

# WOMAN, CASTE AND REFORM

## CHAPTER COVERAGE

- ◆ Introduction.
- ◆ Working Towards Change.
  - ◆ Changing the Lives of Widows.
  - ◆ Girls Begin Going to School.
  - ◆ Women Write about Women.
- ◆ Caste and Social Reform.
  - ◆ Demands for Equality and Justice.
  - ◆ Gulamgiri.
  - ◆ Who Could Enter Temples ?
  - ◆ The Non-Brahman movement.



## INTRODUCTION

1. Nowadays most girls from middle-class families go to school, and often study with boys. On growing up, many of them go to colleges and universities, and take up jobs after that. They have to be adults before they are legally married, and according to law, they can marry anyone they like, from any caste and community and widows can remarry too. All women, like all men, can vote and stand for elections.
2. Of course, these rights are not actually enjoyed by all. Poor people have little or no access to education and in many families, women cannot choose their husbands.
3. Two hundred years ago things were very different. Most children were married off at an early age. Both Hindu and Muslim men could marry more than one wife.
4. In some parts of the country, widows were praised if they chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Women who died in this manner, whether willingly or otherwise, were called “sati”, meaning virtuous women.
5. Women’s rights to property were also restricted.

6. Besides, most women had virtually no access to education. In many parts of the country people believed that if a woman was educated, she would become a widow.
7. Differences between men and women were not the only ones in society. In most regions, people were divided along lines of caste. Brahmins and Kshatriyas considered themselves as “upper castes”. Others, such as traders and moneylenders (often referred to as Vaishyas) were placed after them. Then came peasants, and artisans such as weavers and potters (referred to as Shudras). At the lowest rung were those who laboured to keep cities and villages clean or worked at jobs that upper castes considered “polluting”, that is, it could lead to the loss of caste status. The upper castes also treated many of these groups at the bottom as “untouchable”. They were not allowed to enter temples, draw water from the wells used by the upper castes, or bathe in ponds where upper castes bathed. They were seen as inferior human beings.



## WORKING TOWARDS CHANGE

1. From the early nineteenth century, we find debates and discussions about social customs and practices taking on a new character.
2. One important reason for this was the development of new forms of communication.
3. For the first time, books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets were printed. These were far cheaper and far more accessible than the manuscripts. Therefore ordinary people could read these, and many of them could also write and express their ideas in their own languages. All kinds of issues – social, political, economic and religious – could now be debated and discussed by men (and sometimes by women as well) in the new cities. The discussions could reach out to a wider public, and could become linked to movements for social change.
4. These debates were often initiated by Indian reformers and reform groups. One such reformer was Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833). He founded a reform association known as the Brahmo Sabha (later known as the Brahmo Samaj) in Calcutta. People such as Rammohun Roy are described as reformers because they felt that changes were necessary in society, and unjust practices needed to be done away with. They thought that the best way to ensure such changes was by persuading people to give up old practices and adopt a new way of life.
5. Rammohun Roy was keen to spread the knowledge of Western education in the country and bring about greater freedom and equality for women. He wrote about the way women were forced to bear the burden of domestic work, confined to the home and the kitchen and not allowed to move out and become educated.



### Changing the Lives of Widows

1. Rammohun Roy was particularly moved by the problems widows faced in their lives. He began a campaign against the practice of sati.
2. Rammohun Roy was well versed in Sanskrit, Persian and several other Indian and European languages. He tried to show through his writings that the practice of widow burning had no sanction in ancient texts.
3. Many British officials had also begun to criticise Indian traditions and customs. They were therefore more than willing to listen to Rammohun who was reputed to be a learned man.
4. In 1829, sati was banned.

5. The strategy adopted by Rammohun was used by later reformers as well. Whenever they wished to challenge a practice that seemed harmful, they tried to find a verse or sentence in the ancient sacred texts that supported their point of view. They then suggested that the practice as it existed at present was against early tradition.
6. For instance, one of the most famous reformers, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, used the ancient texts to suggest that widows could remarry. His suggestion was adopted by British officials, and a law was passed in 1856 permitting widow remarriage. Those who were against the remarriage of widows opposed Vidyasagar and even boycotted him.
7. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the movement in favour of widow remarriage spread to other parts of the country.
8. In the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency, Veerasalingam Pantulu formed an association for widow remarriage.
9. Around the same time young intellectuals and reformers in Bombay pledged themselves to working for the same cause.
10. In the north, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who founded the reform association called Arya Samaj, also supported widow remarriage.
11. Yet, the number of widows who actually remarried remained low. Those who married were not easily accepted in society and conservative groups continued to oppose the new law.

