CHAPTER -I

POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

India has always fostered learning. Her kings patronised poets and scholars and also founded educational institutions. The universities of Taxila, Nalanda, Valabhi and Vikramasila were highly reputed seats of learning which owed their origin and patronage to royal munificence. In South India, the illustrious Tamil Sangam was an academy of literary celebrities patronised by the different kings. The Third Sangam flourished at Madurai about the opening centuries of the Christian Era while the two earlier sangams are believed to have existed much earlier.1

Education in South India, in the ancient and medieval period, was mostly religious and based largely on Sanskritic and Tamil learning in its scope and orientation. The four Vedas were believed to contain the essence of true knowledge the acquisition of which was necessary for equipping oneself for leading a good and full life. Education was not exclusively literacy in those days, for the study of subjects like fine arts, technical and other useful arts also received equal attention and patronage.2

Liberal and general education was considered necessary for the people. Each caste or community had its own educational system, which was of a technical character. The types of education of the different classes of people was determined by the nature of their occupation. The State did not interfere in this type of education of the people. Education was largely a private initiative though kings and others who enjoyed power and influence, could give encouragement.³

**Education Institution of Ancient and Medieval South India Ancient Period**

There are many evidences to show that women in ancient Tamil Nadu had a much higher status than what they came to enjoy in later times. The women of ancient period had distinguished themselves in their cultural attainments and virtuous living. The girls of the Sangam Age had good training in literature, music and drama. Many sangam poems are attributed to women scholars. The education received by women was different from that imparted to men. The girls were given good training in domestic science.⁴

More than fifty women have been ranked during the Sangam Period and some of them were outstanding poetesses. They were Avvaiyar, Ade Madiyar Kaveri Pendir, Pari Mahalir, Okkur Masathiyar, Nachellayar, Perungoppendu and

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³ Mahalingam, T.V., *Administration and Social Life under Vijayanagar*, University of Madras, Madras, 1940, p.348.
⁴ Mali, M.G., *Education of Masses in India*, Mittal Publications, New Delhi, 1989, p.44
others.\(^5\) There were great residential colleges which provided facilities for the study of religious literature and secular subjects.\(^6\)

Like Madurai of the ancient times, Kanchipuram was an enlightened metropolis of academic pursuits. The Ghatika of Kanchi was a glorious institution where students and scholars came to acquire knowledge. Mayurasarman, the founder of the Kadamba Kingdom of Vanavasi, is said to have come to Kanchipuram where he aspired to complete his higher studies. Kanchi was a cultural centre of the Buddhists and Jains, no less than the Hindus.\(^7\)

The Ghatika was an establishment consisting of groups of holy and learned Brahmanas, probably in each case founded by a king. It seems to have been a Centre of Higher Learning and a Centre of Vedic Learning. Apart from the Vedas, perhaps Nyaya and Military Sciences were also taught at the Ghatika. Besides these educational activities, the Ghatika also functioned as an electoral college, taking a leading part in the administration of the country. The Ghatikas seem to have been a residential institution, providing free board and lodging to both students and teachers. It is the earliest educational institution in South India, owning a library of its own. Arrangements made for the ringing of the bell, to indicate the periods, show that the Ghatikasala had also maintained a time table showing hours of work. Till the Twelfth Century A.D, Ghatikas promoting

\[^{5}\text{Pillai, J.K., and Rajeshwari, K., } \text{Readings in Women’s Education, } \text{Mother Teresa Women’s University, Kodaikanal, 1981, p.75}\]
\[^{6}\text{Gurumurthy, S., } \text{op.cit., } \text{p.5.}\]
\[^{7}\text{University of Madras, } \text{op.cit., } \text{Vol.I, p.1}\]
Sanskrit studies, consisted only of Brahmanas well versed in the Vedas and Sastras, but about the Thirteenth Century A.D. Tamil scholars were also members of the Ghatikas.⁸

Temple and Mathas were two of the greatest gifts of medieval Hinduism to South India. The origin of the Mathas may be traced to be Pallavas, but they grew up in number and influence only in the subsequent periods, and gradually they spread all over South India. Mathas were commonly attached to the temples after the 10th Century. Besides being maintained by the wealth they possessed, they also received royal patronage.

