FEMINIST ENCOUNTERS
A JOURNAL
OF CRITICAL STUDIES
IN CULTURE AND POLITICS

Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics, 9(2), 30
ISSN: 2468-4414

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Engendering Education and Organisation: The Women's Reform Movement in India

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Published: September 1, 2025

ABSTRACT

The 'woman question' of the late nineteenth century India developed regarding the contestation of two primary actors. The British government advocated for their aim to 'save' the native women from their own barbaric society, as an extension of their ideal of their 'civilising mission.' The consequent emergence of the Indian middle class, comprised of both reform minded men and conservationists, who concerned themselves with differential aspects of the status of women in the colonial custom. Unsurprisingly, both these outlooks were voiced by, and reflected the indigenous and foreign men's views of the Indian woman. The trajectory of the women's reform movement in witnessing the active participation of women, is one that then holds immense significance to understand the cause of change, from the real recipients of the movement. This article elaborates upon the 'educational experiment' of the late nineteenth century in India, that paved way for a generation of women to subsequently organise themselves into becoming the leading voices of the movement. The attempt to place the baton of change in the hands of women, is one that deviates from nationalist and oriental historiography that excluded them of rightful claims based on conservatisms of different, but overlapping kinds.

Keywords: education, history, women, reform movement, Indian women

INTRODUCTION

> Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for….it is we, and not you, who are the real nation-builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your Congresses and Conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is as true today as it was yesterday…...that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. (Sarojini Naidu, speaking to the Indian Social Conference, Calcutta, 1906)

The role of education in impacting the trajectory of the women's reform movement of the nineteenth century was immense. This notion does not only refer to the education of women in being an essential goal of the movement but also extends to the impact that western education had on the emergent middle class that led the call for reforms. The construction of this middle class and its subsequent interaction with colonial structures, reflected what K. N. Panikkar refers to as a 'cultural defence', which impacted their outlook, including their advocacy for reform (Panikkar, 1987).

The objective of this community was to facilitate the process of social reform or transformation, foregrounded in ideals of rationality and modernity, inspired by the West. The construction of this middle class, through a Eurocentric model and a feeling of 'historical denial' by the West, guided its outlook. Their sense of deprivation, stemming from their status as an oppressed people, heightened their desire to hark upon their past glories. While Hindus looked back to the glories of an ancient Hindu past, Muslims nostalgically recalled the worthiness of pre-British Muslim India. However, the historicisation of women in colonial India presents complexities that lie beyond the binary of the colonised and the coloniser. The rationale of their 'civilising mission' was guided by the British outlook of 'saving women' in India, from their own culture. An important aspect of the convergence of the indigenous and colonial, in that regard can be viewed in the emergent systems of land settlements and in impacting local patriarchal norms. Kumkum Sangari notes that there were multiple transformations brought about at the societal level due to land settlements, that included an increased extent of ownership of land, to previously land holding classes (Sangari and Vaid, 1990). Importantly, land ownership rights were vested in the hands of men, and

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women only had ancillary rights. Additionally, the codification of dominant land holding patterns by the state gave a juridical sanction to customary patriarchal practices, naturally becoming more binding and impactful for women.

In Haryana for instance, Prem Chowdhry points out that customs, emerging from the demands of patriarchy and interacting with the geo-economic needs of the colonial state, became largely restrictive for women (Chowdhry, 1986). The *barani* (dependent on rainfall) nature of the area, along with chronic crop failures implied a crucial need to optimise available resources, that included the use of family labour.

Such an economical system reinforced the necessity for male progeny. A male child came to be as essential as the life-giving rain. A local proverb maintained:

> *meehn aur bettya te koon dhappya sai*
> (Who can be satisfied without rain and sons; for cultivation both are necessary)

This saying reflected the dominant social ethos, that manifested itself in a favourable male sex ratio (Chowdhry, 1986). The cultural defence that Panikkar refers to here, is aimed at advocating for a modern, reformed society rooted in tradition. Social aberrations like *Sati*, child marriage and polygamy were amongst the foremost to be taken in account at the public level and critically appraised. Reformers, including Pandit Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Roy, invoked similar ideas of a glorious past to legitimise their arguments. This manifested in the depiction of the Vedic age as a 'golden age' for women, and the invocation of *Shastric* injunctions to disprove the validity of certain practices.

