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The Rise of Women's Educational Empowerment During the Colonial Era

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ABSTRACT

The era 19th century witnessed the transformation of women's status and education in colonial India, particularly under British rule. It analyzes the socio legal reforms initiated by the colonial administration, the active role of Christian missionaries in establishing educational institutions especially for women and the native responses from both Hindu and Muslim communities. Missionary education, while claiming to uplift marginalized groups, was often seen as a tool of cultural imperialism. Hindu reformers like Jyoti rao Phule, Savitri bai Phule, and Ishwar Chandra Vidya sagar, alongside British allies like Annie Besant, advocated for women's education as a means of social progress and cultural preservation. Among Muslims, the community split into modernists led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement and traditionalists, such as the Deoband and Nadwa schools, who resisted missionary influence and worked to protect Islamic values through indigenous education. Legal reforms including the abolition of Sati, widow remarriage rights, and female education were crucial milestones in women's awakening. The research tries to offer a comprehensive look into how education, law, and resistance intersected to shape the course of gender reform in colonial India.

INTRODUCTION:

The fight of women rights in subcontinent has a long history. For centuries Hindus and Muslims living together but Muslims with their culture, religious rituals were remained different. Cultural and religious restrictions, such as purdah and hijab, limited women's participation in political,

administrative, and legal matters. However, exceptional and legendary figures like Razia Sultana, Noor Jahan, and Chand Bibi etc. emerged as brave trailblazers, standing out as remarkable women in a time when such achievements were rare. During the Mughal era elite class women took part and had shown interest in fine arts, music and literature and had gain some education. However this was only confined to rich class people. When in 17th century the British came to India for cause of trade, slowly and gradually they began to take interest in customs, tradition including position of women etc. During that period, Europe was undergoing significant changes in its social and political systems. The British Empire also asserted that their rule would be an improvement for their colonies, promising better treatment and fairness, particularly for women, who were viewed as the most vulnerable group in those cultures. James Mill wrote in his book “History of British India”¹ argued that position of women could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement. But the main reason behind helping women was to benefit or prolong colonial system. Many reforms were introduced in this context.

By the end of 19th century a new class of people had emerged those who spoke English and worked as clerks and assistants to British officers however women were still restricted of higher education because of purdah. The British converted Indians traditional educational system from practical skill to more western style academic with the increase of printing newspapers and books.

There is plenty of literature available in the missionary education. The first book titled, Education in India (1781-1985): Policies, Planning and Implementation, is written by Dr Kuldip Kaur. According to the author, the year 1781 is significant because it marks the establishment of the first Calcutta Madrassa, which he argues signaled the beginning of the modern education system and the eventual replacement of the indigenous system. This shift, he contends, profoundly impacted India’s economic and socio-cultural structure. However, while the book provides detailed insights into British education policies over time, its focus on the post-partition period (1947-1985) somewhat downplays the pre-partition era. This shift in focus could be seen as a limitation, as it reduces the historical context of the earlier colonial period and its long-lasting effects on India's educational landscape.

Another article entitled; “The Aims and Objectives of Missionary Education in the Colonial Era in India” is written by Marwa Farooq. She examines the Christian missionary’s education policy in India particularly after 1857 rebellion. She also highlights the significant influence of Scottish and Protestant missionaries, who not only impacted India's education but also facilitated the spread of Christianity. They taught English as a medium in city school for elite but at villages they used their local languages in hope of that it could reached to more people. Interestingly, the article suggests that the missionaries were more successful in villages than in cities. However, it raises an important question: Was the primary goal of the missionaries to convert people, or was it to improve educational standards for the Christian community?

The article also introduces Orientalists (like William Jones), who valued India's ancient culture and believed in a shared wisdom between East and West, Contrasting them with later 19th century figures such as Lord Macaulay and Alexander Duff, who advocated for the imposition of Western cultural superiority i.e. Lord Macaulay and Alexander Duff etc. The British government after 1857 became more active about religious conversion and focused on "good governance" rather than trying to completely remake Indians into Englishmen.

¹Dr. Razia Musarrat “Women Struggle for Legal Empowerment in Pakistan”, *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, vol. (4), No.1, 2014, P135.

While the article provides valuable insights into the role of missionaries, it falls short in addressing the broader changes in the educational system after 1857. The lack of a deeper analysis into how education evolved beyond missionary influence, especially under British rule, weakens the overall argument and leaves a significant gap in understanding the full impact of colonial educational policies.