Each Matha was presided over by a Pandita who was invariably a cultural ecclesiastic, whose duty was not only the management and administration of the Matha, but also encouragement of learning. They were not merely religious heads but scholars well versed in various branches of learning. The heads of these Mathas played a vital role in society not only as spiritual gurus in the propagation of the Dharma, by the recital of hymns and discourses, but also by spreading literacy among the people. The Kanchi Matha is an important Matha possibly established during the latter years of Pallava Rule. There were generally many disciples in these Mathas, who if they were in the Brahamanical institutions,

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⁸ Pillay, K.K., *Social History of the Tamils*, University of Madras, Madras, 1969, pp. 155-157
studied the Veda and other allied Sanskrit literature and if they were in Non-Brahmanical institutions, studied the vernacular literature.\(^9\)

Besides these Gurukulas, there were also schools for the general public. Each village or each group of villages had a pyal school where the teacher taught the three R’s (Reading, Writing and Arithmetic) to the children of school going age. The school was organized on the pyal of the house of the teacher or under the shade of a big tree. Here the children obtained such knowledge as was necessary for practical purpose in their life.\(^10\)

Girls also at times attended the village schools and learnt some lessons as their brothers. But on the whole, the education of women was neglected because the desire for education as a means of earning a livelihood, did not exist and they were married early. Thus women were generally excluded from the educational institutions of the higher type though there were instances of some highly educated women in ancient India.\(^11\) According to Ibn Bhatuta, the town of Onore contained twenty-three schools for boys and thirteen for girls.

**Native Schools**

Girls and Harijan pupils were excluded from native schools and only girls of dancing class seemed to have attended these classes. Even if girls of other classes attended these classes, they seem to have been very few in number. “To the

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women of Brahmins and of Hindus in general”, reading and writing were “unknown because the knowledge of them is prohibited and regarded as unbecoming the modesty of the sex and fit only for public dancers, but among the women of Rajbandah and some other tribes of Hindoos, who seem to have no prejudice of this kind, they are generally taught.”

Campbell reported regarding Bellary, that “the Hindu scholars are in number 6398, the Mussalman scholars only 243 and the whole of these are males with the exception of only 60 girls, who are all Hindoos exclusively”

Women Education Through the Ages

Female education in India is not a gift of modern civilization. There is a brilliant tradition of it in India. According to the Auxillary Committee of the Indian Statutory Commission, reported in September 1929, “there is nothing inherent either in the Hindu or in the Muslim religion which militates against the education of women. In fact, there were in India, even in early days, many examples of women possessing wide knowledge, particularly of sacred and classical literature.”

There are many evidences which show that women in very ancient times in India had a much higher status and more independence than they came to have later. Thus we find in one hymn that “an unmarried young learned daughter ought

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12 Minutes of Sir. Thomas Munro, 25 June 1822, Selections from the Records of the Madras Government, No.II, Madras, 1855, Appendix A.
to be married to a learned bridegroom, and that a father should never think of giving in marriage a daughter of very young age. A young daughter should only be married after the period of student ship (Brahmacharya).”

The ancient Tamils had high regard for education. They emphasized lifelong education not only for knowledge sake but also for the sake of humanity. Tamil educational system helped to broaden the outlook of the individuals. The concept of education for internationalism is revealed by a popular Tamil Poet Kanian Poonkuntranar. Thus the ancient Tamils developed their education with broadmindedness.14

**Aims of Education**

The aims of education varied from time to time and nation to nation depending upon the political, economic and social systems and the philosophy of life prevailing at the particular time. Consequently, the curriculum, methods and appraisal must also be more or less different in different countries at different times. Changes in the ideals and values accepted by a society will call for corresponding change in the system of education. Therefore, good aims of education are related to situations of life. Any organized system of education must meet the real situations of a community.15 Literature is the only source to know about the ancient Tamil educational system. Tolkappiam is the ancient book (300

