



WOMEN'S ISSUES: CONTRIBUTION OF THE REFORM AND REFORMERS IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, women in India had been sub-ordinate to men and socially oppressed. The age old traditions and orthodox religious principles riveted women to an insignificant corner of indigenous social spectrum. Time and again elements and influences of patriarchy were forcefully imposed on the social structure which ultimately clipped the wings of women. In a nut-shell, women have been seen as mere subjects of male members and looked upon as mere adjuncts to men. In the colonial period, the condition of women was almost the same but due to the reform and the great contribution of the reformers, the victimized condition of the women was improved a lot. Thus, this paper aims to focus on that particular perspective.

KEYWORDS: Patriarchy, Victimized, Sub-Ordinate, Dowry System, Purdah and Sati.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, India had seen a woman as a member of the family or a group and not as an individual with an identity or right of her own. Historically Indian women are equal to men. The concept of woman as Shakti, the primal energy force, finds expression in the famous epic the Mahabharata. In this epic, woman is glorified as a "light of the house, mother of the universe and supporter of the earth and all its forces." The Mahabharata further says that there is no guru like the mother. In the earlier Vedic age, a woman held higher and honored situation in gender relationship. Manu is his Manusmriti, who was the

first to codify the laws in India also writes about this, "Where women are verily honored, there the gods rejoice. Where, however, they are not honored, there all sacred rites prove useless." In addition, he further declared: "In whatever house a woman is not duly honored, that house, with all that belongs to it shall utterly perish." In another epic, the Ramayana, when Rama intended to perform the Ashwamedha Yajana in the absence of Sita, the religious norms advised Rama to keep a golden statue of his wife beside him during the ceremony. These epics through the ages have become benchmark with the status of women is compared.

While making comparison it is always said that as women participate equally along with men in the religious rituals so women are equal to men. The honored status that women enjoyed in the family and society began to undergo radical changes, particularly since the pronouncement by Manu the Hindu law-giver, regarding a woman's changing position through her life cycle. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead to her sons, she should never enjoy independence. This subordinate position of a woman suited to the man also. In this way, the image of woman created by the Hindu lore thus become paradoxical and contradictory to the earlier Vedic Mahabharata and Ramayana days. She became as an essentially weak and dependent creature needing the constant guardianship and protection of man. Marriage, Motherhood and service to the husband were the most valuable attributes of the woman. With the coming of the Muslim rule, medieval India witnessed enhanced dependency of women on men. The Islamic custom of Purdah (veiling of women) forced the public world to be separated from the private world, with women confined to the latter. Following its subjugation by the Muslims, and fearing adverse outcomes for its women, a large part of the Hindu India accepted the practice of veiling. Through this privatization, Indian women were forced to trade their mobility for safety. Repeated invasions by the Muslims further pushed the Indian women towards inhuman "traditions" such as child marriage, the dowry system, purdah and sati (the immolation of the widow on the dead husband's pyre). The challenge of Islamic aggression also made Hindu India defensive and introverted causing a desperate return to orthodox Hindu beliefs and practices and further constraining the status of Indian women. Thus, during the medieval period, Indian women lost their earlier status and were at the lowest ebb. The British occupation of India began in 1772, and the British crown assumed charge of administering the colony from the British East India Company in 1858. Although, the common women faced male domination and atrocities during the British period but at the higher level a woman could become a

ruler or regent of her children at the death of her ruler husband, and she had the right to get training in war tactics. This is evident, from the fact that Maharani Laxmi Bai, participated in the "First War of Independence" in 1857. Girls and women today have better opportunities for their development. They have more freedom to study and work outside of home. However, way back to in the 19th century, the life was much harder for majority of the women. Certain social practices made their life a living hell. Besides, the fear of the invader and loss of family honor was one reason and other reasons were dowry and sharing of ancestral property which further deteriorated their status.

