

April 2020

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### Recommended Citation

Singh, Shivani (2020). Voicing Their Stories: A Discourse on the Relationship Between Education and the Social Position of Indian Women in the Mid-twentieth Century. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21(2), 153-168.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol21/iss2/13>

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## **Voicing their stories: A discourse on the relationship between education and the social position of Indian women in the mid-twentieth century.**

By Shivani Singh<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Indian women in the early twentieth century stood at the threshold of changing times. A social reform movement for women's education came into focus at this time. However, despite efforts to promote higher education by Christian missionaries, the Indian intelligentsia, social reformers, and the British colonial government, there were disparities in its spread. It was still beyond the reach of women in general. Women's education was not pervasive but reserved mainly for those coming from educationally enlightened families, where their parents and other relatives supported the reforms, offering them access to higher education. Feminist researchers, writing about this period, hold multiple views regarding Indian reformers and their efforts in women's education. This paper attempts to draw attention to the social status of Indian women through the self-narratives of two accomplished women educationists from North India, Swarup Kumari Bakshi and Begum Hamida Habibullah, both of whom were witness to pre- and post-independence social and political dynamics. They represent two different religious cultures; however, their social background was quite similar. This paper, an oral history, is based on their independent perspectives, personal experiences and self-narratives shared with the author during interviews conducted in 2009. A comparison between the two narratives offers insights into the contemporary social position of women. It also offers reflections on the elitist approach of the social reforms, and the different viewpoints proffered by feminist writers regarding the relationship between the social position of women and promotion of their education by social reformers. The article concludes with reflection on late twentieth century attempts to transform women's socio-educational status-quo.

*Keywords:* Women educationists, social position, education and social reforms, self-narratives, career history, twentieth century India, Begum Hamida Habibullah, Swarup Kumari Bakshi

### **Introduction**

Women's positions in the Indian social structure reflect the ideology and practices of intersectional inequalities of caste differences and specific privileges and sanctions, which were accorded on the basis of gender roles. Women have been historically subjected to three aspects of discrimination—economic status, social positioning, and political power much of which was

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rooted in religious belief and ideology. In the nineteenth century social reformers in India became conscious of the deteriorating social status of women, but their efforts initially were limited to women's roles in the family. They sought to eradicate the social evils entrenching women's inequality by working on issues including the right to property, remarriage after widowhood, and the abolition of child marriage. Women's education had also been propagated to a certain extent but through an elitist approach. These reforms centered on a limited section of educated, upper, and middle-class women. The problems of women in general were not addressed, thus limiting the reach of the reforms. Even after independence, in spite of constitutional provisions in support of gender and caste equality, revolutionary changes in favor of women's status were observed only to a limited extent. The educational advancements that did occur were made by women who belonged to the educated upper class of society and by those who obtained support from the male members of their families (Mohapatra & Mohanty, 2002).

According to recent research in the history of women's education in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, education among Indian women did make some advances. Indian non-governmental initiatives and financial contributions played a noticeable role in their educational progress. Documents related to women's education in India from 1850 to 1920 show that the strength of female students in schools and colleges increased eight-fold between 1881 and 1951. Nevertheless, in 1911, in British India not more than 1% of the female population had access to education at any level. The early initiatives of Indian women, with this background, assume a special relevance (Bagchi, 2009).

This research paper undertakes to uncover the socio-economic status of women in the early twentieth century, and its connection to women's educational progress, based on two career histories. I begin with a brief background explanation for women's educational attainment vis-à-vis their subordinate position in society, proposing the following hypothesis: initially, women who attained higher education, pursuing an academic career as educationists were able to achieve their education through the support of male family members. Educationists were not only educators but also were seriously concerned with understanding the process of learning in schools and colleges, and they were committed to improving educational standards through motivation, norms, and analysis of the problems of effective teaching (Clapp, 1949). The male family members were mostly social reformers of the period belonging to the educated middle and upper classes. Secondly, the social status of women, the customs and cultural obligations attached to women's positions and gender identification pre- and post-independence, hindered women's capacity to attain higher education and to build a career as educators. The paper then focuses on the narratives of two leading pioneer educationists of the Lucknow<sup>2</sup> district, Begum Hamida Habibullah and Swarup Kumari Bakshi. While they came from different religious backgrounds, their shared social status assisted them in their career attainment, based on interviews I conducted with them in 2009.

