

The Royal Reformer-Maharani Gayatri Devi of Jaipur

Abstract

Royalty is treated with a little disdain in the present world. A democratic nation makes us look down upon the age old feudalistic structure of India. For most of us the former royals were an exploitative class which looked only of their own rule and their own wishes. A class which seldom worked for their improvement of its subjects. India in the 20th century was on the threshold of a mighty change. On the one hand the British rule was keen to continue their rule over their prized colony and on the other hand the Indians under *Gandhiji* were trying to dislodge them through a new weapon called *Ahimsa*. The ruling princes of Rajputana were in a dilemma over their future. Whether to join the British or to go with the winds of Indian nationalists and *Praja Mandals* in their respective principalities. It is in this background that we need to study the role of the wife of the ruler of Jaipur, Rajasthan, Maharani Gayatri Devi.

In 1903 Governor General Lord Curzon told the native rulers to impart English education in their principalities. In Rajasthan Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, Maharaja Pratap Singh of Jodhpur and Sawai Ram Singh of Jaipur encouraged English education. In Jaipur in mid 19th century Maharaja school, Maharaja college and a medical college were opened.

Women education suffered in this period because of the *Purdha* system. Girls were taught normally till the primary level and that too in their houses. They were not allowed to go to school. The *panditiji* came at home and taught them. It is in this context that we need to study Maharani Gayatri Devi, the royal reformer who started the *purdha* school called MGD girls school and gradually transformed it into the MGD public school which we know today.

Keywords: Purdha, Women Education, Social Reform, English Medium, Visionary, Aristocratic Families, Sawai Man Singh, Polo, Coch Bihar, Jaipur, Ms L.G. Lutter, Jija.

Introduction

Education of women is essential. But in a feudal, *purdha* clad society of early 20th century it was a very daunting task to get the *purdha* clad rajput aristocratic girls out of their *havelis* to study in a school. It was this challenge was taken by the queen of Jaipur, Maharani Gayatri Devi. She was born as the princess of Coch Bihar. Her mother was the daughter of the enlightened Baroda ruler Sayaji Rao Gaekwad II, who was a pioneer of university education in India. An emancipated woman herself Gayatri Devi under the patronage of her loving husband Sawai Man Singh, the ruler of Jaipur, transformed Maharani Gayatri Devi School with just 24 girls from the rajput thikana families to its present world wide recognition and a strength of 3000 girls from all the sections of the society.

She imparted English education to the *purdha* clad feudal societal girls. An elitist school started to give education to the privileged girls who had virtually no facility for education. The meager education which they got was through home tutors – the *panditjis*. Maximum education which they got was primary.

Maharani Gayatri Devi was born as Ayesha in London on 23rd May 1919. She was married as the third queen to the Maharaj of Jaipur, Sir Sawai Man Singh GCSI, GOE in the summer of 1940. She was educated in Britain, Switzerland and at Shantiniketan where academic life was combined with dance, music, debates and fairs. There was a feeling of freedom rather than restraint. She felt the fullness of life at Shantiniketan. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore had tremendous effect on her. She felt that every girl should have the same opportunity.

An avid sports person she was fond of riding, swimming, polo and badminton. She played mixed double at Wimbledon and was a semi

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finalist at the All India lawn tennis tournament. Not only did she play but she even encouraged her staff to do so.

Her concern for the education of local court women led her to form the Maharani Gayatri Devi public school at Jaipur. An institution which was the first public girls school in India. In her mind was social change. She wanted to get the girls out from the dark ages.

During her concerned conversation with the Maharaja she talked of opening a *purdha* school in Jaipur. He quickly agreed to her idea and said that the institution would be named after her as the idea was hers. He ordered the Prime Minister of Jaipur, Sir Mirza Ismail and the education minister, Rao Bahadur. Amarnath Atal to allot land and plan the school.

The school was initially started, on 4th July 1943, at a Haveli outside Jorawar Singh gate. Within 2/3 years it was shifted on a 26 acre sprawling present premises just outside Ajmeri gate and near the Ramniwas garden.

Initially the school was started with shy aristocratic 24 girls of different age groups. While Gayatri Devi coaxed and cajoled the mothers to send their daughters the Maharaj ordered his nobles to send their daughters. Both persuasion and coercion were used.

What is important to note is that initially Gayatri Devi never talked of opening a regular school. Instead she called it the *Purdha* school. A school where the entire staff was of females. The school bus was covered from all sides by a *purdha* and it went inside the noble's *Haveli*. The female bus attendant or *Baiji* would get down to get the Baisab (girl student) inside the bus. Initially the only male staff of the school was the driver and the office ministerial staff.

The founding principal of the school was Miss Lilian.G.Lutter a British lady who walked down from Burma during the second world war. She was later awarded the Padma Shri.

