Colonising the Female Mind and Space through Colonial Pedagogy in India, 1880 to 1920s

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Abstract

This article articulates how colonial education of women was designed for them to be a cog in the patriarchal machinery. Women were not seen as professionals; instead, they were to get educated enough to fit in the new middle class households where they could administer their chores effectively and raise kids according to the new set standards. Curriculum for the upper caste middle class women got doubly colonised— it was a composite mixture of the Brahmanical code of conduct taking cues from the British patriarchy. Gender was presented on a binary model rather than in an intersectional way. This article traces the gendered dynamics in pedagogical spaces— power and authority— in teaching approaches. Discussing women like Pandita Ramabai, among the lone voices of dissent, this article will argue that albeit the percentage of women educated was far less than the men, yet they had a far-reaching effect on the society, especially the urban society.

INTRODUCTION

There was almost no interest both among the Indians and the British to educate the females of India. The British saw it as a wastage of funds as women were supposed to be married early and bound in the home, whereas the Indians thought it discomforting as women were brought out of seclusion. The reasons could be different, but the consequence was the same. The Charter Act of

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1813 and 1835 did not allot any funds for women's education as it was deemed futile to spend whatever little funding on women (Seth, 2007, p. 137). Not until the mid-19th century, Sir Charles Wood's General Education Despatch of 1854, was there any official pronouncement on the subject of women's education. Review of Education in India (Croft, 1886) also mentions that there was no demand for education as a means of livelihood for girls and women. Thus, the most effective stimulus to the spread of education was removed. Women's education was still low on the government's list of priorities. 'For all these reasons, the expense, the lack of control, and the cultural and political pitfalls, government's encouragement of female education in the late nineteenth century was half-hearted at best.' (Minault, 1998, p. 163). Apart from not being given enough funds to set up enough schools appropriately, many superstitions were also spread, like girls will get widowed if they studied. The orthodox section of the Indian society clung to the argument that if women were granted these opportunities, most of them would become 'unchaste'. Unfortunately, this kind of bias in the orthodox society gained much currency, and it played a crucial role in drafting the curricula in such a way so as not to make females exposed to the 'openness' of Western societies.

Even if we negate the patriarchal bias in Western society, western education promised women relatively more physical mobility, which threatened social control over the Indian women's behaviour and activities (Sen, 2002, p. 207). They were not supposed to be mannish, competitive and dissatisfied with their position in the society, rather they were to be fit for domesticity.

Although the British officials did not find much stimulus in the spread of education among the Indian women, the Christian missionaries and the social reformers, including Radha Kanta Deb and Raja Rammohun Roy did. Thus, the missionaries and the private voluntary bodies became what Paul calls 'votaries of education'. They took immense effort to set up schools and colleges in various parts of the country and, more often than not, even bore the financial burden of women's education (Paul, 1989, p. 4). They were among the first to clamour for education for women in India from the 1820s onwards. Unmarried female missionaries were assigned to work with women and children. Being female, they got entry into the *zenana* (pertaining to females only) section, where they read stories, taught needlework, and attempted to proselytise (Forbes, 2006, p. 37). The Church Missionary Society was more successful in South India, where it opened its first boarding school for girls in Tirunelveli in 1821. However, in North India, they were not much successful as they could not get many converts from the women's quarters. At this Zenana education given at home juncture, proved expensive,

cumbersome and largely ineffectual. 'When it became apparent that these zenana projects were unproductive, the mission authorities substituted girls' schools.' (Forbes, 2006, p. 37). The Ladies Society for Native Female Education was formed in 1824 under the patronage of Lady Amherst, which managed more than 30 women's schools. The missionaries contributed much to the development of women's education. However, their religious overtones checked the development of secular scientific temper among the women and could not attract women from every section.

