



FATIMA SHEIKH AND THE PEDAGOGY OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION: REVISITING WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN COLONIAL AND CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Fatima Sheikh (1831–1900) was among the first Indian women to recognize education as a means of social change and empowerment. Although her name rarely appears in mainstream educational histories, her work played a crucial role in shaping the early movement for women's education in colonial India. This study explores Sheikh's reformist initiatives and her distinctive approach to teaching within the broader story of India's educational transformation from the nineteenth century to the present. Using a qualitative approach that draws on archival evidence, letters, and historical commentaries, together with insights from existing scholarly studies, the research examines how Sheikh, in close collaboration with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, helped establish some of the earliest schools for girls and marginalized learners. Her efforts directly confronted social barriers of caste, class, and gender, presenting education as a moral and social responsibility rather than merely an academic pursuit. The analysis interprets her vision as an early example of emancipatory pedagogy—an approach that connects learning with justice, equality, and human dignity. By revisiting Sheikh's work through the perspective of transformative education, the paper highlights her continuing relevance to twenty-first-century discussions on inclusion, gender equity, and empowerment. The findings suggest that Sheikh's philosophy of education provides a meaningful foundation for building socially responsive and ethically grounded learning environments in today's India. Recognizing her legacy not only restores a neglected chapter of educational history but also reminds us that education, when guided by compassion and equality, holds the power to transform both individuals and society.

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Introduction

Fatima Sheikh (1831–1900) is recognized as one of the earliest Muslim women educators and social reformers in India. Despite her significant contributions, she has often been overlooked in mainstream educational and historical narratives. Born in Pune into a modest Muslim family, Sheikh's early life was shaped by a socially conscious environment that valued learning and community engagement. From a young age, she demonstrated a keen interest in teaching and social welfare, which laid the foundation for her lifelong adherence to education and reform. Sheikh's work gained prominence through her collaboration with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, pioneering efforts to provide education for girls and marginalized communities in colonial India. Her initiatives were particularly remarkable considering the historical context, where women's literacy was largely neglected, and social norms restricted educational access for lower-caste and minority groups. Sheikh's dedication to education reflected a belief that learning could serve as a powerful tool for personal empowerment and social transformation. During the nineteenth century, Indian society was structured around strict caste hierarchies and patriarchal norms, which severely limited opportunities for women and marginalized groups. Education was largely accessible only to upper-caste men, while girls and women, particularly from disadvantaged communities, were denied literacy and intellectual development. Colonial education policies, although presented as instruments of modernization, often reinforced existing inequalities rather than addressing social exclusion. Within this context, Sheikh's initiatives represented a radical challenge to both gender and caste-based hierarchies, envisioning education as a means to foster equity, empowerment, and social mobility. Her collaboration with the Phules included establishing the first indigenously-run schools for girls and children from marginalized communities in Pune. Sheikh personally opened her home to host these schools, demonstrating her commitment to providing accessible education. By teaching children across caste and religious boundaries, she actively challenged societal prejudices and promoted inclusivity. Her educational philosophy emphasized literacy alongside moral development, social awareness, and human dignity, reflecting a holistic outlook of learning. Sheikh's pedagogical approach also aligns with broader theoretical perspectives in education. Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the

Oppressed” highlights education as a tool for liberation, while Nel Noddings’ ethics of care stresses relational, empathetic, and morally grounded teaching. Sheikh’s practices incorporated these principles, fostering critical thinking, empowerment, and community engagement long before they became formalized in educational theory. Historically, her contributions underscore the importance of recovering marginalized voices in India’s educational history. While reformers such as Savitribai Phule and Begum Rokeya are widely studied, Sheikh’s work remains underrepresented. Confess her contributions not only rectifies historical omissions but also provides valuable insights into the foundations of inclusive and socially responsive education. In contemporary contexts, Sheikh’s vision is highly relevant. Her advocacy for inclusive education, gender equity, and social justice resonates with India’s National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and international frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4: Quality Education). These frameworks stress equitable access, empowerment, and lifelong learning—principles Sheikh championed nearly two centuries ago. Her legacy offers important guidance for designing educational systems that are socially responsive, equitable, and inclusive. This study revisits Fatima Sheikh’s life and work, highlighting three key dimensions: her pioneering efforts in advancing women’s education and empowerment, her transformative role as a social reformer promoting equity and inclusivity, and the pedagogical and socio-cultural relevance of her educational philosophy in the twenty-first century. By situating her contributions within both historical and contemporary contexts, this research aims to restore Sheikh’s rightful place in educational scholarship and demonstrate her enduring influence as an ingenious educator and social reformer.

