

# HISTORY



## Women, Caste and Reforms

### Indian Society in the Nineteenth Century

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The Indian society in the nineteenth century was orthodox in nature. Some common societal practices existing at this time were

- There were child marriages as most of the children were married off at an early age.
- Men belonging to any religion could have more than one wife.
- The custom of 'sati' was practised. A woman was praised if she burnt herself on the pyre of her husband.
- Women had no rights over her father's property.
- Women were mostly denied any sort of education.
- The caste system was prevalent in India where the high class enjoyed all the privileges. People belonging to the lower caste could not enter into temples, draw water from public wells or bath in ponds which were used by the upper class Brahmins.
- Gradually, many people began to realise the evils of these practices in society and began to oppose them.

### Beginning of Debates in Society

In the nineteenth century, many debates and discussions began to be held among intellectuals who wanted to reform Indian society. Development of communication sparked various discussions and debates in society. Newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets began to be published. People expressed their ideas in these means of communication which began to be read widely influencing the people's thoughts.

### Raja Rammohun Roy

- Raja Rammohun Roy was a major reformer from Bengal. He founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 in Calcutta. He advocated Western education in the country.
- He worked for the upliftment of Indian women. He wanted greater freedom and equality for women.
- He is known for his campaign against the practice of sati. He had knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and many European languages. Through his writings, he tried to prove that a practice such as sati was not legal in the ancient period.
- Because of his efforts, the British passed an Act which made the practice of sati punishable by law.
- Later, many reformers used the strategy of Rammohun Roy. They took the help of ancient scriptures to prove the futility of a practice which they wished to challenge.



Raja Rammohun Roy

**Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** also used ancient scriptures for advocating remarriages of widows. The British in 1856 legalised remarriages of widows. In the Madras Presidency, **Veerasalingam** formed an association for widow remarriages. **Dayanand Saraswati** also supported widow remarriages. However, at the same time, many people were also opposing the work of reformers.

## Reforms in Female Education

- Women education was advocated by several reformers. Vidyasagar set up a girls' school in Calcutta.
- The Arya Samaj set up by Dayanand Saraswati opened many schools for girls in Punjab. Jyotirao Phule, a noted reformer, established girls' schools in Maharashtra.
- In Muslim families, girls were taught to read and write the Koran. Reformers such as Mumtaz Ali cited many verses from the Koran arguing in favour of women education.
- However, many people were still not ready to send girls to schools. They thought that schools would prevent girls from learning household work. Girls also had to travel through public places in order to reach schools. This was disliked by their parents. Thus, many girls and women were taught by the male members at home.
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929 according to which no man below the age of 18 and woman below the age of 16 could marry. Later, the age limits were increased.



Ishwar Chandra  
Vidyasagar

## Women Reformers

- Women at this time also began to advocate female education. Begums of Bhopal played an important role in promoting education among girls. They also founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
- Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain established many schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta and Patna.
- Tarabai Shinde wrote Stripurushtulana which criticised social differences which were existing between men and women.
- Pandita Ramabai was a prominent woman reformer. She was a great scholar of Sanskrit. She claimed that the Hindu religion was responsible for the subordinate position of women. She also wrote about the miserable condition of the upper caste Hindu women.
- She established a widows' home at Poona which provided shelter to the widows. The organisation trained women in various arts so that they could support themselves.
- Many nationalist leaders such as Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose were in favour of giving greater equality and freedom to women. They also promised to give women the right to vote. Till then, they asked women to carry on the anti-British struggles.



Pandita Ramabai

## Caste Reforms

Many reformers at this time had begun to question caste inequalities. Raja Rammohun Roy criticised the caste system. The Prathana Samaj and the Paramhans Mandali worked for achieving greater caste equality. Christian missionaries set up schools for educating the children of tribal and lower castes. Many lower caste people left their villages to find work in the cities. They worked in municipal corporations—building roads and digging drains. Many of them also went to find work in plantations and mines in Assam, Bihar, Trinidad and Mauritius. This was an opportunity for them to move away from the hold of the upper caste people residing in villages. They also found opportunities in the army. Many people belonging to the Mahar caste found work in the Mahar Regiment.