The third article written by Lingaraju P., titled "The Evolution of Christian Missionary Activities in India: A Colonial Legacy and its Modern Implications". This article highlights the Christian Missionary works and change in policy in India under British rule from direct conversion to broader social engagement through education and healthcare. At first missionaries were mostly Catholics from Portugal (like St. Francis Xavier) started focusing a lot on education and social good, not just direct conversions. They translated the Bible and set up many schools, including big colleges, teaching English and Western subjects. They believed education was key to spreading Christian values. They tried to convert people especially in South India, but faced strong opposition from local religions i.e. Muslim and Hindus. In South India and Kerala they had positive response with conversions because of older Christian communities there. They focused on local language education, same with the area of Bengal they laid down stressed more on education and social reforms (like ending Sati, the practice of burning widows) with fewer mass conversions, in North India and tribal areas, they faced more oppression but helped marginalized groups (like lower castes and tribal people) through education and healthcare. They strongly pushed for girls' education: 40% female enrollment in Kerala, 35% in South India. They built many hospitals and clinics, especially in rural and under developed areas, providing modern medicine and sanitation. They actively worked to end practices like Sati (abolished in 1829 with their help) and child marriage, and promoted widow remarriage and caste reform. Their work had some long-term impact on Colonial legacy and modern India in field of education, social welfare many missionary-founded schools and hospitals are still top institutions in India today. They helped spread literacy and Western knowledge, they improved the lives of ignored groups and women, laying groundwork for today's social justice movements. After passage of time missionaries came to notice that direct conversions were impossible and tough especially among upper castes. So, they changed their strategy and focus to social reform (like women's rights, widow remarriage) and humanitarian work (healthcare). They specifically helped Dalits and tribal communities who were often left out by the traditional caste system. Missionaries introduced ideas of equality and human rights, which inspired Indian reformers and nationalist leaders like Nehru and Gandhi.

LEGAL AND SOCIAL REFORMS UNDER COLONIAL ERA:

In the 19th century, social reforms in India sparked debates, particularly concerning the improvement of women's lives. Reformers believed that women's rights needed to be safeguard through appropriate legislation. Many of them saw these changes as essential for progress, survival, and the overall betterment of society. After British East Indian Company annexation over the areas; like the Bombay Presidency in 1818, they began replacing traditional values, religious practices, and cultural laws with their own legal systems. The Bombay Regulation Act of 1827 was the first formal legal measure introduced in that region. British legal reforms impacted various areas including criminal law, land ownership, taxation, theft, adultery, and property transfer. They also addressed personal and social matters such as remarriage and family issues though in many cases, local customs and religious laws continued to be observed. Throughout the century, the status of women remained a significant social concern. Indian reformers urged both British and Indian leaders to enact laws that would clearly define and

improve women's rights, gaining them recognition on a broader, even global, scale. Some of legal reforms passed during colonial era are as under:

1. OUTLAWING OF SATI:

The word sati derived from the name of goddess Sati. To sacrifice the women life through burning after the death of her husband became a ritual of Hindu religion where widows were forced to burning alive on their husband funeral pyres. This practice became legal in Indian society for centuries and considered as 'honor killing'. The practice of sati was declared outlawed, and punishable by the Criminal Court.² It was passed through Bengal Sati Regulation Act by Lord William Bentinck the first Governor-General of India. It became possible after so much efforts done by social activists and the government of Colonial India. At first the practice of Sati was banned by the Portuguese in Goa in 1515. Later the Dutchess and French also banned the practice of sati in those areas which they ruled. Colonial government also took action against this practice in 1829 after the pressure from the Indian social humanitarian including Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The legislation declared Sati tradition illegal also blameworthy by the law. This ban was done by the Privy Council in London in 1832.³ This practice was banned in India in 1829 and continues till independence of India in 1947.⁴

2. WIDOWRE MARRIAGE ACT:

The Widow Remarriage Act was passed on July 16, 1856 by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The Act legalized the remarriage of Hindu women, known as Act XV enacted on 26 July 1856. The subject matter of the Act of 1856 is fully covered by four Acts.

3. CHILD MARRIAGE DEBATE:

This period saw strong argument over the girls marriage quickly before the right or certain age to get married. It led to Child Marriage restraint Act.

4. FEMALE INFANTICIDE ACT:

Also another very unbearable custom like female infanticide (killing of baby girls) was outlawed with female infanticide Act 1870. Moreover they modified women legal right and status with more bill and acts.

5. SPECIAL MARRIAGE ACT:

This Act was passed in 1872, allowed people of different religions to marry legally like that of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or with any from Christian.

6. MARRIED WOMEN PROPERTY ACT:

This Act was passed in 1874, grants the right to married women on their own property.

