

Reforms in Indian Society

Indian society during the eighteenth century was divided along gender and caste lines. Women were not allowed to study and were married off while they were still very young. Widows could not remarry. Women did not have the right to inherit property. Their social position was very low and they were dependent on the menfolk in their family. Caste restrictions were also very strict. The upper caste people stayed away from people of the lower castes. To fight these evils, enlightened Indians formed reform associations in different parts of the country, especially in Bengal, Maharashtra and South India.

Associations for reform

A reformist trend started in India during the first half of the nineteenth century. The reformers realized that many social evils and superstitions had kept the society backward and prevented Indians from progress. Some enlightened Indians formed associations to work for reforms.

Brahmo Samaj In 1828, Raja Rammohun Roy founded the Brahmo Sabha (later called Brahmo Samaj) in Calcutta to work for social and religious reforms. Debendranath Tagore

The real name of Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa was Gadadhar Chattopadhyay and that of Swami Vivekananda was Narendranath Dutta.

and Keshab Chandra Sen were actively involved in its activities.

Veda Samaj The Veda Samaj was founded in Madras in 1864. It was based on the ideals of the Brahmo Samaj. Its most important leader was Chembeti Sridharalu Naidu. The association attacked superstitions and the caste system. It also promoted women's education and encouraged the remarriage of widows.

Prarthana Samaj Mahadev Govind Ranade and Ramakrishna Bhandarkar founded the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay in 1867. The association worked for the abolition of the caste system and untouchability, improving the social status of women, widow remarriage, Hindu-Muslim unity and the spread of modern education.

Satyashodhak Samaj In 1873, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, affectionately called Mahatma Phule or Jyotiba, founded the Satyashodhak Samaj. Its membership was open to people of all religions. The association propagated caste equality and worked for the upliftment of the oppressed classes.

Arya Samaj The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. Among other things, the association worked for the remarriage of widows.

Ramakrishna Mission Swami Vivekananda

founded the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 to work for socio-religious reforms. His guru was Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa.

WOMEN AND REFORMS

Improving the position of women was the main agenda before the reformers. They believed that no reform could be effective until the position of women was improved. Many social evils hindered the process of the upliftment of women. These social evils were

- ◆ the practice of widow burning or 'sati',
- ◆ the pitiable condition of widows,
- ◆ lack of education among girls,
- ◆ child marriages,
- ◆ female infanticide, that is, the practice of killing a girl soon after birth,
- ◆ polygamy, that is, the practice of having more than one wife and
- ◆ purdah system.

Banning of sati

The custom of sati was the most barbaric social evil of the time. In this, a widow was burnt alive on the funeral pyre of her husband. The most vocal opponent of this practice was **Raja Rammohun Roy**. He launched a campaign against it. His persistent efforts yielded results and sati was declared illegal in 1829.

Find out Who was the Governor-General of India at this time?

Widow remarriage

In the nineteenth century, the condition of widows was pitiable. They were not allowed to remarry. Nor could they attend family and community functions because their presence at such happy occasions was considered inauspicious.



'Sati', a painting by Baltazard Solvyns, 1790s



Raja Rammohun Roy

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar launched a crusade for the betterment of the widows. He also wanted that widows should be allowed to remarry, if they so wished. His efforts led to the passing of the **Hindu Widows Remarriage Act** in 1856, which permitted widow remarriage. People who were against the remarriage of widows opposed and boycotted Vidyasagar.

Pandita Ramabai Ranade was another social reformer. She dedicated her life to the cause of women's rights. She set up a home for widows in Poona. Women were given vocational training here.

Education for girls

Today, most girls go to school and receive

'... Pandit Vidyasagar came with his friend, the bridegroom, at the head of a large procession, the crowd of spectators was so great that there was not an inch of moving space, and many fell into the big drains which were to be seen by the sides of Calcutta streets in those days. After the ceremony, it became the subject of discussion everywhere; in the bazaars and the shops, in the streets, in the public squares, in students' lodging-houses, in gentlemen's drawing-rooms, in offices and in distant village homes, where even women earnestly discussed it among themselves.'