### **Research Methodology**

In pursuing interviews with my two central research subjects, I adopted a feminist research and writing methodology, emphasizing the inclusion of women's voices and personal stories. Both highlight my research subjects' social and educational achievements in light of Indian history, and to enable readers to relate to personal stories.

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<sup>2</sup>Capital city of Uttar Pradesh, a north Indian state.

Having completed my Bachelor's degree from a renowned college in Lucknow, of which Begum Hamida Habibullah was the Chairperson of the Managing Committee, it was not difficult for me to initiate a request to have an interview with her. She had a secretary to assist in organizing her day, and I was fortunate to obtain an appointment after a brief discussion with her secretary. I was assisted in securing an interview with Swarup Kumari Bakshi through one of her family members. I held two interviews with each for approximately an hour. Considering their age, they were unable to talk at length beyond an hour. However, their energy was vibrant enough to engage me in the narrative nostalgia of their stories. While interviewing, I rarely interrupted them so as not to disturb the flow of their memories and thoughts. I recorded the interviews while taking notes. I conducted their interviews around early evenings, considering they both took rests after their midday meals.

Begum Hamida Habibullah stayed at the palatial 'Habibullah Estate'. I met her sitting comfortably in a cozy white-painted cottage adjacent to the main residential building. She was dressed in Indian attire with light make-up and looked charming with a warm smile. I will not forget her witty remarks in between the self-narratives and her joy-exuberating eyes weaving the story of her triumphs along her journey as an educationist. I held the interview with Swarup Kumari Bakshi in the garden of her bungalow. As she talked in the garden, I noticed that while her age had made her physically frail, her voice had a gentle command in it. Her personality was extremely warm. She was humility personified, as she acknowledged and remembered several people, including those who stood by her, starting from her childhood into her later years of life.

Listening to them weave stories about their career histories, interwoven with their personal viewpoints, I saw the value of listening to women's voices as a research strategy, as they shared the challenges around their access to higher education and the factors underlying it. They not only narrated their life-story but mentioned a few other women in their family-circle who were accomplished enough to leave an impressionable mark on their lives. However, the information regarding those women was limited. Begum Hamida Habibullah and Swarup Kumari Bakshi were not just teachers or educators but they were educationists in true sense. Beyond the exemplary nature of their entire lives, they introduced new practices into the field of higher education in various capacities. They made contributions to cultural and literary fields achieved remarkable work especially in the arena of women's empowerment.

Education is considered by many to be the most important determinant of women's social development. The availability of equal educational opportunities for women leads to various improvements across society through shifting social roles. However, the gender divide has existed across every sphere of life, including women's access to education, especially higher education. The few women who were pioneers in various fields including higher education, mainly belonged to the upper and elite classes. Their social status was conducive to their aspirations of attaining higher education and to lead a professional and eminent social life. Subsequently, all these women worked consistently for the upliftment of women in general, and it was women's education that formed the basic component of this upliftment (Mohapatra & Mohanty, 2002).

The two case studies resulting from interviews in 2009, underscore the relationship between women's social position and educational access. Before each woman passed away (Begum Hamida Habibullah, in March 2018 at the age of 101, and Swarup Kumari Bakshi in April 2019, at 99), their narratives gave rise to moments of realization, awareness and ideals, regarding their own education and empowerment, and for women in general. Detailed biographical interviews offer insight not only into these women's reflections on their own life

experiences and accomplishments but detail their career histories. Each of their life-stories is intricately connected to the historically established social norms and traditions of their time and micro-cultures.