A DESIRE TO CHANGE: SOCIO-RELIGIOUS AWAKENING

Reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Jyotiba Phule, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Pandita Ramabai and others understood that ignorance and backwardness in the society was responsible for hindering its progress and development. This realization was reinforced when they came in the contact the Europeans and found that life was very different in other parts of the world. When the British missionaries started spreading Christianity, they criticized and questioned many of our social and religious practices. Many of their ideas were accepted by our reformers. The desire to reform the society was so strong that these reformers were then ready to face challenges as well as resistance from the orthodox Indians. They started several movements to bring desirable changes in the Indian society. These were made possible by the many eminent reformers. They studied the religious scriptures and criticized the prevalent religious and social practices. According to them, society should be based on the concepts of liberty and equality both for men and women and this was possible only by the spread of modern and scientific education especially among women. The Reform Movements came to be called "Socio-Religious Movement" because the reformers felt that no change is possible in a society without reforming the religion. Most of the reformers considered the prevalent caste practices as against

the original spirit of the Vedas and other scriptures. They considered the caste system as irrational and unscientific. They felt it was against the basic rules of humanity. The untiring and relentless efforts of the social reformers helped people to become more tolerant towards each other.

OBJECTIVES

- ▲ To identify the social practices that existed in the colonial India
- ▲ To explain the efforts of the reformers to deal with issues like caste system, child marriage, sati system, through legislations and other means.
- ▲ To analyze the impact of the reform movement on the Indian society.

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Since ancient times, Indian society had a caste system which was originally occupation based. Over a period of time, interpretation of religious texts by the upper caste and lack of access to religious scriptures by the lower caste led to several superstitious practices in the name of religion. This also resulted in power being concentrated in upper caste and exploitation of the lower caste. Hindu society was based on the Varna system that is Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra.. The people who were engaged in praying and worshipping the Gods were categorized as Brahmins. Those who were engaged in wars were called Kshatriyas. Those whose occupation was agriculture and trading were known as Vaishyas and those who used to serve the upper three Varnas were known as Shudras. A person born in a particular caste could not change his/her caste even though they might have changed their work. This created inequality in society. It also led to the exploitation of the lower castes. Therefore, caste system had become a major hindrance in the development of a healthy, democratic and progressive society specially for the women folk.

THE PREVALENT RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Most of the social practices were done in the name of religion. Hence, social reform had no meaning without religious reform. The reformers

were deeply rooted in Indian tradition and philosophy and had a sound knowledge of the scriptures. They were able to blend the principles of democracy and equality. On the basis of this understanding, they challenged the rigidity and superstitious practices in religion. They cited the scriptures to show that these practices prevalent during that time find no sanction in them. The enlightened and rationalistic amongst them questioned the popular religion which was full of superstitions and was exploited by the corrupt section of people. The reformers wanted society to accept the rational and scientific approach. They also believed in the principle of human dignity and social equality of all men and women.

THE EDUCATIONAL SCENARIO

In the 19th Century, many children, especially girls were not sent to school. Education was imparted in traditional Paathshalas, Madrasas, Mosques and Gurukuls etc, Many superstitious beliefs existed in the society and in certain communities girls were not allowed to be educated. It was thought that educated women would soon become widows after marriage. But in reality the lack of education and awareness was the root cause of social and religious backwardness among the Indians. So, it was very much important to promote modern education. So, all socio-religious reformers whether Hindus, Muslims, Shiks or Parsis aimed at the spread of modern education. They believed that education was the most effective tool to awaken and modernize Indian society.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REFORM MOVEMENTS

1. All the reformers propagated the idea of one God and the basic unity of all religions.
2. All the reformers attacked priesthood, rituals, and superstitions. The humanitarian aspect of these reform movements was expressed in their attack on the caste system and the custom of the child marriage.
3. The reformers attempted to improve the status of girls and women in society. They all emphasized the need of women education.

