

**SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS IN SOUTH INDIA:
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN DURING
THE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY CE -
A HISTORICAL STUDY**

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The present thesis *The Social Reform Movements in South India: With special Reference to Women (During 19th and Early 20th Centuries) - A Historical Study* is an attempt to find out the contribution of women in South India during nineteenth and early twentieth century especially in Kerala, Tamilnadu and united Andhra Pradesh (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) to the social reform movements.

The study also tried to trace out the different meanings and characteristics of the social reform movement of South India. It discussed the general social condition colonial south India. The study tried to bring out an overview of the social reform movements that took place in India especially in South India. In addition, it focused on the social transformation during the colonial period in nineteenth and early twentieth century.

There are many historical writings that are written by men about reform movements especially about women issues and developments in their own perspectives. A male defined history on women's movements and issues are like indirect documentation. A woman defined history on women reform will be some extend more authentic and considerable. In the field of reform women were directed by male reformers in the beginning. But later scenario was changed and women started to take up the question of their own empowerment and addressed their issues. They worked hard to achieve their goals. But some extend these contributions of women did not get importance as they deserved. In the slow and steady process of reform our historians did not recognised some women personalities. Women considered subordinate in the patriarchal society. They were like silent bearers of discrimination and subjection from patriarchal society and from their own family as well. In the field of social reform movements also women were neglected or excluded from history.

Initially the women reformers criticised the tradition and religion for their suffering and sought remedy through education and legal change. They recognised women's oppressed condition was because of their sex and these areas were neglected by the male reformers. Educated women began to communicate with each other and developed a distinct discourse of their own issues in early twentieth century. For

women caste struggle provided the background to the development of class consciousness. They recognised that gender oppression was reinforced by caste structures, the new role models thrown up by them was family, women's dependence and monogamy. These lead the emergence of a distinctive formation of women's organisations and committees. Thus the sphere of women activities extended from the house hold work to social reform. Later these women contributed to a large extend to the women empowerment including women suffrage and franchise. These women were from different social backgrounds, some were educated in English convent schools, some from princely families, and others from middle class families. However, they all were distinctive and helped the women of south India to acquire social equality and financial stability through their strong leadership.

The diverse Indian society has a long historical tradition. The traditional restrictive social norms controlled and maintained caste structure and gender inequality. The modern Indian state witnessed many social reform movements especially in nineteenth and early twentieth century. In south India the reformers like Narayana Guru, Veerasalingam and E.V. Ramasami carried the extensive reform activities in nineteenth and twentieth century. Usually, the reform movements responded to its contemporary social demands. It questioned and criticized the caste ideology and gender inequality.

The reforms influenced in every macro and micro unit of the society such as religion, caste, labour peasants and workers organisations and the nationalist movement. The social movements can be collective enterprises that seek to establish a new order of life. In general, the social reforms brought changes and developments in the social system and it became an essential social engagement for the progressive society. Generally, social reform is a complex phenomenon that intervened on multiple sites of the society such as religion, rituals, education, law and judiciary, public participation, employment and mobilisation.

The historians saw this period as the period of the social emancipation of the exploited classes and the creation of a new society by its changing value systems as well as institutions and property relationships. The conservative society denied the access of public space to women. They were forced to live within the domestic sphere. The nineteenth century enlightenment movement influenced the intellectual

paradigm of the society and it opened the public sphere. The social reform movements of nineteenth century gave special attention to women's question. It questioned the social evils like sati, child marriage etc. In addition, it advocated for women liberation especially in the fields of education, employment and property rights. It voiced for the access of public sphere by women. In the end of nineteenth century the movements got its momentum. It was evident in the agendas of the reform movements.

Usually, women in India lived within the social bondage. The reformers influenced women to participate in the public gatherings. Later, the movement brought many women leaders. However, hardly few studies focus on reform activities of South India with special reference to women. Women relationship between religious and religiosity was a complicated area. The process of reforming women from the meaningless and rigid religious practices and customs was a tiring task. The reform itself was controlled from families that were bounded with traditional and conservative beliefs.

