

Till two hundred years ago girls, women and backward classes (men and women) were treated very badly in Indian society. Gradually, some reformers came forward to improve their condition with the help of the government.

The Plight of the Women

In some social groups the birth of a girl child was considered a curse. She was killed and buried. This practice was called **female infanticide**. In areas where female infanticide was not prevalent, girls were married at a very tender age, usually at the age of eight or even less. They were mostly married to grooms much older to them. They were mentally and physically unprepared for marriage at this very tender age. By the time they gained maturity, they would become a widow. The girls were expected to bring dowry— huge amount of gifts— cash or kind—from their parents. Many girls from poor families remained unmarried or committed suicide to lessen the burden of their parents before or after marriage. In some parts of the country, widows were praised if they chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Women who died in this manner, whether willingly or forcefully were considered as revered as sati, meaning virtuous women. In major areas, where the custom of sati was not followed, widows were not allowed to remarry. The women religiously did not remarry after their husbands may have died or divorced them at a young age. Her hairs were cut off. She could not wear colourful clothes, bangles or eat good quality food. She was forced to lead a secluded life. The custom of polygamy, which allowed men marry more than one woman, made the life of the women miserable. The girls were not given any education as they were neither required to seek employment, nor study the holy books. Only a small number of people taught their daughters to read and write at home. Women had not a right to inherit property.




Bride at the age of eight

Once a Woman's Husband has Died

In her book *stripurushtulna* (1880's) Tarabai Shinde wrote :

WOMEN, CASTE AND REFORM



Once a women's husband has died what is in store for her ? The barber comes to shave all the curls and hair off her head, she is shut out from going to weddings, receptions and other auspicious occasions that married women go to. And why all these restrictions ? Because her husband has died. She is unlucky : ill fate is written on her forehead. Her face is not to be seen, it is a bad women.

Debates on Women's Condition

Development of new forms of communication— books, newspapers and magazines enabled people to express their ideas in their own languages. From the early nineteenth century, we find debates and discussions about social customs and practices reach out to a wider public. This initiated movements for social change. Though it was limited to new cities in the beginning but it worked well to spread the message for the overall social transformation. These debates were often initiated by Indian reformers. Reformers were those who felt that changes were necessary in society and unjust practices needed to be done away with. One such reformer was Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833). He founded a reform group known as the Brahmo Sabha (later known as the Brahmo Samaj) in Calcutta. He was well versed in Sanskrit, Persian and several other Indian and European languages. Rammohan Roy was keen to spread the knowledge of Western Education in the country and bring about greater freedom and equality for women. He wrote about how the women were forced to bear the burden of domestic work and not allowed to move out and become educated. To raise the status of women he also preached in favour of widow remarriage. He also demanded that women should be given the right of inheritance and property.

These social reformers played a significant role in bringing pressure on the British government to pass certain legislations concerning the welfare of the women :

1. Abolition of sati in 1829
2. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1856
3. Act for the Prevention of Female Infanticide 1870
4. Right to Property Act 1874
5. Age of Consent Act 1891
6. Sharda Act (Child Marriage Restraint Act) 1929 fixed the minimum age of marriage for girls at 14 and for boys at 18
7. The Hindu Women Right to Property Act 1937.

Changing the Lives of Widows

Rammohan Roy began a campaign against the practice of sati. He tried to show through his writings that the practice of widow burning had no sanction in ancient texts. He described sati as 'murder' according to every shastra. By his efforts, British officials took notice of the grave

situation. They saw the practice of sati as evidence of the barbarism of the East. In 1829, the Governor-General of India, Lord William Bentinck declared the practice of sati illegal and banned it.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of the most famous reformers, used the ancient sacred texts to suggest that widows could remarry. His suggestion was adopted by British officials and a law was passed in 1856 permitting widow remarriage. The movement in favour of widow remarriage spread to other parts of the country. In the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency, Veerasalingam Pantulu formed an association for widow remarriage. In Bombay Prarthana Samaj founded by Mahadev Govind Ranade, K.T. Teleng and R.G. Bhandarkar supported widow remarriage. In the north, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who founded the reform association called Arya Samaj in 1875, also supported widow remarriage. Arya Samaj was based on the principles of the Vedas. Yet the number of widows who actually remarried remained low. The married widows were not easily accepted in society and conservative groups opposed and boycotted the reformers.