To top it all, the fear of proselytisation was tremendous both among the Hindus and the Muslims. Various private bodies and local committees like the Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam, the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj started taking interest in women's education. For instance, during the 1880s, the Amritsar branch of the Arya Samaj had taken the first initiative to provide education to girls. In 1885, it established three girls' schools. The Lahore, Ferozepur and Jalandhar branches also made similar attempts. The Hindus and the Muslims began founding girls' primary schools of their own to ensure that some religious content, the curriculum also include which should be Hinduism and Islamic religion, not Christianity. Religious spokesmen, like Swami Shraddhanand, decided that Hindus would have to make women's education a priority if they wanted to preserve their culture and religion from the influence of Christianity. Similar was the case with the Muslim reformers as well. The Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam of Lahore was an explicitly anti-missionary measure. 'For Muslim reformers, as for their Hindu counterparts, women were symbolic not only of all that was wrong with their culture and religious life, but also of all that was worth preserving.' (Minault, 1998, p. 6).

Pedagogy

It was not that the duties of females did not exist in Indian society prior to the advent of formal education of women (Sreenivas, 2003, p. 64–65). The colonial female education was put under tremendous pressure to infuse new into the old, i.e., to recarve the roles and duties of a female in the society. It borrowed concepts like 'good breeding' and 'good mannerisms' from the western education system, which influenced the urban educated family. 'Teaching was seen more as a mission than a job' (Kishwar, 1986, p. 22). In 1882, the Education Commission explicitly recommended a separate curricula for girls to attract more female students. By and large, academic education was thought to be for boys, while 'domestic' education was for girls (Sen, 2002). The colonial curriculum that was deemed fit for girls was neither secular nor scientific. There was a virtual boundary drawn through pedagogy—'us' versus 'them', the upper castes

versus the lower castes, the urban versus the rural, the Hindus versus the Muslims, the Indian versus the Western. There was a deliberate attempt by the colonial masters to further the wedge of disunity in Indian society through colonial education. This is what the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Richard Temple, had to say about the growing popularity of the female schools in the urban areas: 'These schools are attended in the first instance by girls of high caste, whereby popularity is ensured; if they had been attended only by girls of humbler castes, they would never have gained influence.' (Temple, 1880, p. 158). The statement made by Temple underlined the very casteist approach (to gain hegemony in the society) as the schools were attended by the high caste children, probably high class as well, which the rest of the society looked up to. Unpretentious in their claims, these schools worked under the penumbra of the existing caste, class and gender divide.

As discussed, school and its curricula required the dominant caste's ideological configurations to be represented as the pervasive knowledge. The curricula were to be redesigned so that a conspicuous divide was visible between the high caste educated women and the low caste men and women (Gupta, 2008). The high castes were to shun the lower caste 'promiscuous' male gaze; further, they were to distance themselves from the lower caste female as well, replicating a stoic hierarchy. The British felt that the Indian girls needed a special kind of education that would enable them to adapt themselves to the new demands made by the educated men of the family without losing their cultural moorings. Since the donors were primarily men, mainly the *seths* (big businessmen) of Calcutta, Bombay, and the crucial decision to send their daughters rested with the males of the family, education needed not to pose a threat to the status quo of the societal norms (Forbes, 2006, p. 33; Kumar, 1996, p. 146). Hence, there were attempts to combine various elements of different education systems that would contribute in make a 'successful housewife'.

As evident, the colonial curricula were geared for gender-specific socialisation. Girls were to be taught household work at schools to carry out their roles as wives and mothers according to the ideals set by teachers and western doctors (Sen, 2002, p. 212). Girls were taught needlework, basic first aid, cooking, sanitation, reading religious texts, history, geography, arithmetic (at a very rudimentary level), music, hygiene. These efforts led to the birth of Home Science as a subject in the 1930s— a nationalist discourse hugely borrowing from western modernity (Hancock, 2001, p. 875). Subjects such as hygiene, nutrition, first aid were new in terms of the domestic worldview to make Indian women an efficient caregiver, which

borrowed heavily from the European sciences (Hancock, 2001, p. 875). Given below is a remark made by Sam Higginbottom, a missionary who worked in the United Province, regarding the desirable virtues among the Indian mothers: "The illiterate Indian mother has her mind filled with superstition, myth, suspicion, and the consequent dread and terror and darkness that cramp and dwarf life. The mother can convey to her child only what she herself has in her own mind." (Higginbottom, 1929, p. 20)

