



From Seclusion to Schooling: Women's Encounter with Western Education in Colonial South Canara

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Abstract

The advent of Western education in colonial South Canara marked an important phase in the changing social and intellectual landscape of the region. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the introduction and gradual expansion of modern educational institutions created new possibilities for women's access to formal learning. However, the transition from domestic confinement to the classroom was neither immediate nor uniform. Women's education was shaped by prevailing social customs, patriarchal structures, caste practices, religious beliefs, economic conditions and differing perceptions of female literacy. In this context, missionary institutions, indigenous reformers, local communities and colonial educational initiatives played significant roles in creating avenues for women's schooling.

The spread of literacy also influenced perceptions of womanhood, family life, social responsibility and the role of women in society. At the same time, resistance to female education remained evident in several sections of society, reflecting anxieties concerning tradition, morality, religion and changing gender relations.

This paper examines the emergence and development of Western education among women in colonial South Canara and analyses the social forces that facilitated or constrained this transformation. The study also seeks to understand how schooling contributed to the gradual reconfiguration of women's social identities and intellectual horizons.

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Introduction

The history of education in colonial India cannot be understood without examining the changing position of women within the educational sphere. Learning in many parts of Indian society was closely associated with social status, community traditions, religious institutions and gendered notions of knowledge. Women's access to formal education remained comparatively restricted, although this did not imply the complete absence of female learning. Women acquired knowledge through familial instruction, religious traditions, oral practices, domestic training and community networks. During the colonial period, the emergence of institutional schooling consequently represented a significant alteration in the established pattern of learning.

In the educational and cultural history of the Madras Presidency South Canara occupied a distinctive position. Its coastal location brought the region into sustained contact with different religious, commercial and intellectual traditions. Traditional forms of learning continued to coexist with institutions that introduced new curricula, languages and pedagogical methods.

Within this changing environment, the question of educating girls acquired particular significance. Sending a girl to school involved considerations that extended beyond literacy. Consequently, the emergence of girls' schooling provides an important lens through which the interaction between colonial institutions and indigenous society can be examined. About the establishment of schools and changing patterns of female enrolment, missionary records, government reports, educational statistics, census materials, gazetteers, newspapers and contemporary writings provide valuable evidence. The educated woman began to appear within the emerging social discourse of the period, although the nature and extent of this transformation varied across social groups.

Channels of Change

An awakening among the women in colonial India is linked to the growth of colonial modernity. The new ideas about women roles and capabilities which the colonial rule introduced were adopted by enlightened Indians. It was those Indians who received colonial education joined hands with colonial administrators, missionaries and educators in the questions of social reform concerning women. In the early 1830's the Law Commission under Thomas Macaulay, which had under taken the task of framing a penal code, discovered a link between the prevailing high rate of infanticide and the prohibition against the remarriage of widows. In a letter of 30 June 1837, the Indian Law Commission sought opinions of the Sadr courts of Calcutta, Allahabad, Madras and Bombay about the passage of a law which proposed abolition of female infanticide. But the proposal was opposed as such a law would allow the Hindus of upper castes and classes to be confused with the inferior castes and tribes among whom remarriage was common. As a result no such legislation was introduced ^[1].

Child marriage which was widespread among all castes had produced a very large range of child widows. According to 1891 census, widows under the age of 10 formed 6 percent of the total population of married girls in Bengal. The fate of widows in upper caste families was not inappropriately called "living death" since the widow was compelled to bear the permanent marks of having allowed her husband to pre – deace her. The prohibition against the remarriage of widows was strictly observed only amongst upper caste Hindus. Since the late eighteen century, colonial law had enclosed an entire realm of social practices and prescriptions of caste, inheritance, adoption, succession, dower, marriage, divorce, religious belief and practice which was to be governed by Hindu and Muslim scripture and interpreted by the authorized religious leaders of their communities ^[2].

In the early nineteenth century Social reformers had provided leadership to the women's movement by frankly acknowledging their degraded position in Hindu society ^[3]. Educational institutions were established in the district by the missionary initiatives both catholic and Bassel Mission, and by the government.

Report of the Education commission 1882 states that, as per

the instructions to the commission, it was to enquire into the present system of educational inspection, with a view to removing defects and introducing improvements.

The important and difficult subject of female education was to receive special consideration, together with the best means of encouraging and extending it so far as the circumstances of the country permit ^[4]. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, female literacy was extremely low in relation to male literacy. English education was introduced into India because the East India Company needed clerks and translators. From 1813 the company set aside some money, and after the charter of 1833 English became the official language ^[5].

Among the earliest women's memoirs from the nineteenth century are stories of a passionate desire to learn to read. In Bengal, Rasundari Devi taught herself to read by stealing precious moments from her housework and the responsibility of caring for twelve children. She was angry over herself for wanting to read books. Haimabati Sen, who was born a half century after the birth of Rasundari Devi, recalled her childhood as "Though I lived like a boy in every respect, in matters of education I remained like a woman. It is a popular superstition in our country that women, if educated, have to suffer widowhood; hence that path was entirely closed for me." ^[6].

Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840's and were assigned to work with women and children. These missionary women, educated and eager to prove their worth, concentrated on converting adult married Indian women to Christianity. They gained entry to households as teachers where they read stories, taught needle work, and attempted to bring their charges to Christ. When it became apparent that these zenana projects were unproductive, the mission authorities substituted girls schools. Missionary women continued to teach and it was their students, Indian women from Christian families, who became teachers in a number of the new girls' schools ^[7].

