

**EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY:  
CONSTRAINTS AND EMPOWERMENT IN KRUPABAI  
SATTHINADHAN'S "SAGUNA"**

**BIO-STATEMENT**

Myself Deva Nanda RJ currently in my second year of post graduation in English Language and Literature at Central University of Karnataka. Passionate about academic excellence and research and I am dedicated to advancing knowledge in the field of my studies.

**DEVA NANDA R J**

**II Year POST GRADUATE STUDENT**

**CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KARNATAKA**

**GULBARGA**

**Abstract:** The semi-autobiographical book "*Saguna: A Story of a Native Christian Life*" by Krupabai Sathianadhan is a seminal piece of Indian feminist writing. It describes the story of Saguna, a girl who converted to Christianity from a Brahmin household, and was published in 1895. Through her story, Krupabai addresses issues of religious conversion, gender inequality, and the fight for women's autonomy and education in colonial India. Saguna's trip is a reflection of the larger shifts in society brought by Christian missionaries who promoted female education. Saguna's quest for education and empowerment, in spite of the socio-religious obstacles she encounters, is a prime example of defiance against patriarchal limitations. This story, which emphasises the continued challenges and advancements in female education in contemporary India, is still relevant. The lasting impact of Krupabai's work emphasises how crucial it is to keep working to remove obstacles to girls' education so they can be empowered and treated equally in all social, cultural, and religious situations.

**Keywords:** *Krupabai Sathianadhan, Saguna, Indian feminist literature, women's education, religious conversion, colonial India, Christian missionaries, gender discrimination, empowerment, patriarchal society, cultural norms, literacy rates, educational barriers, socio-religious challenges, feminist resistance.*

## INTRODUCTION

The first female Indian author who wrote an autobiography in English was Krupabai Sathianadhan. Krupabai came from a family that was Brahmin at first, but gradually became Christian and is one of the earliest families in India to convert to Christianity. She was looked after for a while by two European women following the passing of her father and elder brother. After completing boarding school in Bombay, Krupabai was awarded a scholarship to study medicine at Madras Medical College, which was the first medical school in India to accept female students. Unfortunately, her poor health and melancholy forced her to depart. Later she went on to work as a writer and teacher.

"*Saguna: A Story of a Native Christian Life*," her semi-autobiographical book, is about a girl growing up in a radically different culture. Saguna, the first English-language autobiographical novel by an Indian woman, was published in 1895. The author depicts the experience of growing up in a family that has recently converted to Christianity, breaking away from traditional Hindu ideas, and the ensuing schizophrenic struggle for stability through the tale of a rebellious adolescent caught between the old and the new. The inclusion of Saguna's mother Radha, an orthodox Hindu child bride who later converts to Christianity through her husband and must adjust to her new identity, heightens the poignancy of the story. The life that young women had to lead after getting married and relocating into their husbands' homes was covered by Sathianadhan in *Saguna*. The treatment of women was the primary issue she covered in the book, which was a result of the forced labour they did-slaving over a hot stove, sweeping and maintaining the house immaculate. After publication, her writing was hidden from public view

for decades before resurfacing when feminist and postcolonial theories gained traction. The notion of "the new Indian woman" was introduced by Krupabai, primarily through her literature and the subjects she addressed, such as discrimination, home life, and female education. She critiqued both Brahminical casteism and white racism in her writings. She was a real voice for women since she alluded to the socioreligious, patriarchal, and gender-discriminatory attitudes that were pervasive at the period

### ***Saguna-The Journey of Indian Woman***

The preface of the book opens with the author stating her intention to "present a faithful picture of the experiences and thoughts of a simple Indian girl,". In the beginning personal details are revealed to us following Krupabai's level of education and study during a period when these things were unusual for women. One of fourteen siblings, Saguna/Krupabai was born in Ahmednagar to the first Brahmin converts to Christianity. After her father passed away too soon, her three older sisters were married, and she was left alone at home with four boys. Bhasker, the oldest brother, had a profound and long-lasting effect on Saguna when she was younger. When Saguna was thirteen, he passed away, and it crushed her. She was cared by two European women for a while and when she recovered, exposing her to British customs. She later went to boarding school in Bombay, where she excelled academically and became interested in medicine. Even though she had been given a scholarship to go to medical school in England, her ill health and the patriarchal culture of the time prevented her from accepting the offer. She subsequently enrolled at Madras Medical College, the first medical school in India to admit female students, but regrettably, despair and poor health prompted her to give up her medical career. She met and fell in love with Samuel Sattianadhan, a reverend's son, in 1881 after he had returned from an English university. Although the book closes with their marriage, Krupabai continued on in her life to pursue careers as a writer and teacher. She started a tiny school for Muslim girls and taught in zenanas because she was a strong advocate for females' education. Her travelogues, essays, poems, and fiction were first published posthumously in *Miscellaneous Writings of Krupabai Sattianadhan* after they were initially published in regional journals, magazines, and newspapers.

