

Research Article

## Women and Social Change in Nineteenth Century India

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### ABSTRACT

The quest of women struggle for freedom, equality and right has a long history, Indian women is always suppressed under the prejudices set by the various religious text, and as a result of which she has always been suppressed and received the humiliating treatment. But with the coming of the colonial rule in India and with the influence of the liberal and utilitarian philosophy and the work of the various social reformers who had a scientific temperament, to look at the social problems of the women, this brought radical change in the social condition of the women in the nineteenth century, and the changes definitely brought changes in various dimensions in the life of the women like education, equal rights, reformations in the marriage customs and so on this all has happened in the nineteenth century that is the reason this period is also known as the period of social awakening and social enlightenment, this provided identity and dignity to the women in India.

### Introduction

In the history of India the struggle of women for liberation, equality and justice is the most happening period is the Nineteenth Century period, this period saw the beginning of a new India with liberalism and utilitarianism as her basic principle. Although in the earlier period some attempts were made for the women's, but the real serious concern was showed only in the nineteenth century. The social degradation of women made the social reformers to think regarding, emancipation of women, these social thinkers and reformers appealed to the masses for the social change in India, the first serious steps were taken by the social reformers to awaken the masses (Bayly, 1992)

The period prior to the Nineteenth century, eighteenth century was considered as the darkest period in the history of India, especially if we consider the position of women, Illiteracy was the common lot of all Indian women. Sati, child marriage, polygamy and prostitution flourished as never before. Widow-remarriage was strictly prohibited. Indian women were living in a most deplorable condition. This oppressed situation of Hindu women was regarded by the British as an example of the uncivilized Indians. Interested British scholars, missionaries and bureaucrats had applied European standards and values in judging the position of Indian women. Women were described as tradition bound, religious and submissive, who functions in the limited, oppressive and inhuman environment (Bayly, 1993)

In the nineteenth century, the Indians got influenced by the western philosophy, especially the impact of the western literature made tremendous impact on the mind of the Indian intellectuals; this made them to think of the need to modify traditional mores concerning women. The life of a Hindu woman would adapt to the standards of humanitarianism and rationality, women would be educated and oppressive customs would be proscribed

It is observed by the Social reformers that though the elite Hindus have accepted, the need of change, but in the personal and intimate matters, particularly those relating to women, social customs could only alter according to the percepts of the Hindu religion and tradition. Y.D, Phadke observes, "...though the stimulus for the movement came from outside - through western

ideas - it was deeply rooted in the Indian faith in continuity and evolution, rather than in revolt and sudden change.” (Phadke, 2008)

Historians argued that that the liberal, utilitarian and rationalist ideas have percolated in the Indian psych through the coming of the English education, which started the process of questioning traditionally accepted practices. In the Nineteenth century there was need felt by the reformers to educate the masses especially the women, by education the awareness can be achieved, which will propagate the process of social reform for women. The reforms initiated by these organizations were modern, progressive and reflected their social and political aspirations for India (Heimsath, 1964)

The programme of reform societies was designed to protect and provide for the needs of Indian women. Societies such as the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj established schools for girls. The motivation for starting these schools arose from a desire to defend women of their families against the influence of the Christian missionaries. The women's movement in the early nineteenth century was chiefly concerned with the problems of the upper-class women. The life style of elite Hindu women, their conventions and practices of marriage and widowhood had received wide publicity. While reformers aimed at an overall transformation in the Hindu society, specifically attention was paid to eliminating social evils and inhuman practices which were the cause of the disgraceful condition of women. The reformers of this period concentrated their attention on three important aspects of a woman's life: age of. Marriage, the life of widows and their right to remarry and education. (Saxena, 2017)

