

Gender Concerns and Social Reform Movements in India

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Abstract

The paper is an analysis and understanding of the Social Reform Movements in India which were majorly a part of the nineteenth-century British Colony India and their impact on gender relations. The beginning is an introduction to the nineteenth century and the factors that led to the rise of social reform movements. The next part of the paper deals with the condition of women in the nineteenth century and social reforms in their lives. The transition as a consequence of certain systematic movements can be observed through the lives of two important women of the nineteenth century: Rassundari Devi and Pandita Ramabai. The discussion of the early twentieth century provides an insight into the early phase of feminism in India with the nationalist movement led by Mahatma Gandhi coming into the picture. The conclusion is a reflection of the observations regarding the reformers, nationalist movements, and the early post-independence reforms.

Keywords: Gender Concerns, Social Reform Movements, Women's conditions

Introduction

Social Reform Movements were a part of the eighteenth to the early twentieth century in India. During this time India represented a standing traditional culture and society at a low ebb on one hand; while on the other hand India also possessed a still traditional society in the throes and the creative excitement of modern living and that of emerging as a new nation. The nineteenth-century initiated this process of transformation in the religious social economic political and cultural spheres.

The impact of the British empire influenced administration legislation, trade, a network of communication, industrialization, and urbanization in India, affecting not only society as a whole, but also the traditional pattern of life. British scholars, educators, and missionaries also left a major impact on the cultural field. The reformers consciously reacted to the new situation and advocated deliberate changes in social and religious attitudes and customs of the Indian population.

The reform movements were directed against several evil customs and practices which had become a part of the Hindu social system such as Sati, Child marriage, Female Infanticide, untouchability, and belief in superstitions. Social and religious reform movements spread amongst all communities in India. In religion, they attacked bigotry, superstitions, and the hold of the priestly clan. In social life, they aimed at the abolitions of

castes, child marriage, and other social inequalities. These social evils were fought with firm determination by numerous reforms like Raja Ram, Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand, Rama Krishna Paramhans, Ishwaschandra Vidyasagar, Sir Sayed Ahmed Khan, and others. As a result of these movements, significant advances were made in the field of emancipation of women. With the efforts of these reforms the practices of Sati and Child marriages declined.

Traditional customs and practices for women Traditional such as sati, 'jauhar' and 'devadasi' have been banned among some communities and are eagerly defunct in modern India. However, some instances of these practices are still found in remote parts of India. The 'purdah' is still practiced by Indian women in some prevalent despite it being illegal under current law.

Sati is an ancient Hindu custom according to which a wife immolated herself at the pyre of her husband. We have some stray references to Sati in the Mahabharata and the 4th century BCE, Megasthenes refers to a stray incident in the Gandhara region that Alexander had conquered. Traditionally, the popular belief was that the widow immolated herself willingly and the fire appeared cool to her. After the immolation, a memorial stone and often a shrine was erected for her and she was worshipped as a Goddess. We have such sati stones from coastal Andhra and parts of Madhya Pradesh in Central India, mostly belonging to the Vijayanagar period in the 14th century CE.

'Jauhar' refers to the practice of voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated warriors; to avoid capture and consequent molestation by the enemy. 'Devdasi' is a religious practice in some parts of southern India, where women are married to a deity or temple. The ritual is well established since the 10th century.

The 'purdah' is obediently practiced among the north Indian communities here the woman is always veiled in presence of elder family members, her husband, and when outside the domestic fear of household.

Women In Colonial India (19th Century)

"Women have a history; women are in history"

-Gerda Lerner

The first historical accounts of Indian women date from the nineteenth century and emerged as a consequence of the colonial experience. these accounts constitute a description of an ancient time when women were held in high esteem followed by a long period when their status declined. According to these narratives, when the Europeans came to the scene, they introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities which were adopted by the enlightened Indians. Both British missionaries and those Indians reforms who welcomed the opportunity to put forth a critique of their society hypothesized a "golden age" followed by centuries of corruption and betrayal. European forms of governing, technology, and values came in as salvation. This way of writing out the past (linear movements) was a hallmark of European history. The Britishers had an orientalist perspective towards India, where they looked at women as the 'markers of civilization'. They projected themselves as the discourse of "white man's burden" and also reinforcing patriarchy, therefore maintaining the rural and gender hierarchy. Colonial histories have narrated the civilizing mission of the British as rescuing Indian women from their own culture and society.