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It is written by Tolkappiar. It indicates the vast literary heritage that the Tamil education produced long back. Tolkappiam Cheyyul reveals about 30 types of Tamil literature, devotional hymns, battle hymns, folk lores, satire, elegy, proverbs, prose, etc., Sangam Poetry as a whole, excluding Tolkappium, dates back to 200 A.D and it is comprised of 2381 verses, written by about 473 different poets and ranging in length from three to 382 lines. It is surprising to know that there were 50 women poets who have contributed to the Sangam literature. Athimanthiar, Occur Massathiyar, Avvai, Kakkai Padiniyar, etc., were some of these distinguished poetesses This could not be found in any other language of that time. The degree of freedom given to women to move about in society and to take part in public life gives a good idea of the nature of its administration and enables us to know how far it had realized the difficult truth that women too have a contribution of their own to make to its development and progress.

It is very difficult to understand why in this country, so much difference is made between men and women whereas the Vedanta declares that one and the same self is present in all beings. Writing down smirities etc., and binding them by hard rules, men have turned women into mere child manufacturing machines. In the period of degradation when the priests made the other castes incompetent to study the Vedas, they deprived the women also of all their rights. Manu says, ‘where women are respected, there the gods delight, and where they are not, there

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all work and efforts come to naught’. There is no hope of rise for that family or country where they live in sadness. Women have many and grave problems, but none that cannot be solved by that magic word: education. What does our Manu enjoin? ‘Daughters should be supported and educated with as much care and attention as the sons’. As sons should be married after observing Brahacharya upto the thirtieth year, so daughters also should observe Brahacharya and be educated by their parents. Women have all the time been trained in helplessness and servile dependence on others and so they are good only to weep their eyes out at the approach of the slightest mishap or danger. Women must be put in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. Our Indian women are as capable of doing it as any in the world.17

In ancient times, in all patriarchal societies, the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the family. He lived with his aged parents and did not migrate like the daughter to another family after the marriage. He perpetuated the name of his father’s family. As he grew into adolescence and youth, he could offer valuable co-operation to his family, The daughter, on the other hand, had no fighting value whatever. It is no doubt true that women have potential military value. By giving birth to sons, they contribute indirectly to the fighting strength and efficiency of their community. The primitive

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man, however, could not take such a long view of the situation. In actual fighting, he found the woman a handicap rather than a help. He, therefore, hardly ever welcomed the birth of a daughter. Sometimes he abandoned her after her birth and sometimes he even killed her. 18

Cultured parents were often anxious for daughters as they were for sons. Some thinkers have even pointed out that a talented and well behaved daughter may be better than a son. In cultured circles, such a daughter was regarded as the pride of the family. In lower sections of society where the custom of the bride – price prevailed, the birth of a daughter must have been a welcome event. However no literature reflected their views. 19

The birth of a daughter being an unwelcome event, was a natural result of the greater anxiety which the parents felt for her well-being and happiness. Once the temporary feeling of disappointment was over, the family took as keen an interest in the daughter as it did in the son. On his return from a journey, the father used to recite a prayer (mantra) for the welfare of his daughter just with the same solicitude as he did for the happiness of his son. To impart education to children and to help them in settling in life are the two main duties of parents. Both of them were well discharged with reference to daughter for several centuries in ancient period.

Down to about the 3rd Century B.C, girls could remain unmarried till the age of sixteen. The period before marriage was utilized for imparting education to them. Till about the Christian Era, upanayana or the ceremonial initiation into Vedic studies was as common in the case of girls as it was in the case of boys. The initiation ceremony was followed by a period of discipline and education, which was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable match. The Atharva Veda observes that a maiden can succeed in her marriage only if she has been properly trained during the period of studentship. Women were, like sudras, ineligible for vedic studies is the view of a later age. During prehistoric times, lady poets themselves were composing hymns, some of which were destined to be included even in the vedic samhitas. According to the orthodox tradition itself, as recorded in the Sarvanukramanika, there were as many as twenty women among the ‘seers’ or authors of Rigveda.

