

Women, Caste and Reform

Till the 19th century, the condition of Indian women was deplorable. Their condition was pathetic, which was manifested in various social evils such as child marriage, female infanticide, sati system, etc.

Raja Rammohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj were pioneers in championing the emancipation of women.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Rabindranath Tagore, Derozio, Begum Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain, all worked for the emancipation of women.

A number of women associations were formed which created social consciousness and also voiced public opinion on certain important issues related to women.

About two hundred years ago our society was not as it is now. It had imposed many barriers on women. They could not go to school, they could not marry according to their wilt etc. In some parts of the country, sati pratha existed and widows were praised if they chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands.

The society that existed in those days was also caste-based. People were divided along lines of caste. Brahmans and Kshatriyas were considered as upper caste. After them traders and moneylenders were placed. Then came peasants and artisans. At the lowest rung were those whose job was to keep cities and villages clean. There were also untouchables, who were considered inferior by the so called upper-caste people.

Things have been greatly changed now. Women are now enjoying better position in every field. They are getting high education, and are doing jobs after that. Though caste-feeling is not completely rooted out, but its intensity has been minimized considerably.

What positive changes we see in our society have not occurred overnight. It took long years to take place.

From the early 19th century, debates and discussions began to take place in order to root out the evils that had crippled our society for years. These debates were often initiated by Indian reformers and reform groups.

Raja Rammohun Roy was one such reformer. He founded the Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta.

He wanted to spread Western education in the country. He advocated for women education. He strongly disapproved the system of sati. Many British officials also criticised Indian traditions and customs. They supported Raja Rammohun Roy. Finally sati pratha was banned in 1829.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was a great social reformer. He favoured widow re-marriage. British officials supported his cause and passed a law in 1856 that permitted widows to re-marry. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, founder of Arya Samaj, also supported widow re-marriage.

These reformers felt that in order to improve the condition of women it was necessary to educate them. For this purpose several schools were opened for girls by the efforts of Vidyasagar and other reformers.

People reacted sharply against sending girls to schools. Hence, they were taught at homes throughout the 19th century.

In aristocratic Muslim families in North India, women learnt to read the Koran in Arabic. They were taught by women who came home to teach.

Muslim women like the Begums of Bhopal did a lot for the promotion of education among women.

They set up a primary school for girls at Aligarh.

Begum Rolceya Sakhawat Hossain also opened schools for Muslim girls in places like Patna and Calcutta.

By the 1880s, Indian women began to take university education. Some of them trained to be doctors while some became teachers. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the status of women in society. For instance, Tarabai Shinde published a book named Stripurushtulna.

Pandita Ramabai wrote a book about the pathetic condition of upper-caste Hindu widows. She set up a widow home at Poona in order to give shelter to widows.

Orthodox Hindus and Muslims became worried about all these changes.

However, women ultimately began to enjoy greater freedom. And from the 1920s, some of them even joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements.

Caste inequalities had crippled our society. Reformers made sincere efforts to root out these evils from society. In Bombay, the Paramhans Mandali was founded in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste.

During the course of the 19th century, Christian missionaries became active. They set up schools for tribal groups and lower caste children.

But at the same time, the people from low caste, in order to get rid of the exploitation from upper-caste, began to migrate to cities where there was new demand for labour.

People belonging to lower castes began to organise movements from the second half of the 19th century against caste discrimination. They demanded social equality and justice. In this connection we can mention the Satnami Movement in central India, initiated by Ghasidas who came from a low caste.

In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur's Matua sect worked among low caste Chandala cultivators. Haridas questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system.

Jyotirao Phule, also a low-caste leader, attacked the Brahmans, claim that they were superior to others, since they were Aryans.

He proposed that Shudras (labouring castes) and Ati Shudras (untouchables) should unite to fight against caste discrimination.x

He founded Satyashodhak Samaj that propogated caste equality. In 1873, he wrote a book named Gulamgiri meaning slavery. _

Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Ramaswami Naicker continued the movement for caste reform in the 20th century.

Ambedkar belonged to a Mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. He remembered how he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground and not allowed to drink water from taps meant for upper-caste children. These systems were very depressing.

In 1927, he started a temple entry movement, which was resented by the Brahman priests.

The non-Brahman movement began in the early 20th century. It was initiated by qualified, and wealthy non-Brahman castes. They challenged Brahmanical claims to power.

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, founded the Self Respect Movement. He inspired untouehables to fight for their dignity and self-respect. He was also a great critic of Hindi scriptures.

Several associations were established and movements started by our reformers in order to make Indian society free from all evils. A glimpse of these associations and movements have been given below.

The Brembo Samaj founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1830 to prohibit all forms of idolatry and sacrifice.

Derozio and Young Bengal – Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a teacher at Hindu College, Calcutta initiated the Young Bengal Movement in the 1820s to promote radical ideas and encourage his students to question all authority.

The Ramakrishna Mission and Vivekananda. Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission to stress the ideals of salvation through social service and selfless action.

The Prarthana Samaj. Established in 1867 at Bombay, the Prarthana Samaj worked for removing caste restrictions, encouraging the education of women, etc.

The Veda Samaj. It was established in 1864. It worked to abolish caste distinctions and promote widow Remarriage and women's education.

The Aligarh Movement. Sayyid Ahmed Khan founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 at Aligarh. It later became famous as the Aligarh Muslim University. The institution offered modern education. It is known as the Aligarh Movement.

The Singh Sabha Movement. This movement sought to free Sikhism from superstitions, caste distinctions and practices seen by them as non-Sikh.

Sati: It means virtuous women. These women chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands.

Untouchable: Untouchables were considered to be the lowest by the upper-caste people. They were denied entry in temples, restaurants, etc.

Gulamgiri: A book written by Jyotirao Phule. It means slavery.

Stripurushtulna: A book published-by Tarabai Shinde. It means a comparison between women and men.

Conservative: Those who want to stick to old traditions and customs and oppose new changes.

Suffrage: The right to vote.

1772-1833 – Raja Rammohun Roy brought a lot reformatations in the Indian society during this period.

1829 – Sati was banned.

1856 – A law was passed to permit widow remarriage.

1875 – The Arya Samaj was founded.

1929 – The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed.

1927-1935 – Ambedkar led three temple entry movements between this period.