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**Role of the English Language in Empowering Indian Women: A Historical View**

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**Abstract**

The English language has played a transformative role in the historical empowerment of Indian women by facilitating their educational, social, economic, and political advancement. Introduced during British colonial rule, English initially functioned as a language of administration and governance but gradually evolved into a powerful medium for education, social reform, and intellectual awakening. The spread of English education enabled Indian women to challenge deeply rooted patriarchal norms, gain access to modern knowledge, and participate in public life. Social reformers and educational institutions promoted women's literacy and higher education, thereby creating opportunities for professional growth and leadership. During the Indian freedom movement, English served as an effective tool for political participation and global communication, allowing women to articulate their aspirations for equality and justice. In post-independence India, proficiency in English has enhanced women's access to higher education, employment in diverse sectors, entrepreneurship, and digital technologies, contributing significantly to their economic independence and social mobility. However, disparities in educational access, rural-urban divides, and socio-economic inequalities continue to limit the empowering potential of the language for many women. This article adopts a historical perspective to examine the evolving role of English in the empowerment of Indian women, highlighting both its transformative contributions and the challenges that remain in achieving inclusive and equitable development.

**Keywords:** English language, Indian women, women's empowerment, education, colonialism, social reform, feminism, globalization, gender equality, historical perspective.

**Introduction**

"Language is not merely a means of communication; it is a vehicle of empowerment and social change." In India, English has evolved from a colonial language into a global medium of education, employment, and social mobility. For Indian women, proficiency in English

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has often signified access to higher education, economic independence, and greater participation in public life. According to the 2011 Census of India, the female literacy rate increased to 65.46%, up from 8.86% in 1951, reflecting the expanding educational opportunities available to women. Moreover, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2023–24) indicates a steady rise in female workforce participation, particularly in sectors such as information technology, education, healthcare, and business process outsourcing, where English proficiency is a valuable skill. Historically, the empowerment of Indian women has been closely linked to the spread of English education. During the nineteenth century, social reformers, Christian missionaries, and educational institutions promoted English learning to combat social evils such as child marriage, illiteracy, and gender discrimination. Visionaries like Savitribai Phule, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar viewed education as a means of liberating women from traditional constraints. In the modern era, English continues to serve as a bridge connecting Indian women to global knowledge, digital technologies, higher education, and international employment opportunities. Thus, the historical development of English education has significantly contributed to the social, economic, and intellectual empowerment of Indian women, making it an indispensable component of India's journey toward gender equality and inclusive development.

## **2. English Education During the Colonial Period (1757–1947)**

### **2.1 Early Educational Policies**

The establishment of British rule in India marked a turning point in the history of education, including the education of women. Although the Battle of Plassey laid the foundation for British political dominance, systematic educational reforms began in the nineteenth century. Christian missionaries were among the first to establish schools for girls, with the Serampore Mission opening educational institutions in Bengal during the early 1800s. The publication of Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education by Thomas Babington Macaulay advocated English as the medium of higher education, promoting Western science and literature. Although Macaulay's policy did not specifically target women's education, it indirectly created opportunities for educated Indian families to educate their daughters in English. The Wood's Despatch, often called the "Magna Carta of English Education in India," further emphasized the expansion of education and encouraged female schooling. By the late nineteenth century, government grants and missionary efforts had increased the number of girls' schools. According to the 1881 Census of India, female literacy was less than 1%, but educational policies initiated during this period laid the foundation for future progress. By 1941, female literacy had risen to approximately 7.3%, demonstrating the gradual impact of colonial educational reforms. Scholars such as Geraldine Forbes argue that English education introduced Indian women to modern concepts of liberty, equality, and civic participation, which later influenced social and political movements.

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The colonial educational framework was further strengthened by universities and educational commissions. The establishment of the universities of University of Calcutta, University of Madras, and University of Mumbai in 1857 created pathways for higher education. Although women's admission was initially limited, the late nineteenth century witnessed increasing participation. The Bethune School, founded in 1849 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, became one of India's earliest institutions for female education and later evolved into a women's college. The Hunter Commission recommended the expansion of primary education, including education for girls. English-medium institutions exposed women to Western philosophy, literature, and scientific knowledge, encouraging critical thinking and challenging traditional gender roles. According to educational historians, the number of girls enrolled in schools increased from fewer than 25,000 in the 1870s to over 600,000 by the early twentieth century, though regional disparities remained significant. These developments transformed English from merely the language of colonial administration into a medium of educational and social advancement for Indian women.