It was in the Rig Vedic Period that complete educational facilities were available to women and some of them attained very high educational levels and distinguished themselves. Lopamudra Apala, Vishivavara, Sikata Nivavari and Ghosha were the few names constantly referred to in the Vedas. It is interesting to note that during the Rig Vedic period, girls, like boys, underwent the upanayana ceremony (sacred initiation at an early age, perhaps about the age of eight) and began the Vedic studies. There were women sages who had gone through the

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discipline of Brahmacharya. Further, there were two classes of women students- Brahmavadinis who were lifelong students of theology and philosophy and Sadyodvahas who studied up to the age of 16 or 18 years and learnt Vedic hymns by heart. Specialists in theological work were considered Kasakrisni.\textsuperscript{22} During the eight or nine years that were thus available to them for study, they used to learn by heart the Vedic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers and for those rituals and sacraments in which they had to take an active part after their marriage. There is ample evidence to show that like men, women also used to offer regularly their Vedic prayers, both morning and evening. For instance, in more than one place in the Ramayana, Sita is described as offering her daily Vedic prayers.

Education was mainly centered in the family and girls studied along with family males. Women were initiated into 3R’s when writing came into vogue. Women participated in democratic assemblies. Women had the freedom to choose their life partners. Literature gives proof of co-education that existed in the ashramas. One example was Aitreyi being taught with Lava and Kusa by Valmiki.\textsuperscript{23}

Brahmavadinis used to aim at a very high excellence in scholarship down to about the 4\textsuperscript{th} Century B.C. Vedic and philosophical studies attracted the main attention of society. Therefore, ladies naturally cultivated these subjects with great devotion and enthusiasm. Besides studying the Vedas, many of them used to

\textsuperscript{22} Altekar, A.S., \textit{op.cit.}, p -10.
\textsuperscript{23} Gowri Srivastava, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 16.
specialize in purvamimanas which discussed the diverse problems connected with Vedic sacrifices. This science is a very dry and difficult one, perhaps even more abstruse than mathematics but still a very large number of ladies used to take deep interest in it. A theologian named Kasakritsana had composed a work on mimansa called *Kasakritsni*. Lady scholars who used to specialize in it were designated as Kasakritsnas. Lady scholars in such a technical branch of study were so numerous that it necessitated the coining of a special term to designate them.\(^{24}\)

When the reaction against the Vedic sacrificial religion gave a stimulus to philosophical speculations at about 800 B.C., lady scholars did not lag behind in taking an active interest in the new movement. Yajnavalkya’s wife Maitreyi belonged to this class. She was more interested in finding out the way to immortality than in setting new fashions in dress and ornaments. In the philosophical tournament held under the auspices of King Janaka of Videha, the subtlest philosophical questions were initiated for discussion by the lady philosopher, Gargi, who had the honor to be the spokesman of the distinguished philosophers at the court. She launched her attack on Yajnavalkya, the newly arrived philosopher, with an admirable coolness and confidence. ‘Just as an experienced archer’, says she, ‘Would get ready to attack his enemy with two piercing arrows kept at hand, so I assail you with two test questions. Answer them if you can’. The topics of her enquiry were so abstruse and esoteric in character, that Yajnavalkya declined to discuss them in public. The searching cross-

examination of Yajnavalkya by Gargi shows that she was a dialectician and philosopher of a high order.\(^{25}\) Atreyi was another lady student of Vedanta and she was reading under the sages Valmiki and Agastya. Some of these lady philosophers used to remain unmarried throughout the life in order to carry on their spiritual experiments unhampereced. The above evidence shows that the highest education, including Vedic studies, was open equally to men and women and many ladies distinguished themselves not only as Vedic scholars but also as great philosophers, doctor and teachers.

This high point of women’s education witnessed a gradual decline during the Brahmanical Period. The all pervasive Brahmanic Codes took a constrictive view of the position and rights of women, prescribed various forms of restrictions, generally limiting their roles to *grihasti* (domestic realm) as nurturers and bearers of progeny. Women were forbidden to join public assemblies. Certain derogatory customs like child marriage, enforced widowhood were prescribed (interestingly this was absent in the Rig Vedic Period) and all forms of women’s education particularly formal education, became the exclusive preserve of men. It is significant to note that Kshatriyas did resist this trend at the close of one millennium B.C and women from amongst this particularly princely family

received military and administrative training and some of them even received higher education.26