— A description of the first lawful Hindu widow remarriage, 7 December 1856



Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar



Mahatma Phule



Ramabai Ranade

education. But the situation was very different in the nineteenth century. Girls, then, were discouraged from attending school. Some people believed that girls who were educated would not find a husband. Others were of the belief that the husband of an educated woman will die young.

The reformers of the period wanted women to be educated. They believed that education would give them a better life. The biggest advocates of women's education were **Mahatma Phule**, **Savitribai Phule** and **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**. In 1848, Jyotiba opened a school for girls belonging to the lower castes. Vidyasagar also started many schools for girls. He was closely associated with Lord Drinkwater Bethune, who started the first school for girls in Calcutta in 1849. In the south, **Kandukuri Veeresalingam** worked for the education of girls. Due to his efforts for the upliftment of women, he was known as the 'Vidyasagar of South India.'

Law against child marriage

During that time, children were married off at a very early age. The reformers protested against this and after a lot of struggle, the **Child Marriage Restraint Act** (also known as Sarda Act) was passed in 1929. The Act fixed the minimum age for marriage of girls at 18 and for boys at 21.

CHALLENGING THE CASTE SYSTEM

Another problem that plagued Indian society

was the caste system. The Hindus were divided into castes and sub-castes. At the bottom of the social ladder were the untouchables. They were not allowed to draw water from wells used by people of the high castes. Nor were they allowed to enter temples or study the *shastras*. The untouchables were thought to have a polluting effect on people and therefore a high caste person would not eat or drink anything touched by an untouchable.

Eastern India

The reformers of the period criticized caste inequalities. Raja Rammohun Roy realized that the reform of Indian society had to be preceded by a reform of Hinduism itself. He believed that Hinduism should be free from the control of the Brahmins, who opposed progress and were responsible for the oppression of the lower castes. He realized that to break free from the shackles of the caste system and the meaningless rituals of religion, people should be introduced to the original texts of Hinduism. Thus, he took up the task of translating the Hindu scriptures into Bengali.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and **Swami Vivekananda** also worked for caste reforms. Swami Vivekananda believed that caste was

Munshi Premchand (real name Dhanpat Rai Srivastava) contributed to the reform movement in his own way. Through his writings he attacked many social evils such as the dowry system, the ill-treatment of child widows, the oppression of the farmers, and so on. He preached what he believed in and married a child widow.



Swami Vivekananda's address at the final session of the
World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 27 September 1893

... Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory. But if anyone here hopes that this unity will come by the triumph of any one of the religions and the destruction of the others, to him I say, 'Brother, yours is an impossible hope.' Do I wish that the Christian would become Hindu? God forbid. Do I wish that the Hindu or Buddhist would become Christian? God forbid. The seed is put in the ground, and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth, or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant. It develops after the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant.



Swami
Vivekananda

Similar is the case with religion. The Christian is not to become a Hindu or a Buddhist, nor a Hindu or a Buddhist to become a Christian. But each must assimilate the spirit of the others and yet preserve his individuality and grow according to his own law of growth.

a social system and not a religious institution. The religious texts did not talk of caste. What made a person supreme was not caste but her/his inherent qualities. Vivekananda also criticized the practice of untouchability. He said that the Hindu religious texts did not advocate untouchability.

Western India

Gopal Hari Deshmukh, **Jyotiba**, **Ramakrishna Bhandarkar**, **M. G. Ranade** and **Ramabai Ranade** were the prominent reformers of western India. All of them spoke and wrote against the caste system.

Jyotiba propagated caste equality and worked to uplift the status of the untouchables. He was against the dominance of the Brahman priests. He opened many schools for people considered low in the caste hierarchy.

Southern India

A popular leader committed to caste reforms was **Kandukuri Veeresalingam**. He started a Telugu journal to spread the message of social reform and caste equality. **Chembeti Sridharalu Naidu** also protested against the caste system.