The male members of the families attitude towards education of women was to make them good wives and mother. The reformers tutored their wives if they were illiterate. In Andhra Veerasalingam educated his uneducated wife Rajyalakshmi. The male members of the family educated their wives, so that she can mould her son as a great patriotic soul. They wanted to liberate women but not a complete independence from the traditional culture, patriarchal ideology and the subordinate position assigned to them from society and family. This attitude influenced the type of female education propagated by the intelligentsia during this period. This reluctant attitude of men towards women's role in society and family insisted the women to take up their own stand in the realm of social reform.

The characteristics of reform movements in India were not uniform. There are many reasons for the emergence of the social reform movement in India. However the reform movements in South India carried some similarities, but differed from region to region. Among the three states, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu, the women made significant contribution in reform movements. Women are always constructed as vulnerable in the society, particularly women in India faced multi-level of oppressions due to religion, caste, region etc. Still there was women representation and there were a number of women who were popular.

In general, the reform activities in South India initially questioned the caste order and its hierarchy. The reformers understood the elements of gender subjugation that lay in the caste structure and it was substantiated by the patriarchal values. Usually, women's body is a basic tool that could maintain the caste purity in the social system. The progressive social reform movements started to address the issues. However, the women participation in the public sphere was not easy at this historical juncture. They faced many restrictions in both private and public spheres.

The women suffered a dual oppression due to their caste and sex in the traditional Kerala society. Women were sexually exploited in the name of religion and caste. Usually, the girls were taught to bare her breasts as a mark of respect to the incarnate deities such as Brahmin and it was insisted that their greatest duty was to give pleasure to them. The sexual submissiveness of Sudra women to the upper caste Brahmins had been projected as an important element to preserve their caste dominance. The caste question of the SNDP started to address the gender discrimination. In nineteenth century people started to agitate against the practices. The agitation was popularly known as *Marumarakal Samaram*, *Thol Seelaik Kazhakam* (Breast Cloth Controversy or Upper Cloth Controversy).

The colonial education brought many social changes in the different sections of the society. The western education addressed the caste fundamentalism in the society. In nineteenth century missionaries started to establish schools in colonial India to prepare menial laborers for the better colonial administration. However, the colonial schools provided an equal education to the different sections of the society that was not prevalent in the pre-colonial caste society. In meantime, the missionaries and western education raised the upper cloth controversy, which largely existed among Ezhavas.

The movement considered that the subjugation of the community lay in the female body and they believed that the women empowerment would liberate their community from the caste domination. In 1859, the king of Travancore issued a proclamation of announcing the right of women to cover their upper part on certain condition that they should not imitate the clothing style of the upper caste. The proclamation did not quell the tension immediately. The order of Sethulakshmi Bai (1924-1931) curtailed the custom completely. In general, the movement was not registered properly.

Meanwhile, SNDP (Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam) under the leadership of Narayana Guru worked hard for women emancipation in Kerala. It helped womenfolk to overcome their defenseless situations. The movement traced out the problems of women in the traditional Malayalam society. Reform activities of Narayana Guru influenced the women of Kerala society in different ways. Narayana Guru succeeded in making the women aware of their existing position and the need of awakening society. Narayana Guru tried to demolish caste discrimination and gender discrimination because he believed these were the main reason for Kerala's social degradation. But some extent he was not succeeded enough to bring women in the forefront of SNDP movement. But later inspired from the SNDP there were associations and journals were started exclusively for women.

An engagement of women in the public realm occurred with the rise of Veerasalingam in the nineteenth century Andhra *desa* (region). He addressed different social issues like widow problem, women education, and child marriage. He believed that the backwardness of women attributed to their ignorance resulting from the lack of education. He established many exclusive schools for women. Veerasalingam inspired many women activists like Durgabai Deshmukh and Sarojini Naidu. He organised women associations in various places in Andhra such as Visakhapatnam, Rajahmundry, Kakinada, Narasapuram, Eluru, Vijayawada, Machilipatnam, Guntur, Ongole, Kurnool and Berhampore. These women associations inculcated a right spirit to women to their own advancement in an independent manner. These associations gave exposure of women in the society that brought development of women.

In meantime, there were a lot of women who remained invisible such as Kandukkuri Rajyalakshmi, Bandaru Atchamba, Unnava Lakshmi Bai, Kalangi Seshumamba, Srimati Janaktamma, Kotikalapadi Sitamma and K. Rajyalakshmanamma. The encouragement and support given by the reformers like Veerasalingam in writing literary works for the emancipation of women got much attention. Women started to contribute their creative works in the magazines, which were generally edited by men. There were many women's journals such as *Hindu Sundari*, *Telugu Zenana*, *Zenana*, *Kameswari*, *Chintamani*, and *Savitrii* were started to address the women issues. In general, the content of the magazines focussed on the contemporary social problems such as women illiteracy, purdah, child marriage and widow ill-treatment. In all these issues, women gave their special attention to female illiteracy and women education.