Review of Related Literature

A number of scholars, historians, and educationists have examined the socio-educational reforms in colonial India and the development of women’s education. Their findings contribute to understanding the context within which Fatima Sheikh emerged as a pioneer of social reform and women’s empowerment. The following portion presents a review of significant works by both Indian and foreign researchers relevant to the present study.

Deshpande (2015) examined *The Reformer’s Vision: Education and Social Change in Western India*. He pointed out how reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule established the foundation for women’s education, yet Fatima Sheikh’s collaborative leadership as a Muslim woman remained underrepresented in the mainstream narrative. Kadam (2018) presented a historical study on *Women’s Education and Muslim Reformers in Nineteenth-Century India*, identifying Fatima Sheikh as India’s first Muslim woman teacher. Kadam highlighted her participation in the first girls’ school in Pune and described her as a crucial link between social reform and interfaith cooperation. Patil (2020) analyzed women’s education movements in colonial Maharashtra and observed that Sheikh’s role bridged the religious divide, showing how Muslim women’s involvement was essential to the broader feminist awakening of the time. Bhosale (2019) discussed the contributions of lesser-known female reformers of Western India and underscored Fatima Sheikh’s leadership in educational work. According to him, Sheikh’s involvement was a “silent revolution” that redefined the concept of women’s involvement in public education. Gaikwad (2022) in *Forgotten Educators of India* attempted to reconstruct the life and work of Fatima Sheikh using archival sources. He argued that Sheikh’s invisibility in history was the result of social and religious biases, and that her story symbolized the intersection of gender, caste, and faith-based reform. Alam (2024) offered a contemporary analysis of Sheikh’s educational philosophy, suggesting that her emphasis on equality, accessibility, and moral learning resonates with the recent principles of inclusive education. His work positions Fatima Sheikh as an early advocate of what modern pedagogy now calls “education for all.” From the global perspective, Anderson (2001) in *Feminist Pedagogy in Historical Context* and Evans (2017) in *Educating Women: Feminism and Social Change* compared nineteenth-century women reformers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Catherine Beecher. Their discussions on moral and intellectual empowerment provide a framework to compare Fatima Sheikh’s philosophy within the international discourse on women’s education. Noddings (2013) and Freire (1970), though not directly writing about Sheikh, conceptualized education as a means of care, liberation, and critical consciousness. Their pedagogical ideas resonate strongly with Sheikh’s practice of inclusive teaching, which combined compassion with empowerment for marginalized learners. Patankar (2021) revisited the educational legacy of the Phule–Sheikh collaboration, describing it as the “basis of feminist pedagogy in India.” He asserted that Sheikh’s contribution represented the earliest example of intersectional reform where gender, class, and religion interacted to promote equality in learning.

Research Gap

The review of literature clearly indicates that while various scholars have studied social reform, women’s education, and the Phule movement, the independent and sustained contribution of Fatima Sheikh has received limited scholarly attention. Most studies either place her as a collaborator or mention her briefly within the Phule narrative. Very few works have examined her educational philosophy, teaching practices, or their relevance in the context of twenty-first-century inclusive education. So, this study aims to fill that gap by providing a critical, contextual, and pedagogical analysis of Fatima Sheikh’s pioneering role as a reformer and educator.

Rationale of the Study

In the nineteenth century, women in India faced significant challenges in accessing education due to prevailing patriarchal norms, rigid caste systems, and limited opportunities for formal schooling. However, some forward-thinking individuals believed that education could play a crucial role in driving social change and achieving equality. Among these individuals, Fatima Sheikh

(1831–1900) emerged as one of the earliest Muslim women educators and reformers who dedicated herself to promoting education for girls and marginalized groups. Despite her considerable contributions, Sheikh's life and work have largely been ignored in mainstream educational history, resulting in a notable absence of recognition for her role in shaping inclusive education during the colonial period.

This research seeks to examine Fatima Sheikh's pioneering efforts through both historical and contemporary educational lenses. By analyzing her work in establishing schools for girls, her partnership with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, and her participation in various social reform movements, the study will explore how she used education as a means of empowerment and moral growth. The purpose of this study is to highlight how Sheikh's actions challenged social inequalities and contributed to the development of ideas such as equality, human dignity, and collective progress — values that remain central to modern educational thought. Additionally, the study will address the lack of in-depth analysis on Sheikh's teaching strategies, community based initiatives, and inclusive practices, which have not been thoroughly examined in educational scholarship. Understanding her educational philosophy provides important insights for current efforts aligned with India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Ultimately, this study contributes to restoring Fatima Sheikh's place in the history of educational reform and demonstrates how her vision of inclusive education continues to offer guidance for building more equitable and socially responsible learning systems today.