**Buddhist Education**

By 6th century B.C, the ancient Vedic religion had deteriorated into meaningless forms. Vedic education had become the monopoly of the priestly class. By the time of the Buddha, women were steadily losing the religious and educational privileges as they were losing their rights for upanayana. The admission of women to the Buddhist order gave a great impetus to the cause of female education among the ladies in commercial and aristocratic families. Like the Brahmanical circles, several ladies, in Buddhist families, used to lead a life of celibacy with the aim of understanding and following the eternal truths of religion and philosophy. Some of them like Sanghamitra went even to foreign countries like Ceylon and became famous as teachers of the Holy Scriptures. Among the authoresses of the Therigatha, who were all believed to have obtained the salvation, thirty two were unmarried women and ten married ones. Among the former Subha, Anopama and Sumedha belonged to rich families who are said to have been wooed by princes and rich merchants. When a large percentage of girls were leading a life of celibacy in pursuit of religion and

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philosophy it is but natural to presume that education among them must have been high.\textsuperscript{27}

According to the Jain tradition, Jayanti, a daughter of King Sahasranika of Kausambi, remained unmarried and received ordination at the hand of Mahavira after being convinced by him in discussion. A Jataka refers to the story of a Jain father having four clever daughters touring about in the century and challenging all and sundry for a debate on philosophical matters.

Many educated women used to follow teaching career either out of love or out of necessity. Sanskrit language found it necessary to coin a special word in order to distinguish them from wives of teachers. The latter who were not necessarily scholars, were called Upadhyayanis, but women who were themselves teachers, were called Upadhyayas. Women teachers must have been fairly numerous in society; otherwise a new term would not have been coined to designate them. It may be pointed out that the tradition of lady scholars is known to Puranas as well. Bhagavata, for instance, refers to two daughters of Dakshayana as experts in theology and philosophy.

The cause of women’s education suffered a good deal after 300 B.C on account of the new fashion of child marriage that began to come into vogue. By the beginning of the Christian Era, pre puberty marriages became the order of the day. Naturally, this meant a serious handicap to advanced studies, which could not

\textsuperscript{27} Mukherji, R.K., \textit{Ancient Indian Education}, Oxford University Press, London, 1918, p. 48.
be obviously finished before the ages of 12 or 13, which was the new marriageable age. Even the initiation ritual (upanayana Samskara) so necessary for endowing woman with the proper Aryan status, was first reduced to a mere formality and then dropped out altogether. This put an end to their Vedic education. They became unable to recite even the hymns of daily prayer. It is no wonder that they were reduced to the status of the degenerate classes. Like the sudras, they were, in course of time, naturally regarded as unfit for reciting or even hearing Vedic prayers.²⁸

**Puranic Age**

Once again during the Puranic Age, the status of women was relegated to the back ground. Puranic writers contended that the husband was god for a woman and devotion to him was equivalent to man’s devotion to God. Women and sudras could no longer listen to Vedas. From 200 A.D. onwards, pre puberty marriages became quite popular. Widow remarriage was prohibited and women had hardly any access to education. The *Padasalas* were devoid of female scholars.

By about the Eighth or Ninth Century A.D, the marriageable age of girls was further lowered to 9 or 10 and this gave practically a death blow to any education worth the name. No doubt two or three years were still available, when some primary education could have been imparted but both girls and their

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²⁸ Pillai, J.K., and Rajeswari, K., *op.cit.*, p. 75.
guardians used to devote their attention during this period more to the problem of marriage than to that of education.

In Sangam Literature, many poems are attributed to women scholars, as many as thirty lady poets. Avvaiyar, Adimandiyar, Kakkai Padiniyar, Nachellayar, Okkur Masathiayar, Perunkopendu are some of the names of poetesses who belonged to that period. In Naladiyar, the author says that the physical beauty of a girl does not make her beautiful but learning would make her virtuous and would give her the real beauty. This clearly reveals that women had the privilege of education equal to men. Isai Tamil was considered an important asset to women.

The long tradition of Avvai indicates that women’s education continued to flourish till the medieval times. Examples of Karaikkal Ammaiar the learned Saivite scholar and Andal, the famous Vaishnavite scholar, prove that learning traditions of lady scholars was continuous.