## Movements for Demanding Equality and Justice

By the second half the nineteenth century, even the people belonging to lower caste began demanding equal rights.

- Ghasidas, a person belonging to lower caste, founded the Satnami Movement in central India. Haridas belonging to the Matua sect worked for improving the social condition of Chandala cultivators.
- Sri Narayan Guru from Kerala advocated equality of all people within a sect. All these leaders and sects tried to instil pride and respect among the people belonging to low castes.

### Jyotirao Phule

- He was one of the most noted reformers from Maharashtra. He criticised the Brahmins who had dominated society. He claimed that Brahmins who call themselves the Aryans were actually foreigners who came to the country and subjugated the natives of the land. These natives were actually the low-caste people who were looked down upon by the Brahmins.
- Phule believed that a golden age existed before the advent of the Aryans where peasant warriors cultivated the fields and ruled the land. He wanted all the shudras to unite to challenge the domination of the Brahmins.
- Phule founded 'Satyashodhak Samaj' which advocated caste equality.
- In 1873, he wrote the book Gulamgiri. In this book, he found similarities between the condition of slaves in America and the condition of low-caste people in India. Both communities were dominated and subjugated.



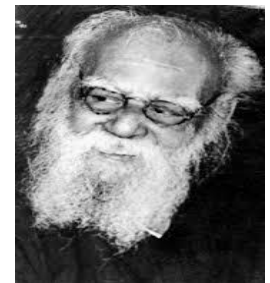
Jyotirao Phule

### Dr B. R. Ambedkar

- Dr B. R. Ambedkar was born into the Mahar caste which was an untouchable caste. In his childhood, he faced various discriminations in society.
- After he returned from the US, he wrote about the domination of the upper caste people in society.
- In 1927, he started a temple entry movement in which lower castes also used water from the temple tank. This created friction between the upper and lower castes.

### E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar)

- The non-Brahmin movement started by the early twentieth century. The movement was started by the non-Brahmins who had obtained education and wealth.
- They contended that Brahmins were the heirs of the Aryans who had invaded north India. They later moved to south India and suppressed the Dravidians-the original inhabitants of the land.
- E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker or Periyar had joined the Congress when he was young. He however left the organisation when he noticed separate seating arrangements for the people belonging to lower castes.
- He then founded the Self-Respect Movement. He said that the people of the lower caste were the original upholders of the Tamil and Dravidian culture.
- Periyar criticised Ramayana, Bhagvad Gita and the Codes of Manu. According to him, these texts were used for establishing the authority of the Brahmins over the people of lower castes.



E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar)

We find that the work of the reformers led to a change in thinking of many people. Many people began to advocate the establishment of casteless societies. However, the orthodox section of society also reacted

to these reform movements by founding *Sanatan Dharm Sabhas*, Bharat Dharma Mahamandal and Brahman Sabha Bengal.

### Names of Some Famous Organisations and their Founders

Name of the Organisation	Name of the Founder/Leader	Principles
<b>The Brahmo Samaj</b>	Raja Rammohum Roy	Prohibited idolatry and sacrifices
<b>Young Bengal movement</b>	Henry Louis Vivian Derozio	Demanded education for women and advocated freedom of speech and expression
<b>Swami Vivekanand</b>	Ramakrishna Mission	Believed in the ideal of salvation through social service
<b>Prathana Samaj</b>	Dr Atmaram Pandurang	Advocated removal of caste restrictions, ban on widow remarriage and promoted women education
<b>The Veda Samaj</b>	Sridharalu Naidu and Keshab Chandra Sen	Demanded abolition of caste restrictions and promoted widow remarriage
<b>The Aligarh Movement</b>	Sayyid Ahmad Khan	Supported western education
<b>The Singh Sabha Movement</b>	———	To rid Sikhism of superstitions, caste distinctions and non-Sikh practices