



Indigenous Education of Urban Middle-Class Women in United Provinces in the Late Nineteenth Century

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Abstract: My focus in this article is on the beginning and growth of women's education in colonial United Provinces, staged in different spaces via colonial agencies. This article examines the institutions and ideals of education in the United Provinces, particularly those centered around women. The trajectory of women's education in the United Provinces exhibited a marked deviation from the Bengal renaissance model which has received abundance of scholarly attention. While claiming that women were quietly creating spaces in spite of such limitations, this article marks out the moments of quiet struggle with patriarchal institution within and outside the household.

Keywords: Indigenous, Education, Middle class, Gender, United Provinces, Colonial, Agency.

1. Introduction

This article is an attempt to study different aspects of indigenous education for women in UP.ⁱ Contrary to the general perception of women of the region confining themselves to supportive roles to the male members of their families, women of the North Western Provinces were actively involved in the nationalist as well as the peasant movements. Recent feminist historiography has created new visibility of individual women and groups of women in Bengal, Bombay, Maharashtra and United Provinces. The antecedents of women's large-scale involvement in the nationalist movement has been demonstrated by a few to be found in the numerous and consistent contributors to Hindi periodicals. This period also saw the growth of women writings in avant garde literature, from patriotic writings by Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (1904-1948)ⁱⁱ to Mahadevi Verma's Chhaywadi (1907-1987)ⁱⁱⁱ (romantic)poetry. Politics and literature were thus two important fields of public life women of this region^{iv}. Taking this cue I began to probe the different stages of the experiment that was most effectively if not singularly responsible for opening the public sphere to these women. Through a study of the initiatives of Indian and British reformist agencies in the field of educating women, I also try to situate the public sphere for the women of this province.

United Provinces, or the NWP offers a case study different from Habermas or Freitag's description of the public sphere^v. Public sphere for the women of UP was more of a semi-public

sphere, which retained a major proportion of its privacy, conforming to their ideals of righteous conduct. The rich domain of Hindi and Urdu manuals written for women by women themselves highlight this theory further^{vi}. Similarly, political activism of women in the Hindi heartland was almost always guided by the men in their family, drawing upon the nation as a family metaphor many a times.^{vii}

In the colonial period, Lucknow emerged as one of the most culturally significant cities of the United Provinces. Lucknow ranked fourth among the cities of India, after the three Presidency towns, and was the eighth largest city of the British empire in the 1880s.^{viii} It had just come into its own as a state capital, was merely a century old in being so, and was also witnessing the growth of a strongly caste conscious middle-class society. United Provinces presented a highly differentiated terrain, not only geographically^{ix} but also in terms of demography and culture.

The corpus of work done on education of women is the result of different methodologies employed for situating Indian women in its history. From accounts of women's history of which education is an integral part^x, to comprehensive studies of history of education^{xi} ; a wide array of writings on this subject only lead to further queries on the issue. Case studies of reformist men and women^{xii}, and of pioneer women's institutions have^{xiii}, besides providing the loci where to women's education can be situated in history, pointed to different areas that need further research. Though the education of women of UP has been studied in parts and as a whole in recent studies^{xiv}, one finds numerous gaps in the understanding of the subject. Rendering voice to the 'silent half'^{xv} of the province has been the objective of most of these writings, wherein the rendering of voice and the silence both appear problematic, making the phrase more of a euphemism. Women in colonial UP were definitely not silent, they were speaking as Bi Amman in Khilafat Movement, writing poetry with patriotic fervour as Subhadra Kumari Chauhan in or even contesting the taluqdars as the unknown kisanins of Awadh, in a jargon conducive to contemporary norms, which needs to be deciphered and thereby contextualised through research. As a corollary, in order to be able to make a valid beginning towards

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understanding the project of women's reform in UP, an awareness of the context in which these women were situated is crucial, which probably has taken a backstage in the zeal to bring women to the fore. I begin this work with a study of the modus operandi in which colonial agencies encouraged and even hampered women's education of women in the province

2. Indigenous Forms of Education for Women in Colonial UP

Di Bona^{xvi} argues that the indigenous education was much better suited to India's needs and should have been retained. However, a careful reading of Adam's Reports^{xvii}-as well as surveys conducted in Madras, Bombay and Punjab -do not convey that the indigenous education was strong and vibrant in the second and third centuries of the nineteenth centuries.

