



Women, Caste and Reform

Status of Women:

Two hundred years ago, the situation of women was altogether different compared to in the modern times. The practice of child marriage was rampant. Both Hindu and Muslim men could marry more than one wife. Burning of a widow on her husband's pyre was a gory practice in many parts of India. This was called the sati system. A widow who died in this manner was praised as a woman of high virtues. Women did not have the right to property. Most of the women had no access to education.

Status of Shudras:

People were divided along the caste lines. Brahmins and Kshatriyas were considered as the upper castes. Traders and moneylenders were placed after them. Peasants and artisans came at the third level. People who did the so called "dirty" jobs were called the shudras. People at the bottom of this hierarchy were treated as "untouchable". They could not enter temples, nor take water from wells (used by upper castes), bathe in ponds which were meant for the upper castes.

Working Towards Change

Effect of Print Technology: From the early nineteenth century, books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets began to be printed in India. Printing enhanced the access of knowledge to the masses because printed material was much cheaper than manuscripts. Ordinary people could now read various texts and many of them could write to express their ideas in their own languages. People could debate all kinds of issues; like social, political, economic and religious. Such discussions could reach out to a wider public and could bring social change.

Debates about social reforms were usually initiated by various Indian reformers and reform groups.

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833):

Raja Rammohun Roy was a pioneer social reformer. He founded the Brahmo Sabha in Calcutta. Later, it came to be known as the Brahmo Samaj. He thought that unjust practices should be done away with and the society should be changed for a better future. He promoted women's education. He began a campaign against the practice of sati. He quoted ancient texts to develop his arguments so that people could listen. It was because of Rammohun Roy's efforts that the British banned the practice of sati in 1829.





Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar:

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was also from Bengal. He also used ancient texts to convince people against social evils. He worked towards widow remarriage. Based on his suggestions, the British officials passed the widow remarriage law in 1856.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, the widow remarriage movement spread to other parts of the country. Veerasalingam Pantulu was a reformer in the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency. He formed an association for widow remarriage. Many young intellectuals in Bombay also worked for the same cause. Swami Dayanand Saraswati also supported widow remarriage. He founded the Arya Samaj.

In spite of all these efforts the number of widow remarriage was quite low. Those; who married often faced problems as they were not accepted by the society.

Girls begin going to school

Many reformers promoted girls' education as a means to improve the condition of women. Vidyasagar set up schools for girls in Calcutta. Many other reformers set up schools for girls in Bombay.

Initially, people were skeptical about girls' school. They thought that education would pollute the minds of the girls. They also feared the schools would take away the girls from home and away from their domestic duties.

Throughout the nineteenth century, most educated women were taught at home by liberal men in their families. Some of the women taught themselves as well.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj established girls' schools in Punjab. Similarly, Jyotirao Phule established girls' schools in Maharashtra.

In North India, Muslim women from aristocratic families learnt to read the Koran in Arabic. For them, women used to come home to teach. Mumtaz Ali was among the social reformers who interpreted the verses from the Koran to argue for women's education.

From the early twentieth century, some Muslim women played important role in women's education. The Begums of Bhopal; for example; founded primary schools for girls at Aligarh. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta.

By the 1880s, Indian women began to enter universities. Some of them became doctors, some became teachers. Many women became writers and published their critical views on the status women in society.





Tarabai Shinde was from Poona. She got education at home. She had authored a book, *Stripurushtulna* which means 'A Comparison between Women and Men'. She criticized the social differences based on gender; in her book.

Pandit Ramabai was a great scholar of Sanskrit. She wrote about the miserable lives of upper caste Hindu women. She founded a widows' home at Poona. Widows who had been badly treated by their husbands' families were provided shelter at the widows' home. They were also trained so that they could sustain themselves economically.

From the early twentieth century, women began to form political pressure groups. They worked for female suffrage, and health and education for women. From the 1920s, some of them also joined different nationalist and socialist movements.

Nationalist leaders; like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose supported the demands for greater equality and freedom for women. They assured of universal adult franchise after the independence.

Law against child marriage: Child marriage was rampant in the society. Many Indian legislators in the Central Legislative Assembly worked towards making a law to prevent this practice. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929. The minimum age for marriage was fixed at 18 for men and 16 for women. This was subsequently amended to 21 for men and 18 for women.

CASTE AND SOCIAL REFORM

Raja Rammohun Roy quoted the ancient Buddhist text to criticize the caste system. Prarthana Samaj followed the Bhakti tradition which believed in spiritual equality of all castes. The Paramhans Mandali was founded in Bombay in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste. Most of these reformers and members of these associations were from upper castes. They usually violated caste taboos regarding food and touch in secret meetings.

During nineteenth century, Christian missionaries started setting up schools for tribal groups and lower caste children. Education gave them a tool to change their world. At the same time, many poor began to migrate to cities in search of jobs. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. Work in the new locations gave them an opportunity to get rid of the oppression which they suffered at the hands of upper-caste people back in their villages.

There were other job opportunities as well. For example; the army offered many opportunities. The father of B R Ambedkar was a teacher at an army school. Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar caste; an untouchable caste in Maharashtra.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, people from the Non-Brahman castes also began to organize movements against caste discrimination.