Initially all the girls were clubbed together. It was only later that they were segregated according to their educational level. The uniform of the school also underwent great changes. From the initial *ghaghras* to sarees (blue with brown) and much latter to the present tunics for the junior girls and salwar kameez with intricately pleated dupattas for the senior girls. Initially the school was mostly for boarders. Only 10% were day scholars. An interesting anecdote shared by Prafulla Kumari of the first batch of 1943 was that when one of the girls missed her school bus she came riding on a horse to the school (after all she was a Thikanedars daughter). It was an era wherein the feudal old order was breaking up and their power was declining. The boys were fetching new jobs in the Indian Republic in the administration and army. The girls groomed in this school which not only educated them but paid heed to honesty, manners and integrity. They fitted well into the new official class.

The school provide lunch to all the students. They were taught to use fork n knife and all the English table manners. For girls eating in thalis it was very new. Though social hierarchy was clearly visible

at home, the school had no such boundaries. The senior girls were called *jijas* and were given utmost respect. The girls were inculcated with leadership qualities and were taught public speaking, horse ridding, needle work along with Indian traditions and festivals.

From the first batch ten girls cleared the school and from them three went to college. The girls had a school council where the head girl and her executive were made. Initially on annual days the performances of the girls were seen by mothers only. It was much later after five years that fathers were allowed to see the performances of their daughters.

The school did not fight the prevalent social structure. It worked within it and gradually brought transformation in the girls. The teachers in Switzerland had taught Gayatri Devi 'to learn all your life' and she it to the Tand imparted the same to the school girls. She gave credit to Miss Lutter for the gradual transformation of the girls. She wrote to her "These are the only roses in my garden- in appreciation of all you have done for the hundreds of girls- whose lives you have made. You live in our memories"

With the school's motto –Our utmost to the highest the school was the first girls public school to be accepted as a member of Indian Public School Council(I.P.S.C.) and remained one till 1976. In 1950's it became the center for the Cambridge examination for Jaipur. Initially the girls had to go to Mayo college, Ajmer to take the exam. In 1962 the school shifted to the Indian school certificate examination. It was much latter that it started following the CBSE curriculum which it is continuing till present day with arts, science and commerce streams up till class XII.

At present the school has a capacity of 3000 students amongst which 400 are residents. The sprawling campus has 8 hostel buildings, gardens, sport fields, tennis courts, stadium cum auditorium and an open swimming pool. The girls are divided into four houses named after notable women achievers-Madam Curie, Helen Keller, Sarojini Naidu and Florence Nightingale. The girls participate in the inter house cultural, sports, arts n crafts, puzzles, debates, music, dance, sports etc.

Some of the illustrious students of the school are Meira Kumar (Lok Sabha speaker and presidential candidate), Rajnigandha Shekhawat (Sufi singer), Apurva Chandela (International shooter), Reema Hooja(Historian).

Review of Literature

Gayatri Devi was a living legend. Literature on her was at two levels. On one level was her own biography A biography- *A princess Remembers: Memoirs of the Maharani of Jaipur*, Gayatri Devi and Santh Ram. It highlights her childhood at Cooch Bihar, the various influences on her and how they moulded her, her relationship within the royal household at Jaipur and with her staff, her toils and turmoils and other intimate details.

At the other level are articles like *Jaipur Rajmata Gayatri Devi, who refused to obey Pardha system*, Tanvi Patel, thebetterindia.com, 28 July 2018

and *The day I lunched with Rajmata Gayatri Devi of Jaipur*, Mark Manuel, which give first hand information about the thought process of the royalty and how she changed with the times.

Rajmata Gayatri Devi Rajmata of Jaipur, Dharmender Kunwar, is a piece of nostalgia. The author was from the first batch of Maharani Gayatri Devi school and in her work talks in details about the hardships and joys of a new school.

Objectives of the Study

1. Peeping the feudal mental makeup on women education.
2. Analyse the problems facing the pardha women.
3. Focusing on syllabus for inculcating overall development of girl child.
4. Developing self confidence amongst women.
5. Comparing women education in the last one century.

Hypothesis

1. Women education is The history of women education is embarrassing.
2. Pardha system curtailed women emancipation.
3. Change should be gradual and be internalized.

Research Methodology

Grounded in the feministic approach this paper is designed with the specific purpose to reflect the changes in the women's education through the past century.

Though interdisciplinary in details ,the paper concerns history most as it evaluates the situations and norms that were failed by the Rajput women in the 19th century .Selection of the topic ,study of literature and review of the literature relevant to the subject, hypothetic assumptions and testings , collection of the secondary data from the available sources , non participant observation within limited range , exploring the points of comparision and finally the interpretation of the education system in a historical perspective.

Findings and Conclusion

In the end, it would be apt to say that it was the courage of Maharani Gayatri Devi who moulded

and equipped the students drawn from houses steeped in the claustrophobic aristocracy of the Purdha age to step out in the mainstream world with confidence and a will to do their best. It was her overdrive which transformed the Purdha girls school to the girls public school we know today.

Maharani Gayatri Devi said that “ the aim of the institution is to make its pupil cultured and useful members of the society when they enter the world they should be able to take an active interest in the betterment of their homes and community and when they grow up; they should be able to fit themselves usefully in the world of tomorrow”.

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