The impression that emerges from all these reports is that of widespread decay and neglect. The village *Pathsalas* were housed in shabby dwellings and taught by teachers who were arbitrarily appointed. Instruction was mainly limited to the three R's, reading, writing and arithmetic, (a phrase which, ironically first appeared as a space filler in 'The Lady's Magazine' in Britain in 1825^{xviii}), and the native Mahajani/zamindari accounts. Printed books were not used and most writing was done on palm leaf, plantain leaf or sand. Pupils were promoted whenever the Guru was satisfied of the scholar's attainments. There were no desks, benches, blackboards or seating arrangements. The decline probably started in the mid-1700s. By the 1820s neither the village schools nor the *tols* or the *madrasas* were vital centres of learning.^{xix}

- a) Indigenous education for women in UP implied instruction under three categories: semi religious, school-based education imparted in *pathsalas*, *tols* etc., where women were virtually negligible in number
- b) professional instruction provided in caste schools
- c) instruction in housekeeping and other skills imparted in their homes.^{xx}

Data on the caste wise occupational set up in colonial UP shows those women were active, even though in modest numbers, in professions like account keeping and craftsmanship, which could possibly due to the existence and enthusiasm of the schools run by caste associations^{xxi}. Evidence is also available about women who were *talluqdars*, managing estates and matters related to land revenue. Any presumption about the status of education of these women, in terms of their ability to read and write will be tentative, and the possibility of proxy ownership cannot be denied. However, the presence of such data is significant for the bearing it has on the gender equations of the period, accentuated by a few interesting stories of assertion of power by these women^{xxii}

Most girls, in the generation that preceded schooling stayed at home and had to rely upon their educated male. The existence of *ustanis* as a service group is more frequently referred to by scholars,^{xxiii} probably due to the fact that *purdah* rules were less stringent for Hindu women who could even be taught by pandits coming to their houses who used to come to teach their brothers. The scope of any form of education for Hindu women was minimal after this and it was only under exceptional

circumstances that they received further instruction later in their lives. Grown up girls at home had little time for study, as most of their waking hours were taken up helping their mother cook, sew and look after the younger children, or helping to supervise other household chores. Their learning was for the most part oral now-learning household maxims and vernacularized episodes from the sacred texts (as recitation of the original texts in Sanskrit was a taboo for girls) from the elderly aunts or grandmothers or some widowed brahmani^{xxiv}, *panditayani* in their large, extended families. Nita Kumar in her work on the widows of Benaras suggests that though not 'schooled' formally, the women of UP cannot be called uneducated.^{xxv}

"They had not, of course, been formally educated, but neither, for that matter, had most males. Although 10,000 students were recorded as receiving schooling in Banaras in 1890, Sherring's observation that the term 'schooling' was an exaggeration was biased but factually correct."^{xxvi} The term '*shiksha*', Kumar observes, could not be happily translated into education (as we know that '*dharma*' cannot be into religion) so that it would make little sense to Banarasis of 70 to 80 years ago to say that women were '*ashikshit*', though they were, of course, unschooled.^{xxvii}

