

Source: <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/41972/1/Unit-1.pdf>

WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD

The women's movements in the colonial period are mainly of two different concerns: **(1) social reform movements and** (2) nationalist movements.

Social Reform Movements

The women's movements began as a social reform movement in the 19th century. The British conquest and its rule over India brought about transformation in Indian economy as well as in society. The new land revenue settlements, commercial agriculture and infrastructural facilities like roads, railways, postal and telegraph services etc. ushered in by the British led to a significant change in the Indian village economy. The new economic system and administrative machinery required a new type of educated personal which resulted in the establishment of Western educational institutions imparting modern education. The Indians who were the beneficiaries of the new economic system were attracted towards this and as a result a new class of intelligentsia evolved in the Indian society. The articulate intelligentsia became the pioneers of all progressive democratic movements: social, political, economic and cultural. The reform movements were not homogeneous and varied a lot in terms of the ideas and changes that was to be fostered. They did however share a common concern for rooting out the social evils, partly in response to charges of barbarity from the colonial rulers. This was a period of the hegemonic control and influence of colonial ideology. This was a time of transition, one of the emerging bourgeois society and values of new modes of thought.

The colonial intervention in the 19th century intruded into the areas of our culture and society and this affected transformation in our social fabric. This potential threat was sensed by the Indian intellectual reformers, exposed to western ideas and values. At this juncture, the Indian intellectual reformer sensitive to the power of colonial domination and responding to Western ideas of rationalism and liberalism sought ways and means of resisting this colonial hegemony by resorting to what K. N. Panniker (Presidential address, Indian History Congress, 1975) refers to as cultural defense.

This cultural defense resulted in a paradoxical situation. Spurred by new European ideas of rationalism and progress, the reformers tried to create a new society, modern yet rooted in Indian tradition. They began a critical appraisal of Indian society in an attempt to create a new ethos devoid of all overt social aberrations like polytheism, polygamy, casteism, sati, child marriage, illiteracy etc. all of which they believed were impediments to progress of women. All the social reformers shared a belief common to many parts of the world in the 19th century that no society could progress if its women were backward. To the reformers, the position of Indian women, as it was in the 19th century was abysmally low and hence their efforts were directed at an overall improvement in the status of women through legislation, political action and propagation, of education. This was mainly spurred by the first wave feminism of the west and concentrated on basic rights for women.

The social reform movement did not radically challenge the existing patriarchal structure of society or question gender relation. They picked up for reform only those

issues which the British were pointing out as evidence of degeneration in the Indian society. Even the women's institutions and organisations that sprang up during this period do not reveal the development of an independent view. As a result even when women were speaking for themselves they were speaking only the language of the men, defined by male parameters.

Women were seen as passive recipients of a more humanitarian treatment to be given by Western educated elite men. There was thus an attempt to reform women rather than reform the social conditions which opposed them. There were no attempts to alter the power structure and the men-women relation in the society. This was but natural since the change in the status of women was being sought only within questioning patriarchy itself. The attempt was to create a new Indian woman, truly Indian and yet sufficiently educated and tutored in the 19th century values to suit the new emerging society. Thus education for girls was not meant to equip them to be self-sufficient, independent and emancipated and train them to follow some profession but to be good housewives (Pande and Kameshwari, 1987).

Women also joined in the struggle against colonialism, but while they were encouraged to participate by leaders like Gandhi, their work in the struggles was just an extension of their domestic work. Very few women were allowed to join the front ranks with men, and the ones that did, spoke of the isolation they felt at times (Kumar, 1993). As a form of backlash to these new ideas that colonialism brought to India, women's roles were being pushed to a more traditional way of life.

In spite of its limitations, it cannot be denied that the social reform movement did help in removing prejudices against women's education and provided a space for women in the public realm. The reformers took up issues, such as, sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, purdah, absence of education among women etc. There were two groups of social reformers, 1) Liberal Reformers and 2) The Revivalists. Both the groups undoubtedly recognised the oppressive social institutions' customs of India. But the former group on the basis of liberal philosophy put forth their work for the cause of women whereas the latter group's work was based on a programme of the revival at the Vedic society in modern India. While arguing in favour of equal rights for women appealed to logic, reason, history, the principal of individual freedom and the requirements of social programme, social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Iswarachandra Vidya Sagar, Kandukuri Veeresalingam Panthulu, M. G. Ranade, Karve, Swami Vivekanantia, Swami Dayanand Saraswathi and others provided leadership to the women's movement by frankly acknowledging the degraded position of Indian women. The social reformers concentrated their attention on important aspects of women like sati, age of marriage the sad plight of widows and their right to remarry. The social reformers established a number of societies like Bramho Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission and others for the cause of Indian women. The best exponent of liberalism was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who was the first Indian to initiate a social reform movement and campaign for the cause of women. He advocated equality between the two sexes and declared that women were not inferior to men morally and intellectually.

Roy's attention was drawn towards the inhuman practice of sati, after female infanticide. From 1818 onwards he began his active propaganda through speeches and

writings against sati. Largely because of his effort and persuasion, the East India Company declared the sati practice illegal and a punishable offence in 1829.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy also opposed other evils like early marriage, polygamy etc. He supported female education and widow and inter-caste marriage. He wanted that women should have the right of inheritance and property. Roy's Brahmo Samaj played a significant role in the reform activities concerning women.

The Brahmo Samaj, soon after its inception became a vigorous social reform movement first in Bengal which then quickly spread to other parts of the country and added to the volume and strength of similarly aimed local reformist movements. The members of the Brahmo Samaj opposed the caste system and they concentrated greatly on improving the low conditions of women and played a very important role in the introduction of several beneficial measures.

Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwara Chandra Vidya Sagar also helped women. He did so by propagating widow remarriage. The child marriage evil resulted in large numbers of young girls ending up as widows whose lives were miserable due to the severe restrictions imposed on them. He argued in favour of widow remarriage and published his work on "Widow Remarriage" in 1853.

Arya Samaj was established by Dayanand Saraswathi in 1875. Dayanand Saraswathi emphasised compulsory education of both boys and girls. A series of schools for women- Arya Kanya Patasalas - were the first concerted effort of the Samaj to promote women's education in a systematic way. Prarthana Samaj founded by some Maharashtra Brahmins in 1867 had leaders like M. G. Ranade, N. G. Chandrasarkar and R. G. Bhandarkar. It concentrated more on sponsoring education for women. Both Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj made forceful efforts to prove that Hindu religious tradition were not the source of legitimacy for the sorrowful condition of women in society. Under the influence of the liberal thought of the west the two Samajes strove to restore to women their dignified status.

The efforts of Vidya Sagar, Keshub Chandra Sen and D. K. Karve resulted in the enactment of widow remarriage act of 1856. In the South Kandukuri Veeresalingam led the widow remarriage movement. In 1874 he performed 63 widow remarriages throughout the Madras presidency and financially supported men who married widows by providing them houses and other benefits.

Another aspect that the reformers worked on was the age of girls at marriage. In the 19th century the average age of marriage for girls was 8 or 9. The extensive propaganda by Vidya Sagar and other reformers in this regard led the British government to legislate in order to improve the condition of minor girls and the age of consent bill was passed in 1860 which made sexual intercourse with a girl of less than 10 years of age as rape. Further social reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade, Behramji Malabari and Tej Bahadur Sapru in their attempts to raise the age of marriage cited several cases of consummation at the age of 10 or 11 which led to serious physical and psychological disturbances. Behramji, a Parsi journalist published his notes on infant marriage and enforced widowhood in 1884 suggesting certain reforms to be adopted in the educational institutions to discourage child marriage and also suggested some corrective measures to the Government. It was

between 1884 and 1889 that enormous pressure was brought to bear on the government to enact law to further raise the age at marriage of the girl. At last due to the collective efforts of the reformers in 1891, the Bill known as the Age of Consent was passed, which rose the marriageable age for girls to 12 years.

The social reformers felt that through female education the social evils that were linked to the issue of preserving and strengthening basic family structure could be eliminated and good wives and mothers could emerge from the same. Starting from Raja Ram Mohan Roy including the liberal as well as orthodox reformers supported female education. This resulted in the establishment of schools for girls and homes for widows. Between 1855 and 1858 while he was inspector of schools, Vidya Sagar established 48 girls' schools. M. G. Ranado along with his wife propagated female education and started a girls' high school in 1884. The limited enforcement and practicability of legislations like widow remarriage act of 1856 and others in a tradition bound society was recognised by D. K. Karve, who, therefore, concentrated his efforts on promoting education among widows. In 1896 Karve along with 15 of his colleagues founded the Ananth Balikashram for the education of widows, where the courses were drawn up with an idea to make the widows self reliant. He also started Mahila Vidyalaya in 1907 and S. N. D. T. Women's University in 1916 a separate educational institution for women so as to lessen the resistance of orthodox section with regard to women's education. The social reform movement in its later phases resulted in producing women social reformers who worked for their own cause. Pandita Ramabai started Sharda Sadan in Bombay in 1889 to provide an ashram to destitute high caste widows. In 1912-1913 a widow's home was established by sister Subbulakshmi, another widow in Madras.

Another important aspect of the social reform movement phase of women in India was that of property rights for Hindu women (Mukharjee 1975a). The existing practice was particularly harsh on the Hindu widow who had no claim on her husband's property except the right at maintenance as a result of which she was at the mercy of her husbands relatives. Raja Ram Mohan Roy suggested that the government should enact and enforce laws to remove these disabilities and bring economic freedom and self reliance. As a result of such efforts, special marriage act of 1872 with its provision for divorce and succession to property to women was passed. The married women's property act of 1874 widened the scope of stridhan (women's property) and expanded the right to own and acquire property by women. It also gave a widow a life interest in her husband's share of the property and a share equal to that of a son.

Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati and Annie Besant were the prominent reformers of the revivalist group who also worked for the cause of Indian women. This group believed in the revival of the Vedic society in modern India. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj was against child marriage. He encouraged widow remarriages and also set up several rescue homes and orphanages. Annie Besant leader of the theosophical movement was also against child marriage and supported remarriage of child widows. She laid emphasis on the importance of female education, thus adding strength to the social reform movement.

Muslim women in India made little progress in their position both in the pre British period or later British period. Western education, the major vehicle of progress during

the British period did not reach them, partly because of the existence of Purdah and seclusion of women from external environment and partly, because education was considered inessential for them. Educated Muslims formed only a small segment of the population in the 19th century and were confined to urban areas in the country. Consequently, efforts in education and association formation among Muslim women did not begin until the 20th century, one notable exception being the Tyabji family of Bombay. Badruddin Tyabji who graduated from Elphinstone College founded a Muslim self-help association in 1876. His female relatives were later active in starting a Muslim girls school (Amina Binte Badruddin Tyabji) and running a girls' orphanage (Begum Nawale Misra) and starting nursing centres (Shareefa Hamid Ali).

Thus the social reformers laid the foundation of the women's movement in India. Social reform movement was the first attempt to remove the obstacles in the life of women. It created awareness among the people that women must be liberated and be made equal of men.