
Chapter – 09 History

Women, Caste and Reform

- About two hundred years ago things were very difficult in our society. There were so many restrictions imposed on women.
 - Widows were praised and called 'satis' meaning 'virtuous' if they chose to by burning themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands.
 - People were also divided along lines of caste. Brahmins and Kshatriyas considered themselves in upper caste, after them traders and moneylenders referred to as Vaishyas and the lower caste were Shudras and included peasants, artisans, weavers and potter.
 - **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 Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta.
 - (iii) He wanted to spread the knowledge of western education and bring about freedom and equality for women.
 - **Changing the Lives of Widows:**
 - (i) Raja Rammohan Roy began a campaign against the practice of sati. Many British officials criticized Indian traditions and customs. They supported him and in 1829, sati was banned.
 - (ii) Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar was one of the most famous reformers who suggested widow remarriage. In 1856, British officials passed the law permitting widow remarriage.
 - (iii) Swami Dyanand Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, and also supported widow marriage.
 - **Girls begin Going to School:**
 - (i) Many reformers felt that to improve the condition of women, educating the girls was necessary.
 - (ii) Many reformers in Bombay and Vidyasagar in Calcutta set up schools for girls.
 - (iii) 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) Pandita Ramabai was a great scholar of Sanskrit, wrote a book about the miserable lives of upper-class Hindu women.
 - (v) She founded a widows' home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been treated by their husbands' relatives.
 - (vi) Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose gave their support to demands for greater equality and freedom for women.
 - **Caste and Social Reform:**
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- (i) Social reformers criticized caste inequalities. Paramhans Mandali was founded in 1840 in Bombay to work for the abolition of caste.
 - (ii) Christians missionaries began setting up schools for the tribal groups and 'lower'-caste children.
 - **Demands for Equality and Justice:**
 - (i) By the second half of the 19th century people from within the 'lower' castes began organizing movements against caste discrimination and demanded social equality and justice.
 - (ii) The Satnami movement in Central India was founded by Ghasidas who came from a low caste.
 - (iii) In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur's Matua sect worked among low caste Chandala cultivators. Haridas questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system.
 - **Gulamgiri:**
 - (i) Jyotirao Phule born in 1827 was known as one of the 'low-caste' leaders.
 - (ii) He attacked the Brahmans claim that they were superior to others, since they are Aryans.
 - (iii) According to Phule, the 'upper' caste had no right to their land and power, the land belonged to indigenous people who were called as low castes.
 - (iv) Phule proposed that Shudras and Ati Shudras should unite to challenge caste discrimination.
 - (v) The Satyashodhak Samaj was founded by Phule to propagate caste equality.
 - (vi) In 20th century, the movement for caste reform was continued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker.
 - **Who Could enter Temples:**
 - (i) Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life.
 - (ii) In 1927, Ambedkar started a temple entry movement. His aim was to make everyone see the power of caste prejudices within the society.
 - **The Non-Brahman Movement:**
 - (i) The Non-Brahman Movement in the early 20th century was initiated by non-Brahman castes that had acquired access to education, wealth and influence. They challenged Brahmanical claims to power.
 - (ii) E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar, was from a middle-class family.
 - (iii) Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement.
 - (iv) He inspired the untouchables and asked them to free themselves from all religions in order to achieve social equality.
 - (v) Periyar was an outspoken critic of Hindu scriptures.
 - (vi) The forceful speeches, writings and movements of low caste leaders led to rethink and self-criticism among upper caste nationalist leaders.
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