By the 1880s, it became clear that the scenario for women to get educated was changing. The upper caste people and middle-class city dwellers accepted the need for women to get educated for household budgeting, tailoring, nutrition, and hygiene. Unlike the early 19th century, when women who had learned to read tried to hide their accomplishments from other women, as it would have led their subject them ostracization and humiliation (Devi, 1876). It provided relief to those who were related to the cause of women's education. Nevertheless, the path that lay ahead did not seem easy. By the late 19th century, the women no longer had to hide their desire to get educated, but it was still the patriarch of the family who decided the females' fate. By the turn of the 20th century, the number of schools for girls and their enrolment in them increased dramatically. In 1881, only four in 1,000 women were literate, compared to 137 men in 1,000 who could read and write Bengali. Between 1901 and 1911, the number of day schools for girls all over Bengal became triple as more men began to demand educated wives. In 1901–02, there were some 5,564 female students in East Bengal; this increased to 16,468 in 1906–07. Widows too got educated because it made them self-reliant, for they could be recruited as teachers in girls' schools. They could also get recruited as *Updeshikas* (women preachers) for *Ved prachar* (preaching of Vedic philosophy). The widows, including Vidya Devi of Benares, Mai Bhagwati, Savitri Devi, Lajjyawati, used to give speeches and raise funds for their schools. Widows devoid of their familial relations could channelise their energy towards educating themselves and subsequently others (Hancock, 2001).

From 1890s, another set of issues came to the fore: that girls need secondary education. Social reformers like Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, G.G. Agarkar, Justice M.G. Ranade and others played a significant role in promoting secondary education among women (Srivastava, 1998). Even the Hunter Commission in 1882 prescribed secondary education for women. Getting secondary education was not much of a problem for the Eurasian, the European, the Parsis— supplying three-fifths of the pupils in English secondary girls' schools. The problem mainly lay with the Hindu and the Muslim communities who, due to

societal norms like *purdah system*, early marriage, early pregnancy, were not very keen on their women to receive higher education (Prior, 1923, p. 112). "…, the cost of educating a girl in a secondary school is practically twice as high as the cost of educating a boy, though in primary schools the cost is almost identical. The total number of Indian girls, including those in boys schools, undergoing education at the end of the year 1921–22 was just over one lakh, and represents only 4.1 per cent of the number of girls of school-going age, compared with 27.8 per cent, in the case of boys." (Prior, 1923, p. 112)

Therefore, state did not find it lucrative to invest in the secondary education of females as it was double the cost of males. Moreover, the missionaries were still preoccupied with primary education. Hence, Indians had to take the maximum initiative for secondary education for women. The Arya Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj were championing the cause of women's higher education. Altogether, 38 per cent of the total cost of maintaining the girls' school came from public funds, while 62 per cent was received from fees and other private sources (Croft, 1886, p. 284). The pupils and the female teachers were primarily Europeans and Eurasians or local Christians. However, gradually the institutions like the Kanya Mahavidyalaya started with teachers training institutes, i.e., the regular schools. Subsequently, many women (like Sister Subhalakshmi), who were themselves a part of the first generation of educated women, took part in establishing regular schools for women.

Acquiring women school teachers had always been a problem. The education that the Indian women received was by and large minimalistic. So, the teachers recruited were either European or Eurasian or native Christians. However, hiring them proved costly, highlighting the racial supremacy of the white female vis-a-vis the brown female teacher. Hiring European or a Eurasian teacher was up to 200 times more expensive than their Indian counterparts. So, the state tried to promote regular schools where the locals could be trained for becoming teachers in the schools. However, given the minimalistic salary and India being the society observing *purdah* strictly, the government had a tough time finding such women who could go to the normal schools (Oldham, 1922, p. 69). "There are, however, other special causes affecting progress in female education in this province, namely, the pardah system, the early marriage of girls, the difficulty of obtaining trained teachers and the conveyance problem... Owing to the lack of suitable trained women teachers, the majority of girls' schools have to depend on old age men teachers, whose abilities as teachers are doubtful." (Prior, 1924, p. 90–1)

Various measures were taken to attract women to these schools.