**Education of Sangam Tamils**

The Tamil society of the Sangam Age was an advanced and civilized society, which had reached great heights in commercial prosperity and in the field of the five arts. During this period, Tamil learning had developed vastly, judging from the number of works extant. However, a study of this society shows that education was not formalized or institutionalized. Teaching does not seem to have developed into a separate or distinct profession. Probably parental upbringing

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30 Jayakothai Pillai, *op.cit.*, p.49.
constituted the full education because education was mostly a training in the hereditary vocation. The pattern of education was not merely reading and understanding books but also reading and understanding books and listening to learned persons.\(^{31}\) The uniqueness of the Tamil culture was affected by the inflow of the exotic groups – the Brahmins, the Buddhists and the Jains, all from the North’. Their influence became very much palpable during the period of the Pallavas. (600 A.D – 850 A.D), who were enthusiastic pro – sanskritists. So the indigenous way of life was affected by the interaction with these new influences and brought in new ideas. The broad and receptive mind of the Tamils echoed in the saying, ‘Every place is our place and everybody is our next of kin,’ welcomed these new ideas. As a result, the Tamil religion and society underwent a marked change. There was a gradual de-secularization of the Tamils and an inculcation of religious fervour unknown to the Sangam Age.\(^{32}\)

The Tamil Academy (Sangam) was unique educational phenomenon of the classical age. Producing the greatest master pieces of Tamil literature, containing the most progressive thinking, this Age must have had an advanced education system. Though not an institutionalized one, it must have been a hereditary system. It was an academy of scholars who were great poets, critics and teachers of the highest caliber.

\(^{32}\) Iyer, V.V.S., (ed.), *Pattupattu Commentary*, Chennai, 1961, p. 414
Role of Buddhist and Jain Schools in Tamil Educational System

Buddhists and Jains were perhaps the earliest protagonists of Tamil Educational System. The very word, ‘Pallikoodam’ in Tamil, meaning a school, has Jain and Buddhist cannotation in as much as the word “Palli” means one of the chambers of monastery where Jain or Buddhist monks held classes for their students and the place where such education was imparted came to be called as “Pallikoodam.” Non Buddhists and non Jain teachers held their classes in their own houses in the raised platform called “Thinnai”, constructed in the porch. Even those places were called as “Thinnai Palli”. Thus the word, Palli, came to be used by one and all in Tamil Nadu in the sense of a school.33

Jaina Pallis and Education in Medieval South India

The Jaina Pallis accommodated both monks and nuns and they were well versed not only in the Jaina literature and sculptures but also in other secular subjects such as astrology, astronomy, medicine etc. They propagated not only the Jaina Philosophy but also education and learning. The Jaina system of education included some unusual features like co-education, animal husbandry, study of Sanskrit literature, grammar etc.

The Jaina Monks constituted the pivot of the Jaina system of education. The Jaina nuns also had an equal share and served as great spiritual guides. The

33 Mayilai Seeni Venkatasamy, *Bauddamum Tamilum*, Chennai, no year, p. 84
spread of Jainism and the promotion of education were entirely in the hands of these monks and nuns, who were all highly educated and versed in many lores.

Co-Education

Numerous inscriptions from the South, point to one of the most salient features of Jaina system of education i.e. the system of co-education run by the monasteries. The Jaina monastery gave all support and encouragement to the promotion of women’s education in the country. Women were highly respected and allowed to occupy high positions in the monastic order. Besides being students and teachers, they also took part in the administration of Jaina establishments. In one of the Karnataka inscriptions, there is reference to a certain Jaina nun by name Huliyabhajjike, who was the disciple of Sirinandi, who was incharge of the Jaina temple constructed by Baladevayya at Saratavura (modern Soratur). As a rule, the male members of the monastic order alone were allowed to occupy such a position and hence this is interesting information which throws light on the role of women in the Jaina monastic life. Both men and women were allowed to stay and study the Jaina scriptures in the monasteries. There were also both men and women teachers. There are references in which male students studying under a female teachers and female students studying under an Acharya are evident. The Jaina inscriptions from Kalugumalai, a famous centre of Jainism, are the best examples in which we find references to teachers and taught belonging

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to both sex, which bear testimony to the system of co-education prevalent in the monastic order in South India. In the monastery at Vedal, there were about 500 students, studying under a lady teacher, Kanakavira Kurattiyar, who was a student of Gunakirthi Bhatara. Thus these inscriptions give us an idea about the educational system which must have been an advanced educational system.

