



SHREEMATI NATHIBAI DAMODAR THACKERSEY

WOMEN'S UNIVERSITY

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संस्कृता स्त्री पराशक्ति

The story of women's education in India from the 19th century onwards is a story of climbing a wall of apathy, prejudice, superstition and opposition and reaching the stage of acceptance and encouragement.

It was during the British period that the foundations of female education in this country were laid. In an atmosphere charged with tradition and orthodoxy, the Christian missionaries set up a number of schools in the eastern and western parts of the country where, as Nora Brockway's book 'A Larger Way For Women' tells us, quite an impressive number of girls took their first formal lessons. However, the social reformers lent an active support to the cause of women's education.

Schools for Maharashtrian and Parsi girls were established in Bombay as early as 1849 with the help of voluntary teachers and rent-free class-rooms. In Poona, Pandita Ramabai, the great champion of women's cause, who was criticised by the orthodox Hindus because she studied Sanskrit and remained unmarried till the age of twenty-one, founded the Sharda Sadan in 1889 for providing education and shelter to unhappy widows.

About this period, Maharshi Karve began giving concrete shape to his thoughts on the emancipation of women. He founded the Anatha Mahilashram (Hindu Widows' Home) in 1896. But it took several more years for the University to take shape. The idea of a women's university germinated in his mind when one day he unexpectedly laid hands on a pamphlet describing a Women's University in Japan. The Maharshi pursued the idea in right earnest, and in a moment

of loud thinking, during his presidential speech at the National Social Conference in Bombay, which began on December 30, 1915, he said: "... we must recognise that both national and social economy require that women should occupy a station of their own distinct from that of men. That they are as integral a part of the social organism as men is beyond question, but that the office they have to fill is different, though equal—perhaps greater—in importance, is equally true."

On 13th February, 1916 a meeting of the Managing Council of the Anatha Mahilashram was held and it was suggested that the proposed University be named 'Bharatwarshiya Mahila Vidyapeeth' (Indian Women's University). A provisional committee was formed with Shri M. K. Gadgil as its secretary to work out the scheme. Meanwhile, Dr. Karve was busy meeting eminent persons to discuss his great idea in minute detail. Dr. Annie Besant advised him to establish the University on an All-India basis. Dr. Rabindranath Tagore liked the idea of the University, imparting knowledge through the vernaculars and advised him not to waste time in securing government recognition through an elaborate process. To quote his words: "It is far better that you should win recognition at the end than pray for it in the beginning." Even Mahatma Gandhi approved of the idea, specially as the teaching to be imparted there was through the mother-tongue of the student even at the stage of higher education. He, however, did not approve of the provision of English as a compulsory subject. But Dr. Karve thought otherwise and found it difficult to be moved from his conviction and in the end Mahatmaji agreed, "Mr. Karve, because

it is you, I yield. However, my opinion is still the same." and he offered to subscribe ten rupees annually to this cause.

The idea of a University exclusively for women and with its own special curricula, generated varieties of reactions in those days. According to some, it was an Utopia; some thought that it would prove a stumbling block in the way of women's education.

This apathy was the result of various social disabilities in the form of seclusion of women, child marriages, partiality towards sons of the family and a number of other humiliating customs.

Under such controversial circumstances, the Indian Women's University was formally inaugurated on June 3, 1916. The emergence of the University heralded a new era in the history of women's education in this country. The first Chancellor of the University was Dr. Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar and the first Vice-Chancellor, Dr. R. P. Paranjpye. The first Senate had five women on it. The first matriculation examination was conducted by it on June 26 of the same year. Four students appeared at it and, having successfully passed the examination, joined the first year class at the college level. But the financial needs of an expanding University were a source of great worry to Dr. Karve. It was at this time that he met Sir Vithaldas Thackersey, who had by then completed a world tour, with his wife, Lady Premlila Thackersey and had been greatly impressed by the work of the Women's University he had seen in Japan. Sir Vithaldas was only too happy to help the cause of women's education in his own country and he set apart the munificent sum of fifteen lakhs of rupees as a trust, from the interest of which the Indian Women's University was to meet its expenses. The main condition of the donor was that the University be named after his mother, Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey. Thus it came to be known as Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University.

It was fortunate for the University that these two great sons of India came together and joined hands in a common cause. This happy coincidence has brought new life and hope to thousands of girls and women and will continue to do so in the years to come.

Dr. Karve very strongly felt that the wide gulf between the social status of men and women must be bridged over and women should be enabled to take an intelligent part with men in the affairs of the home, the city and the nation. With this in view, the curricula prescribed were such that they catered to give not only a general education but to meet the special needs of women.

The special feature of this University was that the medium of instruction and examination since its very inception was the mother-tongue of the student, though English was and is a compulsory subject at all its examinations. The Women's University can thus take credit that it was the first to make a thorough-going experiment of this nature and stick to it through difficult times.

Another criterion which marked out the University differently from other educational institutions was its all-India jurisdiction. The University had already assumed an all-India character when it was named 'Bharatvarshiya Mahila Vidyapeeth'. Even today the University enjoys unrestricted jurisdiction and draws its students from all over the country but predominantly from the two sister States of Maharashtra and Gujarat.

