

**GS Foundation 2024: Modern India**  
**Handout 21: Women's Movement in 19<sup>th</sup> c**  
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*"All nations have attained greatness only by paying respect to its women. That country and that nation that do not respect women have never become great, nor will ever in future. The principal reason why your race is so much degraded is that you had no respect for these living images of Shakti." – Vivekananda.*

The subjection of Indian women in the pre-British Period was rooted in the social, religious, economic and political structure of that period. Many social evils against women were being practised in Indian society. The practice of Sati, Child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide, deprivation from education and other basic human rights, deprivation of a widow from a second marriage as well as of the right to inherit property, were only some of the common evils.

**Factors which encouraged reformers for social upliftment of women**

- **Positive impact of British rule**
  - British introduced capitalist economy, and the legal and political regime based on the principles of the individual equality and freedom, at least theoretically. It did not recognize the inequalities based on birth, sex, caste or community. Western education, western liberal thought, modern institutions, modern means of transportation and communication played a positive role in the emancipation of women.
- **Challenge of the civilizational critique by the West**
  - British scholar James Mill declared that only such civilization can be characterized as progressive under which the condition of women is good. On this basis, Indian civilization was denounced by both British reformers & James Mill. So, Indian reformers took it as a challenge for working for the upliftment of women's condition.
- **Overall social reform agenda:**
  - Almost all social reformers of the nineteenth and the twentieth century gave attention to the issue of women emancipation and their rights. It was ardently felt that most of the social evils were deeply associated with the poor condition of women in India such as the caste system, infanticide, untouchability etc. Improved condition of women would automatically remove most other social ills.

## Specific Reforms

Initiatives by male reformers: from RRM Roy to Dayanand Saraswati, almost all advocated the eradication of deplorable social condition of women. They generally depended on the government support to ban social evils through various penal provisions.

- **Restriction on female infanticide:** This was a very heinous social crime. Earlier the steps had been taken by the company to ban it on the basis of Bengal Regulation of 1795 and that of 1804 but serious efforts to ban it in practice started in 1830s.
- **Abolition of Sati system:** RRM started a campaign, then in 1829 at the initiative of *Bentinck*, Sati system was banned in Bengal. In 1830, it was extended to Madras and Bombay as well.
- **Widow Remarriage Act of 1856:** The right of widows to remarry was strongly advocated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bengal and by Malabari, Narmad, Justice Ranade and K. Natrajan in Bombay. Due to their consistent efforts, Lord Dalhousie's Government passed The Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. Hindu widows now started being permitted legally to remarry, contrary to what the Shastras permitted.
  - In Madras, Veereshlingam continuously for promotion of widow remarriage.
  - Likewise, in Bombay, DK Karve consistently made efforts to encourage widow remarriage.
- **Child Marriage:** Almost all reformers denounced this social evil and demanded government initiative to ban it.
  - Due to the efforts of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, age of consent was fixed at 10 in the Indian Penal Code of 1860.
  - In 1872, the **Christian Marriage Act** was enacted to raise the marriage age of boys and girls to 18 and 14 years respectively.
  - Later, in 1876, **Brahmo Marriage Act** was introduced.
  - Further, in 1891, at the initiative of *Behramji Malabari*, **Age of Consent Bill** was introduced to increase the age from 10 to 12.
    - Behramji Malbari published his messages in "Notes on Infant marriage and enforced widowhood" in 1884.
    - Malabari through his journal 'Indian Spectator', created awareness and argued how child marriage was eroding the Hindu race at its roots.



**Narmadashankar Dave** (Narmad, 1833-86) was a student at Elphinstone Institute. He is considered to be the founder of modern Gujarati literature. His newsletter Dandiyo propagated the social reform cause, including widow remarriage. His poem Jai Jai Garavi Gujarat is now the state anthem of Gujarat.