The aim of this article is to analyse the impact of women's education on the reform movement in transforming their agency and social position from distant passive recipients of the change to active participants and leaders. Subsequently, with the aspiration of the nationalist movement as a diverse but united endeavour by the beginning of the twentieth century, the position and participation of the women in contributing to, and being subjected to, the goals of the larger national framework become questions central to this study.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, in their work, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, make a case for the importance of feminist historiography in the larger realm of cultural history. Such accounts of history, they argue view aspects and materialities of reality through the lens of gender, implying a rethinking of the practice of conventional historiography itself. Rather, feminist historiographies attempt to view gender difference as both a result of, and force of impact upon, wider sets of social relations. Such accounts are prioritised as critical references in the construction of this study. In that regard, the works of Geraldine Forbes, Radha Kumar, Lata Mani, Gail Minault, Tanika Sarkar, and Sumit Sarkar have been instrumental in the characterisation of gender reform in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the primary accounts of speeches, tracts, arguments and works authored by reformers such as Rammohan Roy, Pandita Ramabai, Saraladevi Chaudharani, Annie Besant, Sarojini Naidu, amongst others become another essential point of reference (In reviewing works of Forbes (1996), Kumar (1993), Kosambi (1991) and Minault (1998), references of primary literature including newspapers articles, interviews from archives including the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, magazines, research papers and (translated) autobiographical works including *The Many Worlds of Saraladevi Chaudharani*).

The extension of western education to Indians during the nineteenth century was a move prompted by the expanding clerical requirements of the British administration. The involvement of the British government in the sector of education initially dates to 1813, when the British Parliament revised the Company's charter, setting aside revenues for the promotion of learning. The section of society that became the primary recipient of this education was the traditionally aristocratic, upper-class gentry that had served previous dynasties in their clerical capacities of military personnel, religious officials, and ministers (Minault, 1998). Subsequent changes in administration such as pertaining to land settlements, remunerated them with the rights to collect revenue from villages and *qasbahs*, subsequently leading them to consolidate their dominant positions. These processes, while influencing indigenous balances of power, paved the way for their transition into an emergent middle class, structured on British ideas and institutions. Such was the case with the rise of the *Bhadralok* in Bengal, and also the Muslim middle class in Aligarh. The impact of this cultural emergence also manifested in the arguments made in support of reform. Rammohan Roy, for instance primarily based his case on the sanction and legitimacy derived from scriptures. Quoting works like the Manusmriti, *Yajnavalkya*, and the *Vedas,* he claimed that a woman's right to live post their husband's death was granted by the shastras, and he argued that the act of *Sati* was an act of inferior virtue (Roy, 1830).

Moreover, the European ideals of this era that upheld the progress of a society in tandem with the improving status of its women, as was echoed in the words of John Stuart Mill, William Adam, and others, such writing further guided the defence of reformers in upholding the glory of their women in their distant past. Those who

comprised of this class of reform minded men, approached and argued for the movement in a way that proved that Indian women (and society) did not in fact subscribe to the backwardness that their colonial masters claimed. This contestation was further complicated by the conservationist outlooks of the subsequently emerging nationalist faction, who deemed the interference of British ideas in the sphere of the woman question, as an infringement upon their traditional and private realm.

The institutionalisation of education for men and women in India followed different interests and aims. In contrast to the support lent for institutionalising the education for men, there was little colonial interest in the education of girls. This stemmed from multiple reasons, the primary being an absence of any perceived tangible prospects for women, such as employment. In contrast, education for girls often became a liability for their families, because the pursuit of education did not directly aid the domestic role of women and rather, was suspected of diverting their focus from their household duties. Such social norms, as well as a general lack of concern disincentivised the colonial state to actively advocate for girls' education, it upheld the traditional fold of women being the domestic sphere.

Missionary societies were less reluctant to counter Indian resistance to gender reform (Minault, 1998). Missionary organisations such as the Church Missionary Society, the Church of England Zenana Mission Society, along with the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission Society, had powerful allies amongst the British Indian officialdom, and hosted active fundraising networks in Britain to support their works. Missionary women, with their aims to preach the gospel, also took up challenging careers in teaching and medicine, with degrees of independence that they otherwise could not have achieved at home. It can be concurred that their enthusiasm was based upon and aimed at proselytisation, but carried an undertone of social change (Minault, 1998). One of the missionaries' major contributions was *zenana* teaching. In this initiative, missionaries and their local 'Bible women' would enter *zenanas* and teach multiple generations of women at a time.