After remarriage the widows could not inherit their dead husband's property. In 1874, Right to Property Act was passed. It gave widows a life interest in their husband's property but they could not dispose off such property.

Girls Begin Going to School

Unlike Sati and insult of widow, the practice of child marriage began in India as a safety measure against foreign invaders in the 8th century. Children were taken as spoils of war. So, boys and girls were married off early sometimes at the age of five to protect them from invaders' lust and greed. The continuance of this practice was considered as double exploitation of women, one by the foreign powers and the other by their husbands and in-laws.

To improve the condition of women Vidyasagar opened 35 girl schools many of which were run at his own expense. Many other reformers set up schools for girls in Bombay in the mid-nineteenth century. Many guardians feared that it will prevent girls from doing their domestic duties. Moreover, the public spaces would have a corrupting influence on them. Therefore, throughout the nineteenth century, most educated women were taught at home by liberal fathers or husbands. Sometimes women taught themselves.

Many people thought that having an educated woman in the home would have meant interaction with members outside the family circle which was puzzling them. It was generally believed that the curriculum for girls ought to be less taxing than that for boys. In view of these limitations, education in Home Science was considered a fit subject for girls. Home Science is thus a product of colonial era. However, many girl schools provided girls with the kind of learning that was usual for boys at the time.




Raja Rammohan Roy



Iswarchandra Vidyasagar



Swami Dayanand Saraswati



In aristocratic Muslim families women were taught by women at home from the early twentieth century. Begums of Bhopal founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta. Other schools were also opened by Muslim women.

Women Wrote about Women

By the 1880s, many Indian women began to write and publish their critical views on the place of women in society. Tarabai Shinde, a woman educated at home in Poona, published a book *Stripurushtulna*, (A comparison between Women and Men). In it, she criticised the social difference between men and women.



Pandita Ramabai


An active social reformer, Ramabai championed the cause of emancipation of Indian women. She was a great scholar of Sanskrit. She went to UK in 1883 and studied at the Women's College at Chilternham and learned English Literature, Science and Maths. In 1886, while in USA, she learnt the Froebel's kindergarten system and went on lecture tours to various cities. She was conferred the title of 'Pandita' due to her learning. She wrote a book titled 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' about the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women. She founded a widows' home at Poona to provide shelter to young widows who had been treated badly by their husbands' relatives. Here women were trained so that they could support themselves economically.

From the early twentieth century, women worked political pressure groups to push through laws for female suffrage (the right to vote) and better health care and education for women. Some of them like Sarojini Naidu joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements from the 1920s. However, many orthodox male nationalists felt that women were adopting western ways and that this would corrupt Indian culture and erode family values. But leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru lent their support to demands for greater equality and freedom for women.

Origin and Development of Caste

Differences between men and women were not the only ones in society. In most regions, people were divided along lines of caste. There was prevalent a caste hierarchy which was the result of centuries long political and economic conflict and struggle. In the early period of civilisation it was easy to describe people by their occupations. Later, the people were divided into four groups, each having a different set of functions or occupations. Then, some of them became more powerful than others. They became the rulers. They prescribed these functions as duties. Later on, the division, however, became very rigid. Constant oppression made a part of the society 'down trodden'. They were called as labouring caste.

In the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these poor oppressed people began leaving their villages and small towns to look for jobs that were opening in the cities. There was work in the



factories that were coming up and jobs in municipalities— digging drains, paving of roads, construction of buildings, cleaning of sewers, sweeping, bearing of palanquins, pulling of rickshaws, carriers of loads, etc. Some of them also went to work on plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia where work was very hard. But this was also an opportunity to get away from the long oppressive hold and humiliation. Some of them joined British army too.

Coming from a society that was divided by a class, the British attempted to equate the caste system to the class system. They considered it a more sharper weapon than their maxim gun to keep people divided and rule.

Demands for Equality and Justice

The caste system and the practice of untouchability has been an evil of the Indian society. Some social reformers of the nineteenth century realised the necessity to rid the society of this evil.

During the 19th century, Jyotirao Phule described the oppressed as '**Dalits**'. Under B.R. Ambedkar (twentieth century) the term '**Dalits**' gained more popularity. Gradually, by the second half of the nineteenth century people from within the Dalits began organising movement against caste discrimination, and demanded social equality and justice.