### **Sati**

Sati was one of the stark evils of the time. In the medieval time period many of the enlightened Muslim rulers tried their best to forbid the practice of sati without any concrete result, because they thought to rule the country it is better not to indulge with the religion, custom and usage of the Hindus. The British government however, showed indifference in this matter due to their official policy of non-interference in the existing laws of both the Hindus and Muslims. But in the nineteenth century the government could not remain indifferent and the person who activated off the official reforms was Rammohan Roy. Roy has been rightly called the father of modern India. He worked ceaselessly to abolish this social evil by law. (Mani, L. 1998)<sup>6</sup> the number of widows who perished annually in flames was quite considerable and Lord William Bentinck decided to abolish the institution by legislation. Bentinck's convictions were shared not only by Englishmen but also by a good number of enlightened Indians of whom the most important were Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore. In opposition to a large number of orthodox. Hindus who made a daunting representation to the Governor-General against his interference with their right to burn their women, Roy and his associates sent a petition supporting the proposed legislation, stating that sati had no religious sanction but was a growth of the middle ages, and physical force was often used in burning unwilling widows. On the 4<sup>th</sup> December 1829, the famous resolution was passed by which sati was made a crime of culpable homicide punishable with fine, imprisonment, or both (Ibid, 1998)

### **Child Marriage**

The practice of child marriage was institutionalized by the Hindu society for several centuries. The most significant reason was the Shastric injunction that girls were to be married at a young age so that intercourse might take place with the first sign of puberty. ( Wagle, N.K. 1999)<sup>8</sup> Therefore the debate on the right age of marriage was to focus on the interpretation of the Shastras and the religious duty of the parents. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the noted social reformer of the 19th century, devoted his untiring energy against the evils of early marriage. He strongly backed the view that child marriage was the root of the miseries of Indian widows. He said that if it could be checked and a limit on marriage age of Indian girls could be fixed through official enactments, then the condition of Indian women would improve. Another indefatigable social reformer, Keshabchandra Sen actively supported the women's right for better position and earnestly fought for marriage reforms. On the question of child marriage, Keshabchandra voted against the custom and pointed to the Hindu scriptures, which lay down, “so long as a girl does not know how to respect the husband, so long as she is not acquainted with true moral discipline, so long the father should not think of getting her married.” Consequently Government legislation to improve the situation of minor girls resulted in the first Age of Consent Bill, passed in 1860, which made sexual intercourse with a girl less than ten years, a rape. The bill provided only negligible protection. The ideal of complete surrender was so thorough that it would be only the most exceptional girl who would complain. Social reformers such as M.G. Ranade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru, in their attempts to further rise the age of marriage, cited several cases of consummation at the age of ten or eleven which led to serious physical and psychological disturbance. Behramji Malabari brought the problems of legislation controlling the age of marriage of Hindu girls to the forefront. Malabari's newspaper Indian Spectator and the journal East and West were the major literary vehicles for the 'All India Social Reform Movement'. In 1884 the publication of his notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood successfully drew the attention of a wide section of the people and

social reformers to the glaring social evils prevalent in Hindu society. The Government in pursuance of their policy of neutrality and non-interference with the social and religious practices of the people was reluctant to legislate. Official British opinion, with some exception, opposed the legislation (Singh, 2016). The majority of the Indians favoured legislation or some form of deterrent action to restrict child marriages. The Indian social reformers interpreted the government's refusal to legislate as an indirect means of keeping the people backward.

The All India Social Reform Conference led by M.G. Ranade supported the legislation. As a result of the ceaseless efforts of the reformers, in 1891, the Government passed an amendment to the existing Penal Code rising the age of consent from ten to twelve. The passing of the Bill constituted a definite legal support towards women's emancipation from age-old bondage. Reform societies like the Brahmo Samaj and the Aiyā Samaj and eminent families like the Tagores tried to establish a trend by personal example. Though the intelligentsia became aware of the evil effects of child marriage and sympathized with the movement, few tried to defy established social practices or to institute social changes within their family. Hence the practice of child marriage and early consummation continued unabated (Ibid, 1999)