The situation was slightly different for Muslim women.^{xxviii} After initial Koran lessons with their brothers, they had *ustanis* coming to teach them when they grew older. Many girls received no education beyond memorization of verse from the Koran; others learned to read some Arabic and Persian from their fathers and brothers. Writing was strictly prohibited for both Hindu and Muslim women. While Muslim classic texts prophesied calamity in the event of women learning reading and writing,^{xxix} Hindu scriptures threatened them with widowhood even if they touched a book.^{xxx} A handful of women, however, escaped this general fate of female education in the province. Women of the aristocratic families constituted throughout Awadh history one pole of potential power, through their influence on the nobles and the rulers. These women had greater knowledge of the full range of folk religious discourse, both Hindu and Shi'ite which allowed them to sometimes manipulate superstitious males. Bahu Begum,^{xxxi} the wife of Nawab Shujaud Daula, Badshah Begum^{xxxii} the wife of Ghazi ud Din Haidar and the mother of Nawab Wazid Ali Shah and Mubarak Mahal^{xxxiii} one of the important wives of Nawab Wazid Ali Shah were women who by virtue of their religious genius made gender specific contribution to Awadh Shi'ism.^{xxxiv} Isolated as these instances are, not universal in their representation of educated aristocratic women, they nevertheless do speak volumes on the access of the ladies of the harem to scriptural knowledge and even their monopoly in this field. The existence of such practice in Hindu aristocracy is conspicuous by its absence which could be primarily due to the fact that Awadh during this period was dominated by the High Tradition of Urdu and Persian learning.

There was another type of indigenous school called *Mahajani School* which was to meet commercial needs of the community. Instruction was imparted about indigenous methods of book keeping and accounts along with reading and writing. Along with preparing bills and drafts the pupils were

taught mental arithmetic. This curriculum was obviously need-based and gave vocational training for service with the trading community. Equally obviously women did not need to be trained for this vocation. Soon English was seen to be the means of getting jobs and of fulfilling the demands of efficient administration. The policy of encouraging indigenous education in U.P. was given up, though Pathshala and maktabs continued to function. In any case the Mahajani Schools were not dependent on governmental support for their existence and were supported by their caste associations.

It was in this climate that the first school for girls was established by the Deputy Inspector of Female Education from Agra in Gopal Singh^{xxxv} in the city of Agra in 1855^{xxxvi}. In the next two years the schools spread to the nearby districts. Committees of the local gentry were formed to manage these schools and teachers were selected by the parents. The agricultural classes were found willing to make use of these schools though they were not prepared to go further and pay the teacher^{xxxvii}. The movement spread to nearby districts of Mathura and Mainpuri also. Gopal Singh succeeded in establishing 288 schools for girls in the Agra District with 4927 students on the rolls. Though the figures seem exaggerated the fact that cannot be overlooked entirely is that this was a significant number of schools. When interpreted in terms of the number of students in each school the figure however is a meager 17 students per school. A note by the Under Secretary, Government of India on the State of Education in 1859-1862, recorded that "in the North Western Provinces Female Education by direct instrumentality was set on foot in several Districts in 1856. The cost was altogether defrayed either by Government or school cess".^{xxxviii} In spite of poor attendance the motivating factor behind Gopal Singh's mission leaves scope for considering the possibilities of a change in male

attitudes towards female education. But individuals with such driving force are rare, and the schools were swept away in the disorders of 1857, and recovered so slowly that in 1863 in the three educational circles of Agra, Mathura, Mainpuri, there were to be found only 144 schools with 2265 girls. After 1857 a policy of social and religious neutrality was followed by British rulers for quite some time, which was not conducive to such initiatives.

These schools were not revived but a fresh effort was made in 1859, now at the behest of Thakur Kalyan Singh who undertook the task of "*training a class of native ladies, belonging to the families of his kinsmen as his school mistresses.*"^{xxxix} 1869 saw the publication of an award winning tale, *Mirat-ul-Aroos*, sometimes regarded as the first novel in Urdu.^{xli} The objective of this book was to instruct young girls in the conduct of a virtuous family life"^{xlii}. It was considered ideal reading material for young women, especially in the classroom. Many other government sponsored textbooks for girls were being written around this time, both in Hindi and Urdu^{xlii}.

Education of women was not completely non-existent prior to the coming of British nor did the onset of British rule solely and single-handedly bring about a sudden spurt in the educative ventures for women. There have been references to women influencing the transmission of scriptural knowledge amongst both Hindus and Muslims. Reformism of which education was an integral part, was a continual socio cultural change the logic of which lay embedded partly in the grand project of modernization of the Indian middle class and part in the hitherto pathetic condition of women itself. This continuum was worked upon by the interaction of native and colonial agencies different chronological phases of which will be studied in the first section.

