



Review Article

Women's Education in Medieval India

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Abstract

The medieval period starts with the entry of Muslim invaders into India. The medieval age (1206-1707) is considered to be a "dark age" for women during many foreign conquests, which resulted in a decline in women's status. While it reached a low point for the general population due to social restrictions, it simultaneously produced some of the most brilliant female scholars, poets, and administrations in Indian history. formal institutional access for women due to social practices like the Purdah system, child marriage, and the withdrawal of women from the public sphere. While formal education for the masses was almost non-existent for women, the period saw remarkable intellectual achievements among the royalty, nobility, and religious reformers. Many royal houses had a dedicated libraries "lady teacher" for the harem. Hindu women often learned through the oral tradition of reciting the Puranas and the Epics, while Muslim women studied the Quran. Primary education was imparted in makhtabs, and higher education was imparted in madrasas. The Muslim era was prevalent throughout this time period. Women's lives were drastically altered during this time period.

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INTRODUCTION

The period from 1206 to 1707 encompasses two major eras of Indian history: the Delhi Sultanate (1206 -1526) Mughal Empire (1526 - 1707). During the Sultanate period, education was mostly localised. Girls from noble families were taught within the zenana (Women's quarters). Young girls often attended the same primary school (maktabs) as boys to learn the basics of the Quran and elementary Persian. The most prominent example of the era, Sultan Razia, was not only literate but also trained in military strategy administration and riding skills traditionally reserved for men. The Mughal period saw a "Golden age" for elite female education. Examples include medieval women Gulbadan Begam, Nur Jahan, Jahanara Begun, Zeb un Nissa. The medieval period is often termed a "Dark Age" for women's literacy due to the lack of a formal system for the masses. While they lost the right to Vedic studies, they continued to receive informal education through kirtan, Yatras, and the study of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. They will be able to enhance their competence and talent if their parents pay close attention to numerous elements and encourage their upbringing in an acceptable way. They were discouraged from going to school since it was considered that they would be unable to apply their educational qualifications, talent, and abilities in their married home. The main objective of education focused upon religion education, the extension of knowledge and the propagation of Islam.

C.H Buck writes: 'On the birth of a girl, there is very little rejoicing, for daughters cannot carry on the ceremony necessary for their ancestors' souls, and they are regarded as expensive luxuries.

Purdah system: In medieval India, the Purdah System (from the Persian word Parda, meaning curtain) was a social and religious practice involving the seclusion of women from public view. While its intensity and form varied across regions and religions, it became a defining social feature of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal eras. The system became more rigid and widespread with the arrival of the Delhi Sultanate and later the Mughal. It was heavily influenced by Persian and Central Asian courtly traditions.

Education of Muslim Women: Muslims education in medieval India was primarily religious, centred in Maktabs (primary school near mosque) for basic literacy (Arabic, Persian, Arithmetic, Quran) and Madrassas (higher education) focusing on Islamic theology, law (Fiqh) and sciences.

Maktabs (Elementary Education)

Maktabs were like primary schools meant for children. After acquiring primary education in Maktabs, the Muslim girls engaged themselves, like two Hindu sisters, in learning some practical art (like domestic science, etc.). They were put under the guidance of some elderly ladies who taught them household duties, such as cooking, spinning, and sewing. Only the Mughal princess, Begum and the mightier of the nobles provided higher education in their palaces. The ladies obtain relaxation by reading books called 'Gulistan' and 'Bostan', written by an

author called Saadi Chiragi (Shekh Satdi, Shirazi). Although it is true that education of women in the Mughal period was not prevalent on a mass scale, yet, during the period under review, there was no dearth of educated ladies. But almost all the Mughal begums and princesses maintained their own libraries. The role of some educated women during the Mughal period-

Razia Sultana: The only female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate, she was trained in administration and military leadership, outshining her brothers in competence.

Nur Jahan: The wife of Emperor Jahangir, she was a highly cultured woman, a poet, and a brilliant administrator who effectively ran the Mughal Empire.

Chand Bibi: A polyglot who spoke several languages (Arabic, Persian, and Marathi) and acted as the Regent of Ahmednagar and Bijapur, leading the defence against Mughal forces.

Gulbadan Begum: The daughter of Emperor Babur, she was highly educated and wrote the Humayun nama, a detailed account of the life of her brother Emperor Humayun.

Jahanara Begum: The daughter of Shah jahan, she was a scholar of Persian and Arabic and wrote a famous biography of the Sufi saint Moinuddin Chishti titled Mu'nis al-Arwah.

Habba Khatoon: Known as the "Nightingale of Kashmiri," she was a 16th century poet and ascetic who significantly influenced Kashmiri oral tradition.

Educated of Hindu Women

Akka Mahadevi: A 12th century philosopher and poet from Karnataka who wrote over 400 Bachanaa (prose poems) in Kannada.

Malleshwari (Lal Ded): A 14th century Kashmiri mystic whose "Bakhs" (sayings) are foundational to Kashmiri literature and philosophy.

Ahilyabai Holkar: The Maratha Queen of Malwa, she was a genius administrator and scholar who is still remembered for building hundreds of temples and rest houses across India.

Ganga Devi: A 14th century poet and princess of the Vijay Nagara Empire. She wrote the Sanskrit epic Madhura Vijayam, which chronicled her husband's military conquests.

Mirabai: A 16th century Rajput princess and perhaps the most famous Bhakti saint. She composed hundreds of devotional bhajan (hymns) in Braj Bhasha and Rajasthani.

Educational institution in Medieval India

Education in medieval India was a fascinating blend of ancient traditions and new Islamic influences. The system was broadly divided into two streams: one rooted in the Hindu Gurukul tradition and the other in the Islamic Maktab/ Marada system.

Maktabas is attached to the mosque, which served as an elementary school for Muslim children. Student learned to read and write in Persian and Arabic, recited the Quran, and studied basic arithmetic. Maktabas were generally more accessible and served as the first formal education experience for Muslim children. They were often supported through charitable endowment (waqf) and are integral to the social fabric of Muslim communities across medieval India.

Devadasis: In medieval India, the Devadasi was a woman dedicated to the service of a temple deity for life. Unlike the modern association with exploitation, the medieval period particularly between the 6th and 13th centuries represented the Golden age of this institution where these women held high social status and significant economic power. Deva was considered married to the deity through a ceremony called. The daily life of Devadasi revolved around the ritual cycle of the temple. They were often highly educated in Sanskrit and regional language, literature, and the Shastras, making them scholars. Many Devadasis become dependent on local zamindar and novels.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion in medieval India was a paradox of stagnation and elite excellence. While generally status of female literacy declined compared. To the basic period, education did not disappear, rather it became highly prestigious movement. The period produced remarkable scholars and administrators such as Razia Sultana Gulbadan Begum and Jahanara Akka Mahadevi, Mirabai who was noted scholars and patrons of architecture. The Medieval India era is often termed the Dark Age for Indian women education formal schooling because inaccessible to the common girl. However, the period was also marked by the resilience of women who, through royal privilege or religious devotion continued to contribute significantly to India's literary and political history. Their legacy served as a foundational reminder for the social reform of the 19th century who eventually fought for universal female education.

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Namita Mandal is an Independent Researcher based in Malda, West Bengal, India. Her academic interests include social sciences, cultural studies, and contemporary societal issues. She actively engages in scholarly research and writing, contributing analytical perspectives on regional and social developments through independent academic work.