**Nunnery**

Apart from the institutions consisting of men and women, there were also separate institutions specially meant for the promotion of women’s education. They are called in the records, ‘pen pallis’, which simply meant schools (Palli) for women (Pen) students. One such institution flourished at Vilapakkam during the first half of the Tenth Century A.D.

**Teachers and Students**

The Jaina male teacher was called Bhatara and sometimes Acharya, which means that he was a great scholar. The lady teacher was known by the term Kuratti. The male students were called Manakkar. The women students were called Manankkiyar and Pillaikal.

The women’s education could be classified into two phases as (1) Active and (2) Passive. Since the marriage was a great divide in the life of woman, during the active phase, they undergo the education process mainly at home or at the houses of their co-women students until they attain puberty. Subsequently, they stay at home but the educational process continues. They were taught by their
parents at the primary stage and by visiting poet-saints subsequently. The wandering Panars also contributed their mite in imparting the education specially in the field of fine arts. During the passive stage, after marriage in an educated environment of their husbands, women continuously absorbed the best that transpired in her ‘acquired’ home. Consequently women, whose husbands were educated, had ample opportunity to equip themselves educationally. The following Table summarises these surmises.

**Table I-1**

**Content and Structure of Women’s Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S. No</th>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Age at stage</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Nature</th>
<th>Content</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Age of puberty to 12th year</td>
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The Islamic Rulers, placed in an alien and often hostile environment, encouraged seclusion of women who had accompanied them to India and as they gradually settled down in India and the numbers of converts to Islam increased, the seclusion of women among them and the neo-converts, through the system of Purdha, became a common practice. The girls of the Muslim ruling classes began to be educated at home as their Hindu counterparts.\footnote{Aparna Basu, \textit{Women's History in India, An Historiographical Survey}, Macmillan, London, 1991, p. 140.}

Muslim Rulers, while providing for the education of their sons, also made adequate arrangements for the education of their daughters. While the boys were trained to be competent rulers, the girls were given adequate education, including a knowledge of Quran to such an extent that many of them later distinguished themselves as authoresses of important works. The example of Raziyah, who succeeded her further Iltutmish, could study Quran “With correct pronunciation, and in her father’s lifetime, employed herself in the affairs of the Government’ Gulbadan Begum, daughter of Babur, who wrote the Humayun-nama which later inspired the composition of the Akbar Namah by Abul Fazl, was a highly educated lady and possessed a library of her own containing valuable manuscripts. Salima Sultana, the niece of Humayun, was a learned lady who used to write Persian poems under nom de plume of ‘Makhfi’ or ‘concealed’. She became Akbar’s wife after the death of her first husband, Bairam Khan. Akbar’s wet nurse or foster
mother, Maham Anaega, was a learned lady who founded a Madrasa in Delhi.\textsuperscript{38} Chand Sultana of Ahmadnagar, who offered heroic resistance to Akbar’s son, Murad in 1576, was an accomplished lady who was noted for her skill on the lyre and for her melodious songs, could speak fluently Arabic, Persian, Turki, Kanarese and Marathi. Nur Jahan, the celebrated wife of Shajahan, was similarly well versed in Persian and could compose poems in it. Her female companion, Satiunnisa, who used to recommend to Mumtaz Mahal the names of theologians and pious men for pensions and poor scholars for donations to the marriage of their daughters, could recite the Quran and Persian poems. She was appointed tutoress to Jahanara Begum, the eldest daughter of Shahjahan. Herself a highly educated lady, Jahanara encouraged the learned men of the time with rewards and allowances.\textsuperscript{39} She was elevated by her father to the rank of the first – lady and possessed managerial ability to regulate the affairs of the Imperial Harem as well as of the Women’s Society in the capital. Known for humility and simplicity, she wrote her own epitaph in Persian which reads: “Except with grass and green things, let not my tomb be covered; for grass is an all-sufficient pall for the graves of the poor”\textsuperscript{40} She described herself as “disciple of the saintly family of Chisti, daughter of Shahjahan” and ordered that the epitaph should be placed on her tomb.