## **2.2 Social Reformers and Women's Education**

The spread of English education was closely associated with the efforts of Indian social reformers who recognized that women's education was essential for national progress. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) was among the earliest advocates of modern education and women's rights. He campaigned against the practice of sati and supported the introduction of English education to promote scientific and rational thinking. His efforts contributed to the enactment of the Bengal Sati Regulation under William Bentinck. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) championed women's education and widow remarriage, leading to the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act. He established several girls' schools across Bengal and believed that English education would provide women with intellectual and social independence. In western India, Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule founded India's first modern school for girls in Pune in 1848. Savitribai Phule, often regarded as India's first female teacher, faced intense social opposition but continued her mission of educating girls and marginalized communities. Their reforms directly challenged child marriage, caste discrimination, female illiteracy, and the denial of educational opportunities to women.

The efforts of these reformers created a social environment in which English education became a means of empowerment rather than merely a colonial legacy. English-language instruction introduced women to Enlightenment ideals, democratic values, and concepts of human rights, fostering awareness of individual liberty and gender equality. The Age of Consent Act and the Child Marriage Restraint Act reflected the broader reform movement that emphasized women's welfare and education. Educated women gradually entered professions such as teaching, medicine, and social work, becoming active participants in India's public sphere. By the early twentieth century, women such as Pandita Ramabai and Sarojini Naidu effectively used English to advocate for women's rights and national independence. Historians note that while female literacy remained relatively low at around 7.3% by 1941, the foundations laid by these reformers transformed Indian society

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and inspired subsequent generations of women to pursue education and leadership. Thus, the combined influence of colonial educational policies and indigenous social reform movements established English education as a crucial instrument for the social, intellectual, and political empowerment of Indian women.

### **3. English and Women's Education**

#### **3.1 Educational Access**

The establishment of English-medium schools and colleges significantly expanded educational opportunities for Indian women. The founding of Bethune School in 1849 and women's colleges such as Lady Hardinge Medical College in 1916 enabled women to pursue higher education. English proficiency facilitated admission to universities and professional courses in medicine, law, science, and engineering. By the 1951 Census, female literacy was only 8.86%, but it increased to 65.46% by 2011 and over 70% according to recent national surveys. English education has enabled Indian women to compete globally, secure professional employment, and contribute significantly to the nation's educational and economic development.

#### **3.2 Development of Critical Thinking**

English education exposed Indian women to modern ideas of democracy, human rights, equality, and feminism. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, English literature introduced the works of thinkers such as John Stuart Mill, Mary Wollstonecraft, and later Virginia Woolf, encouraging women to question social inequalities and patriarchal traditions. Universities established after 1857 incorporated English literature and philosophy into their curricula, promoting analytical and independent thinking. English became a medium through which Indian women engaged with global debates on social justice and gender equality. This intellectual exposure inspired many women to participate in social reform movements, politics, journalism, and education, strengthening their role in shaping modern Indian society.

#### **3.3 Growth of Women's Literature**

English education fostered the emergence of Indian women writers whose works addressed identity, freedom, and social justice. Toru Dutt was among the earliest Indian women to write creatively in English during the nineteenth century, while Sarojini Naidu earned international recognition for her poetry and nationalist ideals. Later writers such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, and Arundhati Roy explored themes of women's identity, patriarchy, social injustice, and personal freedom. Arundhati Roy's novel *The God of Small Things* won the prestigious Booker Prize in 1997, highlighting the global impact of Indian women writing in English and their contribution to feminist discourse.

### **4. English and Women's Participation in the Freedom Movement**

English emerged as a common language of political discourse during the Indian freedom struggle, enabling women to communicate nationalist ideals across regional and international boundaries. Sarojini Naidu used her English speeches and writings to mobilize support for independence and became the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925. Annie Besant launched the Home Rule Movement in 1916 through

English journalism, while Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit represented India's interests globally and later became the first woman President of the United Nations General Assembly in 1953. English facilitated women's political participation, international diplomacy, and the dissemination of democratic ideals.

