

## NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN INDIA: THEIR VOICES STRUGGLES

Dave Hetalben D.\*

*Research Scholar*

*Centre for Comparative Literature and Translation Studies*

*School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies,*

*Central University of Gujarat Gandhinagar, India*

*Email : hetal.dave86@gmail.com*

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### ABSTRACT

*Women's education has been a widely discussed subject on which much has been written. Historians would agree on the point that the last decades of the nineteenth century had become a ground for the debate on women's education which became one of the agendas of social reforms. Speeches were delivered and essays were written on the type of education appropriate for women. How much education should be given to them? All of these led towards the discourse of nationalism on the one hand. On the other hand, feminist historiography studies the lives of women in the nineteenth century who struggled a lot for getting education and articulating themselves in the public domain. The paper studies the lives of five females - Rashsunderi Debi, Haimabati Sen, Kashibai Kanitkar, Ramabai Ranade and Rakhmabai and tries to understand their struggles and their voices.*

**Key words:** *Women's education, Nineteenth Century, Desire, Feminist Historiography*

*\* Author for correspondence*

### INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to understand women's desire for education in the late nineteenth century India by studying the lives of some prominent women. There are numerous instances of women who struggled for education and entered into the public sphere by one way or the other. The paper reads the lives of Rashsunderi Debi (1809-1900), Haimabati Sen (1866-1933), Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948), Ramabai Ranade (1863-1924) and Rukhmabai (1864-1955).

Much had been said on women's education and this became one of the agendas of social reforms in the nineteenth century. How much education should be given to women, which type of education was appropriate for them? These types of questions were functioning in the nationalist discourse. Partha Chatterjee's

observation in this regard provides ample insight,

Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues-the typically Framed virtues characteristic of the new social forms of disciplining- of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skill of literacy, accounting, hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world (129-30).

So the education for women had decided format. It was in way to make them good housewives and companions for their male counterparts.

### Concept of Desire:

The paper tries to understand the theorisation of the concept of 'desire' from women's experiences in nineteenth century India. Michel

Foucault defines desire as:

One should not think that desire is repressed, for the simple reason that the law is what constitutes both desire and the lack on which it is predicated. Where there is desire, the power relation is already present: an illusion, then, to denounce this relation for a repression exerted after the event; but vanity as well, to go questing after a desire that is beyond the reach of power (81-82).

Judith Butler discusses the ontology of 'desire' in her book *Subjects of Desire Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (1987). While discussing Foucault, she notes "for Foucault, there is no desire outside of discourse,..." (218-9). Ann Laura Stoler 'rereads *History of Sexuality* volume I in an unexplored light' (viii). In her last chapter of the book, *Race and Education of Desire* (1995), she interprets Foucault's definition of desire, "for Foucault there is no 'original' desire that juridical law must respond to and repress, as for Freud. On the contrary, desire follows from, and generated out of, the law, out of the power-laden discourses of sexuality where it is animated and addressed" (165). So desire is "incited by regulatory discourse" (167). It is constituted within the discourse. Following this argument, the attempt is made to understand the desire for education in the lives of selected females of the nineteenth century India.

### **Their Struggles, Their Voices:**

The life of Rashsundari Debi (1809-1900) is seen as a "life long struggle for learning to read and write" (141). She has narrated her experiences of learning in her autobiography, published in two parts in 1876 and 1906 respectively. Her autobiography is considered as the first autobiography in Bengali literature. She got married at the age of ten in a *Jamindar* family and at the age of fourteen, she handled a large household. Her routine and her longing for reading in her own words, "(After marriage) my days would begin at dawn and I worked till two

at night...I was fourteen years old...I longed to read books...but I was unlucky, those days women were not allowed to read" (Sarkar 95). Secretly, she learnt to read with great efforts and with the help of her sons acquired the skill of writing also.

Her struggle for learning has been seen as a challenge to the reformist agenda of women's education. As Tanika Sarkar argues, "the longing for systematic learning was not a desire implanted by male reformers, missionaries and colonialists. A pious good housewife...., was so driven to sharp desire that she taught herself the letters in great secrecy and with difficulty (48). In her study of the autobiographies of early generations of educated middle class women of Bengal, Malvika Karlekar observes, "The remarkable degree of enthusiasm among middle-class women themselves to acquire and use for themselves the benefits of formal learning. They set this goal for themselves in personal lives and as the objects of their will: to achieve it was to achieve freedom" (129). Thus, both of the above quoted scholars observe a passionate 'desire of learning' in Rashsundari Debi, in the four walls of a *jamindar's* house by performing all the duties of a head mistress (*Karta-thakurani*), before reforms focused on women's education. How to understand the notion of desire in Debi's life? Or the question Subrata Dasgupta rightly asks, "Why did Rashsundari Debi wish to write the story of her utterly anonymous life?" (279). The probable answer he gives, "the narrative is a powerful way of making meaning out of our experiences. It is the means by which the auto-biographer understands and expresses her own identity" (279).