### **Widow Remarriage**

A widow is regarded by the Hindus as an unfortunate and inauspicious woman. From the sixth century onwards the Brahmins and their Shastras had rigidly prohibited widows from remarrying. Manu prohibits widow remarriage, with the exception of those women whose marriage had not been consummated (Ibid, 1999)

When sati was abolished by law, the oppression of then widows became more intensified. The natural consequence of the abolition of sati was the recognition of the right of the widow to remarriage. But in this the British were reluctant to take the initiative. They were inclined to treat the question of widow remarriage as a purely social matter to be decided by Hindus themselves. But the enlightened Hindu public opinion worked incessantly to make legislation possible in this direction, by the sixth decade of the nineteenth century. The movement to improve the position of widows was supported by many social reformers.

Prominent among these were Pandit Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and Maharishi Karve. Vidyasagar who hailed, like Roy, from Bengal championed the cause of the widows. The main obstacle against widow remarriage, according to the orthodox viewpoint, was that it was not sanctioned by the Hindu lawgivers. Vidyasagar published in 1855 a pamphlet entitled 'Remarriage of Hindu Widows' in which he quoted several passages from Hindu scriptures sanctioning widow remarriage and vehemently pleaded for legislation in its favour. The orthodox pandits condemned the pamphlet and its author. They maintained that the alleged permission for widow-marriage was meant for the bygone golden age in which men were good and women virtuous and not for the degenerate Kaliyuga with its evil men and impious women. Vidyasagar pointed out that even Parashara whose code was considered the most authoritative for Kaliyuga permitted widow-remarriage. M.G. Ranade, like Vidyasagar, attempted to convince the orthodox by quoting and interpreting the Shastras. In 1856 the government, despite the protests of the orthodox, passed the Widow Remarriage Act (Ibid, 1999)

The legislation allowed widows to remarry. On their remarriage however, widows lost property rights in the estate of their deceased husbands. For obvious reasons, while legislation for the prevention of sati was successful, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act remained ineffective for a long time. Sati could be stopped by the police but policemen could not arrange the remarriage of widows. Though some organizations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj actively supported widow remarriage and even a 'Widow Remarriage Society' was formed to work as a marriage bureau for widows, it did not find social acceptance. So deep rooted was the prejudice against widow remarriage at the time that even the most vociferous advocates of the reform often evaded the issue, when it came to be a question of their own sons, brothers or themselves marrying widows. An important exception was the son of Vidyasagar who married a widow. Until 1880s local efforts for social reform were organized without much effect on the country as a whole. In 1884 a united social front was developed through the vigorous activities of Behramji Malabari, another untiring social reformer. Though he was not a Sanskrit scholar like Roy or Vidyasagar and nor being a Hindu, Malabari in his book *Niti Vinod* portrayed the sorrows of Hindu widows, with great fervour. His appeal was to the sentiments of all Indians, not merely to the minds of the educated class. He also addressed a note to the Government explaining the ineffectiveness of the Widow Remarriage Act because of the opposition of the orthodox and the general disabilities of widows which prevented them from taking advantage of the law, and stressing the need for doing something positive in the matter. Malabari devoted his life for the uplift of Indian women. In western and northern India, the movement became quite popular due to the vigorous support of Vishnu Shastri Pandit, the translator of Vidyasagar's book in Marathi, with the active backing of reformers like Ranade, K. T. Telang and Gopal Hari Deshmukh (Ibid, 1999)

But the movement of western India differed from that of Vidyasagar's. While Vidyasagar sought government sanction for widow remarriage, Vishnu Shastri desired the sanction of the highest religious authority with jurisdiction in western India, the Shankaracharya of Karver and Sankeshwar. In Ahmedabad Gujarati reformers formed a Remarriage Association. In Madras Presidency Viresalingam Pantulu launched his crusade against enforced widowhood. The Arya Samaj of Dayanand Saraswati also fought against it. Sporadic and occasional marriages took place with the influences and patronage of the reformers. In Bengal Vidyasagar sponsored a few marriages. The Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj encouraged widows to remarry. But the movement did not gain momentum or popularity. The legislation, despite the opinion of the enlightened minority, was far ahead of the sentiments of the population. Widow remarriage was regarded with abhorrence. The ideals of devotion and sacrifice, along with the religious and social conventions, were so well entrenched among the widows that few could be persuaded to remarry. Recognizing these limitations, social reformers like Maharishi Karve concentrated their efforts in promoting education among widows (Ibid, 1999)