Jyotirao (Jotiba) Phule (1827–1890)

Jyotirao Phule argued that the Dalits were the true children of the subcontinent. The foreign invaders defeated them and as they established their dominance they began looking at the defeated population as inferior people. He wrote a book named Gulamgiri meaning slavery in 1873. In it Phule compared the plight of dalits in India with the black in America. He founded an association, the Satya Shodhak Samaj in 1848 in Maharashtra which propagated caste equality. It sought social justice for the backward and oppressed. All his ideas were compiled in his work called Satya Shodh, published in 1887. Satya Shodh was considered the rule book of the Samaj. He established an orphanage for destitute children. He worked his whole life for the upliftment of the Dalits.

Kandu Kuri Veersalingam (1848–1919)

Veersalingam was an avid reader and a great writer. Through his plays and essays in Telugu he vigorously degraded the caste system. He was a great supporter of the oppressed and the downtrodden. He is considered the father of renaissance among Telugu people of Andhra Pradesh. He was one of founding members of Indian National Congress in 1885.

Sri Narayana Guru (1854-1928)

Sri Narayana Guru was a great scholar in Sanskrit, Tamil and Malayalam. He founded Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana. Yogam (SNDP) in 1903 to spread his ideas on social reforms in Kerala. He gave the slogan, "one religion, one caste and one God for mankind". He fought for the

emancipation of the dalits in the society. He was called a 'Karma Yogi'. He founded a number of yoga centres and ashrams at Varkala and Alwaye. Educational institutions were attached to these ashrams.

E.V. Ramaswami or Periyar (1879–1973)



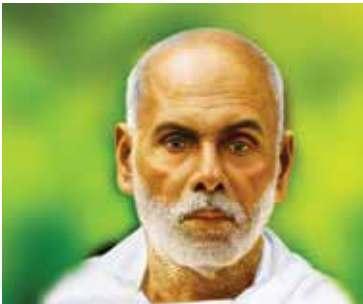
Jyotirao Phule

Popularly known as Periyar or in full EVR Thanthai Periyar and born in a middle-class Tamil merchants family, he became a great social worker. He had been an ascetic in his early life and studied Sanskrit scriptures carefully. Later, he became a member of the Congress. He left it when he found that at a feast organised by nationalists, seating arrangements followed caste distinction. Convinced that dalits had to fight for their dignity, Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement.

Periyar argued that dalits were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by invaders. He was an outspoken critic of the ancient lawgiver scriptures.

In 1930s Periyar was associated with the Justice Party of Madras and later took its control and changed the name of the party to Dravidan Kazhagam (Party of the Tamil). This organisation fought for the reservation of the dalits in government jobs. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the famous political party of Tamil Nadu emerged from this party as a splinter group.

B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956)



Shri Narayan Guru

As a child Ambedkar has experienced what caste prejudice meant in every daylife. His father and grandfather both served in the British Army. Settled in Satara in Maharashtra, Bhimrao studied at Elephinstons College and graduated in Political Science and Economics from Bombay University. He then studied at Columbia University and obtained a doctorate in Economics. Later, he was appointed as Military Secretary to Maharaja of Baroda. In 1920, he went to London and got his Bar-at-Law at Gray's Inn for Law. Upon returning to India, he visualised a struggle for casteless and equal India.

As an active member of the Indian National Movement, Ambedkar insisted on the necessity of separate electorates for the depressed classes. But Gandhiji and the Congress were against this idea. An agreement was reached known as the **Poona Pact** according to which the idea of separate electorates for the depressed classes was abandoned, but the seats reserved for them in the legislatures increased.

Ambedkar later served as the chairman of the Drafting Committee set up by the Constituent Assembly that drafted the Constitution of India. He was the first Law Minister of India. He was posthumously awarded Bharat Ratna in 1990.

The forceful speeches, writings and movements of Dalit leaders did lead to rethinking among nationalist leaders. But the orthodox society reacted by founding Dharma Sabhas to uphold caste distinctions and show how this was sanctified by scriptures. Debates and struggles over caste continued beyond the colonial period.



