



The Impact Of The Socialist Reform Movement Of 19th Century India On Women's Position In Society.

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Abstract -The status of women has been the central concern of many reform movements before and after independence. First, women were stereotyped as servile and submissive beings wholly incapable of having an individual identity, independent existence and autonomy. Second, males in the Indian society had understood that religion was a very important tool that had enabled them to keep their women's social and economic position intact, thereby limiting chances of a potential challenge to male superiority. Third, the male patriarchy had realised that making education inaccessible and unavailable to the Indian women was the best way to prevent an awakening among the women folk, thereby continuing with male dominance in the society. As such, the dominating Indian male would never let the balance of power tilt in favour of the women folk. To that extent, they vociferously resisted the blooming of the seeds of social transformation in the Indian society.

Women's upliftment period began in the late 19th century, first among elite Hindu men and women and, later, Muslims. Leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj were concerned with issues like sati (the ritual suicide of widows), widow remarriage, divorce, female education, purdah system (the veiling and seclusion of women), polygamy, and dowry.

The liberal egalitarian ideology under the British Rule created conditions for a social awakening among Indian women. Several women's associations came into existence both at regional and national levels. Banga Mahila Samaj and the Ladies Theosophical Society functioned at local levels to promote modern ideals for women. **The important national organisations like Bharat**

Mahila Parishad (1904), Bharat Stri Mahamandal (1909), Women's Indian Association (1917), National Council of Women in India (1925) and All India Women's Conference (AIWC)

(1927) and Kasturba Gandhi National Memorial Trust took up issues like women's education, abolition of evil social customs (purdah, child marriage) equality of rights and opportunities and women's suffrage. In 1934, when AIWC introduced a bill for equality in marriage, divorce, and property rights, they drew upon the nationalist rights discourse; and after independence in 1947, women were granted constitutional equality. However, the Hindu, Islamic, and other religious communities retained jurisdiction over family law.

It could be said that Indian women's movements worked for two goals: one, liberation or uplift of women, i.e., reforming social practices so as to enable women to play a more important and constructive role in society; and

two, equal rights for men and women, i.e., extension of civil rights enjoyed by men in the political, economic and familial spheres to women also.

Jana Everett (1979) calls the former as 'corporate feminism' and the latter as 'liberal feminism'.

The strategies used by women's bodies were: making demands by organising public meetings, presenting views to government officials, forming committees to investigate conditions and holding conferences to mobilise women.

Social Reform Movement in India and Role of Women

The social reformers believed in the principle of individual liberty, freedom, and equality of all human beings irrespective of sex, color, race, caste, or religion. They attacked a number of traditional, authoritarian, and hierarchical social institutions and launched social reform movements to liberate the Indian women from their shackles.

There are two distinct groups of progressive movements aimed at emancipation of Indian women. Both groups recognized the restrictive and coercive nature of the social customs and institutions. One group opposed these customs and institutions as they contradicted the democratic principles of liberty and freedom. This group was called the Reformers.

The other group demanded the democratization of social relations and removal of harmful practices on the basis of revival of the Vedic society in modern India, which according to them, was democratic. This group came to be known as the Revivalists.

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Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one of the greatest social reformers of India. He was concerned about a number of evil customs planning the Indian society. These included "saha marana" or Sati, female infanticide, polygamy, infant marriages, purdah, absence of education among women, and the Devadasi system. Raja Ram Mohan Roy led a crusade against the evil and inhuman practice of Sati, in which a widow was forced to immolate herself on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Sati was in practice in many parts of India.

It was accepted and condoned on the grounds that it would secure "Moksha" for widows. It was also felt that a woman could be led astray if she continued to live after the death of her husband. This feeling was disproved by Raja, who felt that a woman could be led astray even during her husband's lifetime.

In fact, after the death of her husband, a woman is under the protection of her family, so she can be watched over with greater vigilance. Raja strongly refuted the contention that Sati was a free, voluntary act of the widow, and called it a monstrous lie. Raja's arguments and anti-Sati activities led Lord William Bentinck to legislate for the prohibition of Sati, which resulted in the passing of the Prohibition of Sati Act in 1829. Widow Re-marriage Act in 1856, through a successful collaboration among Indian reformers was another achievement.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was another great social reformer who sought to improve the condition of widows by legalizing widow remarriages. Since he felt that his own life should set an example for others to follow, he took a pledge that he would allow his daughters to study, and married all his daughters after they were 16 years of age. He also pledged that if any of his daughters were widowed and they wanted to get remarried, he would allow them to do so. He was also against the prevalent custom of polygamy. He also championed the cause of introducing western-style education for women as he saw it as the best vehicle for spreading rational and humane knowledge among

the women in India. He thought it necessary to educate the womenfolk to bring them out of centuries of suppression and servility.

Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade was instrumental in laying down the foundation of an all Indian organization to carry on the struggle for social reform—the Indian National Social Conference. This organization was the first national institution to carry on collectively, in an organized way, and on a national scale the social reform movement.

He took up the problems of widow remarriages and was an active member of a society, which worked for widow remarriages. In fact, the Shankaracharya had excommunicated him for attending the first widow remarriage in 1869. Ranade worked toward educating women. He and his wife started a school for girls in 1884

Maharishi Karve showed great concern for the plight of widows and the problem of widow remarriages. He revived the Widow Remarriage Association and started the Hindu Widow's Home Karve also made efforts to improve the education levels of girls as well as widows.