“No feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu purdah or out of Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development on expression”

-Miriam Schnein

Feminism: The essential historical writing (1972)

In the nineteenth century, the “woman question” was widespread. This was not about “what do women want” but rather “how can they be modernized? It became a prominent question in nineteenth-century British India because the colonization had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. Spellbound with their “civilizing mission”, influential British writers condemned Indian religions, culture, and society for their rules and customs regarding women. The nineteenth century was a time of political, social, and scientific upheaval in Europe. according to the British, their domination of the sub-continent is proof of their moral superiority. In the discussion regarding the colonial subjects in India, they were led to the ideal relationship between men and women (Mrinalini Sinha: “‘manliness’: A Victorian ideal and colonial policy in the late nineteenth century Bengal”). James Mill, in *History of British India* (1826) argued that women's position could be seen as an indicator of society's advancement. According to him; “Among the rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exiled”.

Having learned about Hindu society through reading Halhed’s Code of gender laws, a translation of the code of Manu, some religious works and accounts were written by travelers, missionaries, mill included: “nothing can exceed the hospital contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women ...they are held, accordingly, in extreme degradation”.

Missionary Reverend E. Storrow came to India in 1848 and pronounced Indian disunity a consequence of the low status of women. Storrow’s list of strong countries- Israel, Rome, and Western Europe all derived their courage and virtue from the high position accorded women. (Rev E. Storrow, *Our Indian sisters*). Having lined military strength with the status of women, the British concluded that domination of India was natural and inevitable.

Later in the century, as part of the continuous process of legitimating British rule, Sir Herbert Hope Risley characterized the Indian intelligence as interested is in intellectual and political ideas, but unconcerned with reforming society. Risley was pessimistic about the general progress of Indian without reform. A new gender ideology and modification of the actual treatment of women would be the necessary prelude to any positive change.

Colonial domination set the change in motion; Indians reshaped the imported ideas and institutions to fit the social and cultural milieu. The ideology that emerged is redefined gender relation was an amalgam of new foreign ideas, indigenous concept, and the response of Indian men and women to the foreign presence in their midst.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, there were reform groups in all parts of British India. Their attention was focused on sati, female infanticide, widowed women, polygamy, Child marriage, purdah, prohibition on female education, devadasi, and the patrilocal joint family.

Across India, there is a long list of reforms that undertook major efforts on women's behalf. In Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar championed female education and led the campaign to legalize widow remarriage. In North India, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, encouraged female education and condemned customs he

regarded as degrading to women. In western India, Mahadev Govind Ranade founded the National Social Conference to focus attention on social reforms. In South India, R. Venata Ratnam Naidu opposed the 'devadasi' system while Virasalingam Pantutu worked for marriage reform. It is interesting to note that their ideas on gender were recorded in personal experience; during their lives, they attempted to change those with whom they lived and worked.

Pandita Ramabai:

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was awarded the title "Pandita" in recognition of her great learning. Ramabai's first teacher was her mother. Anant Padmanabha Dongre, Ramabai's father, was a great Vedic scholar who decided to educate his wife over the objection of the community. Her education began at eight and continued until she was fourteen. She memorized the Bhagavata Purana and the Bhagavata Gita; then studied Sanskrit grammar and vocabulary. Pandita Ramabai was truly remarkable as a pioneer in women's education and women's rights. At the age of sixteen, her father-mother died, at this time she was unmarried and able to read Sanskrit. She and her brother traveled throughout India lecturing on female education and social reform. Ramabai's brother died in Calcutta and she married his close friend Bipen Behari Das. The next year, at age twenty-three, Ramabai gave birth to her daughter. Unfortunately, her husband died the following year.

She began to work with reforms to educate women through the Arya Mahila Samaj in Poona. To learn English and study medicine, Ramabai sought help from members of the Anglo-Catholic community. They were able to provide her some assistance while the balance of her expenses was met through the sale of her book "Stri Dharma Neeti" ("Morals for women"), which urged women to take charge of their own lives. In 1883, she left for England with her daughter, where she decided to accept Baptism. She continued her studies until 1886 when she decided to sail for America to attend the graduation ceremonies of her cousin.

Ramabai wrote the high caste Hindu women to finance her trip and popularize her cause. Ten thousand copies of this book were sold before Ramabai had left America. In 1887, a Ramabai association was set up by the Boston admirers to support her work in India. She traveled throughout the United States and Canada studying educational, philanthropic, and charitable institutions and lecturing to various groups.

In India, Padita Ramabai established Sharda Sadan (home for wisdom), a school for widows in Bombay. This was to be a non-sectarian school where all the caste rules of Brahmins were scrupulously observed and it attracted some high caste widows. By 1900 the Sharda Sadan has trained eighty women who were able to earn their living through teaching or nursing. Ramabai's second school, Mulki, was established thirty miles outside of Poona at Kedgoan following the famine that began in 1879. It soon grew into a major institution by 1900, housing 2,000 women and children attending school and involved in industrial training and production.