Until Sir Charles Wood's General Education Dispatch of 1854, there was not any official pronouncement about women's education. This dispatch was significant in noting the increased demand of many Indians to educate their daughters, urging support for female education, as well as mandating aspects like adequate management, periodic inspections, and a decent standard of education for the schools (Minault, 1998). Subsequently, the government paid increased attention to concerns of educational policy during the 1880s, owing to the Indian Education (Hunter) Commission of 1882. Known as the Hunter Commission, this body compiled statistics, gathered extensive testimony, and issued a detailed report in 1884, which included a chapter devoted to female education and it made several recommendations. It supported the recognition and encouragement of *zenana* education, and the establishment of additional schools or classes for the training of women teachers, to ensure the replacement of men teachers in all girls' schools. In the contemporary girls' schools, it recommended for a somewhat different curriculum as from the one for boys, along with the preparation of specific textbooks. Additionally, it favoured the recognition of native associations for the promotion of women's education. Another noteworthy government effort, in 1904 was through its direct approach to the question of women's education in North India, in the United Provinces. Sir Harcourt Butler, the then Education Secretary of the UP government, constituted a committee to discuss methods of improving women's education. The Committee was appointed in 1904, and submitted its report in 1905 (Minault, 1998).

To analyse the nature of the first formalised education provided to women, this study aims to locate the emergence of women's agency in the latter half of the nineteenth century through the coming up of the first women-led organisations. Most women who became the subjects of this educational experiments were consequentially the ones who pioneered the documentation of their lives, struggles, and ideas. These limited biographical accounts such as Saraladevi Chaudharani's *Jeevaner Jharapata* for instance, elaborates in comprehensive detail about her experiences in the Tagore household, relates stories of her mother's Sakhi Samiti, and her time at the Bethune School (Ray et al., 2017). Her organisation, the Bharat Stree Mahamandal, paved the way for organisations such as the Women's India Association and All India Women's Conference. Such documents privileged the experiences of women in their authentic narration, that expanded the impact of their 'voices' beyond regional or geographical limitations. In that regard, the coming together of women to discuss, converse and organise themselves on issues where they were deprived of their agency became a subsequent significant phase of the reform.

The classification of the question of reform in this article will focus on the dominant Hindu and Muslim communities, with the regions of Maharashtra, Bengal, and Aligarh being the focal points respectively. The rationale to this approach is based on the understanding of the concurrence of an emergent, reformist middle class from these regions, and their contestation (and often conflict with), with their conservationist counterparts. This concurrence also extended to the women themselves who became the subjects of the reform movement, claiming positions of leadership and organisation within it.

PURDAH, *BHADRAMHILA* AND THE HIGH CASTE HINDU WOMAN: EDUCATION AS REFORM

Traditionally, education within the Hindu fold was religious in content and thus monopolised by Brahmin men, who assumably came to be known as the ritually sanctioned 'literati' (Kosambi, 2016). Colonial rule inspired the reformist discourse through its introduction of gender and caste-neutral education in various ways. The reform movement in its nascent stage was constructed as an all-male project. This meant that its patriarchal parameters were inherently incapable of accommodating any radical, gender-based initiatives. Reforms came to be strictly mandated by existing normative boundaries and were fashioned towards making better wives for the newly educated class of men, and enlightened mothers of the future generations. 'Emancipation' of women was hence essentially an investment in social that is perceived as male-centred progress, rather than being a step towards establishing gender equality.

The major themes that characterized Hindu social reforms of the nineteenth century did not constitute to be problems within Muslim personal laws (Kosambi, 2016). The Faraizi reformers of the mid-nineteenth century went as far as attributing the prevalence of norms such as widow immolation amongst Muslims to Hindu influence and encouraged Muslims to popularise widow remarriage.

With the decline of the Mughal dynasty in 1857, the Muslim gentry that had served the crown in the capacity of military personnel, administrators and religious officials were remunerated with the rights to collect revenue from villages and towns (Minault, 1998). These processes paved the way for their transition into a bureaucratic middle class, primarily structured on British ideals and institutions. The position of the reformers on the woman question belonging to this class, developed in this regard to encourage and enhance middle class Indian women. Muslim reformers of the late nineteenth century held considerably lesser resources than their ancestors who served the Mughal royalty but viewed themselves as part of the continuum of maintaining high status. This implied an innate retention of literary and cultural values. The position of the women, as 'transmitters of culture' became a matter of discourse (Minault, 1998). Education for instance, was valued as a marker of respectable status and became a recurrent theme in reformers' writings.

The reform movement within Islam during this period is closely associated with Sir Sayyid. Sayyid Ahmed Khan belonged to a family that was a distinguished example of the Muslim gentry that navigated the changing political dynamics with the British. His maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin Ahmed, with whom he lived, served as the *vazir* to the Mughal ruler Akbar Shah II (Minault, 1998: 15). Sayyid Ahmad's mother, Azizunnissa Begam had an imperative role to play in his moral upbringing and ambitions in advocating for reform. She was customarily educated in religious tenets, and was well versed in Arabic, Persian and read the *Quran*. As a woman in *purdah*, her activities in the public realm were limited. However, she held considerable private charities. Her impact on her son is well documented. Sir Sayyid recounted that, 'there is no doubt that a good mother is better than a thousand teachers' (Minault, 1998). It was perhaps because of her influence that Sir Sayyid opposed the cause of expanding women's education beyond home learning and rather, emphasised on the expansion of education for boys in Aligarh. In his testimony before the Indian Education Commission in 1882, he asserted:

> Those who hold that women should be educated and civilized prior to the men are greatly mistaken. The fact is that no satisfactory education can be provided for Muhammadan females until a large number of Muhammadan males receive sound education.

