

## 8<sup>th</sup> – Women Caste & Reform



**Women, caste and reform:** The status of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Two hundred years ago things were very different. Most children were married off at an early age. Both Hindu and Muslim men could marry more than one wife. 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 otherwise, were called 'sati', meaning virtuous women. Women's rights to property were also restricted. Besides, most women had virtually no access to education. In many parts of the country people believed that if a woman was educated, she would become a widow. In most regions, people were divided along lines of caste. Brahmans and Kshatriyas considered themselves as "upper castes". Other, such as traders and moneylenders (often referred to as vaishyas) were placed after them. Then came peasants, and artisans such as weavers and potters (referred to as shudras) At the lowest rung were those who labored to keep cities and villages clean or worked a job that upper castes considered "polluting", that is, it could lead to the loss of caste status. The upper castes also treated many of these groups at the bottom as "untouchable". They were not allowed to enter temples, draw water from the wells used by the upper castes, or bathe in ponds where upper castes bathed. They were seen as inferior human being. Women across the world have been exploited and oppressed for centuries. This way particularly true of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century India. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Indians exposed to western ideas and thought understood that no society could progress until the women of that society progressed. An educated woman, especially an educated mother, had a powerful influence on society. Women formed half the population of any country.

- **The position of women in society:** women were treated as objects. It was widely believed that women could not think for themselves and that they should be kept inside the house. All major decisions in a woman's life were taken by her father, her husband and, later, her son. Women did not have the right to inherit their father's property.
  - **Limited access to education:** women were discouraged from attending schools and colleges. It was believed that once educated, women would be unwilling to do household work or obey their husbands unquestioningly.
  - **Child marriage:** girls were married off at a very young age, sometimes when they were just 5 or 6 years old. They became mothers when they were barely 15 or 16, when they were neither physically nor emotionally ready for marriage or motherhood....
  - **The plight of widows:** widows (even child widows) in many Hindu families were not allowed to remarry. Their head was shaven. They were forced to wear only white clothes, they were allowed to eat only bland vegetarian food. They were treated as outcasts, and often sent away to temple cities like Brindavan and Benaras to fend for themselves.
  - **Sati:** one of the most barbaric acts practised in North India was sati, the burning alive of women on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Widows were told that this was the only way they could attain salvation. Some women chose to commit sati voluntarily, as for them it was preferable to the life of misery they would be forced to lead as widows.
  - **Female infanticide:** the birth of a girl child was seen as a curse in many parts of India. Many female infants were neglected, while some were deliberately killed.
- The social reformers: in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, several social reformers fought hard to change the treatment of women in Indian society. They felt that education was the first step towards women's emancipation. Once educated women would themselves become aware of their rights. They could then think of social legislation.

**Working towards change:** One important reason of the change is the development of new forms of communication. For the first time, books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and

## 8<sup>th</sup> – Women Caste & Reform



pamphlets were printed. These were far cheaper and far more accessible. Therefore ordinary people could read these, and many of them could also write and express their ideas in their own languages. All kinds of issues- social, political, economic and religious- could now be debated and discussed by men (and sometimes by women as well) in the new cities. These debates were often initiated by Indian reformers and reform groups. One such reformer was Raja Rammohun Roy. He founded a reform association known as the Brahma Sabha (later known as the Brahma Samaj) in Calcutta. People such as Rammohun Roy are described as reformers because they felt that changes were necessary in society, and unjust practices needed to be done away with.

Changing the lives of widows: Rammohun Roy was particularly moved by the problems widows faced in their lives. He 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. Many British officials had also begun to criticize Indian traditions and customs. They were therefore more than willing to listen to Rammohun who was reputed to be a learned man. In 1829, sati was banned.

Girls begin going to school: Many of the reformers felt that education for girls was necessary in order to improve the condition of women. Vidyasagar in Calcutta and many other reformers in Bombay set up schools for girls. When the first schools were opened in the mid-nineteenth century, many people were afraid of them. They feared that schools would take girls away from home, prevent them from doing their domestic duties. Therefore, throughout the nineteenth century, most educated women were taught at home by liberal fathers or husbands.