The Satnami movement in Central India was founded by Ghasidas. He worked among the leatherworkers and organized a movement to improve their social status.

Haridas Thakur's Matua sect worked in eastern Bengal. He worked among the Chandala cultivators.

Shri Naryana Guru was a guru from Ezhava caste in the modern day Kerala. He argued against unequal treatment of people on the basis of caste. He believed that all human beings belonged to the same caste.

Gulamgiri

Jyotirao Phule was one of the most vocal amongst the low caste leaders. He was born in 1827. He studied in Christian missionary school. He attacked the Brahmans' claim to superiority. He argued that the Aryans were foreigners who subjugated the true children of the country. He said that the upper caste had no right to land and power and the land belonged to the low caste people who were the original inhabitants of the land in the peninsula. Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj to promote caste equality. He wrote a book named Gulamgiri; in 1873. He dedicated his book to all those Americans who had fought against slavery.

Who could enter temples?

Ambedkar had led many movements to get the right of temple entry for the dalits. The dalits were not allowed to enter into the temples. Ambedkar led three such movements between 1927 and 1935.

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker came from a middle class family. He was also called as Periyar. He used to be a member of the Congress. But when he saw seating arrangements on caste affiliations during one of the feasts organized by the Congress, he left it in disgust. After that, Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement. He felt that untouchables were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture. He felt that all religious authorities saw social divisions and inequality as something which was God-given. Hence, untouchables had to free themselves from all religions if they were to achieve social equality.





Question – 1- What social ideas did the following people support?

Rammohun Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Veerasalingam Pantulu, Jyotirao Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Periyar, Mumtaz Ali and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar

Answer:

- a. Rammohun Roy: Ban on sati
- b. Dayanand Saraswati: Widow remarriage
- c. Veerasalingam Pantulu: Widow remarriage
- d. Jyotirao Phule: Caste inequality
- e. Pandita Ramabai: Ill treatment of widows
- f. Periyar: Caste inequality
- g. Mumtaz Ali: Women's education
- h. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar: Widow remarriage

Question – 2 - State whether true or false:

- a. When the British captured Bengal they framed many new laws to regulate the rules regarding marriage, adoption, inheritance of property, etc.
- b. Social reformers had to discard the ancient texts in order to argue for reform in social practices.
- c. Reformers got full support from all sections of the people of the country.
- d. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1829.

Answer: (a) False, (b) False, (c) False, (d) False

Question – 3 - How did the knowledge of ancient texts help the reformers promote new laws?

Answer: Various social reformers used ancient texts to convince the people about the need for abolishing certain social evils. Quotation from ancient texts gave weight to their arguments.

Question – 4 - What were the different reasons people had for not sending girls to school?

Answer: Initially, people were skeptical about girls' school. They thought that education would pollute the minds of the girls. They also feared the schools would take away the girls from home and away from their domestic duties.





Question – 5 - Why were Christian missionaries attacked by many people in the country? Would some people have supported them too? If so, for what reasons?

Answer: Christian missionaries opened schools for tribal and lower caste children. Caste based segregation was not being followed in the schools which were run by Christian missionaries. Hence, many orthodox people attacked the missionaries. Social reformers would have supported the missionaries for their work against social evils.

Question – 6 - In the British period, what new opportunities opened up for people who came from castes that were regarded as “low”?

Answer: Education gave them a tool to change their world. At the same time, many poor began to migrate to cities in search of jobs. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. Work in the new locations gave them an opportunity to get rid of the oppression which they suffered at the hands of upper-caste people back in their villages. Moreover, the army also offered job opportunities.

Question – 7 - How did Jyotirao and some other reformers justify their criticism of caste inequality in society?

Answer: He attacked the Brahmans' claim to superiority. He argued that the Aryans were foreigners who subjugated the true children of the country. He said that the upper caste had no right to land and power and the land belonged to the low caste people who were the original inhabitants of the land in the peninsula. Many other social reformers used the same logic to promote caste equality.

Question – 8 - Why did Phule dedicate his book Gulamgiri to the American movement to free slaves?

Answer: The Civil Rights Movement in America helped in ending slavery and racial discrimination. Hence Phule dedicated his book Gulamgiris to the movement.

Question – 9 - What did Ambedkar want to achieve through the temple entry movement?

Answer: The dalits were not allowed entry into the temples. It was like denying them one of the basic rights, i.e. equal access to a public place. By organizing the temple entry movement, Ambedkar wanted to regain self respect for the dalits.





Question – 10 - Why were Jyotirao Phule and Ramaswamy Naicker critical of the national movement? Did their criticism help the national struggle in any way?

Answer: He used to be a member of the Congress. But when he saw seating arrangements on caste affiliations during one of the feasts organized by the Congress, he left it in disgust. While nothing is mentioned in this chapter on this issue, we can make some assumptions. After the return of Mahatma Gandhi from South Africa, issues about untouchables became focus of debate by the nationalist leaders. Hence, it can be said that movements by Phule and Periyar must have helped in shaping the opinion of nationalist leaders.