7. DIVORCED ACT:

The Indian Divorce Act of 1869 was another important law enacted in colonial era. It deals with the issue of divorce and other marriage problems. According to section-10, both husband and wife could file divorce, mainly if their partner had been unfaithful. This law also defined that the person who got divorce could marry again this was explaining in section-57.

8. GUARDIANS AND WARD ACT:

The Act gave the court power to appoint legal guardian for children (called "ward") when their natural parents or guardians were not available. It was to protect the right and handed them to those who protect them (children under 18) and made sure about their education, health and

²The Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829 Act 17 of 1829. Published and Commenced December 4, 1829.

³<https://www.geeksforgeeks.org/social-science/sati-abolition>

⁴Dr. Razia Musarrat, "Women Struggle for Legal Empowerment in Pakistan", *Journal of Public Administration and Governance*, Vol. (4), No.1, 2014, P. 138.

property will be given to a responsible guardian; it was for both Hindus and Muslims. This Act was divided into 4 chapters contain 56 sections. This Act is passed in year 1890.⁵

9. MARRIAGE VALIDATION ACT:

This Marriage Validation Act was legally recognizing certain marriage that was seen doubtfully because of religious or social customs. The Act was passed on 1892.

10. MUSLIM PERSONAL LAW:

Muslims personal laws refer to set of laws based on Islamic principles (Shariah) that govern personal matters for Muslims. These include:

- Marriage
- Divorce
- Inheritance
- Guardianship
- Maintenance and Dower (Mehr)

During British rule in India, Muslims accepted some British laws like Child Marriage Act but strongly opposed those which against the Islamic shariah, because of their belief that had granted them clear cut rules or method for such matters. The British government had introduced many laws based on English principles that replaces many Islamic criminal laws such as Indian Evidence Act, Indian Succession Act (1885), the Guardian and Ward Act (1890), which made Muslim community upset.

ROLE OF MISSIONARIES AND BRITISH IN EDUCATION:

During 1813 the Charter Act of the English East India Company was revised giving British missionaries permission to start their mission work in India. The company faced opposition in England and tries their level best to shift focus from a commercial form to a colonial rule. Education was to play a significant role in this transformation. Protestant Christian missionaries began working in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar along with the expansion of British rule in these regions. In the succeeding decades, missionaries arrived in other parts of Kerala and started mission centers and schools. The first missionary to arrive in Cochin was Rev Thomas Dawson. His wife, Mrs Dawson, worked with the women in the area. They started two schools in Fort Kochi, one for boys and one for girls called the Protestant English Boys School and the Protestant English Girls School in 1817.⁶

Different Types of Schools:

Many other types of schools were established by the missionaries that includes seminaries, normal schools (advanced learning and teacher training schools), boarding schools, day schools, high schools. Another group of schools was the Nair Schools, opened in order to the Nair community's request. These schools were co-education and educate to both boys and girls. Moreover, there were Anglo-vernacular, night, and evening schools to serves to those engaged in manual labour during the day.⁷

In the mid 19th century, missionary education became part of the broader effort to provide education in India. However, it lacked a clear or focused goal. The biggest difference between government-run and missionary-run education was seen in higher schools. In these schools, English was used as the medium of instruction, while in primary schools, local (vernacular)

⁵Fahad Ahmad Siddiqi, "Summary of the Guardian and Ward Act 1890," *Courting The Law*, May 10, 2016, [<http://courtingthelaw.com/summary-of-the-guardian-ward-act-1890>] June 20,2025

⁶ <https://keralamuseum.org/article/history-of-womens-education-in-colonial-era/>

⁷ <https://keralamuseum.org/article/history-of-womens-education-in-colonial-era/>

languages were used. Some missionary groups even created a complete system of education in English. Their approach was shaped by a specific mindset and way of thinking. The British Government looked at missionary education from a particular perspective. They saw this education system not just as a way to teach people, but also as part of the larger plan of British rule in India, known as the "ideologies of the Raj"⁸. Missionary education played a significant role in promoting and reinforcing British values and influence in the country. While the primary goal of the missionaries was religious conversion, they invested heavily in education. However, these efforts alone were not enough to achieve their objectives, so they gained the support of the elite class to further their mission.⁹

The earliest Jesuit priests brought missionary work to India during the 16th century, but their activities bloomed exponentially during British rule in 19th and 20th century. The major missionary organization namely, the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, shaped the educational system, healthcare and infrastructure of India. St Stephen's College in Delhi and Madras Christian College, alongside Serampore College, developed into major higher learning centers that influenced Indian people who had formal education and worked in respected profession. During the colonial period, Christian missionaries played a key role in advancing healthcare in India. They built hospitals along with medical clinics and colleges, while missionary doctors and nursing staff made significant contributions in combating with diseases such as cholera, malaria, and plague throughout India.¹⁰