### **Women and education: A brief period analysis, its intent and extent**

For the past four thousand years in India, religion has played a central role shaping women's social status and limitations. Women living during the Vedic period (1500B.C.-1100B.C.) were well-read and erudite. However, gradually the state of their education changed, beginning at the dawn of the Christian era, as new, forms of gender discrimination emerged. These included the growing practices of girl-child marriages and the prohibition of widow remarriage. Pre-puberty marriage of girls in particular posed a hindrance to the post-primary education of girls and daughters were no longer eligible to perform religious duties. These changes created and sustained social pressures in subsequent historical periods, observed most profoundly in ritualized religious behaviors which influenced women's access to and the nature of their education. Thus, the social lives of women were to a great extent, determined by religion. Religious scriptures described the norms of social life in extensive detail as well as the duties of men and women. The gradual degeneration in the social status of women was an outcome of the then prevailing social and religious transition, which led to the deprivation of their basic rights, including education. Thus, the social rights of women were restricted to what was interpreted from the religious scriptures (Altekar, 1959; Bokil, 1925).

A noteworthy change in the educational status of women emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An educational initiative for women was led first by American Christian missionaries, taken up by men and women of the Indian intelligentsia, and later the British colonial government:

“The thread of missionary activity was picked up by Indian social reformers who had themselves received western education and imbibed some democratic, liberal and rational values of the west. British scholars, administrators and missionaries were all very critical of Indian society, particularly the position and treatment of women. These ideas made educated Indians critically examine their own society and they also came to believe that the progress of Indian society was closely linked with the upliftment of women. They emphasized women's education; for they felt that education would increase awareness among women and prevent them from submitting to unjust social customs and traditions. It would also make them play an effective role as the prime agents of socialization and helpmates of their educated husbands” (Srivastava, 2000).

However, not only was the English education too expensive for the majority of the Indian population, but a critical analysis of the educational developments which took place under British rule brings into focus its true intention. Education was designed to fulfill their own administrative requirements, to supply English speaking government officials at the lower levels of administration. Its progress and character were purposely restricted, to limit the intellectual progress of Indians. Thus, mass education was neglected including higher education, which was inaccessible to the great majority of Indians, specifically women (Desai, 1948). Within the patriarchal Indian family, a son's education and career was centered as the aspirational ladder to upward mobility in social status. Daughters were marginally educated enough for marriage, but

not enough to develop a career, considered the domain of men (Morley & Walsh, 1996). Moreover, the British government, particularly the Conservatives, preferred to avoid any contentious issues; they adhered to a policy of social and religious neutrality leaving the issue of education largely to Indian initiatives. Prejudice against the education of women was pervasive among the majority of the Indian population; women's education disturbed their socio-religious status quo. Therefore, attention was paid to the education of men, who in turn would themselves undertake the education of women (Srivastava, 2000). An English officer, Mr. Orange described the obstacles to women's education this way:

“The conservative instinct of the Mohameddians<sup>3</sup>, the system of early marriage among the Hindus, and the rigid seclusion of women is a characteristic of both. The lack of trained female teachers and the alleged unsuitability of the curriculum form subsidiary excuses against female education. They believe that the general education of women means a social revolution.... They are apprehensive that the period of transition will be marked by the loosening of social ties, the upheaval of customary ways and by prolonged domestic embarrassment.... Hence, the demand for female education is much less active and spontaneous” (Shabbir, 20015).

Thus, Indian women were divested of formal education. Moreover, patriarchal society as has been noted, inhibited the growth of higher education for women. Ritualistic customs based on age-old traditions were strictly associated with each stage of a woman's life. The birth of a girl child was not a joyous moment, as that of a boy, cherished through norms of patrilineal descent. Infanticide in the case of infant girls was practiced, although not so commonly. Girls were married early further curbing their chances of attaining higher education. Social evils such as *Sati*<sup>4</sup> and a society vehemently against widow remarriage, led to a deplorable condition for women. The right to education was a very far cry from existent norms and beliefs. According to Bagchi,

“Partha Chatterjee argued that from the late nineteenth century, Indian male nationalists (such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak) created an ideology in which the category ‘women’ was made synonymous with home, spirituality, and the unsullied purity of the Indian nation. In the nationalist ‘resolution’ of the women's question hypothesized by Chatterjee, the ‘unpolluted’ domain of ‘home’ and ‘woman’ was distinguished from the public world of male nationalism, which, demanding greater political liberty for Indians, would have its own independent trajectory” (Bagchi, 2009).

Actions deployed for the social welfare and the educational progress of women were limited to the upper caste Hindus, Muslims, and Parsees and western/English educated Indian men belonging to the upper caste/class families encouragingly arranged for the education of the women in their families.