The native educational institutions also encouraged education for women. By the end of the First World War, there were educational institutions for women in all parts of the country and enrolments tripled at the school level and quintupled in universities. Maharshi Karve has argued that female education was the ideal method of smoothing over the rough spots in the transition from tradition to modernity.

In 1904 the Government of India remarked that peculiar difficulties were encountered in imparting education for girls owing to the social customs of the people, but that as a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people by the education of women than by the education of men, liberal treatment had been accorded for girls in respect of scholarships and fees. Efforts have been also made, not without success, to bring education, through the agency of governesses, within the reach of purdah ladies, to increase the number of ladies on the inspecting staff and to replace male by female teachers in Government and aided schools.

¹ Janaki Nair., *Women and Law in Colonial India*, Bangalore, 1996, p. 59 - 60.

² Anindita Ghosh(ed)., *Behind the veil*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, p.90.

³ Uma Shankar Jha, Premalathpujari (ed) *Indian Women today*, Kanishka Publishers, New Delhi, 1996, p.2.

⁴W.W. Hunter., *Report of the Educational Commission*, Chennai Archives,1882 p.4.

⁵ Geraldine forbes., *women in Modern India*,Cambridge University Press,2008p33.

⁶ Geraldine forbes., *women in Modern India*,Cambridge University Press,2008 p32.

⁷ Geraldine forbes., *women in Modern India*,Cambridge University Press,2008, p37.

Enrolment and Representation

The report of 1870 – 1871 Public Instruction placed South Canara ninth position in the Madras Presidency regarding the number of girls instructed with a total of 249 girls. The 1871 – 1872 Public Instruction Report allotted the sixth position to south Canara district with 366 girls being instructed. The 1885 – 1886 report of Public Instruction in the Madras Presidency projected 1288 girls being lettered with only 1.8% of the population being lettered. The census Report of 1901 quoted 5535 literate females of whom 2861 were Hindus, 497 were Muhammadans, 2091 were Christians and 84 were Jains. According to the report of 1912 – 1913, 6244 female scholars were recorded suggesting only 6.7% of the population being lettered. The report of 1945 -46 showed 10 Mission Girls where in 3398 girls received instruction in Mangalore, of which 2164 were Christians, 564 Brahmins, 537 non-Brahmins 18 were Muslims. The schools being St. Cecily Girls High School Udupi, St. Ann's Girls High School, Mangalore, Lady Hill Victoria Girl's High School, Mangalore, Little Flower Girl's High School, Talapady, Sacred Hearts Girls High School, Mangalore, St. Victoria Girl's High school, Puttur, St. Mary's Girl's Secondary School, Mangalore, Girls Secondary School, Shirva and St. Agnes High School, Mangalore. In addition to the Mission schools there were Government Secondary Schools.

But the total number still remains insignificant in proportion to the female population. The immediate problem in the education of girls is one of social development. The existing customs and ideas opposed to the education of girls. The Governor General in Council accordingly hesitates to lay down general lines of policy which might hamper Local Governments and Administration, and has preferred to call schemes for each province; but he commended the following principles for general consideration. (a) The education of girls should be practical with reference to the position which they will fill in social life; (b). It should not seek to imitate the education suitable for boys nor should it be dominated by examinations; (c) Special attention should be paid to hygiene and the surroundings of school life. (d) The services of women should be more freely enlisted for instruction and inspection.

As there was difficulty in obtaining competent school mistress, it has been suggested that there is large opening for women of the domicile community, who have knowledge of the vernacular and who might be especially trained for the purpose^[8]. The total number of schools under Catholic Board of education rose from 50 in 1935 to 70 in 1939. In 1921 St. Agnes College for girls was opened at Bendore, Mangalore. The government had even permitted the stipend fees for women from backward communities and Muslims in Government Secondary training schools.

The reasons for extending education to women were not as clear even to the colonial rulers when they opened government schools for girls. However, on one point both the rulers and the reformers were in absolute agreement. Education for girls was not meant to equip them for professions or for government service, the introduction of schools for girls was an attempt to transplant into Indian soil the Victorian ideal of the woman as "housewife" as the presiding deity of home and hearth. It was the missionaries

who took a major initiative in fostering the ideology of the Victorian housewife, by aiming to demonstrate to families that girls who had been to mission schools became superior housewives and mothers^[9].

Women's voices in print

The works of the women writers of the second half of the nineteenth century like Muliya Mookambika Amma Jaina Poetess Radhamati stressed more on devotional works. From the beginning of the twentieth century Seethadevi Padukone, Bharati Bai Paniyadi, Matpadi Kamalakshi, Krishnaveni Bai, Satyabhama Devi Vasanti Bai Padukone Belle Seetharatnamma, Leela Bai Karanth, Saraswathi Bai Rajawade, Sharada Shastri and others. They highlighted issues related to problems of women like child marriage, prostitution, pathetic conditions of widows and other women questions. The Women writers of colonial South Canara have left behind an awesome array of memorials. They have produced literary works on religion, culture, social evils, necessity of education for women and nationalism to name a few.

Conclusion

The penetration of western ideas tended to defend everything traditional. Some of the early oppositions to the opening of schools for women was backed by an appeal to "tradition" which supposedly prohibited women from being introduced to bookish learning, but this argument hardly gained much support in South Canara. Colonial modernity is both intrusive and interventionist, and it left very little untouched. It provoked strong responses in support as well as opposition, which makes the colonial phase of Indian history so eminently dynamic. New opportunities and frustrations in education, employment, public sphere, new ideas of liberalism that brought in interventions in law and administration, and an effervescent print culture that projected the hopes, demands and sullenness of the various stake – holders in the changing society meant that nearly every sphere of Indian life was touched by the hegemonic colonialism^[10].

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