Sir Sayyid's views can be deemed consistent with his own cultural socialisation, in implying that his mother's example stood testament to the fact that a woman in *purdah* could be educated. However, it is important to note that his mother's was an exceptional case that was majorly based on their class position. Gail Minault (1998) notes that women possessing the ability to write was considered especially dangerous. It was argued that a girl knowing how to write might write letters to 'forbidden' persons (i.e., men or others), putting her chastity and the status of the family honour at risk. The *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri*, one of the most prominent works of *adab* literature of this era and the *Qabus Nama* warned against the same. Consequently, the ability to write was an extremely rare trait amongst Sharif women of the 19th century.

The views of Sir Sayyid as being opposed to women's education beyond the household fell in line with the normative position of his fellow Ashraf men. However, he vocalised his discontent about the extremes that the custom of purdah had been taken to. Invoking the idea of a rather glorious past, he claimed that women had been educated and knew how to read and write in the early days of Islam. This argument of supporting the purdah along with women's education, in its contradictory undertone echoed amongst the reformers of this generation. Education for girls was portrayed as a contribution to cultural continuity. Gail Minault (1998) notes that, 'the curtains of purdah were not torn down, but rather institutionalised with detailed rules for purdah observation' (Minault, 1998: 248). Sharif's values were emphasised upon and his family ties were glorified. These policies were deemed necessary to attain social acceptance, without which the schools and institutions would have failed. The

emphasis on the continuities of tradition meant that an increasing number of educated women did not necessarily lead to an increase in the number of women professionally employed, implying the lack of any mobility in their agency. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the emergence of women-led *Anjumans*, in the formation of the Hyderabad Ladies Association, and through that, the *Anjuman-i-Khavatin-i-Islam* in 1913.

The granting of education to women in Hindu society followed different trajectories, and can be elucidated through the analyses of Maharashtra and Bengal, as important centers of reform.

By the latter half of the eighteenth century, the British has acquired nearly monopoly control over the foreign trade in Bengal, and subsequently aimed to extend their control to the system of land tenure (Borthwick, 2016). These socioeconomic changes extended to impact indigenous balances of power. The old aristocratic elite continued to perform significant functions for the new British class, but their size was not large enough to fulfil all the needs of the rapidly expanding colonial administration. An emergent social group began to serve the needs of the rulers. This 'middle class' owed its rise and status to opportunities provided by the British. This new social group was known as the *bhadralok*, literally meaning 'gentlemen' or 'respectable men,' and was essential to the maintenance of the British rule. This group stood testament to a significant social phenomenon, by employing the authority conferred by their recently acquired wealth to further strengthen their status. Various terms have been used to describe the womenfolk of this group. Some of them were *bhadrakulabala* (girls of good family) and *bhadrabangsajabala* (girls of good lineage) (Borthwick, 2016: 54). The term *bhadramahila*, while originally emerging as a description for the female members of this class, gradually crystallised into the reference to an ideal type of woman, denoting a certain lifestyle and character.

The *bhadralok* intelligentsia were seemingly united in their support for female education, with even the 'conservatives' favouring it (Borthwick, 2016: 68). Borthwick in her seminal work, 'The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905' underlines the significance of the *Strisiksa Bidhayak* in affirming this argument. The conservative understanding led the view that education would direct women to imbibe greater virtues in their life, without necessarily interfering with the traditional fabric of Hindu society. In that regard, the progressive and conservative faction was nearly in agreement in the understanding of the role that educated mothers and women would play in transforming the health and mental vigour of the future of Bengali *bhadralok*. The difference lied in their expectation of the outcomes of this education, with the conservatives arguing for the upholding of traditional values and traditions, and the progressives advocating for an initiation of social change.