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<sup>3</sup>Pre-20<sup>th</sup> century western term for practitioners of Islam.

<sup>4</sup>Pre-modern historical practice of a Hindu widow cremating herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband.

### Sisterhood in higher education: Begum Hamida Habibullah and Swarup Kumari Bakshi

For Indian women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the period of colonial rule to independence is a journey of women's rising consciousness and emancipation (Forbes, 1996). The rising consciousness among Indian women is evident in elaborate narrations of the lives of those who created a niche for themselves in modern India. The necessity of women's education becomes a focus through the efforts of elite women, who fought for their way in a world where many were denied their basic right to education, limiting their potential. Women's education became the basic and essential demand of the Indian women's movement. As has been noted, the reform movements with women's education as their primary agenda were started by men social reformers. However, documenting the activities of women pioneers in education is essential in order to see how women began to change their lives. They made differences in other women's lives by forming organizations to spread awareness, and they continued working towards women's emancipation.

In the northern province of Uttar Pradesh, the home of the two prominent educationists from Lucknow, Begum Hamida Habibulla and Swarup Kumari Bakshi, women lived deplorably oppressed lives in the nineteenth century. Menon, (2003) quotes G. Minault's "Secluded Scholars" in *Indian Women and Nationalism, the U. P. Story*, stating, "for a woman to know how to write was dangerous. If a woman had power over the written word their capacity to disrupt men's lives would be increased." Introducing higher education for women in Uttar Pradesh was gradual, with the assistance and encouragement of men. Women's participation in public life became evident as they emerged from the seclusion of their homes and started participating in various events related to national struggle, social and educational reforms. Women struggled for domestic and national liberty simultaneously. Many of them came from influential upper-class families which had commendable educational backgrounds and social standing. But the status of Muslim women was still confined to the inner circles of their homes even if they belonged to better placed families.

Begum Hamida Habibullah, who belonged to a very progressive, rich and educated Muslim family of Hyderabad<sup>5</sup> was an exception. Her father, Justice Nazir Yar Jung Bahadur, was a judge at the High Court of Hyderabad, a Muslim state in British India, keen on English education of the younger generation. As a result, Begum obtained her secondary education in the Mahmoodiya Girls' School, Hyderabad and did exceptionally well in Senior Cambridge gaining distinction in ten subjects. Her father always assured her of fulfilling her dream of studying at Cambridge University. However, her mother's unwillingness to leave her alone in England and her imminent betrothal deprived her of this opportunity. Both her mother and her soon-to-be mother-in-law wanted her to get married first. However, she completed a two-year degree course in teacher's training for blind and deaf students at a Teacher's Training College in London where her mother was able to stay with her. Thereafter, she obtained her Bachelor of Arts from Osmania University and was awarded a gold medal for standing first in English. She always kept her interest in education alive even after her marriage in 1938 and relocating to Lucknow (the capital city of Uttar Pradesh), her husband's home. (Her husband, Major General E. Habibullah, was educated entirely in England.) In Lucknow, she immediately became involved in the educational activities of the city.

Her mother-in-law, Inam Begum Habibullah was a great source of inspiration to her. Inam Begum herself renounced the *burqa*<sup>6</sup> and discouraged it among the women of her

<sup>5</sup>A southern princely state in pre-independence India.

<sup>6</sup>A kind of veil worn by Muslim women as compulsory attire.

household. She became a member of the Legislative Assembly on a Muslim League ticket and was very keen to spread awareness among Muslim women. Education formed the basis of her work. In my interview with her, Begum Hamida Habibullah informed me that her mother-in-law was concerned about Muslim women, especially those belonging to the middle and lower middle classes, who were quite far behind other contemporary women due to the practice of *burqa* and seclusion at home. There was no education for them, and higher education was considered beyond their capacity.