Objectives of the Study

1. To thoroughly assess Fatima Sheikh's significant contributions to the progress of women's education and empowerment in the socio-educational environment of colonial and post-colonial India.
2. To evaluate the reformist ideas and social activism of Fatima Sheikh as a key figure in social reform, with a focus on her work in fostering equality, inclusivity, and justice in education and society.
3. To investigate the relevance of Fatima Sheikh's educational philosophy and methods in relation to the needs of modern, inclusive, and equitable education in the 21st century.

Methodology : This study follows a qualitative methodology to explore the educational and social reform contributions of Fatima Sheikh. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable as it enables a thorough examination of historical circumstances, socio-cultural influences, and teaching practices, aspects that are not easily quantified. The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include archival documents, personal letters, and school records that offer direct evidence of Sheikh's initiatives and her association with the Phules. Secondary sources encompass scholarly books, journal publications, biographies, and research studies that provide broader context about women's education, social reform movements, and Sheikh's crucial role in these processes.

Analysis and Discussion

Fatima Sheikh's contributions to education and social reform represent a turning point in the history of Indian education. Her work continues to inspire ideas of equality, empowerment, and inclusive learning even in the twenty-first century. The discussion here centers on three key aspects of the study: her pioneering efforts in promoting women's education, her reformist activism, and the continuing relevance of her philosophy in shaping inclusive education today.

Contribution to Women's Education and Empowerment

In the mid-nineteenth century, when most women in India—particularly those from marginalized backgrounds—were denied access to education, Fatima Sheikh emerged as a bold advocate for change. Born in Pune in 1831, she joined hands with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule to establish the earliest schools for girls and children from lower social groups. It is remarkable that Sheikh opened her own home as a space for learning, an act that directly defied the social taboos of her time. Her approach to education was not limited to teaching literacy; she believed that true learning should also nurture moral growth, independent thought, and social consciousness. Through her initiatives, many young girls and disadvantaged students found not only access to education but also a sense of dignity and purpose. Her classrooms encouraged students to ask questions, challenge discrimination, and think critically about the social order they lived in. In doing so, Sheikh laid the foundation for what we now recognize as inclusive education—where learning becomes a means of personal as well as collective empowerment.

Reformist Vision and Social Activism

Sheikh's educational work cannot be separated from her social vision. She regarded education as a moral and social responsibility—a means to achieve fairness, equality, and human dignity. Her collaboration with the Phules demonstrated her deep commitment to social justice and inter community harmony. She welcomed learners from various castes and faiths, promoting the idea that education must transcend social barriers. Beyond the classroom, Sheikh's activism was equally courageous. She motivated local communities to participate in reform movements, raised awareness about the injustice of caste and gender hierarchies, and encouraged women to play a more active role in public life. Her actions reflected a practical model of what Paulo Freire later described as “education for liberation.” By linking learning with social transformation, Sheikh showed that education is most powerful when it awakens both intellect and conscience.

Pedagogical and Socio-Cultural Relevance Today

The essence of Fatima Sheikh's educational philosophy remains strikingly relevant in today's India. The challenges of inequality, exclusion, and gender disparity persist in many parts of the country. Sheikh's methods—integrating academic learning with moral development and community engagement—offer meaningful lessons for present-day educators. Her stress on empathy, care, and cooperation finds resonance in modern theories like Nel Noddings' Ethics of Care and learner-centered pedagogy. The principles she practiced align closely with the goals outlined in India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), both of which emphasize inclusive and equitable learning. Sheikh's vision anticipated these modern ideas more than a century ago. Her example reminds us that true education does not merely prepare individuals for employment—it shapes compassionate, responsible citizens who contribute to social harmony. Furthermore, recognizing Sheikh's legacy also helps to decolonize Indian educational history. Often, the contributions of women and minority reformers are neglected in mainstream narratives. Acknowledging Sheikh's work restores balance and gives voice to the many unsung pioneers who envisioned education as a moral and social movement. Her life story shows how education can become a means of ethical transformation and cultural renewal.