### **Female Education**

The Indian women were illiterate and ignorant and therefore could not voice any protest against the existing social evils and the ill-treatment meted out to them. The reformers felt that if women were educated, most of the social evils associated with women could be minimized. Therefore apart from social uplift of Indian women, the other factor that attracted the reformers was the question of female education. The British government introduced a curriculum of studies for Indian schools based on the British model, with English as the medium of instruction. The first modern schools for girls in India were started by Christian missionaries. Because of the age-old Indian prejudice against mixed classes even for children, convents and protestant missions started 'zenana' schools, staffed by lady teachers to which girls alone were admitted (Patil, 1991)

Apart from the activities of the European missionaries, the man who zealously supported the cause of female education was Raja Radhakant Deb. Though he was the leader of the orthodox Hindus who strongly opposed Vidyasagar's crusade against enforced widowhood, yet he personally believed that to make a nation progressive, women must have to be educated. Under his patronage a number of girls' schools were founded in Calcutta. On female education Radhakant Deb published a book written by Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalkar (Ibid, 1991)

Apart from missionary institutions, the Bethune School of Calcutta may be said to be the first regular secular school for girls in India. Vidyasagar and Drinkwater Bethune who noticed the reluctance of the Hindus and Muslims to send their daughters to mission schools because of the Bible classes and fear of conversion started it in 1847. The school proved a great success. The Bethune experiment was soon copied all over India. Due to Vidyasagar's encouragement nearly thirty-five schools were opened in Bengal itself between November 1857 and May 1858.

Keshabchandra Sen started the Bamabodhini Patrika and Paricharika to encourage female education and founded the Antopur Strishiksha Sabha for family women. He also founded a rescue home for innocent girls and orphans. In 1896, Maharishi Karve along with fifteen of his colleagues founded the Ananth Balikashram for the education of widows. The institution made slow and modest progress in the beginning. But gradually it became popular and unmarried girls were willing to be admitted to the school (Ibid, 1991)

In Bombay, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and Francina Sorabjee were the three lady pioneers who dedicated themselves to the education and uplift of their sisters. Francina worked for the welfare of all the communities through education. Francina's chief influence was an unifyingness, which compelled love and obliterated all differences. She brought together children of all communities. In an age when welfare organization had not even been conceived, she did practical social service work in Poona and the adjoining villages.<sup>8</sup> Ramabai Ranade worked in close collaboration with Francina. Mrs. Ranade actively worked for female education. She also selected for her special field the economic advancement of widows and destitute women. 'The Industrial Home of Service' which she founded at Poona is a self-supporting and expanding organization conducted by capable women to fulfill the growing needs of the day (Kosambi, 2000)

Pandita Ramabai was a rare genius, whose concern for her sisters was emphasized by her own sufferings. Her parents and a sister died of starvation in the famine of 1877, when she was twenty-four and she lost her husband in 1882. The lot of Indian women in general and of widows in particular thoroughly roused her and she undertook a career of social service for the uplift of her sisters. In 1889 she founded the 'Sarada Sadan' in Bombay for the education of women, particularly widows. In 1890 'Sarada Sadan' was transferred to Poona because of the rising cost of living in Bombay. By the year 1900, the inmates of the various 'Homes' she was running reached the remarkable figure of 2000. Most of them were employed in educational and humanitarian work. The efforts of these tireless pioneers and the social reformers began to bear fruit and the old prejudice against female literacy was overcome in India. Gradually the upper classes were feeling that literacy was an accomplishment to girls. Girls' schools were opened in every city and town. The popularity of female education was on the

upward trend and year by year the number of girls attending schools increased. There were also encouraging signs that Indian girls were prepared to go for higher education and even for careers. A direct result of the spread of female education was the rise of literary women in India and the liberation of dancing from brothels. With the spread of education and the general decline in purdah, music and dancing began to be cultivated among the upper and middle classes. Consequently India produced some famous lady musicians and dancers (Ibid, 2000)

