

SOCIAL REFORMS AND WOMEN EDUCATION AMONG THE PATIDARS OF BARODA STATE, 1850-1950



SUMMARY

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BY

RUMA BATTACHARAYA

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DR. RAJ KUMAR HANS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

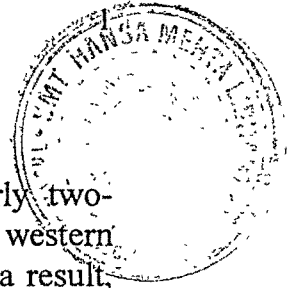
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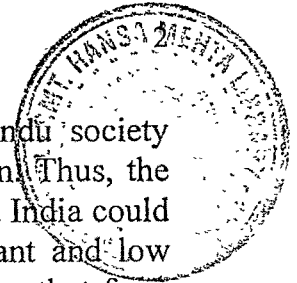
SUMMARY



The greatest and most important contribution of the nearly two-hundred-years-long colonial rule in India was the spread of western education through English language in the nineteenth century. As a result, the outlook of the Indian gentry broadened and they were brought very close to the treasures of liberal and radical thoughts of Milton, Mill, Bentham, Paine, Rousseau and their likes. Throughout the nineteenth century, and especially in the later part of it, they were introduced to the western concepts of nationalism, liberty, democracy, and freedom. The impact of this exposure was that their views gradually transformed from regressive and prejudiced to progressive and constructive ones. The traditional sense of values regarding religion, education, and culture underwent a change and a new sense of values developed. A progressive-thinking new English-educated intellectual middle class came into existence.

Another important aspect of the colonial rule in the same period was the initiatives taken to document the history of Indian women for the first time. The writers who took these initiatives fell in two categories, viz. the orientalist and the colonialists or utilitarians. Writers of the first category, such as William Jones and Colebrooke spoke of a 'golden age' that had prevailed in India during the ancient period when women enjoyed a high social status. However, their observation seemed to be solely based on the reported high status of a few learned women of ancient India such as Gargi and Maitreyee. They hardly provided any further evidence to support the contention that a similar status was also accorded to the ordinary womenfolk at that time. In fact, except for making a passing reference to the women scholars mentioned above they did not objectively comment on the overall status of women in ancient India. On the contrary, writers of the second category, i.e., the utilitarians were very critical of the term 'golden age' and argued that from the very beginning the position of women had been deplorable in the patriarchal social structure of India. Their sharp criticism alarmed the new English-educated Indian intellectual middle class from which emerged a new group of Indian writers – the nationalists. Similar to the orientalist, they also tried to justify the existence of a 'golden age' in ancient India when Indian women enjoyed much freedom and high social status. To remove various social restrictions widely imposed on women at that period, they highlighted the purported 'glorious past' of India when Indian women were free from all these restrictions. However, the historians and feminists today are highly critical of existence of the said 'golden age'

mply because sustained oppression of women in Indian Hindu society through ages has been a de-facto finding without any exception. Thus, the purported high social status of a few scholarly women in ancient India could not be expected to have any impact on the overall insignificant and low status of women in Indian society. Therefore, it is fair to assume that from time immemorial the position of women in Indian society had been anything but respectable.



The dismally low social status of Indian women was accounted by several long-standing, widely prevalent and peculiar social customs prominent among which were 'purdah', i.e., closeting women within the four walls and not allowing them to interact with the outside world in any manner, child marriage, female infanticide, 'sati' or immolation of widows at the funeral pyre of their husbands, complete ban on widow remarriage, assigned role of women only as the producer of the progeny, particularly sons, and denial of the right of women to education. Under such all-pervading social prejudice against women their education was practically out of question.

Introduction of English education by the East India company in the late eighteenth century was largely restricted to the Indian gentry because that was the only accessible part of the population that could be educated and employed as clerks and translators who were vital to run the administration. In the light of 'purdah' and total isolation of womenfolk educating and employing them were totally out of question. Moreover, it was feared that any efforts to educate females would lead to violent social opposition and unrest. Later on when the colonial government came to rule India it also followed the same policy for a considerable period despite pressure created by the missionaries and liberals for female education. Thus, before 1854 not a single pie (paisa) out of the education grant was spent for women education. It was only in 1854 that the government partially recognised women's education as a branch of state system of education.

The belated initiatives of the colonial government notwithstanding, two agencies, viz. the missionaries and the liberal social reformers played pivotal role for the spread of female education. The missionaries were interested in establishing schools to educate females because they believed women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent. Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in 1840s and were assigned to work among 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 needlework, and attempted to bring their charges to Christ. They were seldom successful in their efforts to convert. When it became apparent that these Zanana projects were unproductive, the mission authorities substituted them with girls' schools. The missionary women continued to teach and it was their students, Indian women from Christian families, who became teachers in a number of the girls' schools.