One of the most central aspects of debates amongst those favouring female education centred on the method to be employed. The three essential types under consideration were informal (home) education, *zenana* education, and institutional education in schools. Of all these, home education was probably the most frequently adopted. Progressive husbands and fathers might take the initiative of educating the women of their house. Despite the frequency of its commitment, this was not advocated in practice because the domestic duties of a *bhadramahila* meant that she had long working days. The second method was that of *zenana* education, or private tuition. In the beginning, this initiative was proposed by missionaries, and all teachers were European women. Many favoured the scheme in principle because it did not upset *purdah* arrangements or domestic organisation too greatly, its evangelical character did tend to create obstacles that overwhelmed its evident advantages. The content and material of this form of education had placed great emphasis on Biblical instruction. Despite perhaps being of limited educational value, these lessons seemed to bridge the gap between the *zenana* and the world beyond. They became a point of cultural contact with British women, giving the *bhadramahila* the opportunity of learning the habits, language, and ways of Europe. The distinction of the first school catering to the *bhadramahila* in Bengal went to the Barasat Girls' School, established in 1847 by Peary Charan Sircar and others (Borthwick, 2016). Even though the school was not very well known, it did set a precedent for the public education of girls.

The central impetus for social reform in nineteenth-century Bengal emerged as a complex response of this group to the expansion of British colonial rule. Oriental administrators in the process of rediscovering the 'glory of India's ancient civilisation' initially adopted a policy of non-interference, eventually entering the realm of public discourse through debates and discussions. This contact based itself on a footing of mutual respect. General principles that were derived from topics debated in western philosophical discussions, such as in the liberal western worldview of the rights of the individual, were often put forth and applied to issues more relevant to Indian society. One such issue came to be taken up in the condition and status of women. Forced into a submissive position by the cultural intolerance and theoretical rhetoric of British colonialism, many of the *bhadralok* seemed to have been genuinely troubled by the failure of their women to conform to perceived British imposed standards of ideal womanly conduct. For some, it exaggerated a crisis of identity, for others, it caused a revaluation of their own society. Consequently, Peary Chand Mitra, a prominent figure of the Young Bengal coterie, invoked examples from ancient India to refute James Mill's assertion that Indian civilisation had always degraded women (Borthwick, 2016: 36). The reformist class structured their own critique of the condition of women in Bengal, based on this defence and advocated for the need for reform. It would be a grave oversimplification, however, to establish a direct, causal connection between ideological progress and changes in social behaviour. Ideological change does

not immediately produce political, economic, or behavioural change. Traditional values continued to persist in 'modern' environments. Geraldine Forbes (1996) asserts that this theme is considerably manifested in the conservative nature of the first organisations led by women, as compared to those led by men.

Consequently, the 1880s witnessed three phases of social reform operating in Maharashtra (Forbes, 1996: 26). The movement was pioneered four decades earlier by Gopal Hari Deshmukh and Jotirao Phule. Deshmukh operated primarily within the Brahmin circles, whereas Phule championed the rights and issues of lower castes against Brahmin hegemony. Both however, adopted a generally pro-British stance while demanding political and social rights. Phule was an advocate of gender justice and his anti-Brahmin rhetoric, along with the influence of the Christian ideals made him welcome Ramabai's later conversion to Christianity. Towards the end of the 1870s, the liberals, led by Justice M. G. Ranade and Professor R. G. Bhandarkar appeared on the scenario. Their agenda was to engage with the region's social reform discourse and navigate it in such a way that it came to be equated with gender-related issues. Bhandarkar propagated this cause through his teaching career, public speeches, and writings in support of issues like the late consummation of marriage and allowing widow remarriage. Pandita Ramabai in that regard, emerged remarkably as a pioneer of women's education, rights and organisation. Her father – deviating majorly from cultural and caste-based norms – supervised and encouraged her education. When Ramabai was sixteen years old, she and her brother travelled throughout India lecturing, and advocating for female education and social reform. Some amongst the Calcutta elite, appeased by her knowledge, bestowed upon her the names 'Saraswati' (Goddess of Learning) and 'Pandita'. Returning to Poona, Ramabai began work with reformers to educate women through the Arya Mahila Samaj, which as an institution will be discussed in greater length in the next chapter. While in Poona, she gave testimony before the Hunter Commission, stressing upon the urgent need for women doctors and teachers.

The time that Ramabai spent in Maharashtra in 1882 (and the years following her later return in 1889) coincided with the cusp of the second and third generations of social reformers. With support from the liberals, Ramabai moved into the male led, upper-caste social reform milieu and aimed to inscribe women as subjects rather than objects. Her activities in this year started with public lectures. Devadatta Tilak in citing D. G. Vaidya's description of such a lecture notes the importance of educating women to improve their lot. Ramabai also vehemently protested the objectification of women. She soon incorporated these ideas in her acclaimed book, *Stri Dharma Niti.*

In India, Pandita Ramabai established the Sharada Sadan, a school for widows in Bombay. This was supposed to be a non-sectarian school where the caste rules of brahmins were scrupulously observed. By 1900, the Sadan had trained eighty women in teaching or nursing, helping them earn a living for themselves (Forbes, 1996: 67). Her second school, Mukti, was established at Kedgaon, thirty miles outside of Poona, following the famine that began in 1897. She took women and children who were victims of famine into Sharada Sadan and enrolled them in her school. By 1900, this venture grew into a major institution housing nearly 2,000 women and children. Geraldine Forbes (1996) notes that Ramabai at times urged the inmates of her home to become Christians and developed a specific educational program to suit their needs. Her version of Christianity was doctrinally eclectic, combining her ideas from the sisters at Wantage, and Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Indian Christian friends (Forbes, 1996: 68).