Rassundari Devi

After marriage "My day would begin at dawn and I worked till two at night.....I was fourteen years old...but... I longed to read books ...I was unlucky, those days women were not allowed to read".

These words are from *Amar Jiban*, the first autobiography written by a Bengali woman "Rassundari Devi", born in 1809, a very probably the first full-scale autobiography in the Bengali language. Born in Panba district, in a landowning family, when was

twelve, she was married to Sitanath Ray. He was a prosperous land from Ramdiya village at Faidpur. From the age of fourteen, she looked after the domestic work and brought up twelve children. At the age of twenty-five, she made an unconventional digression. She secretly taught herself to read and studied all the religious texts that her home possessed. Later, she also learned to write. In 1868, at fifty-nine, she became a widow and her autobiography was finished in the same year. She revised and enlarged it when she was eighty-eight.

The orthodox Hindus of her times believed that women if educated are destined to be widows. Her desire to read and write can be seen as an act of disobedience which also deconstructs the 'good wife' role. At fourteen she was looking after the entire household without any help. Her world was the kitchen and the household her 'cage'. She nursed her mother-in-law and cooked two meals every day for at least twenty-five people. Rassundari developed the longing to read since she was fourteen. When she was twenty-five, she dreamt that she was reading the Chaitanya Bhagwata. The very next day, her husband told a son in her presence to replace it among other manuscripts. She identified the manuscript by its illumination, and later she detached a page and hid it to attempt reading. With efforts of memory, she recalled the letters she had learned, she learned to write and read printed books with support from her grown-up sons.

Her life reflects upon the Hindu married woman who was like a "caged girl" in her household. Her life showcases the aspect of the life of a child bride and the ill consequences child marriage has on a women's psyche. She had to educate herself secretly and at the same time live up to the expectations of a 'perfect housewife'.

'New Woman' in India

The reform viewed women as their subjects to be changed as a consequence of persuasive argument, social action, education, and legislation. The historian Sumit Sarker has argued that these reformers were concerned with (primarily) modifying relationships within their own families and sought only "limited and controlled emancipation" of their women. Sumit Sarker in, "The women's question in nineteenth-century Bengal" says that women themselves were not partners in the scheme created for their regeneration, more often they were portrayed as opposed to their liberation. The reforms add a vision of a world where women would be education educated and free from some of the worst customs of the society. Child marriage, sati, but at the same, these new women would be devoted to home and family.

Women as Agents for Patriarchy – It is often seen that patriarchal structures are perpetuated by women themselves. This is because often the women are socially conditioned to believe in and perpetuate the traditions that are detrimental to the growth of women as intelligent and independent individuals at par with men. This is true now and it was also true in the 19th century India. Besides, women are largely dependent upon men in their lives for social and economic status. Hence, they tend to remain close to men by serving their interests.

As a consequence of the social reform movements, there was the emergence of the "New Women" In the late nineteenth century the lives of women began to change. There was a new growing approval of individualism. Due to the changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of the nineteenth century, several women were educated, articulate, mobile, and increasingly involved in public activities. These "New Women" as they were called, were part of a modernizing movement that sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women.

Education for Women in India

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, female literacy was extremely low compared to male literacy. Boys attended three kinds of schools- Small village schools which taught elementary reading and accounting; higher schools for Hindus, primarily brahmins, which taught Sanskrit grammar, lexicography, and literature; and Persian and Arabic schools for Muslims. Female education was informal and largely limited to practical matters. Women from respectable families often studied classical or vernacular literature, and girls from propertied families received education in keeping accounts. But most females learned only the household arts.

English education was introduced into India because the East India Company needed clerks and translators. From 1813 the company set aside some money for education, and after the charter act of 1833 English became the official language. In 1844 Lord Harding announced that English educated Indians would be given preference for government appointments. In contrast, is support for boys' schools, there was little interest in the education of girls. The colonial government, despite the pressure exerted by missionaries and liberals, was unconcerned with female education. The missionaries were interested in female education and schools for girls because they argued, women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent.

Government Support for Women's Education

Lord Dalhousie Governor-general of India from 1848 to 1856, declared that no signal change was likely to produce more important and beneficial consequences than women's education. Sir Charles Wood, president of the board of control from 1853 to 1855, issued an education dispatch in 1854 that detailed a shift in Government policy, from providing for the elites to support for mass education in vernacular. This new focus on a total system of education was to include both sexes. The moral and financial support of the colonial authorities was essential to the spread of female education.