Swarup Kumari Bakshi, a pioneer educationist also from the Lucknow district, belonged to a Kashmiri Hindu Brahmin family (an upper Hindu caste). Her father, Pandit Badri Prasad Shinglu, was a great artist and musician as well as a renowned poet of Urdu and Hindi languages. She completed her junior college and bachelor's degree from Kinnaird College for women, Lahore (estb. 1913, now in Pakistan). In 1940, she was married to Dr. Rajkumar Bakshi, a lawyer by profession, who belonged to a family of landlords in Lucknow district. She was fortunate to marry into an educated upper-class family, since she received whole-hearted encouragement from her in-laws to pursue higher education. Her mother-in-law, Mrs. Dhanrajpati Bakshi, was an eminent Congress leader. She was the Chairperson of District Council of Malihabad<sup>7</sup> and it was her strong desire that her daughter-in-law, Swarup Kumari Bakshi, should pursue her master's degree. The men in the family were equally enlightened and encouraging towards the cause of women's education. Dr. Madan Lal Atal, Swarup Kumari Bakshi's uncle-in-law and the Chairman of a Medical Mission sent by the then Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru to China, showed great enthusiasm for her higher studies. In 1942 and 1949, she completed her Master's in English and Sanskrit Philosophy from Lucknow University, respectively. Remembering her active university days, Swarup Kumari Bakshi recalled, while being interviewed,

“I still hold close to me those pleasant memories, because all that has helped me in becoming a complete person and a good human being. Knowledge is an ocean of happiness. If one wishes to make life happy, then one shall strive to attain knowledge. Happiness without knowledge is not long-lasting. Knowledge eliminates all sorrows and ill-thoughts and the contentment it provides is perennial. Similarly, when a woman attains knowledge by working hard towards it and she enters a certain field of work as profession, she feels complete and gathers strength to face various situations only because of her knowledge” (Interview with author, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

As a student, Swarup Kumari Bakshi was also an active member of the University Student Union. She enthusiastically became involved in the Quit India Movement, initiated under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi.

### **Pioneering Educational Work**

Begum Hamida Habibullah's first endeavor as an educationist was her involvement in the junior college started by her mother-in-law, *Taleem Ghani-Niswan* (Women's Education). Still today, the Institute is instrumental in shaping the lives of many young Muslim women, preparing

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<sup>7</sup>A district in Uttar Pradesh province of India.

them to pursue higher education in a university. Actively involved in higher education, she was on the boards of many college committees in Lucknow city. Her father-in-law, Mr. S. M. Habibullah, was Vice-Chancellor of Lucknow University from 1938-1941. She worked hard to garner all possible support for many locally affiliated women's colleges from Lucknow University. She helped education to reach the under-privileged sectors of society and opened schools in the crowded and oppressed areas of the city. As both the President of the Urdu Academy and as an elected Member of the Legislative Assembly, Begum Hamida Habibullah realized that the cultural aspects of education are equally important as the skills acquired, and thus she promoted Urdu as a language in the curriculum. She also arranged for street plays, songs, and small dramas on the benefits of education and against social evils such as the dowry system; she was instrumental in spreading awareness in towns and villages around Lucknow city. She told me that she realized upon meeting many poor people during her constituency tours, that the young girls and their parents were interested in acquiring better living standards. However, their opportunities for doing so were very limited. Later, when she became President of the Indian Council of Child Welfare (1994 to 1997) she introduced basic literacy courses for young village girls and awareness programs through street theatre and public village spaces teaching the importance of a nutritious diet and problems with the dowry system. She recalled, in particular, that the girls had learned about how a marriage could be joyous, if they were informed and educated.

Following the completion of her higher education, Swarup Kumari Bakshi, sought to spread her knowledge by educating girls, an opportunity she soon obtained. In 1945 she was asked to join the girls' school *Nari Shiksha Niketan* (Women's Education Home), as a teacher by a close friend of her mother-in-law, Mona Chandravati Gupta, a prominent women's activist in her own right who was the founder of various women's organizations including *Nari Shiksha Niketan* (Women's Education Home), *NariSeva Samiti* (Women Welfare Committee) and *NariShishu Niketan* (Women and Child Home). Swarup Kumari Bakshi's husband, on hearing the teaching proposal, encouraged her to join immediately. She recalled,

“My husband and other family members were happy for me. He always wished that like his mother, who was always ahead in social work, his wife must also be an active participant” (3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

