



The Saraswat Brahmin community played a pioneering role in trade, business, and literacy in India since the 12th century. The community is a part of the Hindu Brahmins, spread over different regions of the country including Kashmir in the north, Konkan in the west, and Kerala in the south. It has been said that they used to live near the Saraswati river from the Rigvedic era, and they migrated in parts from the Punjab-Haryana area towards the Konkan region, Goa, and Karnataka. Saraswat Brahmins speak Konkani under the regional dialects of Goan Konkani, Canarese Konkani, and Maharashtrian Konkani. People from this community often had high posts in the courts of the Shilahara, Hoysala, Vijayanagara, Keladi, and Songa kingdoms.

The women in the Saraswat Brahmin community enjoyed more independence than other communities. One of the earliest mentions of philanthropy by a Saraswat woman was in 1113 A.D., when Sahajadevi, the wife of a Kulhana Ravuta from the court of Hoysalas, had constructed a temple dedicated to Goddess Mahalaxmi at Doddagaddavalli on the Hassan-Belur road. It was the first temple constructed in the Hoysala style of architecture. Nadghar Shanti of Mudbhaddkal and Awadabai of Mallapur were famous saintly devotees of the early 19th century who wrote various devotional compositions in Kannada and Marathi.

Dr. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, born in a Saraswat Brahmin family in Mangalore, Karnataka, was most remembered as a social reformer and the first Indian woman to stand for elections in the Madras presidency. Umabai Kundapur was a Seva Dal captain, a branch of the Indian National Congress, in 1922 and participated in the freedom struggle, because of which she was imprisoned and tortured by the British. She established the Bhagini Samaj to help rural women's upliftment during the British Raj (Kamat 2000).



Another Saraswat stalwart who established the first Co-operative Housing Society in India was Rao Bahadur Shripad Subrao Talmaki. He was a social reformer known as the Father of the Co-operative movement in India (Kowshik 2010). He also set up the Shamrao Vithal Co-operative Bank Limited in 1906, now known as the SVC Co-operative Bank, named after his guru Shamrao Vithal Kaikini. Later, on 25th March 1915, he established the Saraswat Co-operative Housing Society in Gamdevi. It is now known as the oldest Co-operative Housing Society in Asia. It celebrated its centennial in 2015. Lord Wellington visited the building on 25th February 1916. He wrote in the guest book, "I visited with Mr Orr this new effort in the co-operative movement and was pleased to see comfortable homes well built and at reasonable rents, giving every prospect of it proving (to be) a successful enterprise. I wish it all success and shall look forward to its development with much interest" (Shelar 2014).



The Society also gave a platform for women by establishing the Saraswat Mahila Samaj in 1917. Sitabai Padbidri and Shantabai Sirur set it up first as a way for women, who were mostly housewives, to meet, discuss their daily lives, and make small products to sell and become independent. The Samaj started a small Swadeshi store, which eventually developed into a production unit of household items, thus helping the women to supplement their household incomes during the freedom struggle. Padbidri aimed to find a permanent home for this establishment, and the Devrao Shivram Ubhaykar Balak Vrinda School later started and conducted by the Samaj. The committee supported a lot of young girls and women. It helped them stand on their own feet. Padbidri received a silver salver for her efforts and guidance during the Silver Jubilee celebrations of the Samaj, held in 1942 ("The Late Smt Sitabai Padbidri", 2013).

Another achievement of the Saraswat Mahila Samaj is their book on culinary masterpieces, Rasachandrika, published in 1943 for the first time. The book provides detailed insights into advice and guidance regarding the observance of Hindu religious days and festivals, as well as the traditional preparation of foods. The elders of the joint family imparted this wisdom (Saraswat 1991 : 220). The book was authored by Kalyanibai Samsi, a freedom fighter and one of the Presidents of the Mahila Samaj. The recipes, compiled by her mother-in-law Ambabai Samsi, had passed from one generation to the next of the Chitrapur Saraswat community. Saraswat cuisine generally uses local products such as coconut and mango, and it can include fish, mutton, and eggs, but not chicken generally. The book also contains home remedies that have been tried and tested for various ailments (Samsi 1943). This literary masterpiece is a part of the Home Science course's syllabus at Marathwada University and holds a special place in the library of the Samaj. ("Smt. Kalyanibai Samsi - Dedicated Social Worker", 2013).

Over the years, the Saraswat Mahila Samaj has persevered in upholding the traditions and practices of its predecessors, infused with a contemporary touch. Groups of women regularly meet to sing bhajans composed by Kalyanibai Samsi and other women writers from the community. However, after the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, these classes continue through online meetings. While some younger members of the community may not express significant interest in the activities of the Samaj, the elders continue to demonstrate the same level of zeal and enthusiasm they had in their youth. They proactively arrange various events within their community hall and make it available for rental purposes for hosting ceremonies like weddings and birthday celebrations. Their YouTube channel is updated regularly with these events, such as Foundation Day celebrations, Diwali programmes, music performances and talent shows (Kodial 2023). The Saraswat Mahila Samaj has been a close-knit group encouraging women through countless generations.



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