

CHAPTER 8

WOMEN CASTE AND REFORM

HAND OUT MODULE I

“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing.” — Swami Vivekananda

Two hundred years ago, the situation of women was altogether different compared to in the modern times. The practice of child marriage was rampant. Both Hindu and Muslim men could marry more than one wife. Burning of a widow on her husband’s pyre was a gory practice in many parts of India. This was called the sati system. A widow who died in this manner was praised as a woman of high virtues. Women did not have the right to property. Most of the women had no access to education.

According to the caste system, Brahmans and Kshatriyas were considered as “upper castes”. Others, 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. The lowest rung were those who laboured to keep cities and villages clean or worked under upper castes. The upper castes considered these groups as “untouchable”.

Working Towards Change:

- (i) In early 19th century things changed because of the development of new forms of communication.
- (ii) Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy founded Brahma Samaj in Calcutta.
- (iii) Raja Ram Mohan Roy pioneered this reform movement. He opposed social practices such as discrimination on the basis of caste, untouchability, superstitions and the custom of ‘sati’. He wanted to spread the knowledge of western education and bring about freedom and equality for women.

Changing the Lives of Widows:

- **Raja Rammohan Roy** set up the **Brahmo Samaj** to fight social evils. He began a campaign against the practice of sati. Many British officials criticised Indian traditions and customs. They supported him and in 1829, sati was banned. He also supported women’s education. In the religious field, he opposed idol worship and meaningless rituals.
- **Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar** was one of the most famous reformers who suggested widow remarriage. In 1856, British officials passed the law permitting widow remarriage.

- **Swami Dyanand Saraswati** founded the **Arya Samaj** in 1875, and also supported widow marriage.
- **Girls begin going to School:**
- Many reformers felt that to improve the condition of women, education for girls was necessary.
- Many reformers in Bombay and Calcutta set up schools for girls.
- With the inauguration of first school in mid-19th century, many people feared that school would take the girls away from home and prevent them from doing domestic duties.
- Many people believed that girls should be kept away from public spaces as they believed that they can get corrupting influence.
- In aristocratic Muslim families in North India, women learnt to read the Koran in Arabic. They were taught by women who came home to teach.

Women write about Women:

- (i) Muslim women like **Begums of Bhopal** promoted education among women and founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
- (ii) **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain** started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta.
- (iii) Indian women began to enter universities by 1880s. Some of them trained to be doctors and teachers.
- (iv) **Tarabai Shinde** got education at home at Poona, published a book, **Stripurushtulna** (A Comparison between Women & Men), criticising the social differences between men & women.
- (v) **Pandita Ramabai** was a great scholar of Sanskrit, wrote a book about the miserable lives of upper-class Hindu women. She founded a widows' home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been treated badly by their husbands' relatives.
- (vi) Later, women were trained to support themselves economically.
- (vii) Orthodox Hindu & Muslim Nationalists were worried as women started adopting western cultures and according to them that could corrupt and erode family values.
- (viii) Women started working for reforms. They wrote books, magazines, founded schools & training centres, and set up womens' associations.
- (ix) Women formed political pressure groups to push through laws for female suffrage (the right to vote).
- (x) Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose gave their support to demands for greater equality and freedom for women.

As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way.