These missionaries established pioneering Western educational institutions, many of which are still well-known today. Through these institutions, they helped communities lacking access to education by creating a system that supported women and members of lower castes who previously had no access to traditional learning institutions. According to educational records, missionary societies ran over 600 schools by the 1850s, and this number grew significantly by the early 20th century.¹¹

MISSIONARY FOCUSE ON FEMALE EDUCATION:

Women's education was a unique focus of missionary efforts, showing clear difference with the traditional Indian society which restricted female literacy; female missionaries played an important role in opening girls schools. Their first attempt to instruct girls in an organized school were made in 1818 at Chinsura, but the school failed due to no admissions. In 1820, David Hare established girls school at Calcutta and ran it at his own expense. Lady Amherst in 1824 encouraged a society for the education of native females, by becoming its patroness. Even in 1823, the Church of England Missionary society ran 20 girls schools in Calcutta and its neighborhood with 400 students. But most of the mission schools were attended only by the girls

⁸Mavra Farooq, "The Aims and Objectives of Missionary Education in the Colonial Era in India," *Pakistan Vision*, Vol.15, no. 1 (2014): 119.

⁹Marva Farooq, "The Aim and Objective of Missionary Education in the Colonial Era in India", *Pakistan Vision*, Vol.15, no.1 (2014), P119

¹⁰ Chaman Shahzad Masih and Ghulam Shabbir, "The Role of Christian Missionaries in Colonial India: An Exploratory Study," *Pakistan Languages and Humanities*, Review.8, no. 4 (October–December 2024): 146–155, [https://doi.org/10.47205/lhr.2024\(8-IV\)15](https://doi.org/10.47205/lhr.2024(8-IV)15).

¹¹ Chaman Shahzad Masih and Ghulam Shabbir, "The Role of Christian Missionaries in Colonial India: An Exploratory Study," *Pakistan Languages and Humanities*, Review.8, no. 4 (October–December 2024): 146–155, [https://doi.org/10.47205/lhr.2024\(8-IV\)15](https://doi.org/10.47205/lhr.2024(8-IV)15).

from the lower classes.¹² No major shift was witnessed until 1849 by the coming of John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune. His efforts were regarded as marking the real beginning of women's education in India. Some of prominent girl's institutions formed after as under:

BETHUNE SCHOOL:

Bethune school was established in 1849, later it became college. It's founder was John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune in Calcutta, India. This school had great significance because it was the first formal school for girls in India. John Bethune, was a British educationist and law member of the Governor General's Council, believed in the importance of women's education in India. He collaborated with Indian social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who strongly supported female education. Only 21 girls enrolled in that year. Later this school was evolved into Bethune College in 1879, making it the first women's college in India.¹³

ZENANAMISSION:

The Zenana Mission (or Zenana Bible and Medical Mission) was a specialized Christian missionary effort in 19th century colonial India aimed at educating women, particularly those secluded in Zenanas, the private women only sections of Indian households, especially among upper caste Hindu and Muslim families. Zenana mission began in the 1850s to educate women inside homes (zenana) due to Purdah practices. It helped to establish nursing as a profession for Indian womens. Some converts from Zenana missions became teacher's nurses.¹⁴

St MARGARET'S SCHOOL:

It was founded in 1871 in Calcutta, India by Scottish Missionary Women (Church of Scotland). The main focus of this institute was to educate Christians and non-Christian girls to combine Christian values with western education taught English, Bengali, moralscience, sewing, hygiene, and occasionally religious texts.¹⁵

The Wood's Dispatch plan of 1854 strongly supported the female education in India but unfortunately was halted due to the 1857 uprising. Till 1870 not much was achieved till 1870.¹⁶

There were many social factors restraining girls from education such as the system of Purdah and child marriage, indifference of parents to their daughters education, distrust in the western system of education, financial pressure on the middle classes, lack of women teachers and girls schools, absence of a suitable curriculum for girls and lack of material considerations which form a contributing factor in boys education. However with the establishment of municipalities and the levy of a local fund aiding primary education helped the establishment of special primary and secondary schools for girls in the whole country between 1870 and 1882.¹⁷ In all provinces grants were given to the to girls schools than to boys schools on easier terms. Even the posts of inspectresses of girls schools were created and few training schools for women teachers were also established. Scholarships were also offered to girls in Madras, Bengal, North-Western

¹² Dr Kuldip Kaur, *Education in India (1781-1985): Policies, Planning and Implementation*, (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1985), p. 234.