ⁱ In my MPhil dissertation I had explored political activism among women of Awadh, come across evidence of a remarkable participation of women of the region in the peasant and the nationalist movements of the 1920s MPhil Thesis on *Political Activism Among Women of Awadh, 1920-25*, JNU, New Delhi, 2001

ⁱⁱ Born in Nihalpur village in Allahabad District, Uttar Pradesh. She initially studied in the Crosthwaite Girls' School in Allahabad and passed the middle-school examination in 1919. After her marriage with Thakur Lakshman Singh Chauhan of Khandwa in the same year, she moved to Jabalpur. Her important

works include *Seedhe-Saade Chitra* (1946) "Mera naya Bachpan" (1946) "Bikhare Moti" (1932) "Jhansi ki Rani". *Rajaswi, M.I. Rashtrabharti Kavyitri Subhadra Kumari Chauhan (Hindi)* (1 ed.). New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2016

ⁱⁱⁱ Mahadevi Verma (26 March 1907 – 11 September 1987) was a Hindi poet, freedom fighter and educationist from India. She is widely regarded as the "modern Meera". She was a major poet of the "Chhayavaad", a literary movement of romanticism in modern Hindi poetry ranging from 1914–1938

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^{iv} Suruchi Thapar-Bjorket, *Women in the National Movement: Unseen Faces and Unheard Faces, 1930-42*, Sage, New Delhi, 2006.

^v Sanjay Joshi while arguing about the fractured state of modernity of the middle class of UP, asserts that the public sphere in colonial UP though strikingly different from the definition of Habermas and Freitag, offers a broader understanding and thereby accentuates the European concept of Public Sphere. Sanjay Joshi, *Fractured Modernity. Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 187

^{vi} Vir Bharat Talwar, *Rassakashi: Unnisween Sadi ka Navajagar aur Pashchimotar Prant*, Saransh Prakashan, New Delhi 2002; Dr. Nagendra, *Hindi Sahitya ka Itihas*, Mayur Prakashan, Delhi, 1991. Acharya Ramchandra Shukla, *Hindi Sahitya ka Iti has*, Nagri Pracharini Sabha, 1968

^{vii} Gail Minault, *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, New Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1981; Geraldine Forbes, The Politics of Respectability: Indian Women and the Indian National Congress, in D.A. Low.(ed.) *The Indian National Congress: Centenary Hindsights*, OUP, Oxford, 1988; Swaroop Kumari Nehru, *Our Cause: A Symposium by Indian Women*, Allahabad, Kitabistan, 1937

^{viii} Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989

^{ix} Until the 1940s, United Provinces of Agra and Awadh were divided into two distinct regions, western UP and the Doab area (the fertile tract of the country between Ganga and Yamuna; and eastern UP and Awadh. Districts that fell within these broad divisions in UP included Allahabad, Aligarh, Agra, Muttra, Barabanki, Benares, Bulandshahr, Pratabgarh, Cawnpore (Kanpur), Farrukhabad, Fiazabad, Raebareli, Jalaun, Lucknow, Mainpuri, Shahjanpur, Meerut, Moradab ad, and Sitapur. See C.A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880-1924*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975.

^x Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996; Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1998

^{xi} SC Ghosh, *The History of Education in Modern India 1/5 7-20 07*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2009; Gail Minault *Secluded Scholars*, OUP, New Delhi; Krishna Kumar, *The Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1991; -----, 'Quest for Self-Identity: Cultural Consciousness in the Hindi Region, 1880-1950", *EPW*, June 9, 1990

^{xii} Nita Kumar, *Lessons From Schools: The History of Education in Benaras*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2000.

^{xiii} Madhu Kishwar, Arya Samaj and Women's Education, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Volume XXI.

^{xiv} Uma Rao, *Some Aspects of Women's Education in UP*, Unpublished Mimeograph. IIAS Simla, 1998; also Uma Rao, 'Women in the Frontline: The Case of UP', in Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar (eds), *Women and Indian Nationalism*, New Delhi, Vikas, 1994

^{xv} Suruchi Thapar, op. cit. p. 8.