- Later at the initiative of Harvilas Sharada (an Arya Samajist), Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929 (**Sharada Act**) was passed to increase age for both boys (18) and girls (14) for marriage.
- These developments not only improved the social condition of women but also sent a message across, that everything is achievable if only one fights for it.
- **Anti-Devdasi movement**
  - The institution of temple prostitution (Devdasi) was prevalent in different parts of India, especially in South India, as their temples had a kind of grandeur to them. Devdasis formed a hereditary caste of women who consecrated themselves in early childhood to temple service. In the guise of dancing and singing they worked or were rather, forced to work, as prostitutes in the temple.
  - **Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi**, a social reformer, started a movement against this practice, which resulted in a ban on trafficking of minors (1925).
- **Women education:**
  - The **Wood's Dispatch** (1854) and the **Hunter Commission** (1882) recommended encouragement of women education, but more than the State, the social reformers and the Christian missionaries opened schools for girls and put these good intentions into actual practice.
  - European Efforts: The **Church Missionary Society** started the first boarding school for girls in Tirunelveli in 1821.
  - Indian social reformers gave great importance to women education because they believed that education brought with it, awareness, and self-confidence.
  - Bengal
    - **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, with the help of John Elliot Drinkwater (JED) Bethune, founded the first school for girls, 'Hindu Balika Vidyalaya', in May 1849, for the girls of high caste families. It was later renamed as **Bethune School** in 1856.
    - Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did a lot in the field of women education in the status of the supervisor of Bethune school, he laid the foundation of at least 35 girls' schools. Vidyasagar succeeded, to a great extent, in removing the prejudices against female education in the country.



- Western India

- **The alumni of Elphinstone college** at Bombay took initiative to promote girls' education.
- **Mahatma Phule and Savitribai Phule** started first girls' school at Bhidewada in Pune in 1848.
- **(Maharshi) Dhondo Keshav Karve** started India's first women's university SNDT in 1916 at Pune.



- Widespread poverty of the majority of Indian population became one of the major hurdles in the growth of women's education. Yet, the steady growth of women's education was reflected in the fact that the number of girls attending schools rose from 12.3 lakh in 1917 to 28.9 lakh in 1937.

The process of social reform for women took a new turn when the nationalist movement started and women, especially in Gandhian movement, joined it. Thousands of women took active part in political mass movement, picketing of liquor shops, marching in demonstrations, courting jails, facing lathi-charges and even bullets. Many of them worked as ministers, under-secretaries and Deputy Speakers of provincial legislatures when Congress governments were formed in 1937. Indian women also became members of local boards and municipalities. Thus, a new awakening took place among the Indian women. Now, they were ready to write their own destiny.



Speaking to the Indian Social conference at Calcutta in 1906, **Sarojini Naidu** said, "instruction may mean accumulation of knowledge, but education is an immeasurable, beautiful and indispensable atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being... How then shall a man dare to deprive a human soul of its immemorial inheritance of liberty and life? Your fathers, in depriving your mothers of that birthright, have robbed you, their sons, of your just inheritance. Therefore, I charge you restore to your women their ... rights... you are, therefore, not the real nation-builders... Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself..."



That there was a sense of great achievement among women and of new spaces opening up for them was beautifully put by the Tamil nationalist poet **Subramanya Bharati** in his poem, "**The Dance of Liberation**", in 1920

*Dance! Rejoice!*

*Those who said it is evil for women to touch books are dead.*

*The lunatics who said they would lock women in their houses, cannot show their faces now.*

## Achievements and Limitations of the Women's Reforms

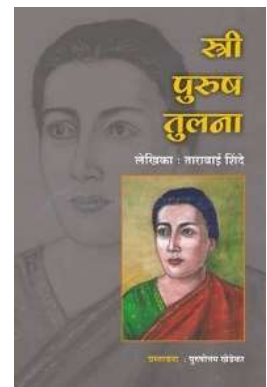
- Gradually, women joined the mainstream of Indian life and their social condition slightly improved.
  - First two female graduates in India were from Calcutta University – Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu.
  - **Kadambini Ganguly** was also the first female speaker in Indian National Congress.
- **Limitations:**
  - The early 19<sup>th</sup> century women's upliftment programme was **initiated by male reformers** and high caste Hindus.
    - So, it was not a complete program for female empowerment in modern sense. The reformers couldn't become free from the impact of patriarchy. They were inclined to work for the social upliftment of women, but they were not ready to encourage women liberation.
  - The reforms were **initiated from above** without creating a proper social climate for that so they proved less effective.
    - Even after the abolition of sati system, the sati system was still idealized in common consciousness and folk literature.
    - In spite of legal ban to widow remarriage, only 38 widows get married in whole 19th century. (eg even today we take dowry...J)
  - It was the failure of the reforms movement that the question of women came to be **viewed within the sectarian boundary**. So, even today the Hindus could talk about the issues of their own women & Muslim reformers have to work for Muslim women. So, finally, the objective of a uniform civil code became a distant dream.