He created the Kane Women's University. His efforts in the movement to liberate the Indian women are of great significance, and the extensive and successful work brought about a change in the attitudes of people towards widows.

In order to set an example for others, he married a widow after the death of his first wife. As a result of the social reform movement, a number of institutions and organizations were established. The institutions started by the reformers covered the whole country with their activities.

Madan Mohan Malviya

He ardently favored the idea of social upliftment of women and opined that they should be properly educated he sincerely took up the cause of women education and advocated that girls must be well educated as they will become the true teachers of their children. Malaviyaji knew that the welfare of household, society and humanity depended largely on girls, ladies and housewives. He, therefore, set it as a mission to free them from backwardness. He was in favour of adult suffrage for women and the removal of Purdah. He supported widow remarriage and opposed child marriage both for boys and girls. In his speeches and writings he always talked about the equality of men and women in our society. He was firm in his belief that liberty and justice "are birth right of every man and woman". (The Hindustan Times, Feb. 5, 1932).

The following excerpt from "Twelfth convocation Address in B.H.U. delivered by Malviyaji explicitly and categorically puts forth his views on the role and functionality of women: "There is no teacher like the mother". We must, therefore, define the goal of their education and take counsel together and obtain the best advice as to what course will most suit them, how we shall secure to them a good knowledge of our ancient literature and culture and combine with it a knowledge of modern literature and science, particularly biological science, of art and painting, and of music, how we shall secure the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual building of the womanhood of the country." He used to refer the women of the immortal stories of Arundhati, Draupadi, Maitreyi, Gargi, Savitri and Sita and transport his listeners to ethereal realms.

Gandhi

He visualized women as active, self-conscious agents of social change. He is principally concerned with bringing about radical social reconstruction. One of the most lifelong contributions of Gandhi to the women's cause was that he gave it moral legitimacy. But few scholars asserted that Gandhi endorsed the fact that women's 'primary function is to look after the home'. He did not interrogate 'class based forms of the patriarchal oppression of women' as per Sangari and Vaid argument in 1989. Sujata Patel argued that Gandhi's 'reconstruction of women and femininity did not make a structural analysis of the origins and nature of exploitation of women.

The institutions established during this period are as follows:

The Gujarat Vernacular Society:

This social institute was established in 1848. The aim of this institute was to decrease the largescale illiteracy and superstitious beliefs that was a feature of the Gujarati society. It was associated with all social reform activities concerning women in Gujarat.

The society worked for the cause of women through education. It started a number of coeducational schools. It published literature on women's issues in the vernacular press. It tried to organize elocution competitions and provide a platform for women to talk about their issues and problems.

The Deccan Education Society:

This society was formed in 1884. The society started girls' schools and encouraged education of women in Maharashtra.

The Ramakrishna Mission:

The Ramakrishna Mission was established in 1897. It set up homes for widows and schools for girls. It also gave refuge to invalid and destitute women, ante- and post-natal care for women, and provided training for women to become midwives.

The Arya Samaj: Though started as a revivalist organization, the Arya Samaj emphasized women's education. Girls received instructions in home science and domestic affairs. Fine arts were also included in the curriculum for girls. It also included instructions in religion and religious ceremonies for women. It provided shelter to distressed women in times of difficulty.

The Hingne Women's Education Institute:

This institute was started in 1896 to meet the demand of women, whether married, unmarried or widowed. By imparting training to young unmarried girls in various fields, it tried to prevent early marriages. It tried to impart skills and education to married women to enable them to carry on domestic life efficiently and economically. It also gave training to widows to make them economically independent.

S.N.D.T. Women's University:

This university was established to meet the needs for higher education for women in such a manner that women's requirements were satisfied. It provided education in the mother tongue. It was established exclusively for the education of women.

The Seva Sadan:

Seva Sadan was started in 1908, with a view to bringing together enlightened women of different communities who desired to work for the upliftment of backward women. Its main activity was to provide social and medical aid to women and children of the poor classes, irrespective of their caste or creed. It also established a home for destitute and distressed women and children.

It also provided training to poor women in domestic crafts to enable them to earn a livelihood. The Seva Sadan in Poona was established to educate women in religious, literary, medical, and industrial subjects. It also emphasized on all-round development of a woman's personality. It stressed on economic self-sufficiency of women.

The Indian National Social Conference:

Some of the activities taken up by this organization were—to deal with disabilities of child marriages, sale of young girls, the practice of polygamy, and the issue of widow remarriages. It also took up the problem of access to education for women.

All India Women's Conference:

The primary focus of this organization was women's education as well as social reforms. Its aim was to work actively for the general progress and welfare of women and children. It passed various resolutions in different sessions in order to elevate the status of women.

It also dealt with the evils of early marriages, polygamy, and prohibition of divorce. It advocated complete equality for women in property matters. It sought to improve working conditions for women. It also agitated against immoral traffic in women and children, and against the inhuman custom of Devadas.

Conclusion -In essence, the 19th-century socialist reform movements in India, driven by the ideals of individual liberty, freedom, and equality, sparked a social awakening that gradually improved the position of women and paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable society. While challenges remained, these movements laid the foundation for the eventual granting of constitutional equality to women after India gained independence in 1947.

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