This University was the only institution in the world which owed its existence largely to the contributions of the upper middle class and lower middle class people of society. This feature also marked it out from similar institutions of learning.

Among the many milestones of the University, the year 1949 will stand out in golden letters in its history. It was in this year that the Government of Bombay passed the bill in the Legislative Assembly, giving it statutory recognition. Most eloquent words were expressed while the bill was being passed, as the University had served as a lifeline to many girls and women who, if it was not for the existence of the University, would have been denied the opportunity of receiving higher education. Moreover, this was a turning point in the growth, development and progress of the University. In 1951, the University Act was put on the Statute Book when Dr. Smt. Premlila V. Thackersey was nominated by the Government as

the first Vice-Chancellor of the statutorily recognised University.

After Independence, the object of women going in for higher education has changed considerably. Prior to the Second World War, education was given to girls just to make them better mothers and better citizens. In view of this, the University never thought of any other faculty except that of Arts, because the Liberal Arts course was then supposed to be the only suitable course for women giving them some sort of broadening of outlook. After the Second World War, and more particularly after the achievement of Independence, a new goal has been added to women's education. With the rise in cost of living as well as emergence of new concept of the standard of life, the young girls do not just wish to get education for the sake of knowledge but they also aspire to make a career out of it. As the well known educationist Gordon Blackwell observes, "We have come to the conclusion that the peculiar life cycles of women, the multiple roles which they must play in modern society and their needs for self-fulfilment - intellectually and professionally - require special kinds of education". In order to meet this need, educationists have seriously to consider ways and means of reorienting the courses of education for women. The University has also changed its concept of education with changing times, and has now the disciplines of Humanities, Social Science and Fine Arts, Home Science, Education, Library Science and Nursing.

The Home Science Faculty at present caters to the undergraduate as well as postgraduate programmes and has to an extent met the requirement of specialised and professional education for women in the context of contemporary needs.

Though the Constitution of the country gives equal rights to men and women, many women are still living in the dark and have not seen the light of knowledge. The enrolment figures confirm this sorry state of affairs. There is tremendous disparity existing between the percentages of school-going boys and school-going girls. Unfortunately, this gap widens with each level of education. In order to make women's emancipation complete, they must be made economically independent. To meet this need, the University is trying to diversify and reorient

its courses in different directions and contemplates providing vocational courses through a women's polytechnic, later leading to an institute of vocational and professional arts. It also hopes at a future date to add the Faculties of Social Work, Science and Medicine to the existing ones.

A new felt need of the University is to create an independent research unit on women's education. This unit can concentrate on maintaining records with regard to the different facets of women's education. It can further collect data and offer assistance on various problems on women's education right from the elementary level to the highest level. It can thus lay down guide-lines in the existing areas and various aspects of women's education and can also help discover new areas. In order to achieve this lofty aim, it will need the cooperation of various institutions more particularly women's organisations of this country as well as of abroad. It may thus become a fountain source of information and guidance.

Since its inception, this institution has permitted and encouraged external students. The system of external examination gives the opportunity of getting knowledge to those girls who are unable to attend college as regular students. However, it may be mentioned, that these are the students who are deprived of the advantages of university life and instruction. They are denied college experience. Hence, the University in time to come, proposes to introduce correspondence courses, summer courses and guidance courses partially to remedy this drawback.

The University has all along been aware of the fact that its responsibilities do not end with providing mere academic knowledge. It has the tremendous task before it of moulding the future citizens of the world's largest democracy. It hopes to achieve this by providing opportunities to women for their intellectual, emotional and social development. To meet this end the University in the near future proposes to add one more dimension of functional orientation to its role by establishing a Centre of continuing education for lifelong learning at the University, helping in the acceleration of social and economic change in the community. This centre it is hoped will help to provide educational needs of individuals and society ranging from "the young

adult entering into the challenging world of reality, the middle-aged and their needs for vocational refresher work, and the older age group who need not despairingly contemplate a diminution of vocational productiveness and an attenuation of those things which help us to live."

The fifth estate, namely, the students are never forgotten in any of the schemes of the University. The welfare of students at the University has been made the focal point of its activities and the programme includes student welfare activities like health programmes, advisement, guidance and counselling, orientation and cultural and co-curricular activities.

Modern India today is facing several important problems as far as women's education is concerned. The chief among them are bridging the gap between the education of girls and boys, of men and women, a realistic and flexible approach to meet the problem of wastage, the stress and strains as a result of the dual role of woman and her status and identity in the changing

society, the problem of educated women and unemployment and the utilisation of woman power through full-time and part-time jobs and the modernising process taking place in the area of women's education.

Today when the University has completed half a century's work, it can look back with satisfaction that it has contributed substantially towards lighting the "unlighted lamps". However, it is today at cross-roads and has a heavier and a much greater task to perform in the changing context of the times. Indian society at present is exposed to a variety of new challenges in the field of education. As the noted sociologist Yogendra Sing remarks: "The basis of this challenge mainly lies in the commitment of nation to a new system of values and social structure". The major challenge is the new role of woman. In the context of modernising Indian society, a new womanhood is emerging. The Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Women's University has upto now accepted various challenges and hopefully it will meet this challenge too.