¹³(<https://www.bethunecollege.ac.in>) "history of Education in India" by S. Nurullah and J. P. Naik(1951) p 112-113.

¹⁴Purdy, Elizabeth.(2004).-women,s education in colonial India) 9 (Greenlee, Joseph M (1970).- The Story of the Zenana Mission) 10 (Church Missionary Society Archives CMS Archives)

¹⁵(Scottish Church college Historical Notes..... complete reference

¹⁶ Dr Kuldip Kaur, *Education in India (1781-1985): Policies, Planning and Implementation*, (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1985), p. 235.

¹⁷Dr Kuldip Kaur, *Education in India (1781-1985): Policies, Planning and Implementation*, (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1985), p. 235.

provinces, Punjab and the Central provinces.¹⁸ By the end of the 19th century, there were 12 colleges, 467 secondary schools and 5,628 primary schools for girls with a total enrolment of 444,470 students in the whole of India.¹⁹

NATIVES RESPONSE TO MISSIONARIES ACTIVITIES:

The native response towards Christian missionaries varied with resistance and uncertainty, with emergence of Reformist and Revivalists movement in both Hindus and Muslim communities. While some individuals found their benefits and opportunities in Missionaries initiatives. Many individuals believe that these missionaries were acting as Western agents, potentially paving the way for imperialism and posing a threat to their traditional customs and rituals. Following the 1857 uprising, Hindu responses to Christian missionary education grew more intense, with increased efforts to strengthen India's *own* educational systems and encourage social reform within Hindu society. At the same time, the British government became more careful about overtly supporting missionary activities to avoid further religious unrest.

Hindus responded firmly to protect their religion and way of life, particularly as they saw Christian missionaries actively pursuing conversions, spreading Christianity, and trying to influence their culture and religious traditions. Religious leaders and nationalist figures grew increasingly opposed to missionary activities, viewing them as a threat aimed at forced conversions and the imposition of Christian beliefs and Western cultural norms on Indian society. Missionary education was seen as a clear indication of this agenda, reinforcing Western dominance and weakening traditional Indian values by prioritizing English over native languages.²⁰

Hindu leaders who wanted India's complete independence made significant efforts to establish their own schools and colleges in many areas to support their religious rituals and preserved their cultural values, and offer a modern style of education as an alternative to missionary run schools. In this context many different groups like Arya Samaj started schools called Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) schools, and the Brahmo Samaj also worked hard on education. These groups wanted to combine modern educational methods with a strong emphasis on Hindu identity and cultural pride²¹

Hindu leaders believed that, although missionary education provided Western knowledge, it also served as a means of conversion and cultural erosion. Therefore, their own educational initiatives placed a strong emphasis on moral and religious instruction rooted in Hindu scriptures and philosophy.

Many other Hindus were of the view that missionaries were doing to fix social problems (like stopping the practice of Sati or speaking out against the caste system) with doubt. They thought these efforts were just use as tool for conversion to Christianity and threat to their old Hindu traditions.²²

Besides the religious concerns, there was a growing recognition among Hindus of the practical necessity of English education for mean of administrative and professional opportunities within

¹⁸ Dr Kuldeep Kaur, *Education in India (1781-1985): Policies, Planning and Implementation*, (Chandigarh: Centre for Research in Rural and Industrial Development, 1985), p. 236.

¹⁹ Dayal Bhagwan, *The Development of Modern Indian Education*, 1955, 465.

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998)

²¹ John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), S. Natarajan, *A Century of Social Reform in India* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1962)

²² Oddie, 2006; Viswanathan, 1998).

the British Raj. Many Hindus sought Western education for its secular benefits, rather than for religious conversion.

PERSONALITIES TOOK STAND FOR WOMEN EDUCATION AND OTHER ACTIVITIES AGAINST MISSIONARIES:

After the 1857 Rebellion, there were many Indian personalities stepped up to champion women's education, often with the aim of promoting social progress within India while also providing an alternative to Christian missionary schools. Their efforts reflected a desire to uplift women while preserving Indian cultural and religious identity.