\textsuperscript{40} Aprana Basu, \textit{Essays in the History of Indian Education}, Concept Publishing Co., New Delhi, 1982. pp 31-32
near that of Nizamudhin Auliya. Zebinda Begum, the fourth daughter of Shahjahan, was a gifted poetess and composed a volume of mystical verses in Persian. Aurangazeb took great care in educating his daughters. The eldest one, Zeb-un-Nisa, who was well-versed in Persian and Arabic as well as proficient in the knowledge of the Quran and in the art of calligraphy, was taught by Aurangazeb himself.

Such Muslim educated ladies in Medieval India would perhaps appear to pale into insignificance when compared with their educated counterparts in Spain such as Zainab, Hamda, Fatimah, Aishah and Maryum or in other parts of the Islamic World but there is no doubt that the education of the female members of the royal families was never neglected and the examples cited above clearly show the extent and care taken by the Islamic rulers in educating them.41

An almost similar care was shown by some of the Muslim rulers in educating the ladies of their harems. Thus Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Khilji, who ruled in Malwa between 1469 and 1500 A.D, established within his seraglio all the separate offices of the court and “among these were school mistresses, musicians, women to read prayers and persons of all profession and trades”. The very fact that he retained school mistresses in the harem indicates that the ladies in the palace were taught by them. Similarly, Akbar in his Palace at Fathepur Sikri, set

apart certain chambers to serve as school for educating the ladies of his harem who were then not less than five thousand in number.

With so much care for the education of their daughters and ladies of their harems, it is indeed surprising that the Muslim rulers at the imperial capitals at Delhi and Agra did not do anything remarkable for the education of their women. Education of girls was treated by the Muslim rulers as extremely personal and left it to the wishes of their fathers and guardians. There is no doubt that the Muslim nobility followed the examples of their masters in educating their own daughters at their homes but there is doubt whether an ordinary Muslim subject could emulate it, as the appointment of a teacher, who was to be presented with some gifts at the beginning and at the completion of their education, was often expensive. However, since study of the Quran was incumbent upon all faithful followers of Islam, one could perhaps be justified in presuming that education of girls in ordinary Muslim houses was not neglected and they were either taught at home by their parents or sent to a local *maktab* in a private house. Many a Muslim widow considered it to be their sacred duty to impart religious education to their daughters and number of such schools kept in private houses for the instruction of girls was numerous in India.\(^4^2\)

At lower levels of the Muslim society where people were either poor or earned their living by very humble pursuits, it is doubtful whether the girls in their

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houses could have had the privilege of being acquainted with the Quran. Education was too expensive to obtain by a poor family, either in a village or in a town, Since the number of such families vastly outnumber those belonging to the royal and affluent classes, it is reasonable to surmise that the overall picture of the education of girls and women in Medieval India was a dismal one and certainly not an encouraging one for the posterity.

Female education was informal and largely limited to practical matters. Women from respectable families often studied classical or vernacular literature as “a pious recreation,” and girls from propertied families received some education in keeping accounts. But most females learned only the household arts.43

It was believed that if women were religious, the children will be more religious and therefore it was compulsory for all women to know verses of the Quran essential for daily prayers by heart. We find that for girls also the ‘Maktab’ ceremony was performed and usually were taught at home. Besides the religious knowledge, domestic training in cooking, fine arts, music, dancing, painting, spinning, embroidery, garland making and general home management were taught. In aristocratic households, training in hunting, shooting, archery, outdoor games like polo was given to girls. Women theologians were appointed to give religious education.

During Akbar’s time, young girls were regularly taught in the maktabs for seven years. In other words, co-education in the maktab for about seven years must have existed in some parts of the country. It has been customary to teach the girls to write a verse ‘idi’ relating to the festival of ‘Id’ at the beginning and when the girls finished the required portion from Quran, the ustad was given presents by the parents.\footnote{Jaya Kothai Pillai, \textit{Indian Education Historical Foundations}, Elango Pattipagam, Chennai 1972, p. 56.}