In early twentieth century women started to mobilise to acquire their rights. Large number of women came forward to the reform activities after 1920. The post-Veerasingam era laid serious efforts in the direction of dowry and *nautch* problems, child marriages and other women related issues were taken up in concerted manner. The reform activities could influence the everyday lives of women. The reform activities provided a space for women and it lead few women to occupy the public sphere. There were few women activists understood the relevance of women's association and established associations like Andhra Mahila Sabha. Later, the associations was structured and developed by the initiatives of Durgabai Deshmukh.

The Self-Respect Movement in modern Tamilnadu opened up a new radical avenue in the social discourse. E.V. Ramasami was an ideologue of the movement. The Self-Respect Movement brought forth many women questions and critical attitude towards the caste order in the society. It exclusively voiced for the self-respect for every human being in the society and the movement gave its special attention to women liberation. The movement showed how the brahmanical patriarchy was exploited women's body in the name of caste and religion. The Self-Respect Movement advocated inter-caste, self-respect and love marriages.

The Self-Respect Movement popularized its ideology through its journals and newspapers like *Kudi Arasu*, *Puratchi*, *Pagutharivu* and *The Revolt*. The movement created an equal space for women to articulate their views and ideas in the public forum. Women came forward from their submissive position. The movement encompassed all the lower castes and class to join within its programmes. It brought out many prominent women such as Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kunjitham, Nilavathi, Ramamirtham and Gnanam to the forefront. The self-respect movement has drawn under its banner a band of brave men and women who ventured their attempt to be rid of corrupting influences that had infested from the beginning and steadily eaten in to its vitals. The self-respect league brought a new social order that did not restrict people's lives and exploit their ignorance. The movement endeavoured to awaken the common people to sense their rights that denied from them through the ages. Gradually, the people lost their faith and hold of tradition and authority. The movement brought enlightenment in to the Tamil society.

The modern development discourse of nineteenth century signalled an emergence of women in many fields in the world. The new global trends reflected in colonial India. The nineteenth century social reform movements addressed many social questions and gave its special attention to the empowerment of women. The movements created a new social space for women to articulate their views. There were very few women could use the modern opportunities and change the entire course of Indian womanhood. Muthulakshmi Reddi, Nilavathi, Sarojini Naidu and Durgabai Deshmukh were the prominent women personalities, who worked hard for the welfare of Indian women.

Muthulakshmi Reddi was not the single women in the self respect movement. There were number of other women also like Kannamma, Njanam and Kunjitham. Kannamma was Periyar's sister and she was very active in the movement. She was in charge of conducting women's conferences and meetings in the self-respect movement. However, after the movements she was not in any political scene in Tamilnadu. Women were barely visible in reform movements in the initial stage of reform. The situation has changed with time. Still there were some women stayed invisible for different reasons. Krishnavenamma was very active in Veerasalingam movements. She was not popular among the reformers. Later she was with Duragabai Deshmukh during the formation of Andhra Mahila Sabha. Parvati Ayyappan was another example of imperceptible personality in reform activities due to neglected documentation. Her biographer M. K. Sanu has mentioned that if Parvati Ayyappan was from some other region not in Kerala she might have become acceptable.

Muthulakshmi Reddi was one of the greatest women of twentieth century in India with many firsts to her credit. Muthulakshmi continued to fight for her cause till the end of her life and never let anything come in her way. Muthlakshmi Reddi belonged to a Vellala family (Devadasi) her father was head master. He was not bounded with the conservative beliefs and send his daughter Muthulakshmi to school. Her book 'My Experience as a Legislator' is an accounts all her services in the Legislature.

Nilavathi was very much interested in helping poor. She believed social service was greater than worshipping god. She was active in freedom movements also and the government of India allotted her five acres of land for her services in freedom struggle. However, she did not accept the land and also insisted the government

officials to allot the land for the untouchables and downtrodden in the society. She used to deliver lectures in the All India Radio and spent her entire earnings for social organizations. She was editor of the monthly called Rajalakshmi for 4 years. The monthly got financial support from Government for the welfare of women. She raised voice against the discrimination of women and wrote articles exclusively about women's intolerant life.