In the first section of her autobiography, Sattianadhan describes her mother's early years. When we first meet Saguna's mother Radha, she resides in her older brother's home with her frail little brother and an aged father. Her sister-in-law is a cruel, cynical person who frequently loses her anger. Radha silently takes all of her beatings and works as a slave for her day and night. Sattianadhan goes to great lengths to emphasise that other young girls were also compelled to perform household chores for their families, in addition to Radha. The two fundamental topics of the book are the treatment of women and the Christian faith which are set up by early depiction of the life of young Hindu girls.

Radha's bad luck doesn't stop when she is made to move in with her husband's family. Her mother-in-law is a harsh, conceited individual. Radha is shown as a vulnerable and defenseless young woman who lacks autonomy and is entirely dependent on other people. Her birth religion and her sexual orientation are the two things that upset her the most." While her treatment of Radha was objectionable from an outsider's perspective, we also have to consider the Hindu perception of a

daughter-in-law as a lying, screaming wretch who is always willing to cause trouble for her mother-in-law, stealing the affections of a good and obedient son when she can, and turning into a serpent on those who fed and clothed her." "What is the use of learning for a girl?" her mother once asked her. She continued that a girl only needed to know how to take care of the house and cook for her future spouse.

"Poor girls? What can we expect from such impoverished, stunted minds?" asks Krupabai.

This displays the sophisticated, civilized mind screaming or looking down on it pitifully as a remnant of barbarism, and the highly educated countrymen still consider that the daughters of India don't need any improvement. However, Saguna, like Krupabai, was able to pursue her education because her parents had become Christians, and she received particular encouragement from her elder brother. Nonetheless, her curiosity brought her into contact with the foreign missionaries' culture. She soon discovered that she would be chastised for not being spiritual enough if she did not admire their middle-class evangelical ideals.

The story of Saguna demonstrates how Christian missionaries changed the educational landscape for women in southern India. Many missionaries in the 19th century may have been charged with cultural insensitivity. Mary Ann Aldersey served as a prime illustration. In the West, giving girls and women access to education and career prospects will, in fact, empower them and provide them with the ultimate freedom of choice. Driven by their humanitarian and religious convictions, these missionaries founded a large number of educational institutions, specifically for the purpose of teaching girls. They brought in Western education, placing a strong emphasis on moral instruction, vocational training, baking, and writing. In an area where traditional conventions frequently hindered female education, prominent personalities like Amy Carmichael and organizations like the Church Mission Society played key roles in fighting for the education of females. In addition to raising women's literacy rates, this movement helped advance more significant social reforms that challenged gender inequality and empowered women.

Saguna's path was clearly defined by the initiatives of missionaries who broke down barriers to traditional gender roles by establishing schools and promoting education for girls. Through her character, the story illustrates how Christian missionary efforts encouraged societal transformation in the region by inspiring a generation of Indian women to pursue knowledge and independence and by making education more accessible to women. Saguna's decision to convert to Christianity has had a significant effect on her academic path. Her intellectual and personal development is influenced by the way religious studies and general education are combined at missionary schools, which gives her a sense of purpose and empowerment. An important turning point in her life is her baptism, which represents her dedication to her studies and her beliefs. Saguna finds encouragement in the Christian community to pursue her goals of study. This support gives her a sense of validation and belonging in a community where women's education is not frequently appreciated. She forms a strong sense of solidarity and mutual support with the Christian girls she interacts with at the missionary school (Sathianadhan, 1887, p. 95). Saguna could say, "A magic wand seemed to have touched and transformed everything around me," once she and her Western teachers had developed a stronger understanding of one another. Later, she goes on to say that education made her 'free of the chains that held me and independent. I was therefore deliriously joyful, much like a slave whose freedom had just been bought'. From this, it is clearly evident that the system prevailed and chained the lives of young girls and women.