For instance, male teachers were expected to bring their spouse to normal schools. 'The employment as teachers, of the wives of schoolmasters does not seem to make much way.' (Croft, 1886, p. 292). So they tried to invest in widows who were a burden to their families. A petty stipend was given to them, which made them self-dependent. It proved to be successful. Various other *samaj* also attested widow education and channelising their energy into productive work like teaching. Various colleges like the Arya Mahila College, and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya were set up to educate widows. Historian Anshu Malhotra points out that when the scheme became successful, the government withdrew its financial assistance. Therefore, educating the Indian women to become teachers was once again become the responsibility of the Indians.

By the wrap of 1920s, a lot of new things were coupled with the old. The first generation of women beneficiaries were ready to give back to the society by propagating female education. Rokeiya Hossain Shekhawat, Mataji Tapaswani, Sr. Subhalakshmi Iyer, and Pandita Ramabai took up the cause of education and tried to educate women. D. K. Karve, a social reformer, on the model of Japan, started the first university for women which could not get recognition until Subhalakshmi India got freedom. In the 1920s, a boost was given to medical education for women in India. Although women's entry into the medical profession was not welcomed, the social conditions in India, wherein women connected only to female doctors, necessitated the training of female doctors. The educational opportunities available for women and the importance given to midwifery in medical training increased after the 1920s.

Pativrata—Paragon of the Feminine Virtues

Since the political and socio-economic situations were changing, it found its reverberations even in the domestic spheres. With industrialisation, the concept of time became linear important. A responsible wife was supposed to get her man ready for work and send children to school. In a way, they were conditioned which would replicate an average British household. Though the nationalist thinkers thought of making Indian women different from the European women but their discipline was very much based on the industrialisation happening in Europe (Hartigan-O'Connor, 2016; Blunt, 1999). The purpose of education for the women was to make them potential wives and efficient mothers (Kishwar, 1986, p. 10). The meagre salary that their husbands received was to be spent judiciously. Now the role of wives was two-fold, first to administer the household and second, to act as a companion to their husbands so that they may not seek pleasure outside of their marriage (Malhotra, 2009, p. 125–128). For instance, in

January 1902, Lala Devraj began to propagate the necessity for girls to learn English because English was the *Rajya Bhasha* (state language) and women having the knowledge of it was becoming essential for men (Kishwar, 1986). Hence, it became imperative for women to learn English so that there was mutuality in the relationship between men and women.

She had to be educated enough to serve as his confidante, but not enough to pose any kind of challenge to him (Sen, 2002, p. 217). In the urban context, women undertook new forms of domestic work. In areas where the housewife came under criticism — employment of servants, domestic hygiene, cooking, household medicine, and management of finance — extremely complex changes were taking place. A sharper enunciation of gender division of labour accompanied a renewed emphasis on gendered spaces (Oldham, 1922). Thus, there was a greater resistance to women's acquisition of skills that would enable them to earn a place among the upper echelons of the society. From a violation of the 'traditional' roles of men and women to a complete moral degeneracy and collapse of the social order was but a short step (Sen, 1999, p. 57). Gradually the demand for the educated brides increased in cities and also in the middle class and upper middle class economic bracket. But, at the same time, since the females of the Indian society were under the control of the Indian men, they also had to etch how the Indian women were different, in a way better than the western women. Given below is an excerpt from *Godan* where one of its key character Mehta does the, character assassination of the western women and declares that no Indian woman should blindly imitate them

The Western woman doesn't want to remain a housewife. The keen desire for sensual pleasure has robbed her of all restraint. She is sacrificing the modesty and dignity which is her crowning glory on the altar of frivolity and amusement. When I see educated Western girls making a display of their charms — their shapely limbs, their nakedness— I feel sorry for them. Their passions have conquered them so fully that they can't even protect their own modesty. And what greater degradation can exist for a woman? (Premchand, 1968, p. 202)