In 1951, Swarup Kumari Bakshi became the Principal of *Nari Shiksha Niketan* (Women's Education Home). Under her principalship many important changes started to take shape: the percentage of overall students in the institute improved so that 100% passed their courses (Department of Education, Govt of Uttar Pradesh). These results impressed the managing committee, and who requested her to continue as the permanent principal. While being interviewed, she vividly recalled,

“The school was still in its formative stage. The Institute was gradually gaining strength. At the time of my joining *Nari Shiksha Niketan* (Women's Education Home), the staff consisted of 10 to 12 female teachers, which kept on increasing every year. Similarly, the strength of girl students was 50 to 60. There were 5 to 10 girls in 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It was not that the people were less enthusiastic towards educating their daughters, but the schools and colleges were located at far distances. In 1947, there were only 2 colleges in Lucknow city: Mahila Degree

College and Isabella Thoburn College. Parents were apprehensive about sending their daughters to far distances because of security reasons. Girls were only able to attain education till 8<sup>th</sup> grade in schools. Besides, there was widespread poverty too. People used to put their meager financial resources in supporting their big families and educating their sons. Before independence, generally people were earning through farming. They had fewer financial resources. Service class was small at that time. But after independence, the Indian government came up with various social welfare schemes which aimed towards progress of the youth of India. Many schools and colleges were established all over the country. The number of teachers also increased with the rise in enrollment of girls and boys. It was seen that there were many girls who after attaining higher education, were willing to enter professional fields, mostly preferred teaching” (Interview with author, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

### **Kindling the flame to extinguish passivity: political, literary and social contributions**

As noted earlier, India remained patriarchal in its character, despite constitutional provisions for the equality of women and men. This sustained major gender gaps and hindered women’s progress in various fields, especially in higher education. Women’s advancement requires changes in prevalent attitudes towards issues of health, education, and careers for women. Women themselves, needed to recognize their own potential, to empower themselves through higher education. As the most essential instrument in liberating women from oppression and subordination, education empowers women. It does so by enhancing their self-esteem and self-confidence. As women became educated critical thinkers, their contributions to society, the polity, and the economy began to be appreciated. Higher education fostered decision-making, enabling women to make informed choices in areas like education, health, and employment. A newly independent India needed educated women; yet, their empowerment could be attainable only when they were provided with information, knowledge, and skills for economic independence. Moreover, women’s education also enhanced their access to legal literacy, knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements in society. These steps towards women’s empowerment through higher education could ensure their participation on an equal level in all areas (Gupta, 2000).

*Begum Hamida Habibullah*



**Fig. 1 Begum Hamida Habibullah. Photo by the author**

Both Begum Hamida Habibullah and Swarup Kumari Bakshi were remarkable in that they succeeded even beyond their roles as educationists: they made extensive contributions to political, social, literary, and cultural fields. Socially, Begum Hamida Habibullah remained a remarkable figure until her last years of life. Empathy towards the less privileged was deeply embedded in her since her childhood. She felt that she needed to make a difference in the lives of the downtrodden and this became her lifelong work, first appreciated and encouraged by her father. As a young girl of twelve in Hyderabad, she often visited girls' orphanages. In addition to food, clothing, and other amenities for children, she worked alongside her father to arrange for their education. When she moved to Lucknow after her marriage, she engaged actively both in higher education and established herself as a forerunner, helping poor women *chikan*<sup>8</sup> embroidery workers, the majority of whom were Muslim, through the NGO SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association, founded by Runa Bannerjee). She worked to remove the intermediaries involved in the trade and enabled the women to sell their product through the NGO directly in the market, thereby gaining control over the financial management of their craft and business. These women, after gaining financial independence, were seen to be less dependent on men for every decision related to their lives. Also, as President of the Indian Council of Child Welfare, she worked against child labor and successfully created Mid-Day Meal programs in many of Lucknow's primary schools.

Begum Hamida Habibullah came from a family with political influence. She would attend the public speeches made by leaders including Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan. Later, she strongly stood against the partition of India. During the 1970s, she became quite enamored of Indira Gandhi as a leader, and under her leadership she contested the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly elections running for office and winning the Haidergarh seat. She then took charge as the Minister of Social Welfare and Minister of Tourism in the Uttar Pradesh government. Later, in 1976 she was also elected a Member of Parliament.