On the other hand, the education and conversion of women to Christianity were often met with distrust and contempt in traditional Indian society, especially in Hindu communities. The animosity and exclusion Saguna's family faces from her community serves as a reminder of the social norms she must overcome (Saththianadhan, 1887, pp. 70–72). But she didn't feel as though she had to give up her own culture. In one instance, a young Indian man who had studied in England felt that full Westernization was the only path forward for Indians. She angrily rejected him. When Krupabai stayed with W. S. Saththianadhan and his wife Anna, there was a clear sense of relief. She traveled to Madras to become the first Indian woman to study medicine at Madras University, and Saththianadhan met her at the Madras station. He struck her right away as a father figure.

Krupabai discovered a young man. Samuel, who attended a British university, was the son of the Saththianadhan. He also urged her to pursue her intellectual goals and desires. Later, they were married, and because of her poor health, which prevented her from advancing in her medical career, it did not stop her from writing. With Saguna, she became the first Indian woman to write an English-language novel. Her early death in 1894 ended their lovely marriage. Saguna has to negotiate a patriarchal culture that places severe restrictions on women's freedoms and gender responsibilities. Her search for knowledge and her commitment to religion turned into acts of resistance that changed social mores and provided room for her agency. She is an excellent example of this resistance because of her resolve to finish her studies in spite of social rejection and her family's financial difficulties. Saguna's journey might be interpreted as a fight for empowerment and autonomy from a feminist perspective. Her quest to assert her uniqueness and free herself from patriarchal limitations is entwined with her education and conversion.

## CONCLUSION

A key piece of Indian feminist writing, the book beautifully portrays her inner tensions and ambitions. "Saguna" uses education and conversion as a metaphor for more general themes of empowerment and personal change. They stand for Saguna's struggle against social pressure to pursue her dreams of self-actualization and education. Her struggle for intellectual and spiritual independence is marked by her persistence in going to school in spite of many challenges.

Millions of women in India are unfortunately illiterate today. Approximately 67% of the illiterate adults worldwide are believed to be female. Despite their cultural disorientation, the Western missionaries who established the first girls' schools in Africa, China, and India demonstrated the critical role that education played in empowering women. In summary, Krupabai Saththianadhan's depiction of Saguna's journey in "Saguna" offers significant insights into the relationship between religious restrictions, cultural norms, and female education in both ancient and modern India. We witness the ongoing fight of women against cultural norms and patriarchal systems that impede their access to personal autonomy and education through Saguna's story.

Despite achievements in improving educational opportunities and gender equality, modern India still faces similar difficulties. Religious barriers present serious obstacles for girls who want to pursue higher education outside of traditional roles. But Sathianadhan's portrayal of Saguna's tenacity and defiance acts as a timeless reminder of how education can break down these barriers. Recent studies have proven that the literacy rate among girls aged 7 and above remained lower than that of males. Dropout rates are high, especially for females from underprivileged backgrounds. More from states like Rajasthan and Bihar. Educational judgments are still influenced by conservative readings of religious texts and customs. For instance, cultural traditions in regions like Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, which have strong religious conservatism, prevent families from sending their daughters to school.

These data can provide clarity on the complex relationships that shape women's prospects in India today between education, religious constraints, and societal norms. Even though there has been progress, efforts are still required to address lingering issues and guarantee that all girls, regardless of their religious or cultural background, have fair access to education. Cultural sensitivity must be taken into consideration, and religious communities must be included in initiatives to support girls' education that combine academic learning with empowerment programs customized for local situations.

Moreover, Saguna's adoption of Christianity in the book highlights the historical and contemporary contributions made by religious organizations to the advancement of women's access to higher education. Christian missionary schools have been essential in part because they remove obstacles and give girls opportunities for intellectual and personal development. India can keep moving forward towards a future where every girl has the chance to succeed academically and make a significant contribution to society by taking inspiration from Saguna's experience. Maintaining Krupabai Sathianadhan's legacy requires constant lobbying, legislative changes, and community involvement to make sure that education turns into a symbol of female emancipation that transcends religious and cultural boundaries. India can achieve its goal of providing justice and equality to all of its residents by implementing these measures.

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STUDENT

M.A ENGLISH

CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KARNATAKA

KADAGANCHI, GULBARGA