The contribution of the western-educated, liberal-minded Indians was also important in the spread of female education in the country. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great advocate of female education. The Brahmo Samaj also contributed much in this direction. The Mahakanya Vidyalaya established by the Arya Samaj in Jullandhar, Punjab and many other girls' schools established in different parts of the country greatly helped in the spread of female education in India. The contributions of Prarthana Samaj and the Deccan Education Society also deserve special mention in this regard. Drinkwater Bethune, a member of the Governor General's council and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played key roles in establishing the Hindu Balika Vidyalaya in Calcutta in 1849 which was later named Bethune School. Soon a college also came into existence by the same name. In Wood's Despatch there was a specific directive to encourage female education. But the government did nothing more than pay grant-in-aid to the girls' schools that grew up on private initiative. By 1873 as many as 1640 girls' schools were established in India mainly through private initiative. In the next ten years the number increased manifold. The Hunter Commission in its report recommended that the Government and the District Board must bear the expenses of female education. Thereafter the government began spending a little more liberally for female education.

Besides paying attention to female education, some reformers also made efforts to improve the social status of women by sensitising the public and attempting to remove various social evils against women such as 'sati', child marriage, and ban on widow remarriage. Primarily due to their initiatives the colonial government started taking social reform measures through suitable legislation such as the Act XVIII of 1829 forbidding the practice of 'sati'; remarriage of widows was legalised by another Act in 1856. The heinous crime of female infanticide was prohibited by an Act in

70. The practice of marriage of young girls was checked by the Age of Consent Act in 1891 wherein the lower age limit for consent was fixed at 12 years. Ultimately, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929 which raised the lower age limit for marriage to 14 for the girls and to 18 for the boys. Moreover, to widen the property rights of Indian women an Act was passed in 1874. This was subsequently amended in 1929, 1937, 1956, and in 1973.

Although social reform movements gained roots first in Bengal in the eighteenth century slowly and gradually it spread to other parts of India. In Gujarat the impact of social reform movements was noticed a little later. The reformers there, such as Durgaram, Narmad, Ramanbhai, Nilkant, Pradhan Tripathi, Dalpatram, etc. made efforts to stop the practice of child marriage and female infanticide, and legalise remarriage of widows. Efforts were also made for the spread of women education at first in Ahmedabad, followed by Surat, and then at other places of Gujarat. The role of Gujarat Vernacular Society was noteworthy in this connection.

The princely State of Baroda was considered to be one of the most progressive states of India during the second half of the British rule. It was particularly so under the rule of its enlightened ruler Maharaja Sayajirao III. His long rule of sixty years (1875-1939) proved extremely fruitful for the people of Baroda and the State registered noteworthy progress in administrative, social, educational, cultural, economic, and industrial fields. It is notable that in such matters the State of Baroda competed with the British in India. He took great care to improve the position of women by giving them proper education and also by progressive legislations. According to him women education was needed for the proper development of a child; for running home life nicely; for making them fit to carry the same academic work as men; for uplifting their status in society, and to make them rational minded and bold enough to fight against various social restrictions which restricted their scope of progress. The measures undertaken by him for the spread of their education is discussed which reveals that he established a female training college in 1882 to provide trained teachers in all girls schools; in 1885 he announced his resolve to give special attention to women education to fit the girls for their function in society; in 1906 he made primary education compulsory for girls side by side with the boys; for the growth of secondary education among girls Maharani Girls' High School was established in 1917; Zanana classes were established for grown-up girls; besides, the education of backward classes

received special attention. Thus he worked seriously for the spread of women education in Baroda State.

As a result of consistent efforts of the social reformers in Gujarat and Baroda State an awareness developed among the upper caste Hindus, viz. the brahmins and banias towards improving the status of women by removing various evil social customs and practices that had strangled them for centuries. Awareness came to the upper caste Hindu parents to send their daughters to school that helped to check the evil of child marriage to some extent. Because of the dynamics of the time the patidar or the main peasant community of Gujarat was also propelled towards an atmosphere of reforms. The social problems plaguing the women of the patidar community included the practice of hypergamy, i.e., marrying the girl to a groom belonging to an aristocratic family or to higher social status, exorbitant demand for dowry from the groom's family, fixing the price for a bride, and child marriage. Looking at the reforming climate of the brahmins and banias the liberal and reformist members of the patidar community such as Bechardas Laskari, Durushottamdas, Pragnadeep Chhaganbha, etc. tried to create public awareness towards the glaring social anomalies discriminating women and remedy these in favour of their women.