Implications for Contemporary Education

The practical value of Sheikh's philosophy is considerable. Teacher education programs can integrate her humanistic principles to develop teachers who are empathetic, socially conscious, and inclusive in practice. Policymakers can draw from her example to frame educational schemes that effectively reach marginalized communities. Researchers, too, can use her life as a historical case study of transformative pedagogy, linking past reform efforts with contemporary educational goals. In essence, Fatima Sheikh's legacy stands as a testament to the power of education to transform individuals and societies alike. Her pioneering work in women's education, her fearless social reform, and her enduring educational ideals remain deeply relevant to present times. She demonstrated that education, when guided by empathy and moral responsibility, has the capacity to uplift entire communities. Her life continues to remind educators and reformers that true learning extends beyond the classroom—it is a lifelong pursuit of justice, equality, and human dignity.

Significance of the Study

This study on Fatima Sheikh is significant for multiple reasons, both historically and in the context of contemporary education. Fatima Sheikh's pioneering contributions to women's education and social reform have been largely overlooked in mainstream academic discourse. By critically examining her work, this research restores her rightful place in the history of Indian education and highlights the role of minority women reformers in shaping inclusive educational practices. From a pedagogical perspective, the study underscores the relevance of Sheikh's educational philosophy for modern classrooms. Her emphasis on moral development, social awareness, and equity aligns with contemporary educational frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). By analyzing her methods and practices, educators and policymakers can gain insights into developing inclusive, socially responsive, and learner-centered educational strategies.

The study also has social significance. Sheikh's work addressed both gender and caste-based inequalities, demonstrating how education can function as a tool for empowerment and social change. Understanding her approach provides valuable lessons for promoting equity, social justice, and inclusivity in present-day educational settings. Moreover, this research seeks to bridge a crucial void in the literature. While figures like Savitribai Phule and Begum Rokeya have received substantial scholarly attention, Fatima Sheikh's remarkable contributions continue to occupy a marginal space in historical and educational studies. By documenting and analyzing her contributions, this study enriches the academic discourse on social reform, women's education, and inclusive pedagogy in India. In conclusion, the value of this study rests in its capacity to bridge historical contributions with present-day educational imperatives, providing meaningful insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers devoted to advancing equity and social justice in education.

Suggestion for Further Studies

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of Fatima Sheikh's contributions to women's education and social reform, several areas remain open for further research. Future studies can explore comparative analyses between Sheikh and other contemporary reformers such as Savitribai Phule, Begum Rokeya, and Pandita Ramabai, to examine similarities and differences in their pedagogical approaches and social activism. Empirical research can also investigate the practical application of Sheikh's educational philosophy in modern classroom settings, particularly in promoting inclusive and equitable education for marginalized communities. Case studies in contemporary schools implementing learner-centered and socially responsive teaching methods inspired by her approach would provide valuable insights.

Additionally, cross-cultural studies comparing Sheikh's pedagogical practices with educational reformers from other countries could enhance understanding of universal principles in inclusive education. Researchers may also explore the long-term societal impact of her educational initiatives, particularly regarding women's empowerment and social justice in India. By exploring

these dimensions, future research can further deepen the academic dialogue on both historical and contemporary educational reforms, while reaffirming the lasting significance of Fatima Sheikh's contributions.

Conclusion

Fatima Sheikh's contribution to women's education and social reform marks a significant milestone in India's educational history. During a period when women and marginalized groups were largely denied access to learning, she emerged as a courageous reformer who broke through the barriers of caste, gender, and religion. As one of the earliest Muslim women educators, Sheikh worked with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule to establish schools for girls and disadvantaged children, promoting education as a means of empowerment and social upliftment. Her dedication extended beyond literacy; she viewed education as a tool for moral development, self-respect, and collective progress.

The study emphasizes Sheikh's dual role as an educator and a social reformer. Her educational initiatives reflected the belief that true learning must nurture empathy, justice, and community responsibility. Through her efforts, education became an instrument of liberation, inspiring learners to challenge inequality and envision a fairer society. Sheikh's work demonstrates that social reform and education are deeply connected—each reinforcing the other in the pursuit of equity and dignity. Her philosophy remains highly relevant in contemporary education. By integrating inclusive practices, moral values, and social awareness, Sheikh anticipated the principles later articulated in India's National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education). Her vision continues to guide educators and policymakers striving for equality in the twenty-first century. In essence, Fatima Sheikh's legacy serves as a reminder that education, when guided by empathy and justice, holds the power to transform lives and societies. Her life stands as a timeless example of how courage, compassion, and learning can together build an inclusive and equitable future.

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