

Assignment 4

Introduction to History, Monsoon 2020

The book “Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India” by Shekhar Bandopadhyay is an account of various historical events through Indian history starting from the decline of the Mughal Empire till the Independence of the Indian state in 1947. The author discusses at length several movements through history, some against the British and some against the unjust social construct that prevailed in the Indian society. One such movement was the non-Brahman movement in western and southern India. The movement started in Maharashtra under the leadership of the Mali leader Jotirao Phule. Phule called the Brahmans and upper castes “outsiders who sought to dominate over the untouchables”. He believed that the roots of the caste system could be seen in the Aryan invasion and sought to unite the non-Brahman peasant castes in a common movement against the monopoly of the Brahmans over power and authority in the Indian society.

Christian Missionaries like Rev. Robert Caldwell and G.E. Pope spoke about the “antiquity of the Dravidian culture”. They came to a conclusion that the Vellalas community, now an oppressed Dalit faction, did not initially count as Sudras (lower Hindu caste or Dalit). It was the colonizing Aryan Brahmans who had imposed the status of Sudras over the Vellala community. They argued that the Brahmans had created the caste system and created social divisions in an attempt to thrust their idolatrous religion on the local communities. They claimed that the Tamil language did not owe its roots to Sanskrit and neither was the caste system indigenous to the Tamil culture. This had become the basis for the non-Brahman elites, especially in the south to construct a “non-Brahman identity” and claim the Tamil language, literature, and culture as “empowering”.

Shekhar Bandopadhyay also talks about the social notion of Pardah and how it had become a symbol of her physical seclusion behind the walls of her home. The purdah, according to a scholar was “a symbolization of the distance between the sexes.” The purdah put forward an ideology and a code of conduct for women. It demanded female modesty which had become the basis for a woman’s life wherever she went. The purdah was universalized for both Hindu and Muslim women in the nineteenth century. As quoted by Shekhar Bandopadhyay, “The degraded condition of Indian women was taken as an indicator of India’s inferior status in the hierarchy of civilizations.”

Even at a time when the colonial society sought modernity and a movement began to identify the “new woman” through the spread of education, the stereotyping had never left the minds of Indians. The final goal of the educators of the Muslim women, as claimed by Gail Minault (an American historian of South Asia), was “to create women who would be better wives, better mothers, and better Muslims”. Voices were hardly raised against this stereotyping of women in the nineteenth century. But it was not absent. Tarabai Shinde had published a book in 1882 “A

Comparison between Women and Men” or “Stri Purush Tulna” where she openly spoke against the stereotyping of women and the notion of *pativrata* that bound the Indian woman to live her life as a dutiful wife and nothing more.

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