Women write about women: Muslim women like the begums of Bhopal played a notable role in promoting education among women. They founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh. By the 1880s, Indian women began to enter universities. Some of them trained to be doctors, some became teachers. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the place of women in society. Tarabai Shinde, a woman educated at home at Poona, published a book, *Stripurushtulna*. (A comparison between women and men), criticizing the social differences between men and women. Pandita Ramabai, a great scholar of Sanskrit, felt that Hinduism was oppressive towards women, and wrote a book about the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women.

Caste and social reform: Rammohun Roy translated an old Buddhist text that was critical of caste. In Bombay, the Paramhans mandali was founded in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste. There were also others who questioned the injustices of the caste social order. Christian missionaries began setting up schools for tribal groups and 'lower'- caste children. These children were thus equipped with some resources to make their way into a changing world. At the same time, the poor began leaving their villages to look for jobs that were opening up in the cities. There was work in the factories that were coming up, and jobs in municipalities. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. Work in the new locations was often very hard. But the poor, the people from low castes, saw this as an opportunity to get away from the oppressive hold that upper-caste landowners exercised over their lives and the daily humiliation they suffered. The father of B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalit movement, taught at an army school.

**Demands For Equality And Justice:** People from within the Non-Brahman castes began organizing movements against caste discrimination, and demanded social equality and justice. The Satnami movement in Central India was founded by Ghasidas who worked among the leatherworkers and organized a movement to improve their social status. Sri Narayan Guru, proclaimed the ideals of unity for his people. He argued against treating

## 8<sup>th</sup> – Women Caste & Reform



people unequally on the basis of caste differences. According to him, all humankind belonged to the same caste. One of his famous statements was: “oru jati, oru matam, oru daivam manushyanu”(one caste, one religion, one god for humankind).

**Gulamgiri:** One of the most vocal amongst the “low-caste” leaders was Jyotirao Phule. Born in 1827, he studied in schools set up by Christian missionaries. On growing up he developed his own ideas about the injustices of caste society. Phule argued that the Aryans were foreigners, who came from outside the subcontinent, and defeated and subjugated the true children of the country- those who had lived here from before the coming of the Aryans. Phule claimed that before Aryan rule there existed a golden age when warrior-peasants tilled the land and ruled the Maratha countryside in just and fair ways. He proposed that Shudras (labouring castes) and Ati Shudras (untouchable) should unite to challenge caste discrimination. In 1873, Phule wrote a book named Gulamgiri meaning slavery. Some ten years before to the end of slavery in America. Phule dedicated his book to all those Americans who had fought to free slaves, thus establishing a link between the conditions of the “lower” castes in India and the black slaves in America.

**Who could enter temples?** Ambedkar was born into a mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. In school he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground, and was not allowed to drink water from taps that upper-caste children used. After finishing school, he got a fellowship to go to the US for higher studies. On his return to India in 1919, he wrote extensively about “upper-caste” power in contemporary society.

**The non-Brahman movement:** The non-Brahman movement started. The initiative came from those non-Brahman castes that had acquired access to education, wealth and influence. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or periyar, as he was called, came from a middle class family. Periyar was an outspoken critic of Hindu scriptures, especially the codes of Manu, the ancient lawgiver, and the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana. He said that these texts had been used to establish the authority of Brahmans over lower castes and the domination of men over women. These assertions did not go unchallenged. The forceful speeches, writings and movements of lower-caste leaders did lead to rethinking and some self-criticism among upper-caste nationalist leaders. Orthodox hind society also reacted by founding Sana tam Dharma sabhas and the bhagat dharm Mahamandal in the north, and associations like the Brahman sabha in Bengal. The object of these associations was to uphold caste distinctions as a cornerstone of Hinduism, and show how this was sanctified by scriptures.

