

UPSC

Old NCERT Summary (Bipan Chandra)

Growth of New India - Religious & Social Reform After 1858- 3

EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN

- For countless centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The various religions practised in India as well as the personal laws based on them consigned women to a status inferior to that of men. The condition of upper class women was in this respect worse than that of peasant women. Since the latter worked actively in the fields alongside men, they enjoyed relatively greater freedom of movement and in some respects a better status in the family than the upper class women. For example, they seldom observed purdah and many of them had the right to remarry. The traditional view often praised the role of women as wives and mothers but as individuals, they were assigned a very lowly social position. They were supposed to have no personality of their own apart from their ties to their husbands. They could not find any other expression to their inborn talents or desires except as housewives. In fact, they were seen as just adjuncts to men. For example, a woman could only marry once among Hindus, a man was permitted to have more than one wife. Among Muslims too this custom of polygamy prevailed. In large parts of the country women had to live behind the purdah.
- The custom of early marriage prevailed, and even children of eight or nine were married. Widows could not remarry and had to lead an ascetic and new life. In many parts of the country, the horrifying custom of Bati or self-immolation of widows prevailed. Hindu women had no right to inherit property, nor did they enjoy the right to terminate an undesirable marriage. Muslim women could inherit property but only half as much as a man could; and in the matter of divorce even theoretically there was no equality between husband and wife. In fact, Muslim women dreaded divorce.
- The social position of Hindu and Muslim women as well as their values were similar. Moreover, in both cases they were economically and socially totally dependent on men. Lastly, the benefit of education was denied to most of them. In addition, women were taught to accept their subjection and even to welcome it as a badge of honour. It is true that

occasionally women of the character and personality of Razia Sultana, Chand Bibi or Ahilya Bai Holkar arose in India. But they were exceptions to the general pattern, and do not in any way change the picture.

- Moved by the humanitarian and egalitarian impulses of the 19th century, the social reformers started a powerful movement to improve the position of women. While some reformers appealed to doctrines of individualism and equality, others declared that true Hinduism or Islam or Zoroastrianism did not sanction the inferior status of women and that true religion assigned them a high social position.
- Numerous individuals, reform societies; and religious organizations worked hard to spread education among women, to encourage widow remarriage, to improve the living conditions of widows, to prevent marriage of young children, to bring women out of the purdah, to enforce girl They were bound to assert their monogamy, and to enable middle class rights as human beings women to take up professions or public.
- Another Important development was employment. After the 1880s, when the birth of a women's movement in the Dufferin hospitals (named after Lady country. Up to the 1920s enlightened men Dufferin the wife of the Viceroy) were started, efforts were made to make modern medicine and child delivery techniques available to Indian women.
- The movement for the liberation of the most outstanding of women received a great stimulus from the rise of the militant national movement in the 20th century. Women played an active and important role in the struggle for freedom. They participated in large numbers in the agitation against the partition of Bengal and in the Home Rule movement. After 1918, they marched in political
- processions, picketed shops selling foreign cloth and liquor, spun and propagated khadi. went to jail in the non - cooperation movements, faced lathis, tear gas and bullets during public demonstrations, participated actively in the evolutionary terrorist movement, and voted in elections to legislatures and even stood as candidates. Sarojini Naidu, the famous poetess, became the president of the National Congress. Several women became ministers or parliamentary secretaries in the popular ministries of 1937. Hundreds of them became members of municipalities and other organs of local government. When the trade union and kisan movements arose in the 1920s, women were often found in their forefront. More than any other factor, participation in the national movement contributed to the awakening of Indian women and their emancipation. For how could those who had braved British jails and bullets be declared inferior. And how could they any longer be

confined to the home and be satisfied with the life of a doll or a slave girl? They were bound to assert their rights as human beings.

- Another important development was the birth of a women's movement in the country. Up to the 1920s enlightened men had worked for the uplift of women. Now aware and self-confident women under-took the task. They started many organisations and institutions for the purpose, the most outstanding of which was the All India Women's Conference founded in 1927.
- Women's struggle for equality took a big step forward with the coming of independence. "Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution (1950) guaranteed the complete equality of men and women. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956 made the daughter an equal co-heir with the son. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permitted dissolution of marriage on specific grounds. Monogamy was also made mandatory on men as well as women. But the evil custom of dowry still continues even though the demanding of dowry has been banned. The Constitution gives women equal right to work and to get employment in state agencies. The Directive Principles of the Constitution lay down the principle of equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Of course many visible and invisible obstacles still remain in putting the principle of the equality of sexes into practice. A proper social climate has still to be created. But the social reform movements, the freedom struggle, women's own movement, and the Constitution of free India have made a big contribution in this direction.

STRUGGLE AGAINST CASTE

- The caste system was an other major target of attack for the social reform movement. The Hindus were at this time divided into numerous castes (jatis). The caste into which a man was born determined large areas of his life. It determined whom he would marry and with whom he would dine. It largely determined his profession as also his social loyalties. Moreover, the castes were carefully graded into a hierarchy of status. At the bottom of the ladder came the untouchables or scheduled castes as they came to be called later, who formed about 20 percent of the Hindu population. The untouchables suffered from numerous and severe disabilities and restrictions, which of course varied from place to place. Their touch was considered impure and was a source of pollution.
- In some parts of the country, particularly in the south, their very shadow was to be avoided, so that they had to move away if a brahmin was seen or heard coming. An untouchables dress, food, place of

residence, all were carefully regulated. He could not draw water from wells and tanks used by the higher castes; he could do so only from wells and tanks specially reserved for untouchables. Where no such well or tank existed, he had to drink dirty water from ponds and irrigation canals. He could not enter the Hindu temples or study the shastras. Often his children could not attend a school in which the children of caste Hindus studied. Public services such as the police and the army were closed to him. The untouchables were forced to take up menial and other such jobs which were considered unclean', for example, scavenging, shoemaking, removing dead bodies, skinning dead animals, tanning hides and, skins. Usually denied ownership of land, many of them worked even as tenants-at-will and field labourers.