Indian norms and social customs made the British model of schooling difficult, if not impossible. Deeply rooted nations of segregation and, in some areas, of complete seclusion, meant girls had to have female teachers and study in separate institutions. The widely accepted ideal of youthful marriage limited a girl's school-going years. Moreover, the demands on women for food production and nurturing left little time for lessons and studying.

The breakthrough came with the establishment of government schools such as Bethnis and schools sponsored by reformist religious institutions. First, the Brahma Samaj and later the Prarthanasamaj, Arya samaj and theosophical society all supported female educations. Prarthana was founded by Aatma Ram Pandurang in 1867. Later RG Bhandarkar a noted Sanskrit scholar and Justice Ramdev Govinda Ranade joined it. This movement was mostly propelled by the efforts of Justice Ranade. Arya Samaj was a Vedic movement founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati from Kathiawar in Gujarat. It was officially established on the 7th of April 1875 in Bombay. Before this, he established Vedic schools or Gurukuls between 1869 and 1873 in Farrukhabad (1869), Mirzapur (1870), Kasgunj (1870), Aligarh (1870), and Varanasi (1873). These schools ran on the model of traditional ancient Gurukuls and revolved around learning and imbibing the values of the Vedas.

Members of the Brahma Samaj, the Bengal-based reform society, led the movements for female education and equality between the sexes. Keshub Chandra Sen, a Brahma Samaj, lectured on the importance of female education in 1861 and the following year organized a

society for males who supported reforms for women. 1865, the Brahma Samaj sponsored the first organization, where women met for religious instruction, sewing lessons, and discussions of social issues.

In Madras, it was the Theosophical society that encouraged women's education. Speaking as a leader of the society, Annie Besant (1847-1933) asserted that in ancient times Hindu women were educated and moved freely in society. She urged a return to this "golden age". In England, Besant had been identified with women's suffrage in 1874. Besant warned that Indian's fate would be sealed if women were not educated. But western education was not the answer. According to her Indians should look to their ideal of womanhood the goddess Durga.

In north India, women's education was encouraged by the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu sect that followed the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. By the end of the nineteenth century, AryaSamaj recognized the importance of involving women in their reform efforts.

Conclusion: Reform Movements And Feminism

The first phase of feminism is associated with the social reform movements related to caste and gender relations. It was initiated by men to uproot the social evils such as sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, to educate women as well as to regulate the age of contest and to ensure proper rights through legal intervention. In addition to this, some upper-caste Hindu women rejected constraints they faced under Brahminical traditions. However, the efforts to improve the status of women in Indian society faced hindrances by the late nineteenth century, as nationalist movements emerged in India. These movements restricted colonial interventions in gender relations particularly in the areas of family relations.

The second phase of feminism is observed during the nationalist movements (1915-1947), where the influence of Gandhi is prevalent. The 1920s was a new era of localized women's conference (AIWC), a national level women's association that was closely affiliated to the Indian National Congress. Under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, it worked within the nationalist and anti-colonialist freedom movements.

Gandhi told his audience India needed women leaders who were "pure, firm, and self-controlled" like the ancient heroines: Sita, Damayanti, and Draupadi. These were the heroines who had suffered at the hands of men but survived with dignity. According to Gandhi, only when they appreciated the strength of their ancestress, would women comprehend their right to freedom and liberty.

Gandhi evoked Indians sacred legends, especially the *Ramayana* when he asked Hindu women to join the political movement. Gandhi compared the British rulers to the demon Ravana who abducted Sita. Gandhi modified this message to appeal to Muslim women, for them the demon or the British rule was the rule of Satan. He explained to women that there was a place for them in the movements, then he expressed faith in their courage. Gandhi legitimized and expanded Indian women's public activities by initialing them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British Raj.

Women's participation in the struggle for freedom developed their critical consciousness about their role and right in independent India. This resulted in the

introduction of the franchise and civic rights of women in the Indian constitution. A strong foundation for women's upliftment in society was laid by the social reformist to provide basic rights to women such as widow remarriage and education. They wished to have educated and enlightened women such as an answer to represent Indian society better and modern in opposition to what the orientalist discourage by the Britishers represented. The reformist also expected their companions and women at home to be emancipated and educated to support and understand them.

The Indian constitution made provisions for women's upliftment through affirmative action, maternal health, and child care provision, equal pay for equal work, etc. Soon the state adopted a patronizing role towards women, considering them as the "weaker section" of the population and therefore needs assistance to function as equals. Thus, the women in India have a very different struggle for equality. The utopia ended soon when the social and cultural ideologies and structures failed to honor the newly acquired concepts of fundamental rights and democracy.

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