Jyoti rao Phule (1827–1890) & Savitri bai Phule (1831–1897):

Jyoti rao Phule, a pioneering social reformer and activist from Maharashtra, along with his wife Savitri bai Phule, was among the first to advocate for women's education in India. In 1848, well before the 1857 rebellion, he established one of the country's first schools for girls in Pune, welcoming students from all castes. His efforts continued to grow and inspire others even after the uprising. Jyoti rao Phule strongly opposed caste discrimination and gender inequality, viewing education as a powerful tool for liberation. Savitri bai Phule also played a crucial role in the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* ("Society of Truth Seekers"), founded by Jyoti rao Phule in 1873 to promote social equality. Today, she is widely regarded as a role model for women's empowerment in India.²³

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891):

He was prominent Bengali reformer, Vidyasagar did a lot effort to promote women education along with women social reforms like Widow Remarriage Act 1856, from within Hindu society often independent of missionary influence. He always tried to make education accessible to all, especially women in all sources of language.²⁴

Annie Besant (1847–1933):

Annie Besant, was a leading figure of the Theosophical Society, took a strong stance on promoting local education rooted in Hindu values, explicitly as an alternative to both missionary and purely secular government schools.²⁵

Besant believed that the absence of religious education in government schools and the recruiting nature of missionary schools were leading to "religious neutrality and skepticism" among Hindu youth. To overcome this, she advocated for religious instruction as major part of education.²⁶ In 1898, she opened the Central Hindu College in Varanasi, which put attention towards Hindu religious and moral instruction alongside modern subjects. This institution later became the foundation of Banaras Hindu University. She also established the Hindu Girls' School in Varanasi (1904) and co-founded the Women's Indian Association (1917), which advocated broadly for women's education and rights within a nationalist framework.²⁷

MUSLIMS REACTION TO CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES

After the 1857 war, the Muslim community in India faced profound problems and had been largely blamed for the revolt, they faced a significant decline in political power, economic

²³R.A. Kushwah, "Savitri bai Phule: The Philosophy of Education of Liberation and Reform," The Philosophy Project, [Jan 3, 2022], accessed July 21, 2025) 16 (www.britannica.com)

²⁴Ranès C. Chakravorty, "Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar," in *EBSCO Research Starters*, published 2023, accessed July 21, 2025.

²⁵Annie Besant: The Pearl of the Indian Renaissance By lukemiron side on May 16, 2018

²⁶R.. Pricila, "Role of Annie Besant Towards the Development of Education," *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal* (January 31, 2022) p, 918-922

²⁷Nitin Singh, *Annie Besant: The Foreigner Who Became "Ammā" of India*, posted October 30, 2023, in *Indian History*, July, 19 2025

standing, and social influence. Their traditional educational institutions also suffered. In response to this crisis, and to the ongoing presence of Christian missionaries and the British educational system, Muslim reactions to missionaries varied differently and were dividing into two groups. One was those who are willing for adopting Western education (with modifications) to regain lost position in all walks of life and second were those who emphasized and put stressed upon traditional Islamic education to preserve religious identity.²⁸

The Muslim reaction towards British was obvious. Their reactions marked a dramatic shift, as they went from being rulers to becoming the ruled under British authority. One of the major sources of discontent was the change in official language Persian, once the administrative language under Muslim rule, was replaced by English, which was made mandatory by the British. Additionally, the British often viewed Muslims with suspicion, considering them inherently rebellious due to the concept of jihad, and consequently kept them at a distance from positions in government and administration.

THE ALIGHARH MOVEMENT AND MODERNIST APPROACH:

Among the Muslims, the first person who venture against this powerful danger was Saiyid Ahmad Khan who soundly said: "There was no mishap sent from Heaven, which ere it plummeted to earth, didn't look for its resting place the abodes of Muslims"²⁹

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) believed that the decline of the Muslim community was largely a result of their rejection to modern Western education and their attachment to rigid, outdated interpretations of Islam. He recognized that the British were the new rulers and that engagement with their system, particularly through education, was crucial for Muslim survival and revival. His approach was a calculated strategy to uplift the community from its post 1857 predicament.³⁰

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan believed that Muslims needed to study modern science and learn English in order to improve their economic conditions and take an active role in the evolving society under British rule. He also sought to demonstrate that Islam was compatible with modern science and reason, making it less threatening for Muslims to embrace new learning.³¹ According to him "Acquisition of knowledge of science and technology is the only solution for the problems of Muslims."³²

Sir Syed's strategy was not to directly resist or join missionary institutions, but to provide an alternative that offered Western education without the direct or implied threat of conversion. He understood the deep-rooted fear among Muslims that missionary schools were designed to undermine their faith. By establishing their own institutions, he offered a "safe" space where modern education could be pursued alongside a strong grounding in Islamic values. This

²⁸(<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/whp-1750/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:unit-5-imperialism-colonialism-and-responses/xcabef9ed3fc7da7b:5-3-responses-to-colonialism/a/read-1857-indian-uprising-beta>) July 18,2025

²⁹ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p.349-370

³⁰ <https://www.ssuet.edu.pk/about-us/sir-syed-ahmed-khan/>, July 18,205

³¹ Abdulrahim P Vijapur, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Multiple Secular Thoughts in Life/Philosophy," *ResearchGate*, October 10, 2024.)

