubts. Her strong beliefs, honest expression, and unwavering commitment earned her the title 'Iron Lady of Bharat' (Malik, 2019). Her journey remains a guide for those wanting to make a difference in society.

Conclusion

In the annals of India's colonial history, a cohort of remarkable women reformers emerged as architects of change, challenging the prevailing norms and advocating for the rights and education of women. Savitribai Phule, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Pandita Ramabai, Annie Besant, and Durgabai Deshmukh stand as luminaries in the fight for women's causes, their collective endeavors constituting a significant chapter in the broader narrative of social reform. In unison, these reformers scripted a narrative of resilience, foresight, and courage. Their collective impact went beyond immediate reforms, influencing subsequent generations and shaping the contours of an evolving India. The fight for women's rights and education, spearheaded by these visionary reformers, became a beacon illuminating the path toward a more equitable and enlightened society.

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