

**From Colonial Reform to Contemporary Enterprise:
Uncovering the British Foundations of Women’s
Entrepreneurship in India**
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ABSTRACT:

Although women’s entrepreneurship in India has grown significantly in recent decades, the underlying historical factors that made this possible are frequently disregarded. This essay makes the case that the institutional and socio-legal frameworks put in place during British colonial control unwittingly prepared the way for women’s subsequent involvement in entrepreneurship. The paper uses a conceptual analysis to link post-independence policies that support the growth of women’s enterprises with reforms from the colonial era, specifically in the areas of law, education, and sociopolitical thought. To show how historical reforms facilitated changes in social norms, which subsequently complemented policy support to create the current generation of female entrepreneurs, a conceptual model is put forth. The study adds to the scant body of research that links gendered enterprise outcomes in emerging economies to colonial institutional history. While the practical implications suggest creating entrepreneurship development programs that actively dismantle gender constraints from colonial times, the theoretical implications emphasize the necessity of historically sensitive policy frameworks. The study emphasizes the necessity of conducting interdisciplinary research that connects entrepreneurship studies with historical institutional change.

KEYWORDS:

Colonial Legacy, Women Entrepreneurship, Institutional History, British India, Feminist Economics, Gender Empowerment.

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1. Introduction:

In India, women-led enterprises are becoming more widely acknowledged as catalysts for inclusive economic growth. Research on women entrepreneurs, however, usually focuses on current barriers like financial availability, technological integration, or gender bias without taking into account the more profound historical foundations of women's economic agency. Even though the British government had no intention of empowering Indian women, colonial rule changed social reform movements, legal rights, and educational opportunities. These adjustments set the stage for women to enter the business world and work for themselves in subsequent decades. In this conceptual study, the indirect effects of the British legacy on the development of women entrepreneurs in India are examined.

2. Objectives

This paper aims to

- To identify key colonial reforms that reshaped women's socio-economic position in India.
- To conceptually connect these historical reforms to modern forms of women's entrepreneurship.
- To develop a conceptual framework explaining the progression from colonial change to present entrepreneurial outcomes.
- To highlight underexplored areas for academic research at the intersection of history, gender studies, and entrepreneurship.

3. Review Insight and Theoretical Basis

Raja Ram Mohan Roy stands out as a pioneering figure in Indian socio-religious reform, whose advocacy in the 18th and 19th centuries laid key groundwork for women's empowerment (Chaudhary, 2022). His relentless campaigns against oppressive practices such as sati, child marriage, and purdah, coupled with advocacy for widow remarriage and women's property rights, challenged the rigid patriarchal norms of his time. Roy's establishment of the Brahmo Samaj and his promotion of modern, inclusive education opened avenues for social transformation crucial to female autonomy and participation in public life. His efforts in liberalizing education included founding institutions where both boys and girls could be educated equally, a radical idea then, fostering literacy and skill development among women which later contributed to entrepreneurial

capacities.

Roy's advocacy extended to political and economic reforms, emphasizing civil rights, press freedom, and social justice, framing the intellectual environment necessary for women's socio-economic participation. His emphasis on rationality, gender equality, and religious reform reflected a vision of a modernized society where women's roles transcended traditional confines.

Contemporary scholarship contextualizes Roy's contributions within the broader colonial framework which, despite its exploitative nature, unintentionally created institutional and legal infrastructures that modern women entrepreneurs build upon (Guarnieri & Rainer, 2021; Believe & Aaron). Siddique (2015) offers a socio-economic theoretical framework highlighting the crucial nexus between historical institutional change and women's entrepreneurship development in South Asia. Recent studies (Sunil & Sudha, 2024) further explore how entrepreneurial ventures by women are central to sustainable development goals, linking economic empowerment to wider social progress.

Key elements that influenced societal frameworks during British rule are highlighted in research on Indian colonial history, including social reform movements, missionary education, and legal restructuring. On the other hand, current empowerment initiatives, digital inclusion, and skill development are the main topics of studies on women entrepreneurs. Scholarship that combines these historical influences with contemporary entrepreneurial empowerment is noticeably lacking, though. This connection is based on two theoretical stances: Feminist Economics, which sees empowerment as a dynamic process rooted in structural access to rights, knowledge, and participation in public life, and Historical Institutionalism, which maintains that colonial-era institutions continue to influence social and economic conditions long after they were founded. Using these frameworks, the study makes the argument that women's entrepreneurship in India is not just a late 20th-century event but rather the result of long-standing structural changes that started during British colonial rule.

4. Colonial Era Drivers That Enabled Women Entrepreneurship

4. 1 Legislative Reforms and Women's Rights

A number of legislative reforms implemented by the British

colonial government in India profoundly changed the legal standing and social rights of women. Abolition of sati in 1829, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, and the Age of Consent Act of 1891 are important examples. Despite the fact that these laws were not specifically created to encourage women to start their own businesses, they gradually improved women's freedom, mobility, and property rights. These legislative reforms created the groundwork for later advancements in women's involvement in business and economic decision-making.