The second life this paper selects to read is of Dr. Haimabati Sen (1866-1933). Her life began almost half a decade after Rashsundari Debi, albeit the struggle on her part is not less than her predecessor. She was a contemporary of Kashibai Kanitkar and Ramabai Ranade whose

lives are also a part of this study. Sen expressed her plight minutely in her memoir she wrote in the last decade of her life. Her brief autobiographical sketch is insightful in understanding her life better. She was born in a rich family of East Bengal but her birth was not a happy incident for her mother. However, her father decided to bring her up as a son (310). She was allowed to attend school but just to hear lessons given to boys. On one occasion, she impressed a school inspector with the answers the boys could not give. This occasion convinced her father to get her educated. But the opportunity was snatched by early marriage at the age of nine with a forty five years old widower. Her life became hell after this marriage. Her husband died within a year. She writes, "My widowhood was entirely my fault. My first fault was acquiring an education" (312). At this point, she also realised "now she was a widow, education could no longer hurt her" (312). And she started getting education again with the help of her brothers at her father's home. She learnt Bengali and wanted to learn English. But her life was not destined to go smooth. She lost support from her parental as well as her marital home after the death of her father and mother-in-law respectively (313).

She went to Varanasi and took shelter in a Hindu widows' *aashram* and accepted a job in a girls' school. Her desire for learning became stronger day by day. In her words, "the desire of higher education had persisted throughout my life" (313). To fulfil her desire, she came to Calcutta with letters of recommendation for members of *Brahmo Samaj*. During this period, her life passed from many upheavals. She experienced all that a young widow in her twenties had to face. Later on, she came into the contact of a young *Brahmo* Kunjabihari Sen and they got married. Some years after her marriage, she appeared for and cleared the admission test for medical education at the age of twenty six. She completed her degree with the highest

marks while performing all homely duties.

In this regard, Karlekar notes, the debate on the intellectual and physical abilities of women for education preserved for men. This debate divided the *Brahmos* into two groups - radical *Brahmos* like Dwarkanath Ganguly, Sivanath Sastri believed in equal chances for both men and women in education without justification for the study of separate subjects whereas Keshub Chandra Sen and other advocated limited education for girls (Karlekar 25). Due to Ganguly's efforts, Sarla Das and Kadambini Ganguly appeared in the entrance exam of Calcutta University in 1877 (26). Later on, Ganguly along with Chandramukhi Basu became the first women graduates and decided to study medicine. In 1886, Ganguly was awarded the GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) degree in 1886 (27). The above debate provides much insight to understand the desire of higher education in Haimabati Sen.

The life of Kashibai Kanitkar (1861-1948) has a different story of struggle to tell. She was torn between the desire of her husband to get her educated and the opposition of the family to it. Kanitkar came to know about her husband's unwillingness to spend life with an uneducated wife. She initiated teaching herself with the help of her brothers but it was not accepted by her family. At her marital home, she secretly acquired the basic skills. In this context, her biographer Sarojini Vaidya writes, "The tremendous efforts Kashibai put into learning Marathi and English was primarily a strategy for survival in a very hostile situation" (Tharu 256). Gradually, she acquired the basic skills and began to write in periodicals and the rest is history. She tolerated her husband Govind Kanitkar's vehement anger while learning from him (Kosambi 178). However, as a devoted wife, she credited him for her education. Thus, the life of Kashibai Kanitkar shows the time of nineteenth century India when the middle class

educated reformists wanted their wives to get educated. The next example we have is of Ramabai Ranade.

Ramabai Ranade (1863-1924) is seen as a husband's creation (12). She became an ideal example of a wife who followed her husband's footsteps. She faced the same plight and struggle in fulfilling the husband's wish and opposition of womenfolk at home though she became an equal companion of her husband. She expresses, "I never failed to do what himself (Ranade) wanted, because I knew very well that himself expected his wishes to be followed at any cost and would otherwise be angry" (16). In this regard, Suma Chitins writes that the desire to educate a wife or daughter became a passion for many men of the nineteenth century. They even disregarded sentiments or protests of other members of the family. They implemented the idea of educating their wives with such a force that raises questions while observing the process of education on their counter parts (viii).

The last life this paper has included is of Rukhmabai. She is deviant in the whole discourse of women's education. She is considered as the first woman doctor practitioner of India. She got education because of her father. She challenged the patriarchal orders by refusing to spend her life with a man with whom she had married in her childhood. She expresses, "Day by day my love for education and social reform increased...I began seriously to consider the former and present condition of our Hindu women, and wished to do something, if in my power, to ameliorate out present sufferings" (18) Sudhir Chandra calls Rakhmabai a young rebel who "seemed to hang the fate of a pervasive domestic social order which rested on parentally arranged child marriage"(2).

### Conclusion

So, the lives of these women show their struggles to acquire education. Rashsunderi Debi's desire for reading leads her to write an

autobiography; Haimbati Sen struggled a lot to get higher education. Kashibai Kanitkar becomes an early woman writer in Marathi literature who wrote a biography of Dr. Anandibai Joshi which is considered as the first biography in Marathi literature. Ramabai credited her husband for whatever she achieved but still her struggle for education required immense efforts. Rakhmabai stormed political and social notions of marriage by denying her childhood marriage.

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