The widening ambit of the Arya Mahila Samaj, along with the generous official patronage extended by Dr Hunter's familiarity brought Ramabai into close contact with British officialdom (Kosambi, 2016: 32). She was invited to testify before the Education Commission (headed by Dr Hunter) whose mandate was to evaluate the functioning of all branches of the Indian educational system. In September 1882, Ramabai presented evidence before the commission. In her testimony, Ramabai traced her reformist underpinnings to her idealistic father, who had advocated for women's education in the face of tremendous opposition, spelling out her agenda for women's education which embraced the shastras, as well as a secular curriculum. Ramabai subsequently made herself the discursive focus of women's education in Maharashtra. Meera Kosambhi argues that this measure, despite being less difficult to implement than the other reform issues which necessitated structural changes in patriarchal normative system, the obstacles were immense. Ideologically, education was guarded as the monopoly of Brahmin men, which was especially gatekept from Brahmin women. Women of certain families who had imbibed knowledge of Marathi were at times compelled by their families to mispronounce certain words, to underline their inferiority (Kosambi, 2016: 34).

As a medium of reform, literacy was aimed to enable women to bypass stringent family controls and exercise their own agency. The primary way of averting this from happening was to deter women from desiring literacy in the first place. The reality of those few women who deviated from such norms to avail themselves of education is described by Anandibai Joshee, who lived in Girgaum, Mumbai, in the 1870s. The sight of her walking to school made people gape at her from their windows and the street (Kosambi, 2016). Some passed lewd remarks, made gestures, and laughed in her face. Kosambhi asserts that given the state of such hostility towards girl students embedded within Mumbai's progressive milieu, it was natural to expect the idea arousing anxiety amongst parents in smaller Marathi cities and towns.

Following 1905, there was an evident change in the national scenario regarding this subject. The claim to education for women was asserted as a birthright and the strength of Indian mothers was valorised, echoing their position as the 'mothers of the nation.' Hence, the place of Indian women in the 'national life' was first to be accepted as mothers. This theme was echoed by Madame Cama in 1910, at the meeting of the Egyptian National Congress in her saying, 'remember that the hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that builds the character' (Kosambi, 2016). This semi-mystical vision of motherhood also coincided with the further growth of the Darwinian 'objective-scientific' views of social reformers. Ideals and conceptions of ancient India came to be appropriated by the early twentieth century reformers, revivalists, and nationalists alike.

Geraldine Forbes (1996) narrates the trajectory of these processes associated with education in impacting women. The first generation of educated women by writing and documenting about their lives and conditions had found a voice that never existed before. The subsequent generation articulated these needs, critiqued the society and the British, and pioneered the formation of their own institutions. The emergence of these organisations took place in the face of immense ostracism and discrimination, as had been customary. However, the boundaries of the late nineteenth century had been stretched considerably by the advent of the twentieth century, implying the emergence of new struggles, new means of dissent and the 'new women.'

TOWARDS ORGANISATION

The estrangement of the social reform movement from Indian nationalism began towards the end of the nineteenth century, and gradually grew over the years, expressing itself in the form of debates over the comparative importance of social and political issues. On the one side, the loyalist social reformers felt that the endeavours of social reform were divided by political allegiances, and hence needed to be steered clear of, while certain others felt that the social and political were distinct but intertwined spheres. The interaction of those involved in the women's cause with nationalist leaders produced different reactions, each differing on the basis and positions of those involved. Sarala Ray, for instance frequently discussed issues of social and political importance with Gokhale, emphasising which should proceed first. After much discussion, he asserted that the two are like 'the hands and feet of a man … one cannot get on without either' (Kumar, 1993). However, not all dialogues came to such amiable conclusions.