4. 2 Modern Education and Female Literacy

A major change in female education occurred during the 19th century when mission schools, English-medium institutions, and women's colleges were established in India under British colonial rule. Particularly focusing on women's education, missionary endeavours like the Zenana missions offered basic literacy and vocational training while progressively increasing access to more general subjects like science, history, and languages. Despite their initial conversion-focused goal, these educational programs helped dismantle gender stereotypes and allowed women to learn new skills, enter the workforce, and start small businesses or careers. It would not have been possible for educated women entrepreneurs to systematically rise in India without these fundamental educational reforms.

4. 3 Social Reform and the Public Presence of Women

In 19th-century India, social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Jyotiba Phule, and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar challenged regressive social norms and pushed for legislative and educational changes, sparking important discussions on women's status. By supporting legal reforms and fighting for women's education and property rights, Raja Ram Mohan Roy's unrelenting campaigns against customs like sati, child marriage, and the purdah system set the stage for women's empowerment. Women leaders who pushed the limits of conventional gender roles included Sarojini Naidu, Pandita Ramabai, and Annie Besant. They became emblems of women's involvement in public life. Together, these social reform initiatives raised women's profile in the public eye and paved the way for Indian society to embrace them as active participants in the economy, which in turn paved the way for their subsequent engagement in entrepreneurship.

4. 5 The Use of Institutional Infrastructure Today

The institutional infrastructure established during British colonial rule in India, including banks, courts, commercial laws, urban municipalities, and administrative systems, continues to shape the modern Indian business environment. Contemporary government schemes such as MUDRA, Stand-Up India, and Stree Shakti operate within these inherited institutional frameworks. Despite their colonial origins, these structures provide the administrative and legal foundation essential for the functioning and regulation of entrepreneurship and commerce in India today.

5. Post-Independence Acceleration of Women Entrepreneurship

Four main factors contributed to India's notable increase in female entrepreneurship after independence. First, gender equality was legally supported by the equal rights guarantees found in the constitution. The second was the shift from welfare to empowerment brought about by women's development programs that began in the 1970s. These programs, such as the Prime Minister's Rojgar Yojana and Entrepreneurship Development Programs, focused on skill development, credit access, and institutional support. Third, economic liberalization in 1991 opened up new markets, allowing female entrepreneurs to operate in a variety of industries. Fourth, after 2000, digital transformation made it easier to access online platforms for networking, e-commerce, and finance, which increased women's economic participation even more. Collectively, these elements made historically underrepresented women prominent businesswomen, significantly increasing their influence in both urban and rural economies.

6. Conceptual Framework

Historical Pathway from Colonial Reform to Women Entrepreneurship



The conceptual framework depicted in the diagram provides a historical trajectory that explains the evolution of women's entrepreneurship in India. It all started with changes made to the legal and educational systems during the British era. Social attitudes regarding women's roles gradually changed as a result of these structural adjustments. Following independence, specific policy assistance encouraged women's economic engagement even more, which led to the rise and growth of female entrepreneurs. This framework highlights that modern women's entrepreneurship is the outcome of interconnected legal, social, and policy transformations spanning both colonial and post-independence periods in India.

7. Implications

This study has a number of significant ramifications for future research, policy, and investigation:

Academic Value

Instead of considering women's entrepreneurship as a purely contemporary phenomenon, the framework gives existing literature on the subject historical depth by linking its origins to colonial legal, educational, and institutional reforms. This encourages interdisciplinary approaches, merging gender studies, institutional theory, and colonial history to enrich scholarly understanding of women's economic empowerment.

Policy Significance

Findings highlight the long-term benefits of educational and legal reforms for women's empowerment. Policies must address long-

term structural disparities resulting from past institutional arrangements, such as access to property, credit, and public life, in addition to skill development, in order to effectively support entrepreneurship.

Potential Directions for Future Research

This research creates opportunities for: quantitative tests to determine whether areas with more robust colonial reforms now have more female entrepreneurs. Studying early post-independence women entrepreneurs through oral history captures stories that are frequently overlooked in quantitative research. Comparative research examining the effects of Portuguese, French, and British colonialism on women entrepreneurs in various nations aids in extrapolating results and comprehending global trends. The importance of considering women's entrepreneurship from a historical, structural, and comparative perspective is highlighted by these implications, which also help to ensure that future interventions are inclusive and long-lasting.

8. Conclusion

It is common to characterize the expansion of women-led businesses in India as a recent development. On the other hand, historical analysis makes it clear that colonial-era legal, educational, and social interventions serve as the institutional foundation. Despite its lack of intention, the British Raj's reforms unintentionally upended social structures and increased opportunities for women to participate in the economy. These foundations were later strengthened by post-independence policies, resulting in the flourishing environment for women entrepreneurs that exists today.

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