Employing a two-pronged approach on sociological and feminist lines the present study explores the condition and status of women belonging to the patidar community of the former Baroda State. This community comprised of mainly four groups viz., Leva, Kadwa, anjana and matia. But for the purpose of this thesis only Lewa and Kadwa groups will be covered. Because in Baroda state out of the four groups of patidars the major two, viz. Lewa and kadwa patidars were found to be prevalent in overwhelming majority. The patidars basically belonged to the agricultural community of Gujarat whose main occupation was farming. They were also termed as kanbis which was applied to the cultivating castes only. However in the past there was a distinction between the two terms 'kanbi' and 'patidar' and it seems that only the aristocratic kanbis were known as patidars and the rest as the kanbis. Especially in Kheda (Charotar) the distinction between the two terms was found to be very strong. However, with the passage of time, especially during the twentieth century the distinction started losing its prominence and finally after 1931 the term 'kanbi' was dropped from the census report.

Though lewas and kadwas both belonged to the same (patidar) community and had similar social customs, marked dissimilarities between them had evolved over a long period of time. While the practice of hypergamy was prevalent among the lewas which gave birth to the strict custom of receiving excessive dowries from the bride's family at marriage, the kadwas were fairly free from it. The twin evils of hypergamy and the exorbitant dowry demand from the groom's family in the lewa community prompted the hapless parents of female child to take the extreme step of killing her soon after birth. Thus, the practice of female infanticide gained prominence among the lewas. But this was rare among the kadwas. Widow-remarriage was allowed among the kadwas but was a taboo among the lewas. Conversely, polygamy was allowed and practiced among the kadwas which was rare among the lewas.

Therefore, as a whole, the condition and status of patidar women of Gujarat was not well during the later half of the nineteenth century. Backbreaking burden of dowry on the bride's family, ban on widow remarriage, deplorable status of widows, etc. prevalent among the lewas and child marriage, selling of girls, etc. among the kadwas all worked together to a very lowly social status of patidar women in Gujarat. Moreover, denial of formal education further weakened the position of women in the community. However, this sorry state of affairs of the patidar women of Baroda State and elsewhere was not an aberration, rather it conformed well with similar low status of women in most other parts of the country.

In order to raise their social status in the brahminical social set up the patidars deployed the 'sanskritization' strategy during the nineteenth century. They stopped consuming liquor and meat and the kadwas put a stop to the practice of widow remarriage. The practice of hypergamy was considerably reduced among the lewas as they started forming their own endogamous circles known as 'ekda' and attempted to perform the marriages within the circle. Formation of caste associations and efforts to bring social reforms through these associations was another development in the community during the twentieth century. The system of marriage of young girls considerably reduced among the lewas with the spread of primary education while among the kadwas child marriage continued because of the peculiar custom of periodical marriages. Social reformers of the patidar community such as Becharbhai Laskari, Jorabar Singh of Patdi, Govindbhai Hathibhai Desai, and Vasudev Gopal Bhandarkar tried to bring changes among the community by organizing meetings and also through the

ormation of caste associations. They focused on such important issues like excessive dowries during marriage, female infanticide, child marriage, denial of education to women, etc.

My attempt is to find out the social progress of patidar women and specially their access to formal education in the late 19th and up to mid-20th century. It becomes interesting because during this period patidars successfully moved towards business and became wealthy in that process. If they progressed so much economically, did they try to improve their social position also by improving the status of women? This question led me to the larger problems of women of the community.

I had chosen the former Baroda State as my area of research because apart from a significant presence of the patidar community here a major part of the study period coincides with the nearly 60-year-long golden rule of the state by the illustrious ruler Maharaja Sayajirao III, who was also a keen social reformer. My M. Phil. dissertation entitled "Women Education and Social Reforms under Sir Sayajirao III (1875 - 1939)" made me focus on the patidar women of this State to fully appreciate the enterprise of the Maharaja.

A close look at the works of Sayajirao III leaves no doubt that he had made exemplary efforts to improve the status of women through special state-sponsored education drive for women and also through progressive legislation favouring welfare of women. He had been spectacularly successful in popularising women education especially among the upper caste Hindus of Baroda State. And in this study I wanted to investigate how much benefit did the patidar women of this State were allowed to derive by their community from the wide opportunities provided by the Maharaja.

The study is based on sources collected from different repositories: Baroda Archives, Baroda; S.N.D.T. College Library, Mumbai; Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai; Smt. Hansa Mehta Library, Baroda; Central Library, Baroda and several other libraries located in Baroda. Besides written records, both primary as well as secondary, the study is based on oral evidence. Several notable patidar women and a few men have been interviewed, their testimonies recorded and memoirs used in reconstructing the period-specific story of women education. The oral evidence provides interesting details that are not easily available in the written materials.

