



## ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

## History

### WOMEN EDUCATORS OF THE 19TH CENTURY AND THE FIGHT AGAINST PATRIARCHY

**KEY WORDS:** Women educators, 19th century India, patriarchy, colonial reform, feminist history, girls' education

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of 19th-century Indian women educators in resisting both colonial subjugation and indigenous patriarchal norms. Figures like Savitribai Phule, Begum Rokeya, Pandita Ramabai, and others played a transformative role not only in promoting girls' education but also in reshaping the very meaning of womanhood in colonial India. Their contributions laid the foundation for feminist consciousness and social reform. The paper also examines the backlash these women faced, the ideological and institutional barriers they challenged, and how their legacy continues to shape educational and gender discourses in India today.

#### INTRODUCTION

The 19th century in India was a period of intense transformation. Under British rule, Indian society began to experience new ideas about modernity and reform. At the same time, traditional patriarchal values continued to dominate the social structure. In such a context, a few brave women emerged who not only broke the barriers of gender but also challenged colonial and societal norms by promoting education for girls. This paper highlights the lives and work of some of these pioneering women educators and their fight against patriarchy.

#### Savitribai Phule: Pioneer Of Girls' Education

Savitribai Phule is widely regarded as the first female teacher of India. Along with her husband Jyotirao Phule, she opened a school for girls in Pune in 1848. Despite facing severe social discrimination, casteist abuse, and threats, she continued to teach girls from marginalised communities. She wrote poems to motivate young women and used education as a tool for empowerment. Her work was not only a challenge to Brahminical patriarchy but also to the caste system that denied education to Dalits and Shudras.

#### Pandita Ramabai: Scholar And Social Reformer

Pandita Ramabai was a Sanskrit scholar, social reformer, and an early feminist thinker. She travelled across India and abroad to understand different education systems. In 1889, she established Sharada Sadan, a residential school for widows and orphaned girls in Mumbai. She was among the first to openly challenge the oppressive traditions of child marriage, enforced widowhood, and the exclusion of women from formal learning. Though she later converted to Christianity, she remained committed to improving the lives of Indian women through education.

#### Begum Rokeya: Educating Muslim Girls

Begum Rokeya, a Muslim reformer from Bengal, founded the Sakhawati Memorial Girls' School in Kolkata in 1911. At a time when Muslim girls were often kept in strict purdah and denied education, Rokeya advocated for secular and inclusive learning. Her writings, including the famous 'Sultana's Dream', offered a bold vision of a feminist future where women led society. She encouraged rational thinking among girls and promoted female agency within the framework of Islam.

#### Resistance And Patriarchal Backlash

These women faced intense resistance from orthodox communities, including verbal abuse, physical threats, and social boycotts. Many questioned their morality, dismissed their efforts, or accused them of breaking tradition. However, through resilience, strategic alliances, and an unwavering belief in the power of education, they continued their work. Their resistance was both intellectual and practical, as they created spaces for other women to learn, speak, and lead.

#### Legacy And Contemporary Relevance

The contributions of these educators remain foundational to

the ongoing struggle for gender equality in education. While India has made significant progress in women's literacy and school enrolment, disparities still exist, especially in rural and marginalised areas. The National Education Policy 2020 acknowledges gender inclusion, but the historical lessons from these pioneers are vital for its effective implementation. Their legacy reminds us that education is not merely about literacy but about dignity, voice, and justice.

#### CONCLUSION

Women educators of the 19th century were not just teachers; they were revolutionaries. In a society bound by colonial rule and patriarchal norms, they opened doors that had long been shut for women. Their courage and commitment laid the groundwork for generations of Indian women to dream, learn, and lead. Today, as India reimagines its educational future, these women remain guiding lights in the journey toward equality and empowerment.

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