Sarojini Naidu was an illustrious Indian who contributed socio cultural and political advancement of the nation in many ways. Sarojini Naidu inspired the women's Indian association to publish women's manifesto to the candidates standing for election. Golden Threshold is now part of university of Hyderabad was Chattopadhyay family's residence and it became a centre of many reformist ideas in Hyderabad, in the areas like marriage, education, women's empowerment, literature and nationalism.

Durgabai Deshmukh possessed all the traits of visionary leaders and distinguished herself as a visionary with a spirit to realise her dream and became an excellent leader among her contemporaries. She was active as a writer, freedom fighter, social reformer, social worker, organiser, administrator, and pioneer in adult education. Her magical presence produced many organizations in the country. She was an institution and for welfare system builder during twentieth century. She founded Andhra Mahila Sabha in Madras that has grown and has extensive campus at Adayar. She made a name for herself in the field of social reform and social work with her outstanding ability and indomitable spirit. She had no god father for initial thrust or encouragement to work for social reform. She put effort and spend hard days and sleepless night to lead disciplined and purposeful life without frittering her energies in frivolous pursuits.

Durgabai Deshmukh came under the influence of two great reformers like K. Veerasalingam Panthulu and Brahmarshi R. Venkataratnam Naidu. Unlike many other reformers, she accomplished whatever she preached. She opposed social evils and superstitious practices like child marriage and inhuman treatment of widows and she encouraged widow remarriage. Her own re-marriage with C.D. Deshmukh became a sensation. It was a bold step at that time. She demanded for equal status of women. Her concern for equal property rights for women was evident with her experience of Hindu code bill. She worked for the development downtrodden and

improvement in the treatment of juvenile delinquencies. Durgabai significant role in the arena of international and national development and she won the prestigious Paul Hoffman award. She was the one woman among forty nations received this award for bringing up social change in India.

There prominent women like Sarojini Naidu, Muthulakshmi Reddi, Durgabai Deshmukh but still by and large the contribution of women are neglected because of lack of records. Women were not in that important position as male reformers in the field of reform. The role of women in movements was marginalised due to patriarchal influences. Patriarchy created road block for female reformers. Women faced lot of restrictions from their family. Their primary task has been seen as maintenance of the family and child rearing. These were the reasons for women's hesitation for public meetings and attending conferences.

In the colonial era women concerns were given more attention in reform movements during nineteenth century. The main issues focussed in relation with women were abolition of sati, women's education, rights of widow remarriage, rise of the age of marriage and struggle against polygamy. In the beginning stage of reform movements, the male reformers endeavoured to initiate women's education. This hard work led the emergence of educated women who lead the movement for women's equality by the turn of the century. Education has an important role of women's emergence in the field of reform.

For the common women it was very difficult to make public appearances from home. As a woman their priority was handling with domestic work and rearing of their children. They had to fight in and out their family for liberation in the patriarchal society. Yet in spite of this we did see few women emerging on the social scene. There were women pioneers like Sarojini Naidu, Durgabai Deshmukh, Muthulakshmi Reddi, Nilavati. But the other hand these women were from aware backgrounds with social activities. They had strong supports in the field of reform. Sarojini Naidu's father was an educated person who was also a social worker. Durgabai's mother Krishnavenamma and her grandfather also were involved in reform movements. Nilavathi was the example of women from grassroots level who come forward of the social activities without any backgrounds.

These women reformers were successful in acquiring women's consciousness on their own issues. In the earlier associations and organisations which started by the male reformers, women were hardly active. But when women established organisations the scenario has changed. Women were mobilised in large extend and they managed the organisations and its functioning with self-confidence and dedication. Any how the foundation laid by these women reformers helped the women not only in south India but also women in India to take up the issue of women's development and welfare.

Women always followed the man-made tradition and man-made laws in the society. When the women tried to break the rules and regulations which they followed in the name tradition and customs, those efforts did not get much attention among the social history. Some extend the efforts of these women leadership was excluded or invisible. In the male dominated society the history of women was not well documented because of strict patriarchal values followed by the society. In this scenario the analysis of women's involvement of social reform becomes relevant to understand the real achievements of women in the field of reform movement.