4. By attacking the caste system and untouchability, the reformers helped to unify the people of India into one nation.

REFORMERS AND REFORMS

Raja Ram Mohan Roy:-

He had been forced to commit Sati. He was determined to uproot this social practice. This led him to challenge other unfair social and religious practices prevalent at that time. He founded Brahma Samajh in 1828. He was the first person to take an initiative to challenge the practice of Sati and it soon became his life-long crusade. He mobilized public opinion and cited the scripture to show that this practice had; no sanction in Hindu religion. In the process he faced displeasure and enmity of orthodox Hindus. In his efforts he was supported by the then Governor General of India, Sir William Bentinck. A law was passed in 1829 making Sati illegal and punishable. He also made efforts to advocate widow re-marriage and condemned child marriage.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar:-

A great scholar and reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar dedicated his whole life mainly in social reform. The first Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was introduced in 1856 owing to his relentless effort. He also protested against child-marriage and against polygamy. Though he did not concern himself much with religious questions, he was against all those who opposed reforms in the name of the religion. He believed that condition of women could be improved only through their education. His efforts in this direction were parasite worthy. He helped in opening about 35 girls' school in Bengal. He was a champion of women's education. The admission of non-Brahmin students in the Sanskrit College was made possible through his efforts.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati:-

The Arya Samaj founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 undertook the task of reforming Hindu religion and women's condition in North India. Arya Samaj advocated social reform and worked improve the condition of women. It fought untouchability and the rigidities of the hereditary caste system and promoted social equality and specially to women.

Swami Vivekananda:-

Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission after the name of his guru Ramakrishna Paramhansa. Through his speeches and writings, he brought out the essence of Hindu culture and religion. He believed in the spirit of Vedanta and the essential unity and equality of all religion. He laid stress on the removal of religious superstitions, obscurantism and outdated social customs. He tried to remove caste rigidities and untouchability. He motivated the people to respect women while he himself worked for women's up-liftment and education.

Sir Syed Ashmed Khan:-

He worked hard to raise the status of the Muslim women. He was against the "purdah" system, polygamy, easy divorce and lack of education among the girls. Though he was opposed by the orthodox Muslims. He made commendable efforts in promote women's education. He tried to interpret the Quran in the light of reason and spoke out against fanaticism and ignorance. He also initiated social reforms for the upliftment of the Muslim society.

Jyotirao Govindaro Phule and Savirribai Phule:-

He first educated his wife, after which both of them opened a school for girls' in India in August 1848 took up the cause of women and started a girls' school in Poona (Pune) in 1851. He is also remembered for his efforts towards promoting widow remarriage. In September 1873, Jyotirao along with his followers formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj with the main objective of liberating the lower caste and protecting them exploitation and atrocities.

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade:-

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade established the Poona Savajanik Sabha and the Prarthana Samaj in 1867 in Bombay to bring about religious reforms. It sought to remove caste restriction, abolish child marriage, the shaving of widow's, the heavy cost of marriages and other social functions, encourage education of women and promote widow remarriage.

Pandita Rambhai:-

In Maharashtra, Pandita Rambhai, a renowned social reformer, fought for the rights of women and protested against child marriage. She promoted girls education and started the Arya Mahila Samaj in 1881, in Pune to improve the condition of women, especially child widows. In 1889, she established the Mukti Mission, in Pune, a refuge for young widows who had been deserted and abused by their families. She also started Sharda Sadan. She also wrote many books showing the hard life of women, including child brides and child widows. The Pandita Rambhai Mukti Mission is still active today.

Annie Besant:-

Annie Besant was a member of the Theosophical Society and came to India for the first time in 1893. It aroused political awakening and helped Indians recover their self-confidence and get a sense of pride in their own country.

Muslim Reform Movement:-

A few movements were launched which aimed to spread modern education and removing social practices like the polygamy. The Mohammedan Literacy Society of Calcutta was founded by Abdul Latif in 1863. It was one of the earliest organizations that promoted modern education among the upper and middle class Muslims. It also played an important role in promoting Hindu-Muslim unity. Shariatullah of Bengal, Leader of the Faraizi movement in Bengal, took up the cause of peasants; he also condemned the evils of the caste system among the Muslims. Muhyammad Iqbal influenced the philosophical and religious outlook of several generations through his poetry.