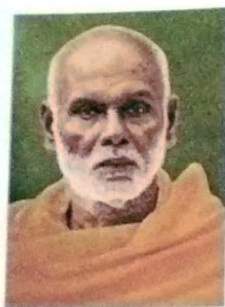
Sri Narayana Guru was another reformer

from the south. He had experienced the oppressive caste system and devoted his life to the upliftment of the untouchables. Going against caste rules, he acquired Sanskrit education. He built many temples in which there were no images of deities. In the first temple that he built, a stone was placed instead of an idol. On the stone was engraved this message—'Here is the place where all people live in fraternity without caste distinctions and religious rivalry.' He founded an association in 1902 called **Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam** that popularized his belief of 'One Caste, One Religion and One God.'

Reformers such as **E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker**, **K. Kelappan** and **J. K. Madhavan** fought for the right of the untouchables to enter temples. Dr B. R. Ambedkar was also actively involved in the **Temple Entry Movement**. **E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker**, popularly called 'Periyar', started the **Self-Respect Movement** to fight against the domination of the Brahmins.

The fight against untouchability

Mahatma Gandhi Mahatma Gandhi started a nationwide movement against untouchability. He called people of the so-called lower castes



Sri Narayana Guru



Periyar



B. R. Ambedkar

'harijans' or children of god. He founded the **All India Anti-Untouchability League** and started the weekly *Harijan*.

Bhim Rao Ambedkar B. R. Ambedkar wanted to end untouchability, caste discrimination and

the exploitation of the harijans. He founded several journals to spread his message. Between 1927 and 1932, he led his followers in a series of non-violent campaigns to assert the right of the untouchables to enter temples and draw water from public wells.

To Sum Up

- ◆ To fight socio-religious evils, many reform associations were formed in the nineteenth century. Some of them were—Brahmo Samaj, Veda Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Satyashodhak Samaj, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission.
- ◆ The reformers wanted to emancipate women. Due to their efforts, the condition of women improved. Sati was declared illegal, widow remarriage was legalized, hundreds of schools for girls were opened and child marriages were forbidden by law.
- ◆ The reformers attacked the caste system. They worked for caste reforms, including the removal of untouchability.

Time to Learn

A. Tick (✓) the correct answers.

1. Indian society during the eighteenth century was divided along _____ and caste lines.

a. language	b. religious	c. gender	d. race
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2. The most vocal opponent of sati was

a. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar.	c. Mahatma Phule.
b. Raja Rammohun Roy.	d. Swami Dayanand Saraswati.
3. The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in

a. 1829.	b. 1855.	c. 1856.	d. 1857.
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4. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in

a. 1929.	b. 1919.	c. 1939.	d. 1949.
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5. Gandhiji called the so-called 'lower castes'

a. priyajans.	b. harijans.	c. sajians.	d. veerjans.
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B. Match each statement to the reformer.

1. 'Widows must be allowed to remarry.'
2. 'Untouchables must be allowed to enter temples.'
3. 'Sati is an inhuman custom and must be abolished.'
4. 'All girls must receive education.'
5. 'The caste system perpetuates inequality and must end.'

- a. Raja Rammohun Roy
- b. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar
- c. Jyotirao Govindrao Phule
- d. Sri Narayana Guru
- e. Bhim Rao Ambedkar

C. Give short answers for the following questions.

1. How was the society in eighteenth century India?
2. Discuss the role of Raja Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in improving the condition of women.
3. What was the condition of the untouchables in British India?
4. Who was Jyotiba Phule? How did he contribute to the reform movement in India?

D. Give long answers for the following questions.

1. Name some associations that worked for socio-religious reforms. Also list the social evils against which they raised their voice.
2. 'The condition of women in nineteenth-century India was pitiable.' Elaborate this statement with regard to the social evils that plagued them.
3. How did the reformers seek to end the caste system?
4. Write a note on Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar's role in fighting the curse of untouchability.
5. Most social reformers founded a society or formed an association through which they carried out the reforms. Why did they form associations and societies? Could they have not reformed the society single-handedly?
6. Why were most social taboos associated with women?