### **5. English After Independence**

Following independence in 1947, English retained its status as an associate official language under the Indian Constitution and became an important medium for higher education and employment. Women increasingly entered universities, professional colleges, technical institutions, and research organizations through English-medium instruction. Female literacy increased from 8.86% in 1951 to 65.46% in 2011, reflecting greater educational access. English proficiency enabled women to secure employment in information technology, banking, medicine, education, journalism, corporate management, and civil services. According to recent labour surveys, female participation in the workforce has steadily increased, particularly in-service sectors requiring English communication skills. Economic independence has strengthened women's decision-making capacity within families and society.

### **6. English in the Digital Era**

Globalization and digital technology have significantly enhanced the importance of English for Indian women. The rapid growth of the internet and online learning platforms has enabled women to access quality education, acquire professional skills, and participate in global markets. According to recent estimates, India has over 900 million internet users, with increasing female digital participation. English proficiency facilitates remote employment, freelancing, online education, and digital entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs use English for international marketing, e-commerce platforms, and professional networking. Social media campaigns concerning gender equality, women's safety, education, and legal rights achieve wider national and international visibility through English. Thus, digital literacy combined with English proficiency has become a modern instrument of women's empowerment.

### **7. English and Feminist Thought**

English education introduced Indian women to influential feminist philosophies that questioned traditional gender roles and advocated equality. The writings of Mary Wollstonecraft in 1792, Virginia Woolf in 1929, and Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 profoundly influenced feminist thought worldwide. Their works emphasized women's education, economic independence, and intellectual freedom. Through English translations and university curricula, Indian women scholars and activists engaged with these ideas and adapted them to local social conditions. The interaction between global feminist literature and Indian social realities encouraged movements against gender discrimination, domestic violence, unequal educational opportunities, and workplace inequality, strengthening the discourse on women's rights.

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## 8. Challenges

Despite its empowering role, access to English education remains unequal across India. According to the **2011 Census**, significant differences persist between rural and urban female literacy rates, reflecting disparities in educational infrastructure. Quality English-medium education is often expensive and concentrated in urban centres, limiting opportunities for economically disadvantaged women. Critics also argue that excessive dependence on English may marginalize regional languages and local cultural traditions. Furthermore, the digital divide remains a challenge despite increasing internet penetration, as many rural women have limited access to digital devices and connectivity. These inequalities reduce the transformative potential of English and highlight the need for inclusive educational policies that balance global competitiveness with linguistic diversity.

## 9. Government Initiatives

The Government of India has introduced several programmes that indirectly promote women's empowerment through education, digital literacy, and skill development. *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, launched in 2015, seeks to improve the status and education of girls. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes multilingual education while encouraging global competencies, including English proficiency. Digital literacy initiatives and skill development programmes provide women with opportunities to acquire technological and communication skills necessary for modern employment. Various entrepreneurship schemes and vocational training programmes further enhance women's economic participation. Collectively, these initiatives strengthen women's educational access and improve their prospects for social and economic empowerment.

## 10. Findings

The historical analysis demonstrates that English has played a multifaceted role in empowering Indian women. First, it supported social reform movements that challenged discriminatory customs and promoted female education. Second, English expanded access to schools, universities, and professional education, enhancing women's academic achievements. Third, it increased economic opportunities by facilitating employment in diverse sectors of the modern economy. Fourth, it strengthened women's participation in political and national movements while fostering global communication and international engagement. Fifth, English introduced feminist thought and encouraged literary expression among Indian women writers and scholars. However, persistent inequalities related to class, geography, and digital access indicate that the benefits of English education remain unevenly distributed and require inclusive policy interventions.

## Conclusion

The historical journey of English in India demonstrates that the language has been a significant instrument of women's empowerment. From the colonial period to the digital age, English has enabled Indian women to challenge traditional barriers, pursue education, secure employment, participate in politics, and engage with global discourses on gender equality. While English alone cannot guarantee empowerment, its role as a bridge to knowledge, opportunity, and social mobility is undeniable. Future policies should ensure equitable access

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to quality English education while preserving India's rich multilingual heritage, thereby enabling women from all backgrounds to participate fully in national and global development.

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