The Akali Reform Movement:-

The formation of the two Singh Sabhas at Amritsar and Lahore in the 1870's was the beginning of religious reform movements among the Sikhs. The setting up of Khalsa College in Amritsar in 1892 helped promote Gurmukhi, Sikh learning and Punjabi literature. The college was set up with the help from the British. In 1920, the Akali movement which rose in Punjab, started the cleansing of the management of the Gurudwars or Sikh shrines. With the aid of this act and by direct action, they freed

the sacred places from the control and domination of corrupt Mahants.

Reform Movement among the Parsis:-

Narouji Furdonji, Dadabhai Naoroji, S.S. Bengalee and others began religious reforms among the Parsis in Mumbai in the middle of the 19th century. In 1851, they founded the Rahmumai Mazdayasnan Sabha or Religious Reform Association. They played an important role in the spread of education, specially among girls. They also campaigned against the orthodox practices in Parsi religion. In course of time, the Parsis became one of the most progressive sections of Indian society.

Contribution of the Reform

Movements:-

The reformist organizations such as Brahmo Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, the Arya Samaj set up by Dayanand Saraswati in 1857 and Ramakrishna Mission created by Vivekananda in 1897 and reformers like Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Mahadev Ranbade, Gopal Krishna Gokhle etc led the fight against women's oppression by condemning such practices as polygamy, early marriage, enforced widowhood and by advocating female literacy. The Britishers along with Indian reformers raised their voice to eliminate brutal practices against women, which had placed them at the marginalized position in the society such as female infanticide, child marriage, enforced widowhood and sati. Thus, in order to raise the status of Indian women, the British rule led to a number of socio religious reforms in the country. In 1857, the National Social Conference was formed specially to lead the social reform campaign to further support one of its major objectives of women's emancipation. It created a separated entity known as the Indian Women's Conference. Gandhiji openly held that sacred texts and customs which rationalize injustice to women or advocated female subservience deserved neither respect nor compliance. He supported women's induction into public life while asking also that their domestic role be fully honoured and valued. His tools of mass agitation policies served him well in getting women out of the private into public sphere. Thus, during the freedom struggle no distinction was made in

the participation of either women or men. This gave equal status to gender. In recognizing their contribution the principle of "Gender Equity and Equality" was enshrined in the constitution of free India in 1950. Besides, importance was given to education especially women's education. Some legal measures were introduced to raise the status of women. For example Sati Pratha and infanticide were declared illegal. Widow Remarriage was made possible by a law passed in 1856 and condition of widow's improved. A law passed in 1872, sanctioned inter-caste and inter-communal marriages. Marriageable age of girls was raised to ten by a law passed in 1860. Further, Sharda Act was passed in 1929 preventing child marriage. According to it, a girl below 14 and a boy below 18 cannot be married. The impact of the efforts of these reformers was most evident in the National Movement. A large number of women came out to take part in the freedom struggle. The role of women like Captain Laxmi Sehgal of Indian National Army, Saronini Naidu, Annie Besant, Aruna Asaf Ali and many others was extremely important in the freedom struggle. Women now came out of the prudah and took up jobs. The persistent efforts of the reformers had immense impact on the society. These reform movements helped many Indians to come to terms with the modern world. People became more conscious of their identity as Indian. It was ultimately responsible for their united struggle against the British in the freedom movement of India.

CONCLUSION

The reform movements were able to create socio-religious consciousness among the Indians during the 19th Century. All these movements laid stress on rational understanding of social and religious ideas and encouraged a scientific and humanitarian outlook. The reformers felt that modern ideas and culture could be best imbibed

by integrating them into Indian cultural streams. The introduction of modern education guided the Indians towards a scientific and rational approach to life. All the movements worked to improve women's status and criticized the caste system especially the practice of untouchability. These movements looked for social unity and strived towards liberty, equality and fraternity.

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