H
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T
S

Time to Do

Enrichment Activities*

E. A Class Project Choose any reformer from the lesson. Make a project on that reformer and her/his reforms. You can include the following points to make your project interesting.

- ◆ Family background of the reformer
- ◆ Her/his education (paste a photograph of the reformer)
- ◆ Social evils that were prevalent during that time
- ◆ The reformer's contribution in eradicating those social evils
- ◆ Attitude of the British towards those social evils

F. Make a PowerPoint presentation on the problem of untouchability. You can include the following points to make your presentation thought-provoking.

- ◆ Who were the untouchables?
- ◆ Why were they called so?
- ◆ What problems did they face?
- ◆ Important leaders who worked for the eradication of untouchability

* For more enrichment activities go to page 78

- ◆ How did each of those leaders contribute to the eradication of untouchability?
- ◆ Literature of the period that highlighted the evils of untouchability
(For example, Premchand's stories like *Thakur's Well*, *The Shroud*)

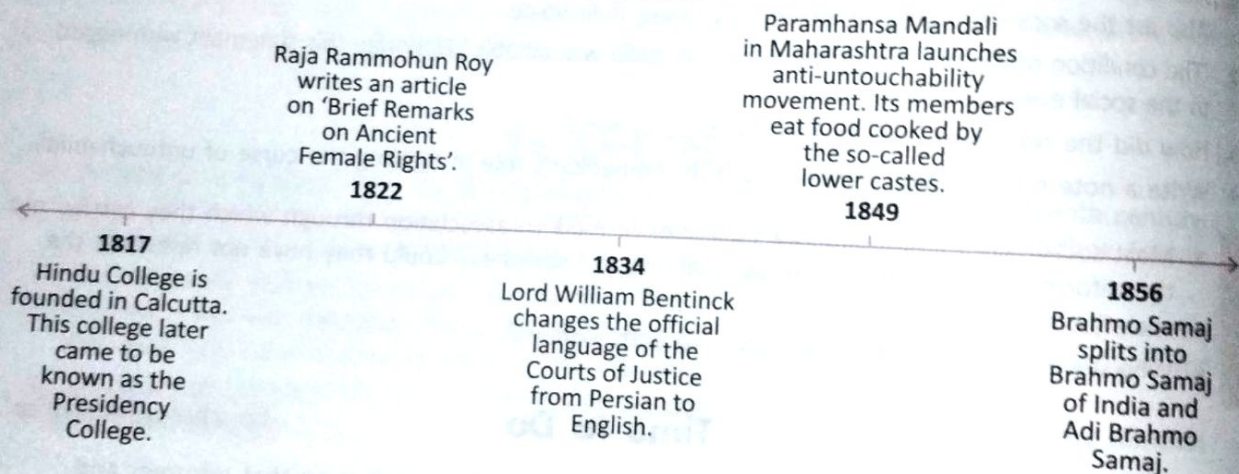
G. Divide the class into groups of seven. Each group has to do a three-minute role play in the class on any of the following issues.

- ◆ Sati
- ◆ Polygamy
- ◆ Child marriage
- ◆ Female infanticide
- ◆ Lack of education among girls
- ◆ Plight of widows
- ◆ Purdah system

Invite other classes to watch your play. You can use props to make your play realistic and effective.

H. Imagine you are living in the times of Raja Rammohun Roy. There are some people who are opposing his anti-sati campaign. As an ardent follower of Raja Rammohun Roy, give a two-minute speech in class advocating his anti-sati campaign.

Timeline



Life Skills

Thinking/Emotional

- You must have come across advertisements on fairness products. This is because a majority of us believe that being fair is being beautiful. Is it true that only fair people are beautiful? What is more important to you—a beautiful face or a beautiful heart? Challenging the media-hyped notions of fairness and beauty, have a class discussion on 'I am happy being myself'.