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<sup>8</sup>A type of embroidery done by men and women, especially Muslim; considered to be a handicraft specific to the Lucknow region in Uttar Pradesh.

Over the course of her life, Begum Hamida Habibullah saw more women come out of seclusion, realizing the great value of higher education in their own upliftment. As I completed my interview with her, she shared her thoughts on education and reiterated,

“Girls have now come out of veiling, and they are studying in universities and pursuing further vocational education, getting jobs and qualifying for better avenues” (interview with author, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

However, she also emphasized her perceptions of the shortcomings of the higher education system in India. Education, she believed, needed to be expanded in its scope. She noted that education was too costly for the lower-middle class and the under-privileged. Child labour was a significant, incessant problem and defeated the educational efforts initiated by the government, especially for the above-mentioned classes. Parents, due to poverty, preferred to send their children to work and earn daily wages instead of educating them. Begum Habibullah bemoaned that poor children in India don't have a childhood. She lamented that Indian society still needed to work seriously toward child-care and child education. Further, she strongly regretted the mentality that undermined the importance of education for girls, because marriage was considered the supreme goal of a girl's life. In such situations, education was not going to bring them any kind of income after marriage since the general attitude of patriarchal Indian families is opposed to women working outside the home. She was also concerned that too many people did not fully recognize the practical utility of higher education. Girls were lagging behind in enrollment, because of the mediocre financial status of their families, and their education was not willingly financed by their parents the same way it was for boys. Girls were only educated enough to prepare for marriage, their own educational needs neglected. Begum bemoaned these persistent inequalities calling on both individuals and the government to support female education.

*Swarup Kumari Bakshi*



**Fig. 2 Swarup Kumari Bakshi, photo by the author**

Swarup Kumari Bakshi's political engagements were intricately entwined with her educational initiatives. Involvement at the public level was not new to Bakshi, as her husband's family was politically active. In 1969, she was sent to the U.S.S.R. as the leader of the Indian

Cultural Delegation. In 1974, she was elected to the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly and was appointed Education Minister. The universities of Bundelkhand, Faizabad, Garhwal, Kumaon and Rohilkhand<sup>9</sup> were registered with the University Grants Commission under her minister-ship. She was instrumental in opening a degree college at Dwarhat (Almora)<sup>10</sup> and another in Pithoragarh in Uttaranchal<sup>11</sup>(both the districts are located in the northern, less-developed mountainous region). Throughout the state of Uttar Pradesh, she introduced correspondence courses for 10<sup>th</sup> graders and junior college students who were unable to afford regular schooling. She also advanced adult education and the enrollment of girls in non-formal education. In 1981, she was nominated by the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi to visit the Soviet Union as a member of the Indian Women's Delegation. The same year she took over as Home Minister in the Uttar Pradesh government and carried on with education reforms. In 1988, reappointed as Education Minister, she launched a project to establish a new university, the Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar University in Lucknow. In addition, three-year bachelor's degree courses were introduced in all the state universities of Uttar Pradesh. She also established a separate Directorate of Urdu education<sup>12</sup>.

Swarup Kumari Bakshi was also a writer, a practice she began in her student days. She reminisced,

“My father always said that if you wish to become a good writer, a poetess, then you must have good command over two languages as subjects, viz., Sanskrit and English. Sanskrit, since it is considered the mother of Hindi language. It is an ocean of knowledge. Secondly, by studying the English language, one can easily have access to world literature, as all the great works are translated into English. When one goes through the Russian, French and English literature, he/she gains deep literary knowledge as well as inspiration to write” (interview with author, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

Her writings occurred in many literary forms; at the time of our interview, she was writing about the life of Abraham Lincoln. Her goal was to highlight the new moral direction Lincoln showed the world by morally opposing slavery and upholding two principles of modernity: uniformity of law and democracy. She is credited with numerous literary works including approximately 40 books, poems, songs, dramas, musical dramas and short stories particularly, her hypophora titled, *Prashnottar Tarangini- Saagarke Anmol Moti (Waves of Hypophora—Precious Pearls of Ocean)*, memoirs and essays. Her writings have had social as well as spiritual inclinations. Many of her stories were women-centric and provided solutions to the issues raised within the stories. Primarily based on social themes, her literary works portrayed the lives of different segments of Indian society.