- The caste system was an evil in another respect. Not only was it humiliating and inhuman and based on the anti-democratic principle of inequality by birth, it was a cause of social disintegration. It splintered people into numerous groups. In modern times it became a major obstacle in the growth of a united national feeling and the spread of democracy. It may also be noted that caste consciousness particularly with regard to marriage prevailed also among Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, who practised untouchability though in a less virulent form.
- British rule released many forces which gradually undermined the caste system. The introduction of modern industries and railways and buses and growing urbanisation made it difficult to prevent mass contact among persons of different castes, especially in the cities. Modern commerce and industry opened new fields of economic activity to all. For example, an Brahmin or upper caste merchant could hardly miss the opportunity of trading in skins or shoes nor would he agree to deny himself the opportunity of becoming a doctor or a soldier. Free sale of land upset the caste balance in many villages. The close connection between caste and vocation could hardly continue, in a modern industrial society in which the profit motive was increasingly becoming dominant.
- In administration, the British introduced equality before law, took away the judicial functions of caste panchayats, and gradually opened the doors of administrative services to all castes. Moreover, the new educational system was wholly secular and, therefore, basically opposed to caste distinctions and caste outlook. As modern democratic and rationalist ideas spread among Indians, they began to raise their voice against the caste system. The Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophists, the Social Conference, and nearly all the great reformers of the 19th century, attacked it.
- Even though many of them defended the system of four varnas, they were critical of the caste (Jati) system. In particular they condemned the

inhuman practice of untouchability. They also realised that national unity and national progress in political, social and economic fields could not be achieved so long as millions were deprived of their right to live with dignity and honour.

- The growth of the national movement played a significant role in weakening the caste system. The national movement was opposed to all those institutions which tended to divide Indian people. Common participation in public demonstrations, giant public meetings, and satyagraha struggles weakened caste consciousness. In any case those who were fighting for freedom from foreign rule in the name of liberty and equality could hardly support the caste system which was totally opposed to these principles. Thus, from the beginning, the Indian National Congress and in fact the entire national movement opposed caste privileges and fought for equal civic rights and equal freedom for the development of the individual without distinctions of caste, sex or religion.
- All his life Gandhiji kept the abolition of untouchability in the forefront of his public activities. In 1932, he founded the All India Harijan Sangh for the purpose. His campaign for the root and removal of 'untouchability' was on the grounds of humanism and reason. He argued that there was no sanction for untouchability in Hindu shastras. But, if any shastra approved of untouchability, it should be ignored for it would then be going against human dignity. Truth, he said, could not be confined within the covers of a book.
- Since the middle of the 19th century, numerous individuals and organizations worked to spread education among the untouchables (or depressed classes and scheduled castes as they came to be called later), to open the doors of schools and temples to them, to enable them to use public wells and tanks, and to remove other social disabilities and distinctions from which they suffered.
- As education and awakening spread, the lower castes themselves began to stir. They became conscious of their basic human rights and began to rise in defence of these rights. They gradually built up a powerful movement against the traditional oppression by the higher castes. In Maharashtra, in the second half of the 19th century, Jyotiba Phule, born in a lower caste family, led a lifelong movement against Brahmanical religious authority as part of his struggle against upper caste domination. He regarded modern education as the most important weapon for the liberation of the lower castes. He was the first to open several schools for girls of the lower castes. Dr; B.R. Ambedkar, who belonged to one of the scheduled castes, devoted his entire life to fighting against caste tyranny. He organised the All India Scheduled Castes Federation for the purpose.

- Several other scheduled caste leaders founded the All India Depressed Classes Association. In Kerala, Sri Narayan Guru organised a life long struggle against the caste system. He coined the famous slogan: “One religion, one caste and one God for mankind. In south India, the non-brahmins organised during the 1920s the Self-Respect Movement to fight the disabilities which brahmins had imposed upon them. Numerous sat agraha movements were organised all over India jointly by the upper and depressed castes against the ban on the latter’s entry into temples and other such restrictions.
- The struggle against untouchability could not, however, be fully successful under alien rule. The foreign government was afraid of arousing the hostility of the orthodox sections of society. Only the government of a free India could under-take a radical reform of society. Moreover, the problem of social uplift was closely related to the problem of political and economic uplift. for example, economic progress was essential for raising the social status of the depressed castes; so also were the spread of education and political rights. This was fully recognised by Indian leaders.
- The Constitution of 1950 has provided the legal framework for the final abolition of untouchability. It has declared that “‘untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The endorsement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law”. The Constitution further forbids any restriction the use of wells, tanks, and bathing ghats, or on the access to shops, restaurants, hotels and cinemas. Furthermore, one of the Directive Principles it has laid down for the guidance of the government says : “The State s hall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice, social, economic and political, shall inform all the institutions of the national life’. The struggle against the evils of the caste system, however, still remains an urgent task before the Indian people, especially in the rural areas.