³²Azhar Mohammed K, "Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: His Life and Contribution," NewAgeIslam.Com, published October 23, 2012, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.newageislam.com/books-and-documents/sir-syed-ahmed-khan-his-life-and-contribution/d/8340>.

provided a crucial buffer against missionary preaching, allowing Muslims to access the benefits of modern education without compromising their religious identity.³³

After 1857 Sir Syed consistently spoke in favor of modern, western and scientific education for Muslim For betterment of Muslims. At that time the focus was to modernize Muslim *quom* meaning men of the community. He did alot to uplift their position. He believed that “We will remain humiliated and rejected if we do not make progress” (in scientific field)”³⁴ The Aligarh Movement was characterized by several concrete initiatives:

Scientific Society (1864): Established to translate Western scientific and literary works into Urdu. This initiative aimed to bridge the knowledge gap by making modern concepts accessible to a wider Muslim audience (both male and female) in their own language. It later moved to Aligarh and became known as the Scientific Society of Aligarh.³⁵

Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO):This was great initiative in Aligarh movement molded like British universities like oxford and Cambridge, it was an evolution in AMU. First it was established as primary school in 1875 Aligarh, India, upgraded to college in 1877 began offering higher education. Its foundation was laid by Viceroy of India Lord Lytton on 8 January 1877. It was upgraded to University in 1920, MAO College became Aligarh Muslims University under AMU Act passed by the British Indian Government.³⁶While simultaneously nurturing Islamic values and a strong sense of Muslim identity. It explicitly sought to produce graduates who were educated in both Islamic traditions and modern disciplines³⁷. “Sons (of MAO college later AMU)) shall go forth throughout the length and breadth of the land to preach the message of free inquiry, of large-hearted toleration and of pure morality.”³⁸ “Yes the main purpose of this college (MAO) is to impart modern education to Muslims who are suffering because of lack of it but this institution is for all, Hindus and Muslims alike. Both of them need education.”³⁹

Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq (The Muhammadan Social Reformer) (1871):Sir Syed took another significant step for the upliftment of Muslims by launching a journal to promote his reformist ideas. Through its articles, he advocated for social reform, modern education, and a rational interpretation of Islam. He directly addressed conservative opposition and aiming to convince Muslims to adapt to the changing times.⁴⁰The Aligarh Movement had a lasting impact on the Muslim community by promoting modern education and encouraging Muslims to pursue government and professional careers. It helped reduce doubts and fears surrounding Western

³³ Nadeem F. Paracha, "The forgotten future: Sir Syed and the birth of Muslim nationalism in South Asia," *Dawn*, August 15, 2016.)

³⁴ Azhar Mohammed K, "Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: His Life and Contribution," *NewAgeIslam.Com*, published October 23, 2012, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.newageislam.com/books-and-documents/sir-syed-ahmed-khan-his-life-and-contribution/d/8340>.

³⁵The Significance of Scientific Society Translations In The Proliferation of Modern Sciences," *Migration Letters*, accessed July 22, 2025, <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/download/10449/6979/25845>.

³⁶Mashori Balouch, "Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in 1875, evolved into Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) in 1920, aiming to modernize education for Indian Muslims," *Academia.edu*, [October 26, 2018], accessed July 22, 2025,

³⁷<https://www.amuonline.in/>. July 22,2025

³⁸Azhar Mohammed K, "Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: His Life and Contribution," *New Age Islam.Com*, published October 23, 2012, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.newageislam.com/books-and-documents/sir-syed-ahmed-khan-his-life-and-contribution/d/8340>.

³⁹ Azhar Mohammed K, "Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: His Life and Contribution," *New Age Islam.Com*, published October 23, 2012, accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.newageislam.com/books-and-documents/sir-syed-ahmed-khan-his-life-and-contribution/d/8340>.

⁴⁰<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sayyid-Ahmad-Khan>, 20th July ,2025

education, showing many Muslims that such knowledge was both valuable and essential for the progress and survival of their community.⁴¹

Sir Syed, Altaf Hussain Hali, Nazeer Ahmad and Shibli Naumani were amongst the first generation of the Aligarh movement who talked about women's education in traditional way where women of Sharif or respectable families are taught vernacular languages and religious education. At that time the question of women education was associated with the religion, tradition and the socio-economic structure of society.