#### ◆ **Girls Begin Going to School**

1. Many of the reformers felt that education for girls was necessary in order to improve the condition of women.
2. Vidyasagar in Calcutta and many other reformers in Bombay set up schools for girls.
3. When the first schools were opened in the mid-nineteenth century, many people were afraid of them.
  - (i) They feared that schools would take girls away from home, prevent them from doing their domestic duties.
  - (ii) Moreover, girls had to travel through public places in order to reach school.
  - (iii) Many people felt that this would have a corrupting influence on them.
  - (iv) They felt that girls should stay away from public spaces.
4. Therefore, throughout the nineteenth century, most educated women were taught at home by liberal fathers or husbands.
5. Sometimes women taught themselves. Rashsundari Debi was one of those who secretly learned to read and write in the flickering light of candles at night.

6. In the latter part of the century, schools for girls were established by the Arya Samaj in Punjab and Jyotirao Phule in Maharashtra.
7. In aristocratic Muslim households in North India, women learnt to read the Koran in Arabic. They were taught by women who came home to teach.
8. Some reformers such as Mumtaz Ali reinterpreted verses from the Koran to argue for women's education.
9. The first Urdu novels began to be written from the late nineteenth century. Amongst other things, these were meant to encourage women to read about religion and domestic management in a language they could understand.

#### ◆ Women Write about Women

1. From the early twentieth century, Muslim women like the Begums of Bhopal played a notable role in promoting education among women.
2. They founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
3. Another remarkable woman, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta. She was a fearless critic of conservative ideas, arguing that religious leaders of every faith accorded an inferior place to women.
4. By the 1880s, Indian women began to enter universities. Some of them trained to be doctors, some became teachers.
5. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the place of women in society. Tarabai Shinde, a woman educated at home at Poona, published a book, *Stripurushtulna*, (A Comparison between Women and Men), criticizing the social differences between men and women.
6. Pandita Ramabai, a great scholar of Sanskrit, felt that Hinduism was oppressive towards women, and wrote a book about the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women. She founded a widows' home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been treated badly by their husbands' relatives. Here women were trained so that they could support themselves economically.
7. Needless to say, all this more than alarmed the orthodox. For instance, many Hindu nationalists felt that Hindu women were adopting Western ways and that this would corrupt Hindu culture and erode family values. Orthodox Muslims were also worried about the impact of these changes.
8. As you can see, by the end of the nineteenth century, women themselves were actively working for reform. They wrote books, edited magazines, founded schools and training centres, and set up women's associations. From the early twentieth century, they formed political pressure groups to push through laws for female suffrage (the right to vote) and better health care and education for women. Some of them joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements from the 1920s.
9. In the twentieth century, leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose lent their support to demands for greater equality and freedom for women. Nationalist leaders promised that there would be full

suffrage for all men and women after Independence. However, till then they asked women to concentrate on the anti-British struggles.

## ➤ **CASTE AND SOCIAL REFORM**

1. Some of the social reformers we have been discussing also criticised caste inequalities.
2. Rammohun Roy translated an old Buddhist text that was critical of caste. The Prarthana Samaj adhered to the tradition of Bhakti that believed in spiritual equality of all castes.
3. In Bombay, the Paramhans Mandali was founded in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste. Many of these reformers and members of reform associations were people of upper castes. Often, in secret meetings, these reformers would violate caste taboos on food and touch, in an effort to get rid of the hold of caste prejudice in their lives.
4. There were also others who questioned the injustices of the caste social order. During the course of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries began setting up schools for tribal groups and “lower”-caste children. These children were thus equipped with some resources to make their way into a changing world.
5. At the same time, the poor began leaving their villages to look for jobs that were opening up in the cities. There was work in the factories that were coming up, and jobs in municipalities. Drains had to be dug, roads laid, buildings constructed, and cities cleaned. This required coolies, diggers, carriers, bricklayers, sewage cleaners, sweepers, palanquin bearers, rickshaw pullers. The poor from the villages and small towns, many of them from low castes, began moving to the cities where there was a new demand for labour.
6. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia.
7. Work in the new locations was often very hard. But the poor, the people from low castes, saw this as an opportunity to get away from the oppressive hold that upper-caste landowners exercised over their lives and the daily humiliation they suffered.