^{xvi} Dibona, Joseph (ed) *One Teacher, One School*, Biblia Impex Private, New Delhi, 1983.

^{xvii} William Adam, *One Teacher, One School: The Adam Reports on Indigenous Education in 19th Century India*, Biblia Impex, 1983

^{xviii} Jacqueline Pearson, *Women's Reading in Britain, 1750-1835: A Dangerous Recreation*, Cambridge University Press, 1999

^{xix} Dharampal, *Indigenous Education in the Eighteenth Century*, Biblia Impex Private, New Delhi, 1983; Joseph Dibona (ed) *One Teacher, One School*, Biblia Impex Private, New Delhi, 1983.

^{xx} Leitner gives a similar structure for nineteenth century Punjab. See GW Leitner, *History of Indigenous Education in the Panjab Since Annexation and in 1882*, Language Department, Punjabi, 1971, p. 67.

^{xxi} The emergence of caste associations, with leaders from communities like the Kayasthas (1873-1887) and Kashmiri Pandits (1887) among the first to form such associations in northern India, were a direct result of the sort of social changes happening at the time. See Lucy Carroll Stout, *Colonial Perceptions of Indian Society and the Emergence of Caste Associations*, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1975, pp. 64-65

^{xxii} At any given time we find a sizeable number of women taluqdars in Awadh. See Census of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh ,Parts I and II, Vols for the years 1901,1911,1921 and 1931. There are interesting cases of extortion by these taluqdars as well. A 'thakurain' (Taluqdar) in Pratapgarh had a boil on her leg which turned septic. She distributed Rs 15000 to 'sants' (religious men) who prayed for her recovery. The entire sum was realized from the peasants in the form of 'pakawan'(a septic cess). See Kapil Kumar, *Peasants in Revolt: Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh, 1886-1922*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1984, p.46

^{xxiii} Minault has referred to the homeschooling of Muslim girls from elite families by women who were usually wives of maulvis and ustadhs. Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, op. cit. p. 34.

^{xxiv} Jyoti Atwal in her work explores the world of literate widows of the early twentieth century in UP, illustrating how they were conscious of the lacunae in the reformist agenda and developed their unique critique of their economic and social oppression. Jyoti Atwal, *Real and Imagined Widows: Gender relations in Colonial India*, Primus Books, Delhi, 2016. Also, for a Bengal centric analysis see Tanika Sarkar's interpretation of Amar Jiban in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation*, op. cit., p. 94.

^{xxv} Nita Kumar, *Widows, education*, op. cit. p. 134

^{xxvi} M A Sherring, *Benares: the Sacred City of the Hindus, Delhi*, 1975 first published in 1868. Apart from the well-known discussions of indigenous education such as Dharmapal, for an analysis that stresses what was different in it, see Joseph di Bona, 'Indigenous Virtue and Foreign Vice: Alternative Perspectives on Colonial Education' in *Comparative Education Review* 25, No 2 (June 1981): 202-15.

^{xxvii} Vidya in *Khatri Hitkari*, March 31, 1907; 'Hamari Dasha' in ibid; 'Sri Samaj ki Sad- bhavnayen' in *Khatri Hitaishi*, November 1937. 25 Ram Prakash Lal, *Bal Bodhini* (Meerut, 1900): 2-33; Baburam Sharma Indravati, *Kanya Sudhar* part I (Itawa, 1940): 13-22; Rameshwari Devi Sinha, *Mahila Kalpadrum* (Mathura, 1939): 10-31.

^{xxviii} Minault has dealt with the subject at length in her research through the past few decades. Gail Minault, *Voices of Silence: English Translation of Hali's Majalis un Nisa and Chup ki Dad*, Chanakya Publishers, Delhi, OUP, 1986; --, *Perfecting Women. Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar: A Partial Translation with Commentary*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1992; ----, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Social Reform in Colonial India*, OUP, Delhi, 1998; ----, *Gender, Language, Learning: Essays in Indo-Muslim Cultural History*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2009

^{xxix} Minault refers to *Qabus nama*, a classic Persian didactic prose of the eleventh century Nasiruddin Tusi's work *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri* in this context. See Minault, p. 24.