For the first time the institutional education for women was raised by Syed Karamat Hussain (chief propagandist) with Mumtaz Ali in the Muhaamd Educational Conference in 1890 and left the impression on MAO students to further push women education. Later among these students; Shaikh Abdullah with his wife Waheeda Jahan Begum opened Zenana Aligarh school in 1906 . and in 1930 this school upgraded into College.⁴²

THE DEOBAND MOVEMENT AND TRADITIONALIST APPROACH:

Aside to Aligarh, the Darul Uloom Deoband, founded in 1866 in Uttar Pradesh, represented a powerful traditionalist response. Its founders, including Muhammad Qasim Nanautawi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi, together aimed to revitalize Islamic religious sciences and preserve traditional Islamic identity in the era of colonial rule and missionary influence. It was not as like the Aligarh Movement whose aim was to embrace Western education and reconcile it with Islam, Deoband focused on preserving and strengthening traditional Islamic identity and knowledge.⁴³ Deoband's role in Christian missionaries was after 1857, Christian missionaries intensified their preaching activities, they often worked with the unspoken approval of the government. They established schools that, while offering modern education, aimed to attract converts by critiquing Islam and traditional Hindu practices. The Deoband movement viewed this as a direct threat to the religious fabric of the Muslim community.⁴⁴ Dar ul Uloom Deoband's syllabus mainly emphasized the *Dars-i-Nizami*, a traditional syllabus focusing on Islamic religious sciences: Quranic exegesis (Tafsir), Hadith (prophetic traditions), Islamic law (Fiqh), Arabic language and grammar, and logic. The goal was to produce a well-trained class of *ulama* (religious scholars) who were deeply grounded and profound in Islamic knowledge and capable of defending Islam against external challenges, including missionary arguments. The main focus of Nadwa was on male as the bread runner of the society.

NADWATUL ULLMA: A SYNTESIS OF TRADITION

The Nadwatul Ulama (Assembly of Scholars), founded in Lucknow in 1893, it became prominent socio-religious movement among Indian Muslims after 1857 rebellion in colonial era. It sought to provide a synthesis of traditions, it wanted to overcome or close the gap between Aligarh Movement and Deoband school. Its role in the Muslim reaction to Christian missionaries was largely indirect but vital by strengthening internal Islamic intellectualism and promoting a balanced education, which aimed to strong Muslims to defend their faith and culture. Nadwa aimed to produce a new generation of *ulama* who were intellectually vigorous and capable of refuting Christian refutation through informed Islamic arguments, while also engaging with the

⁴¹Dr. Saleh Shahriar, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Muslim Renaissance in South Asia," *The Business Standard*, last updated October 21, 2024, accessed July 22, 2025. p, 1-3

⁴² Kashif Umair, "Aligarh Movement and Women's Education: A Historical Survey" *Islam and Muslim Societies: A Social Science Journal*, Vol. 15, No.2 (2022), p. 34-35. 34-48

⁴³ Razia Yasmeen, "Colonization of India and Muslims Response through Socio religious Movements," *Al-Irfan Biannual Journal*, 29 (July–December 2022), p, 29.

⁴⁴Vajiram Editor, "Deoband Movement," Vajiram& Ravi, last updated July 1, 2025, accessed July 23, 2025, <https://vajiramandravi.com/upsc-exam/deoband-movement/>

contemporary world. This approach, emphasized on rigorous scholarship and the establishment of its own educational institutions, served as a crucial indigenous alternative to missionary schools, providing a means for Muslims to pursue relevant education without compromising their religious identity more effectively.⁴⁵ Similar to Deoband, Nadwa also follow the pattern of male education.

CONCLUSION:

The colonial era in India marked a turning point in the history of women's rights and education. While British and missionary efforts introduced significant legal and educational reforms often with the underlying goal of sustaining colonial control but they accidentally sparked strong social and religious reform movements among Indians. These reforms challenged regressive practices like Sati, child marriage, and female infanticide, and opened the door for modern educational opportunities for women. However, the native reactions were complex and layered. Hindu reformers sought to balance modern education with religious and cultural preservation. On the other hand Muslim thinkers developed varied strategies; ranging from integration with Western education (Aligarh Movement) to strict devotion to Islamic traditions (Deoband and Nadwa).

On the whole, the period witnessed the beginning of a broader awakening among Indian women, supported by both reformist leaders and legislative changes. The foundation laid during this era helped redefine the role of women in society and created pathways for future generations to assert their rights and identities. Despite the colonial motives, the era catalyzed a transformative process that became integral to India's social, political and intellectual evolution.

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