The preaching of Ramakrishna Paramhansa was quite a break from the nineteenth century efforts for social upliftment of women. While the reformists worked to obtain legal sanction for their cause, Paramahansa with his simplicity directly appealed to humanity to sanction a revered position for women. His worship of the Goddess Kali attracted the ordinary masses as well as the educated elite. In all women he recognized the mother, even in the most degraded women. And his devotion for the mother cult led men to think and behave politely to women. The ideas of Paramahansa were carried further by his famous disciple Swami Vivekananda's liberalism, humanism and refreshing boldness. According to Vivekananda Indian women should be emancipated from their artificial bondage to make India truly modern. But he was not enthusiastic about widow remarriage, child marriage and other such issues. His view of freedom was that if women were given education, they would themselves be competent to settle all further questions of their fate (Singh, 2016)

In northern India another movement against social evils developed with the founding of the Arya Samaj by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. Dayanand Saraswati held that women were equal to men in their ability to achieve emancipation.

They should be educated and not allowed to marry before they reached eighteen. A staunch Vedantist Swami Dayanand held that widows should be allowed to take other husbands and thus fulfill their role as mothers. The Arya Samaj tracts and newspapers frequently attacked various caste and sect rituals. Dayanand Saraswati insisted that women should be released from the seclusion of purdah and allowed to participate in religious and public life (Ibid, 2016)

### **Prostitution**

The patronage prostitution had enjoyed from rulers and the aristocracy in ancient and medieval India ceased during the British Period. The British disapproval of professional prostitution in the West, the strict attitude of the later British, objection against loose morals, and unpopularity of the 'nautch' among English educated Indians, all had a salutary effect on Indian public opinion about prostitution. Courtesans were no more considered necessary for the adornment of courts or for public entertainment.

The institution of devadasi was abolished during the British period. Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi's Bill for prohibiting the keeping of paid devadasis in temples was passed into law by the Madras Legislative Council in 1927. Ten years later a bill was passed against the dedication of children to temples. In other provinces the problem was not as serious as in Madras and by the time the British left, there were no temples in India where devadasis were retained (Ibid, 2016)

The outcome of such efforts of reformers was a distinct improvement in the status of women within the family, especially among the urban educated classes. However the aim of reformers was to ensure women some dignity and status within the family.

They did not think of expanding women's role outside the home. Although some women began attending the first few sessions of the Indian National Congress, yet the beginning of women's movement, which organized itself for a share in public life, did not appear till the second decade of the twentieth century. A delegation of women led by Sarojini Naidu went to England to demand franchise for women. The Government of India Act of 1919 conferred limited franchise based on education and ownership of property, on the wives of men voters. The emphasis on wives as an essential qualification for political rights indicated the limited achievement of women's cause till that date. The political movement, which developed along with social reform movement in spite of the fact that it shared many common leaders like Ranade, Naoroji, Shankar Nair and C. Y. Chintamani, was unwilling to associate itself with the reformers' cause. This was manifested in Tilak's opposition to the Age of consent Bill and his refusal to permit the National Social Conference to hold its meeting inside the Congress pandals. Progressive reformers found their causes obstructed by political extremists, while the latter accused the reformers of fondness for the alien government (Sunthakar, 1993)

The social condition of women in India was pathetic, the plight of the women, was difficult to solve, as she was burdened under the customs and traditions, prevailing in India, the impact of the western philosophical ideas, and education, made the social reformers to awaken the masses and ask for the social change in the society so that the women can live with equality and freedom.

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