### ◆ **Demands for Equality and Justice**

1. Gradually, by the second half of the nineteenth century, people from within the “lower” castes began organizing movements against caste discrimination, and demanded social equality and justice.
2. The Satnami movement in Central India, founded by a leader named Ghasidas who came from a “low” caste, worked among the leatherworkers and organized a movement to improve their social status.
3. In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur’s Matua sect worked among “low” caste Chandala cultivators. Haridas questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system.
4. In what is present-day Kerala, a guru from among “low” caste Ezhavas, Shri Narayana Guru, proclaimed the ideals of unity of all people within one sect, a single caste and one guru.

5. All these sects were founded by leaders who came from “low” castes and worked amongst them. They tried to change those habits and practices among “low” castes which provoked “upper” castes’ contempt. They tried to create a sense of self-esteem amongst the lower castes.

### ◆ **Gulamgiri**

1. One of the most vocal amongst the “low-caste” leaders was Jyotirao Phule. Born in 1827, he studied in schools set up by Christian missionaries. On growing up he developed his own ideas about the injustices of caste society.
2. He set out to attack the Brahmans’ claim that they were superior to others, since they were Aryans.
3. Phule argued that the Aryans were foreigners, who came from outside the subcontinent, and defeated and subjugated the true children of the country – those who had lived here from before the coming of the Aryans. As the Aryans established their dominance, they began looking at the defeated population as inferior, as lowcaste people.
4. According to Phule, the “upper” castes had no right to their land and power: in reality, the land belonged to indigenous people, the so-called low castes.
5. Phule claimed that before Aryan rule there existed a golden age when warrior-peasants tilled the land and ruled the Maratha countryside in just and fair ways. He proposed that Shudras (labouring castes) and Ati Shudras (untouchables) should unite to challenge caste discrimination.
6. The Satyashodhak Samaj, an association Phule founded, propagated caste equality.
7. In 1873, Phule wrote a book named *Gulamgiri*, meaning slavery.
8. Some ten years before this, the American Civil War had been fought, leading to the end of slavery in America. Phule dedicated his book to all those Americans who had fought to free slaves, thus establishing a link between the conditions of the “lower” castes in India and the black slaves in America.
9. As this example shows, Phule extended his criticism of the caste system to argue against all forms of inequality. He was concerned about the plight of “upper”-caste women, the miseries of the labourer, and the humiliation of the “low” castes.
10. This movement for caste reform was continued in the twentieth century by other great dalit leaders like Dr B.R. Ambedkar in western India and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker in the south.

### ◆ **Who Could Enter Temples?**

1. Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family.
2. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. In school he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground, and was not allowed to drink water from taps that upper-caste children used.
3. After finishing school, he got a fellowship to go to the US for higher studies. On his return to India in 1919, he wrote extensively about “upper”-caste power in contemporary society.

4. In 1927, Ambedkar started a temple entry movement, in which his Mahar caste followers participated. Brahman priests were outraged when the Dalits used water from the temple tank.
5. Ambedkar led three such movements for temple entry between 1927 and 1935.
6. His aim was to make everyone see the power of caste prejudices within society.

#### ◆ The Non-Brahman Movement

1. In the early twentieth century, the non-Brahman movement started. The initiative came from those non-Brahman castes that had acquired access to education, wealth and influence.
2. They argued that Brahmans were heirs of Aryan invaders from the north who had conquered southern lands from the original inhabitants of the region – the indigenous Dravidian races. They also challenged Brahmanical claims to power.
3. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or Periyar, as he was called, came from a middle-class family. Interestingly, he had been an ascetic in his early life and had studied Sanskrit scriptures carefully.
4. Later, he became a member of the Congress, only to leave it in disgust when he found that at a feast organised by nationalists, seating arrangements followed caste distinctions – that is, the lower castes were made to sit at a distance from the upper castes.
5. Convinced that untouchables had to fight for their dignity, Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement. He argued that untouchables were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by Brahmans. He felt that all religious authorities saw social divisions and inequality as God-given. Untouchables had to free themselves, therefore, from all religions in order to achieve social equality.
6. Periyar was an outspoken critic of Hindu scriptures, especially the Codes of Manu, the ancient lawgiver, and the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana*. He said that these texts had been used to establish the authority of Brahmans over lower castes and the domination of men over women.
7. These assertions did not go unchallenged. The forceful speeches, writings and movements of lowercaste leaders did lead to rethinking and some selfcriticism among upper-caste nationalist leaders.
8. But orthodox Hindu society also reacted by founding Sanatan Dharma Sabhas and the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal in the north, and associations like the Brahman Sabha in Bengal.
9. The object of these associations was to uphold caste distinctions as a cornerstone of Hinduism, and show how this was sanctified by scriptures. Debates and struggles over caste continued beyond the colonial period and are still going on in our own times.