During our interview, she shared her views on education and especially drew attention to the importance of the inclusivity of women's higher education, particularly the poor, to gain prestige and self-respect. She spoke unfeignedly about the need for women's organizations to represent the different cultural communities of India with the larger purpose of uplifting

<sup>9</sup>Different districts in the neighbouring states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in north India.

<sup>10</sup>A small district in Uttarakhand, a part of Uttar Pradesh previous to 2000.

<sup>11</sup>A small district in Uttarakhand, a part of Uttar Pradesh previous to 2000.

<sup>12</sup>Established to protect and safeguard the constitutional rights of the Minority Language Institutions and to improve the standard of education of these institutions.

underprivileged girls, needy old women, and widows. She emphasized the value of moral and spiritual teachings within the curriculum at all levels of education, expressing without any religious prejudices, that the relevant preaching of all religions must be inculcated in young minds. As a writer, she asserted that,

“A writer must always strive to present a solution to all prevailing social problems through his writings” (interview with author, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2009).

### **Reflections and Conclusion**

These two eminent, contemporary women educationists represented the upper educated class of 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian society. The women of this stratum of Indian society had the constant backing of the men and women from their respective families. The stories of these two women, underscore social norms common to their day, of the accessibility of higher education among upper class, educated, urban-based women. Heralding from two different religious groups, Hindu and Muslim, their stories highlight a shifting paradigm in the values and aspirations of women towards their careers, religious outlooks, and national consciousness, which marked a change in their own attitudes towards their social status. They both experienced strong educational foundation from their families, especially their fathers, mothers and mothers-in-law, who also were politically active in their respective areas. Each had a positive influence on their educational and career journeys. Their families opened horizons of opportunities to them when society's widespread views on women's education and careers were beginning to undergo a transition. The role of women, strictly confined to the domestic sphere as housewives had begun to change inside and outside the home (Chakrapani, 1994).

Kaur (1983), the first woman Vice-Chancellor (1975-77) in north India, Punjabi University, Patiala<sup>13</sup>, in discussing these ideas has stated that women in general wished to live a socially useful life, which they could attain through higher education. Both university vocational educations could provide them with opportunities to raise their personal status and render an independent social standing. These two pioneers insisted that women's education should not be different from the purposes and objectives of men's education. There were, however, some vital differences in the ways in which women's education could be realized. Sarkar and Sarkar (2008) have demonstrated the lopsided spread of higher education for women outside the upper classes and castes; lower caste and poor women had limited or negligible access to higher education. The prevalent social customs and norms had conditioned people against progressive ideas. William Adam, in his Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836) summarized this view well: “A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow.”

Over the years, the number of women teachers at various levels of education has expanded. Some women have attained positions in university administration and management, becoming important role models for their students, and other women, offering recognition of women's qualifications and representations in the academy (Rao, 2003.) Women constitute the majority of the teaching force through the secondary level, a less contentious career arena regarded as an extension of women's nurturing domestic roles. Still, higher education remains an exception, and women are also markedly underrepresented in positions of higher educational

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<sup>13</sup>A district in the state of Punjab in north India.

leadership. This is based on many social factors, among including that marriage remains the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Married women are encouraged to sacrifice their career aspirations and restrict themselves to household affairs (Chakravarty, 2003). Also, in financial precarious patriarchal homes families opt to invest in their son's education to the neglect of their daughters (Mahale, 1987). There have been many cultural and structural barriers which have inhibited women teachers ascending career paths. Besides organizational, cultural and institutional norms, which are covertly patriarchal, there are cultural values and attitudes that have defined women's roles in relation to domestic responsibilities as priority over career aspirations. These responsibilities, such as childbearing, nurturing, and elder care limit women academicians in the necessary academic socialization and planning for career advancement in universities (Luke, 1999). The lives and ideals promulgated by Begum Hamida Habibullah and Swarup Kumari Bakshi remain centrally relevant as women continue to struggle for equity in a patriarchal society.

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