A major shift occurred with an attempt to prioritise political reform over social concerns towards the end of nineteenth century, in Maharashtra by B. G. Tilak. As ideological accomplices, Tilak and Principal G. G. Agarkar pioneered multiple reformist ventures such as the weekly newspapers *Kesari* and *Mahratta*. The ideological divergence between the two appeared in the late 1880s over Tilak's increasing social conservatism, which clashed with Agarkar's ideas of rationalist liberalism. Consequently, Agarkar left his association with Tilak and in 1888, started his own Anglo-Marathi weekly, the *Sudharak*. Additionally, Tilak's dislike and public animosity toward Ramabai's ideals can be viewed as providing another similar site of conflict. N. C. Kelkar, Tilak's biographer and acquaintance, documented and affirmed the fact the Tilak harboured a degree of personal animosity against her. He claimed that Tilak's dislike stemmed from the actions of educated women who 'flaunted' their achievements and thus regarded Ramabai as a 'social enemy' all his life (Kosambi, 2016). The constitution of the Arya Mahila Samaj by Pandita Ramabai in 1882 was a particular instance that drew his disregard. The objective of the *Samaj* was more ambitious and emancipatory than its earlier counterparts, in being a revolutionary attempt by a woman to mobilise her fellows to discuss social reform issues which impacted their own lives. It was assumably welcomed by liberals like Ranade.

However, the public assertion of female agency supposedly posed a threat to the male hegemony of reform and therefore, drew stringent retaliation from Tilak, who went ahead to warn Ramabai, against the trespassing of the male dominion in asserting:

> In real life, it is the task of men to eradicate these and other evils customs … Women cannot interfere in them for years to come, even if they are panditas and have reached the ultimate stage of reform … women will have to submit to male control for a long time to come. (Kosambi, 2016)

Moreover, several apprehensions and concerns arose over Ramabai's conversion to Christianity which preceded the establishment of the institution, through newspapers and articles. The *Indu-Prakash* (4 March 1889) issued a note of caution in arguing, that her conversion could lead to the hindrance of the progress of the *Sadan* by creating doubts in the minds of Hindu widows wishing to seek shelter in the *Sadan* (Kosambi, 2016: 176). Generally, however, the leading reformers of the Bombay Presidency supported the *Sadan*. This response was documented by the *Kesari's* optimistic prophesy (12 February 1889) in asserting that people would likely develop trust her work, if her conduct remained straightforward (Kosambi, 2016: 178).

The trajectory of women's organisations in India dates back to Arya Samajist and Brahmo origins. From the late nineteenth century onwards, these were followed by the formation of regional organizations, such as the Bangal Mahila Samaj in Bengal, the Satara Abalonnati Sabha in Maharashtra, and the Bharat Mahila Parishad in Benares. Some of these worked for reformist endeavours, whereas others were constituted more as discussion platforms for women. The Aghorekamini Nari Samiti, for instance, based itself on the principle of self-help, and trained women to attend to the sick (Kumar, 1993). On the other hand, organisations such as Bharat Mahila Parishad organised discussions on issues such as the customs by which Hindu women should live, and their roles and duties as citizens of modern India. At a meeting held in 1905, the Parishad hosted a meeting during which women read their papers. Subsequently, one of the first attempts of coming together on a larger scale was made in 1908 with the organization of a 'Mahila Parishad' or Ladies' Congress in Madras, which saw the participation of women from across South India, and the presentation of about nineteen papers by women in languages like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Marathi and English. These associations emerged all over India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most were constrained by geographical boundaries but unequivocally shared the goal of coming together to discuss women's issues and debate.

These limited surviving accounts hold testament to the emergent presence of women in the public sphere, in articulating their needs. The educational experiment of the nineteenth century that the previous section elaborates upon, marked a distinction in their worldviews as well as ascribed gender roles, from that of their mothers and grandmothers. Education was seen as essential even if many of them married young. Some of the earliest *mahila samitis* taught basic subjects such as mathematics, geography, and English as well as held lectures on health, childcare, hygiene, and nutrition (Forbes, 1996). Women leaders began to define and argue for women's issues such as equality in access to education, the observance of *purdah*, and status in the family.

Saraladevi Chaudhurani of Jorasanko, was amongst the first to call for a permanent association of Indian women. When her male contemporaries criticised her, she charged them with patronising women. These men, she argued, 'lived in the shade of Manu,' and were unwilling to allow women independent action (Forbes, 1996). Saraladevi's organisation, the Bharat Stree Mahamandal had its first meeting in Allahabad in 1910, with the object of bringing together women of all classes and creeds, to institutionalise their common interest in the material progress of women in India. Owing to the existence of cultural and social constraints, the organisation was unable to achieve an all-India character, which remained limited to its three branches in Lahore, Allahabad, and Calcutta. The Mahamandal regarded the prevalent practice of *purdah* as a major stumbling block in the acceptance of female education. To navigate this issue, they sent teachers into households to teach skills in reading, writing, music, and embroidery. Saraladevi wrote extensively about the importance of women escaping male domination, so only women were allowed to join the Mahamandal. In 1917, a delegation led by Sarojini Naidu approached the committee headed by Mr Montague and Lord Chelmsford to demand a set of reforms to better the condition of Indian women, Sarala Devi presented before the committee on behalf of the Mahamandal. The delegation, organised by a European suffragette, M. E. Cousins, comprised of fourteen women, aimed to ask for better educational facilities, improved health services, and the same franchise rights that 'would be extended to their brothers.'