As described by Mehta in *Godan,* a true Indian woman was not supposed to be 'shameless' like the European women, i.e., to be oblivious of her own sexual pleasures. Education was to help her to purge the obscene language, once in common parlance to emote oneself— a very Brahmanical sense of righteousness. Samita Sen finds through such coating of Brahmanical ideology eroding the customary rights of lower-caste women (Sen, 1999, p. 62). They were attempting to remould the girls who would become better than traditional women in the 'womanly' virtues. The reformers

constantly assured themselves and the others that they would only 'cleanse' the excesses generated within the social structure and not touch the patriarchal structure itself. "The truly modern housewife, it was said, would be so auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principle embodied in the goddess Lakshmi— the goddess of domestic well-being by whose grace the extended family (and clan, and hence, by extending the sentiment, the nation, 'Bharat Lakshmi') lived and prospered" (Chakrabarty, 1992, p. 15). In many ways, the movement was intended to 'reform' women rather than to reform the social conditions that oppressed them.

A vast didactic literature proliferated in the domestic manuals and women's journals prescribing and circumscribing the women's domain (Sen, 1999, p. 56). *Stridarpan* (a contemporary didactic magazine) talked about women's conformity, where they had to be an obedient wife in the so-called conjugal relationship (*The Bengal Magazine*, Vol. 4, 1876). Mutuality or conjugality in a marital relationship was a borrowed concept from the West. Though the protégé of the western educated 'natives' borrowed the concepts from their masters but they did not want to blindly replicate the West. In fact, their vision was very much tailored to the needs of India. (*The Bengal Magazine*, Vol. 4, 1876). In an article titled *Dampati Prem*, the author remarked:

> *Humare desh mein jis riti se vivah hota hai usme adhiktar purush hi padhe likhe aur sikshit hote hain, aise dasha mein pati ke agyaanusaar karya karna stri ka mukhya karma hai, parantu aaj kal prayah striyan is ke pratikool dekhi jaati hai (Vasanti, 1910, p. 22).*
> (The manner in which marriages are conducted in our country, the husbands are mostly educated, in these circumstances it is the wife's duty to work according to the wishes of the husband. But these days majority of women do the contrary.) (Authors' translation)

He further says that under no circumstance a woman is supposed to raise her voice to vent her frustrations. Only through her kind words and soft demeanour, she can change the heart of her husband. These newly designed women were the preservers of traditions and mascots of culture, femininity and dignity.

Conclusion

In retrospect, the drafting of the pedagogy of women's education had so many influences emerging from different quarters like the nationalists, reformers, missionaries and the colonial state. Coming from different schools of thought, these significant influences were sometimes acknowledged in each other's endeavours and in most of the cases, were dismissed. No matter from which quarter the influence emerged, they were not devoid of ideologies and motives. However, the underlying thread was the

entrenched patriarchy— the desire to educate women was only for the smooth functioning of men's world. Through conjugality, they meant that women could work better as per the directions given by their husbands. There was no balance of power within the family— women were subservient in the family. Whether housewives or school teachers, women were not perceived as professionals, instead as docile and submissive and not posing any threat to the status quo of the societal norms. They were to be forged into the category of so-called educated women who cannot think for themselves and make their own decisions. A wife's role was the combination of physical, emotional and sexual services that made her work so burdensome and yet invisible (Federici, 1975).

The pedagogical objective was to fit women in the given mould, purging the freedom enjoyed by the women venting their grievances and sexuality through songs and expressions which were henceforth deemed low and immoral. Power and authority in teaching approaches demonstrated the gendered dynamics in pedagogical spaces. Their curricula were re-designed to reinforce the male-centred perception rather than make space for women in the men's world. Society was not evolved enough to give voice to women's dreams— their voice was choked in their drudgery and reforged to fit an ideal woman. The cultural bottleneck in the given political context made the society more rigid and very much defined. As a result the society, including men and women, was made to reach a consensus of stiffening the shackles of patriarchal norms and duties.

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