Periyar Ramaswami



B.R. Ambedkar

Abolition of Untouchability

The Indian Constitution of 1950 has declared that "Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden.....". The Constitution further forbids any restrictions on the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats or on the access to shops, restaurants and hotels and cinemas.

Other Social Reformers

Mahatma Gandhi made social reform a part of the programme of the nationalist movement. He assigned utmost importance to removal of untouchability. He declared that it was no less than important than the political struggle for freedom.

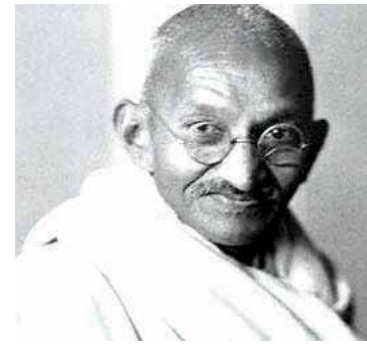
Swami Vivekanand believed and preached that the best way to serve God was to serve mankind. He strongly condemned the caste system and urged his countrymen to work for the upliftment of the poor.

A number of organisations like the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta (1897), the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay (1867), the Veda Samaj in Madras (1864) and others stressed the need of social service and selfless action.

In Other Parts of the World

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century the Europeans captured black people and sold them as slaves to the European planters mostly in the southern United States. The slaves worked on cotton and other plantations from dawn to dusk. They were whipped and tortured for inefficient work.

Many people, white and black, opposed slavery through organised protest. Abraham Lincoln was their leader. He said that those who had fought for slavery had done so for the cause of democracy.



Mahatma Gandhi



Swami Vivekanand

Key Words

- » Infanticide : killing of the newborn child.
- » Sati : burning of a widow on the burning funeral pyre of her husband; literally a virtuous woman.
- » Dalit : the oppressed and so called untouchable people.
- » Emancipation : to be free from social restrictions.
- » Polygamy : the custom of having more than one wife.

SUMMARY

- ▶ Female infanticide, child marriage, dowry, polygamy, practice of sati, insult of widow, no right of women to inherit property were the social evils against women which made their life miserable.
- ▶ Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati supported the women's causes .
- ▶ The government passed legislations— Abolition of Sati in 1829, the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act 1856, Act for the Prevention of Female Infanticide 1870, Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929 and other acts to improve the status of women.

- ▶ Schools and colleges were opened for the education of girls.
- ▶ Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai and others wrote in support of women's demand for equality and education.

Exercise Time

A. Tick (✓) the only correct choice amongst the following :

1. The girls were mostly married to grooms equal in _____ to them.
a. size b. age c. colour d. much older
2. The custom of polygamy allowed men to marry _____ than one woman.
a. higher b. one c. more d. smaller
3. The head of the widow was _____.
a. education b. shaved c. oiled d. equality
4. _____ campaigned for the abolition of the practice of sati.
a. Pandita Ramabhai b. Rammohan Roy c. Mahatama Handhi d. Vidyasagar
5. _____ was the chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution.
a. Tarabhai Shinde b. Swami Vivekanand c. B.R. Ambedkar d. Periyar Ramaswami

B. Fill in the blanks :

1. _____ founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
2. _____ described sati as a form of murder.
3. The _____ Act raised the marriageable age of girls to 14.
4. _____ was appointed as the military secretary to the Maharaja of Baroda.
5. Swami Vivekanand preached that the best way to serve God is to serve _____.

C. Answer in one word or one phrase :

1. Who wrote the book titled 'The High Caste Hindu Woman' ?
2. Which book Tarabai Shinde wrote ?
3. Who founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj ?
4. Where were the African slaves sold ?
5. Which dalit leader gave the slogan 'one religion, one caste and one God for mankind' ?

D. Answer these question briefly :

1. List the social evils prevailing in Indian society in the nineteenth century.
2. What were the different reasons people had for not sending girls to school ?
3. The reformers were involved in campaigns of widow remarriage. Why ?
4. Why was child marriage prevalent ? What are the ill effects of child marriage ?
5. In the British period what new opportunities opened for dalits ?
6. What do you know about Pandita Ramabai's contribution to women's reforms ?

PROJECT WORK

- From nineteenth century India to the present India, collect the names of women who made a name for themselves and have made us proud in the fields of — national movement, politics, mountaineering, space travel, literature, etc.