

PAPER 1 DSE-A-1 SEM -5: HISTORY OF

BENGAL (c.1757-1905)

V. SOCIAL REFORMS AND THE WOMEN'S QUESTION.

Nineteenth century in India was a period marked by the growth of middle class reform movement across different parts of the country which raised many questions in the minds of the people regarding certain social customs such as sati, condition of the widows, child marriage as well as the fact that the women or girls were denied their rights to education. It was these issues at the backdrop that the women's questions emerged in the 19th century in India. The women's question could be said to have become the centre of many or rather most of the socio-religious and cultural movement of that period. The movements aimed at upliftment of the women folk and also to bring them out of the inhuman social and religious barriers that they were bound by for a long time.

India women were in the grip of the evils of the social customs and their plight became a cause of concern for the Christian missionaries as well as also the Indian socio-religious reformers of the time. With the help of the British Government the Christian missionaries and the Indian social and religious reformers raised their voices against the practices of sati, child marriage, polygamy, dowry, female infanticide, condition of the widow among many others. Their aims were to abolish the evils of the social customs from the society and to induce in the society, western modern thoughts guided by reasons and logic. Reform agendas also included voicing in favour of women's' education.

Emancipation of women and education of the womenfolk of India was a major field of activity for the missionaries from the mid 18th century onwards. To

improve the condition and status of women in India a number of measures were taken. Much emphasis was laid on education of women. Most schools for girls were product of missionary activities. Among the Indian social reformers Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is remembered gratefully by his countrymen for his contribution to the uplift of India's downtrodden womanhood. He waged a long struggle in favour of widow remarriage. Eventually in 1856, The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed. In the Hindu society the widows were made to observe certain rigorous customs like shaving off their head, discarding colourful clothes and jewellery, living in seclusion and not attending any functions and ceremonies and also undergo regular acts of penance. Being financially depended on the male members of the family made the situation worse for the widows. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar after a lot of hard work was finally able to abolish the plights of the Hindu widows by being able to pass the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act and gave a new lease of life to the widows.

The most irrational and in humane custom widely followed in Hindu society was the custom of sati or the self immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. This custom was so deep rooted among the orthodox Hindus that it required a serious attempt from the British in the form of legislation to bring an end to it. In 1829 sati was declared illegal in the Bengal presidency (Regulation XVII) under the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck. By this Regulation anyone assisting a voluntary sacrifice was to be held guilty of culpable homicide and anyone using violence to force a widow to burn herself was to be liable to the death sentence. Raja Rammohun Roy had immense contribution in the abolition of sati.

Apart from these there were widespread protest against practises of polygamy and child marriage. The struggle against child marriage started in first half of nineteenth century. Great leaders like Keshab Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade etc. raised their voices. The reformers

also felt that the practice of child marriage is the main cause of other social evils related to women of India. The purdah system prevalent among the womenfolk was also questioned and was considered as a barrier that prevented the young Indian women to come out of their house and mix freely with the masses and go to schools and colleges and to be economically independent.

The problem of human sacrifice and female infanticide first attracted government action in 1802. After an investigation made by the Baptist missionary, William Carey, Lord Wellesley suppressed human sacrifice. Female infanticide was found to be more widespread and prevalent among the wealthier and upper caste section of certain areas. By a Bengal Regulation (XXI) of 1795 the practice was declared to constitute murder and the territory to which the regulation applied was extended in 1804. The system of Devadasis declined as a result of growing social consciousness.

As a result of the exposure to western education and scientific knowledge of the west the Indian society witnessed immense intellectual and cultural stirrings which further paved way for certain social and cultural reform measures.

Several important measures were also taken in the cause of female education. The initial efforts in this direction were made by the Christian missionaries. But the social reformers also greatly contributed towards the growth of female education. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar opened nearly thirty-five girls schools in 1857-58 in Bengal. The spread of female education led to several other social reforms of great consequence, such as abolition of Purdah which further led to the participation of women in the freedom struggle.

During the course of the 19th century, the patterns of women's lives in India began to change. As a consequence of changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of 19th century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile and increasingly involved in public

activities. These “new women” were a part of the modernising movement which sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women. During this period many women were taught at home and then sent to a girls’ school. Parents who cared about female education waited until their daughters reached the age of marriage before arranging for their marriage. Often there were opportunities for women to exercise some choice of their own and consequently their status was far less derivative than it was before. There were also significant changes in what women can do, but the shift was neither abrupt nor permanent. Women, now being educated and literate began to write and publish their works which gave women a voice. In Bengal, women produced almost 400 literary works, ranging from poetry to novels and autobiographies and journals. Through their writings they were able to communicate with each other and develop new social network.

The steps taken by the well educated and respected Indian men and social reformers linked improving women’s status with the modernisation agenda. Their campaign set in motion, further attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders. The nineteenth century reform movement left its mark on the women’s question and with the intensification of the national movement, greater political and economic participation by women was witnessed.