The constitution of latter-day organisations such as the Women's India Association (1917) and The All-India Muslim Ladies' Conference (1914), amongst their differences comprised of women who possessed some degree of interest in issues of social justice concerned with women and were the products of the first generation of the educational experiment in equal gender access. Their understanding of 'women's issues' differed significantly from their English counterparts who employed the usage of the term 'feminist.' Geraldine Forbes (1996), in her work *Women in Colonial India,* asserts that this happened because of the perceived negative notion that European feminism implied a prioritisation of women's rights over that of nation, villainising men in entirety. Their definition of the enemy was 'custom,' and their concerns were 'women's issues' which had origins in the nineteenth century reform movement and were subsequently interlinked to the linked concerns of liberation from foreign dominance and exploitation. Their ideology of rights substantially gained legitimacy from the notion of a 'golden age', similar to that invoked by their nineteenth century reformist counterparts. Sarojini Naidu, being one of the most prominent leaders of this strand, wrote and spoke extensively on such themes. The 'new woman,' according to her, was one in close contact with her roots and ancestral values, who understood the need to move beyond the home and contribute to the cause of the nation (Forbes, 2005). The idea of the home occupied a central position in Indian civilisation, placing significance on the mother as the keeper of purity, honour, and service. Naidu emphasised on extending this model to the national realm, imagining India as the 'house,' and its citizens as 'members of the joint family' (Forbes, 2005). Her ideas regarding the role of women in this framework granted them an important, distinct position, and called for a denunciation of such customs that inhibited them from playing this role.

CONCLUSION

This article has observed how women's agency pursued social and political activities in the period following the educational experiment in greater gender equality at the end of the nineteenth century. The women who were affiliated with organisations such as the AIWC and WIA, pioneered these attempts in occupying and participating in spaces like conferences, discussions, and events that had traditionally excluded them; they began to enter the public sphere. Moreover, features such as sex-based segregation and the traditional norms of female seclusion offered many of them opportunities to form their own formal and informal associations, relatively free from male involvement and restriction. The reason this question poses considerable significance is due to the existence of and aim to unravel a commonsensical understanding that the women's movement of this period was part and parcel of the larger, nationalist project. Many women who became a part with women's rights movement of this period entered the realm of the 'political' through the 'social.' This refers to their own associations and organisations being crucial links in their participation in the nationalist movement.

Women that were reached during the first generation of educational reform were restricted to largely upper class/upper caste circles. The trajectory of change is nonetheless understood as of a landmark phase for the women's movement. The significance of the educational experiment was that it began to inaugurate immense change in the lives of Indian women, as its impact across different classes began to emerge. Geraldine Forbes' (2005) argued that the transformation of these newly educated young women into socially conscious beings, through the awareness of social systems of inequality, is a factor that deeply impacted the nature of leadership roles they took up (Forbes, 2005). These changes in India were distinct from the women's movement in the west with its ideals of feminism. Western feminists, like Grace Seton (who came to India in 1925), concluded that Indian women were seemingly working towards two contradictory goals: their advocacy of the notion of the 'woman in the home' model was deemed inconsistent with their support for women to also enter the decision-making realm (Forbes, 2005). In observance of this specifically 'Indian type' of feminism, she wrote: 'They need to develop considerable skill as chariot drivers to make a successful race on those two mismatched horses' (Forbes, 2005).

It is important to note that Indian women did not agree with many of the assumptions of Western feminism. The ideas of aiming to go back to the 'golden age,' and live in a world where the concept of *shakti* prevailed did not only become a major driving force for Hindu women, but also morally and philosophically appealed to them. Indian women visualised in such religious and spiritual images, notions of feminine power and they were reluctant to abandon this relation for the western archetype of a feminist. The questions regarding the impact of these ideas remains negative to a certain extent, with prevailing social norms in modern India still denying women access to education, political participation, and legal redressals. However, the contextual changes that women's organisations achieved in the post-independence period largely hinged on the actions of their predecessors. To conclude, it suffices to assert that without the fight to enrol into schools, publish in journals, speak at conferences, organise, and agitate, the tryst with destiny that India made, would have been bereft of the future of its women.

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Citation: Bharti, M. (2025). Engendering Education and Organisation: The Women's Reform Movement in India. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 9(2), 30. https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/16788