

## 👤 Life of Women in the 1800s

Around 200 years ago, girls were often married young. Most women had no access to education or property. Widows were expected to live strict lives and, in some cases, commit sati — where a woman died on her husband's funeral pyre.



 Fig. 1 – A painting of sati by a European artist, used to show Indian traditions as cruel

Hindu and Muslim men could have more than one wife, and many believed that educating girls would bring misfortune. These strict customs were rarely questioned before the 19th century.

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## 📏 Caste Divisions in Society

Caste created strict social order. Upper castes like Brahmins considered themselves superior. Below them were traders, peasants, and artisans. At the lowest were those who cleaned waste or worked with leather — they were treated as untouchables and were denied access to temples, wells, and public spaces.

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## 🧠 Reform Begins

From the early 1800s, reformers began to question social customs. Printing made newspapers, books and pamphlets available to more people. This allowed debates about caste, women's rights, and social rules to spread across society.

Raja Rammohun Roy, a key reformer, spoke against sati. He used religious texts to prove that sati had no scriptural basis. In 1829, the British banned the practice.



 Fig. 2 – Portrait of Raja Rammohun Roy

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## Changing Lives of Widows

Reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar supported widow remarriage using references from Hindu texts. This led to the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Still, only a few widows remarried as society remained conservative.



 Fig. 5 – Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar

Other reformers like Veerasalingam Pantulu in south India and Swami Dayanand Saraswati (founder of Arya Samaj) also encouraged widow remarriage.

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## Girls' Education

Many believed girls shouldn't attend school as it would take them away from household duties and expose them to public spaces. Early reformers like Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule started schools for girls. In Punjab, Arya Samaj built girls' schools.



 Fig. 6 – Hindu Mahila Vidyalyaya students, 1875

In Muslim homes, girls were taught at home. Reformers like Mumtaz Ali promoted women's education using religious texts. Women like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain set up schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta.

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## Women Raise Their Voices

By the early 1900s, many educated women began to write and speak publicly.

- Tarabai Shinde wrote *Stripurushtulna*, criticising the unequal treatment of men and women.
- Pandita Ramabai, a Sanskrit scholar, wrote about upper-caste women's struggles and started a widow home at Poona.



 Fig. 7 – Pandita Ramabai

Despite progress, many orthodox groups opposed women's education and reform, fearing it would damage family values.

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## Law Against Child Marriage

**With support from women's organisations, the Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929. It set the legal marriage age at 18 for men and 16 for women (later raised to 21 and 18).**



 *Fig. 8 – A photo of a child bride from the early 1900s*

## **Caste and Reform**

Many reformers also questioned caste discrimination. Organisations like the Prarthana Samaj and Paramhans Mandali promoted equality and violated caste rules in secret meetings. Christian missionaries opened schools for children of lower castes.

Poor labourers from lower castes began moving to cities for work – as coolies, sweepers, or factory workers. This gave them some independence from caste rules in villages.



 *Fig. 9 – A ship carrying Indian labourers to Mauritius*



 Fig. 10 – Madiga leather workers in 19th-century Andhra

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## Demands for Equality

**Movements from within the lower castes demanded justice:**

- Satnami movement (Central India) led by Ghasidas
- Matua sect (Bengal) led by Haridas Thakur
- Shri Narayana Guru (Kerala) declared “One caste, one religion, one God for mankind”

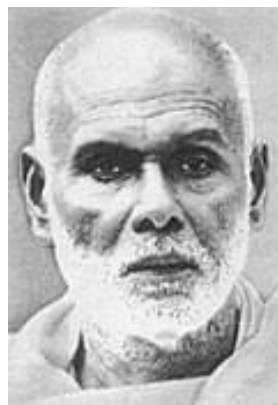


 Fig. 12 – Shri Narayana Guru

**In Bombay, untouchables weren’t even allowed inside classrooms. They could only sit outside and listen.**

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## Jyotirao Phule and Gulamgiri

**Phule challenged Brahmanical dominance and said the Aryans were outsiders who conquered India’s original inhabitants. He argued that lower castes were the true children of India. In 1873, he wrote Gulamgiri, linking Indian caste injustice to slavery in America.**



 Fig. 13 – Jyotirao Phule

He started the Satyashodhak Samaj to promote caste equality.