Chapter I entitled *Social Reforms and Women Education in India during Modern Times* shows that the first historical account of Indian women was started during the colonial rule by the foreign writers. This deals in details with various groups of writers such as the orientalist, utilitarians, and the nationalists who expressed their views about the status of women in the Indian society since ancient times. It gives a detailed account of the efforts of the nationalists to improve the status of women through educational developments and by prompting the colonial government pass suitable legislation to protect the welfare of girl children and women. It is found that the colonial government gradually came into the picture of women education in India following the initiative and initial efforts by some highly motivated missionaries and social reformers. As a result of efforts from all sides women education became well accepted especially among the upper caste Hindus and women themselves became aware of the need to be educated for all-round progress. Further, it discusses the achievements of some prominent women of that period and participation of women in India's freedom struggle. Lastly, it deals with various women organisations established to liberate them from the shackles of social discrimination.

Chapter II *The Gujarat and Baroda Scene* is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the history of women's education in Gujarat which was first started in 1849 at Ahmedabad by Gujarat Vernacular Society and then gradually spread to other parts of the State. In the second part the history of women education in Baroda State under the special efforts of Maharaja Sayajirao III is discussed. Sayajirao III was easily the most progressive of the native rulers during the colonial rule and his efforts at launching and educational movement in his state especially covering and focusing the male education stands out.

Chapter III *Socio-Historical Background of the Patidar Peasant Lords* examines detailed information on the origin of patidars as the leading agricultural community of Gujarat. Various divisions among them and the differences between the lewas and kadwas are also discussed here. It explores the question of solidarity and fragmentation of this community. Early features of the patidar community such as the formation of 'gols' on the basis of hierarchy, practice of hypergamy, excessive dowry, female infanticide, etc. are discussed. Social changes noticed during the first half of the twentieth century are also discussed. The community's movement from the sphere of pure agriculture to business and industry has also been highlighted as having bearings on the literacy.

Chapter IV *Problems of Women in the Patidar Society* scrutinizes the patriarchal social structure of the patidar community. The sanskritization process among the patidars that had begun somewhere in the eighteenth century assumed a definite shape in the nineteenth century entailing a lower position for the patidar women. In order to elevate their social status among the Hindu elite the patidars started marrying daughters as children and indulging in female infanticide. The women were denied education and came to be secluded. The chapter goes into details of several problems faced by the patidar women.

Chapter V *Social Reforms and Women Education among the Patidars of the Baroda State* is divided into two parts. In the first part, social reform measures undertaken by various enlightened reformers of the community is discussed in which it is seen that a focus on reducing marriage expenditure and excessive dowry, abolition of female infanticide, encouragement of education of women, and remarriage of widows is given. The role of newspapers such as *Vartman Patra*, *Khabar Darpan*, *Patel Bandhu*, etc. and magazines such as *Swadeshi Hitvardhak*, *Kadwa Vijay*, etc. are also discussed in this part. Besides, the role of the caste associations in organizing meetings and discussing the burning social problems related with women are also narrated here.

In the second part, Census Reports on changes among the patidar women is discussed. The history of education among the patidar females from 1881 to 1941 is traced to see the progressive increase. This part offers comparative view of female literacy among the patidars with that of the rahmin and bania communities. The opinion gathered from the senior lewa and kadwa women about their education is analysed in this chapter.

Chapter VI incorporates my conclusions drawn on the basis of findings of this study. It is concluded that the patidars were a little late to come under the social reform movements of Gujarat. Even this belated participation was half-hearted, much like that of a reluctant soldier in the battlefield. The efforts of the reformists and Sayajirao III notwithstanding, the lewa patidars continued to disallow widow remarriage while the kadwas who had previously allowed the practice, stopped it altogether as a result of their adopting the brahminical social values. While women education grew rapidly among the brahmins and banias with radical changes in these communities, this was not so with the patidars. This community showed far

less receptivity of the reformist trends and a lukewarm response to the call of reformers for a radical transformation through empowerment of women. Consequently, women education grew slowly and gained only a modest ground in this community and this was not sufficient to bring radical changes in its discriminatory outlook towards women. While the attitude of the kadwas towards child marriage hardly changed and they continued with this evil practice the lewas made some concession by raising the lower limit of age at marriage of girls to 12 years. Spread of female education was somewhat more successful in the lewas than the kadwas as reflected by the female literacy rate which was much lower in the latter. Lastly, both lewas and kadwas did not favour higher education of their women beyond primary level.

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