## Women Reformers

Women reformers came forward in this regard only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They had begun to think, speak, and act themselves. *The challenged the notion of women being mere subjects for liberal law and education.*

### Western India

- **Savitribhai Phule** along with her husband founded the first girls school in Pune.
  - Savitribhai Phule chose poetry on education, women's liberty and oppression of the lower castes were recurrent themes.
  - She wrote a *powada* (ballad) on English language and prayers to speak of the injustice done to the untouchable Shudra castes.
- **Pandita Ramabai:** She was a Sanskrit scholar and social reformer. She remained active in Maharashtra and led the foundation of a widow ashrama.
  - In 1878, Calcutta University conferred on her the titles of **Pandita** and **Sarasvati** in recognition of her knowledge of various Sanskrit works.
  - She founded **Arya Mahila Samaj** to promote women education and campaign against child marriage.
  - She converted to **Christianity** in 1880s in England. She **translated Bible**, from original Hebrew/Greek into Marathi.
  - She toured in the USA to collect funds for destitute Indian women. With the funds raised she started **Sharada Sadan** for child widows in Pune, in which MG Ranade also helped her. The more famous orphanage, **Mukti Mission** (salvation) opened at Kedgaon in 1898.
  - She wrote **Stri Dharma Niti** and **High-Caste Hindu Woman**.
  - She was one of the 10 women delegates to the Congress Session of 1889.
- **Tarabai Shinde:**
  - In 1882, Tarabai Shinde's book, **Stree Purush Tulana** generated heated discussions in public. It was a critique of patriarchy and caste system. She questioned the status of women in society. She insisted that the faults, commonly ascribed to women, such as superstition, suspicion, treachery and insolence, could be as much found in men. This book is considered as the first modern feminist book in India. Her exploration of deep-seated connections to religion, caste, and patriarchal norms — was an unexplored territory till then.





## Eastern India:

- Rabindranath Tagore's sister **Swarnakumari Debi** launched "Sakhi Samiti" with the aim of training widows to learn, to teach and thus become the most powerful agents of spreading education among women in 1886.
- **Begum Rokeya Shekhawat:**
  - At her initiative, girls' schools were founded at Patna and Calcutta
- **Aghorekamini Nari Samiti** was based in Bengal. It adhered to empower women through spread of education among them. It campaigned against ill-treatment of women workers by the tea planters.
- **Banga Mahila Vidyalaya** (Bengali Women's College), established at Kolkata in 1876, was the *first women's liberal arts college* in India.
- **Kamini Roy** was a great Indian feminist. She took part in the Ilbert Bill agitation. She worked with Banga Mahila Samiti in their social reform projects.



## South India

- **Sister Subbulakshmi:** She was a Christian missionary and social reformer who dedicated her life to education and the welfare of women in Tamil Nadu. She played a crucial role in establishing schools and empowering women through education.



**RD Karve** (1882-1953) was a pioneer in initiating family planning and birth control for masses in Mumbai in 1921. Because of his views about family planning, population control, and women's right to experience sexual/sensual pleasure as much as men he had to face opposition from the conservative elements in society.

- Karve started the very first birth control clinic in India in 1921, the same year when the first birth control clinic opened in London.
- He started a Marathi magazine *Samaj Swasthya* in 1927 where he discussed issues of society's well-being through population control through use of contraceptives to prevent unwanted pregnancies and induced abortions. He promoted responsible parenting by men, gender equality, and women's empowerment and right to experience sexual/sensual pleasure.
- Three cases were slapped against him for 'spreading vulgarity'. Instead of encouraging Karve's humanitarian work, leaders of various religions had come together to pull him down. Dr BR Ambedkar defended him in one of these cases.