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## Dr B.R. Ambedkar and the Temple Entry Movement

Ambedkar, born in a Mahar caste, experienced caste discrimination all his life. In 1927, he launched temple entry movements, where Dalits entered tanks and temples from which they were banned. His goal was to show the unfairness of caste barriers.

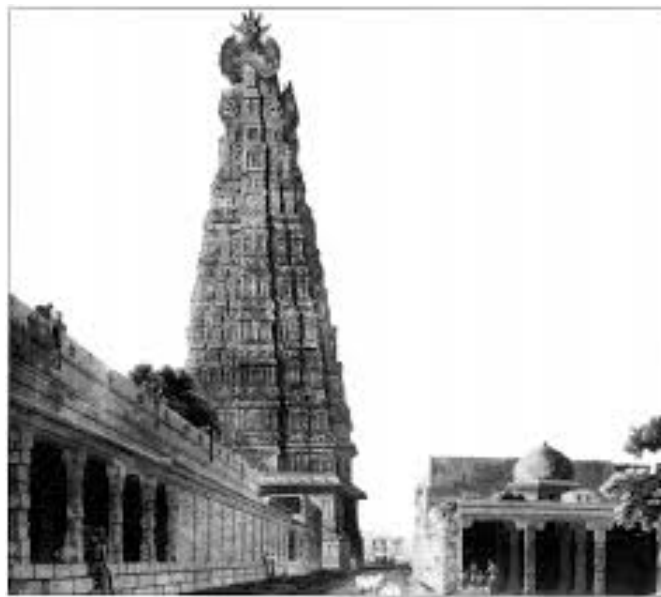
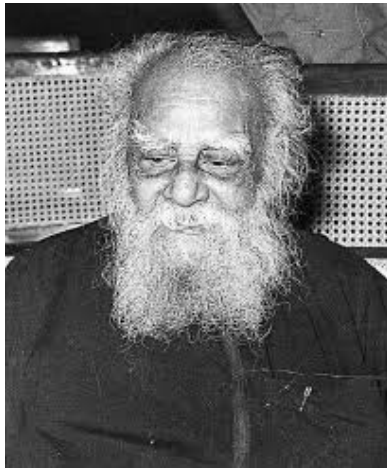



 Fig. 14 – A temple gate in Madurai, once closed to untouchables

## The Non-Brahman Movement

In South India, Periyar (E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker) launched the Self Respect Movement. He believed untouchables were the real creators of Tamil culture and criticised Hindu texts for supporting caste and gender inequality.



 Fig. 15 – E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar)

Orthodox Hindu groups like the Sanatan Dharma Sabha opposed such reforms and defended caste as a part of religion.

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## Other Reform Groups


- Brahmo Samaj (1830) – opposed idol worship, supported women's rights
- Prarthana Samaj (1867) – focused on women's education and ending caste
- Veda Samaj (1864) – aimed to remove superstitions
- Ramakrishna Mission – promoted service to humanity
- Derozio's Young Bengal – encouraged critical thinking and freedom



 Fig. 17 – Henry Derozio






 Fig. 18 – Swami Vivekananda

## Aligarh and Sikh Reform

- Sayyid Ahmed Khan founded the Aligarh Muslim University in 1875, promoting modern education among Muslims.



 Fig. 19 – Sayyid Ahmed Khan

- Singh Sabha Movement (Punjab, 1873) promoted Sikh reform and education.



**Fig. 20 – Khalsa College, Amritsar, established in 1892 by the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement**

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