^{xxx} Ironically, the first generation of educated women in the country included many widows, Haimabati Sen, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde were a few such names. In the United Provinces a few of them became famous writers. Shivrani Devi was a prominent such example. See Atwal, op. cit. pp. 78-93; Sarkar, op. cit. p. 55.

^{xxxi} She employed her own private fortune to help her husband pay off the war debt after the British Defeated him in 1864. in return she received all cash offerings and revenue receipts of the nawab there after. she bequeathed a large portion of this amount to the clergy who tutored her in her maiden days in Iran. Resident to Sec, GOI, For. Dept. Pol. Cons., 9 Nov. 19 16, no. 17, NAI, in Richard B. Barnett, *North India Between Empires: Awadh, The Mughals, and the British, 1720-1801*, Berkley, University of California

^{xxxii} Badshah Begum is known for her innovations in Shi'ite rituals. Her introduction of the celebration of the sixth day after birth Chhati celebrations of the Twelfth Imam Muhammad Al Mahdi, is of particular interest in this context. See Abdul Ahmad Rabit, *Tarikh Badshah Begum*, translated by Muhammad Taqi Ahmad, *Idar-i-Darbiyar*, Delhi, 1977 quoted in Juan, R.I. Cole, *Shi'ite Noble women and Religious Innovation in Awadh in Violette Graff (ed.) Lucknow: Memories of A City*, OUP, New Delhi, 1997, p. 89.

^{xxxiii} The power of the educated harem was a scary proposition. It is further illustrated in the story of Mubarak Mahal's relationship with her tutor Maulvi Hasan Bilgrami who also taught the co-wife Sultan Aliya Begum. Bilgrami grew wealthy and began exercising political influence. The shah's minister Umtazuddaula grew resentful and conspired with the Shah and the British resident to have him banished and his property confiscated. Later Mubarak Mahal managed to compensate Bilgrami for some of his losses and the tutor to the queens retired to Simla. Kamal ud din Mass hadd i, Qaisar at

Tawarikh, Nawal Kishore, Lucknow, 1896, pp. 87-88 in Cole, op. cit., p. 89.

^{xxxiv} Mahmud dressed in female attire and enacted female life-cycle rituals in imitation of his mother Badshah Begum. Similarly, Mubarak Mahal's mujtahid reasserted feminine dominance in matters of religion and ritual in the aristocracy. *ibid*, p. 90.

^{xxxv} See M Kemopson, *Report on the Progress of Education in the North Western Province for the year 1867-68*, Allahabad, Government Press, a878, IOL, London.

^{xxxvi} The local committees in Dacca and Calcutta had started Municipal schools for which grants were sanctioned.

^{xxxvii} Reverend Rowland Williams, a Scottish founded St John's College around this time. His wife Bessie, visited zenana seclusion and examined girls' schools for missionary societies, also took upon herself and also took temporary

responsibility for a number of mission schools during and after the disturbances of 1857. See Avril Ann Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire*, Boydell and Brewer, 2010.

^{xxxviii} Document no 17, A.M Monteath, Under Secretary, Government of India, in his Note on the State of Education in India for 1859-1862. S. Bhattacharya, et al, (ed) *The Development of Women's Education in India: A Collection of Documents 1850-1920*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 31.

^{xxxix} *Ibid*.

^{xl} M. Asaduddin, First Urdu Novel: Contesting Claims and Disclaimers", in Meenakshi Mukherjee, (ed.) *Early Novels in India*, New Delhi, 2002, p. 131.

^{xli} *Ibid*. p. 23.

^{xlii} S. Bhattacharya, et al., *Progress of Women's Education in Oudh* as reported by the Department of Public Instruction in 1875. *op cit*, p. 65.