

## Unit - 8

# Status of Women in India through the ages



## Learning Objectives

To acquaint ourselves with

- ▶ The position of women in the ancient society
- ▶ Deterioration in the status of women in medieval period
- ▶ The major social evils prevalent in the Indian society
- ▶ The Role of Reformers in the social evils eradication
- ▶ Women emancipation through education
- ▶ Social Legislations and Empowerment



## Introduction

Generally human society is constantly changing with additions, assimilations and omissions from within and outside. Women constitute half of the population. This is imperative to have a historical understanding of the status of women through ages.

The position of women was not uniform in all periods, differed with regional variations. In ancient India particularly early Vedic period women, enjoyed equal rights. But with the passage of time their status in the society found deteriorated as a result of frequent foreign invasions. They were subjected to subjugation and subordination. New social practices, customs and systems which crept into the society in turn put limitations and restrictions on the liberty of women.

During the British Raj, many socio-religious reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswathi, Keshab Chandra

Sen, Iswara Chandra VidyaSagar, Pandita Ramabai, Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar, Jyoti rao phule, Periyar E.V.R, Dr. Dharmambal were the prominent leaders who fought for the upliftment of women. Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of sati in 1829. Vidya sagar's crusade for the improvement in the condition of widows, led to the passing of Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. The reformers rightly realized that female education as an emancipating agent in eradicating social evils. So they started girls' schools in various parts of the country, which brought significant changes in the lives of women.

Women played an important part in Indian Freedom struggle. Until independence, there was no radical changes in the status of women. In independent India, last few decades have witnessed the all round development of women. Women are now making their presence felt in every walk of life.

## The position of women

### a) Ancient Period

In the ancient Indus civilization of India, evidences show the worship of the mother goddess. Hence, the adoration for the mother is evident during that period. During the Rig Vedic period, it is believed that the position of wife was honoured and women's position was acknowledged, especially in the performance of religious ceremonies.

During later Vedic age witnessed a transitional development in the status of women restricting her role in the social life except in the performance of religious sacrifices. Her social and political freedom was restricted. Sati became popular during the later Vedic period where the widows either chose for themselves or were forced to jump into the pyre of their husbands. The patriarchal system became rigid. Women were denied to study Vedic scriptures.

### b) Medieval Period

The position of women in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period and they suffered from many social evils such as sati, child marriages, female infanticide, and slavery. Normally monogamy was in practice but among the rich polygamy was prevalent. 'Sati' was in practice particularly among the royal and upper strata of the society. Widow re-marriage was rare. Devadasi system was in practice in some parts of India. Among the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practiced. The condition of widow became miserable during the medieval period. But we don't ignore the fact that the Mughal ruler Akbar attempted to abolish sati. In fact very little attention was paid to female education.

Jauhar refers to the practice of collective voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated Rajput warriors, in order to avoid capture and dishonour.

In spite of general determination, we can find some exceptions Razia sultana, Queen Durgavati, Chand bibi, Nurjahan, Jahannara, Jijabai and Mira bai.

During medieval times Women's education was not completely ignored, though no regular separate school seems to have existed. Female education was informal. Girls usually had their lessons from their parents in their childhood. The rich appointed tutors to teach their daughters at home. The daughters of Rajput chiefs and Zamindars studied literature and philosophy.

### c) British Period

For centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The major effect of national awakening in the nineteenth century was seen in the field of social reform. The enlightened persons increasingly revolted against rigid social evils and outdated customs. Numerous individuals, reform societies and religious organisations 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 enforce monogamy and to enable middle-class women to take up professions or public employment.

In the beginning of nineteenth century female literacy was extremely low when compared to male literacy. The Christian missionaries were the first to set up the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society in 1819. The Bethune school was founded in 1849 by J.E.D. Bethune, who was the president of the council of education in Calcutta.

Charles Wood's despatch on education in 1854 laid a great stress on the need for female education. Indian Education Commission (Hunter) of 1882 recommended to start primary schools for girls and teacher-training institution and suggested special scholarships and prizes for girls. In 1880's Indian women began to enter universities. They were also trained to become doctors and teachers. They



began to write books and magazines. In 1914 the women's medical service did a lot of work in training mid-wives. In the 1890s D.K. Karve established a number of female schools in Poona. Prof D.K. Karve, Pandita Rama bai, made sincere effort to emancipate women through education was really remarkable. The Indian women's university was started by Prof. D.K. Karve in 1916. It was an outstanding institution imparting education to women. In the same year Lady Harding Medical College was started in Delhi.

## Major Social Evils

### a) Female infanticide

Female infanticide was another inhuman practice afflicting the nineteenth century Indian society. It was particularly in vogue in Rajputana, Punjab and the North Western Provinces. It was mainly to avoid economic burden.

Factors such as family pride, the fear of not finding a suitable match for the girl child were some of the major reasons responsible for this practice. Therefore, immediately after birth, the female infants were being killed.

The company administration in India took steps to ban this practice by passing the Bengal Regulatory Act XXI of 1795, the Regulating Act of 1802 and the Female Infanticide Act of 1870.

### b) Female Foeticide

Female foeticide is also an inhuman practice which cuts across the caste, creed, class and regional boundaries. Whether it is female infanticide or female foeticide the prime motive remained the same. In order to ban the female foeticide and sex-determination the central Government passed various Acts.

### c) Child marriage

The practice of child marriage was another social disgrace for the women.

Akbar prohibited child marriage and made it obligatory for the parents to obtain the approval of both the bride and the bridegroom before the marriage. He prescribed 14 years as the age of constant for girls and 16 years for boys.

In 1846, the minimum marriageable age for a girl was only 10 years. The native marriage Act was passed in 1872. It fixed the minimum marriageable age of girls at 14 and boys at 18.

In 1930, the Central Legislative Assembly passed Rai Saheb Harbilas Sarada's child Marriage Bill fixing the minimum marriageable age for boys at 18 and 14 for girls. It was later amended to 18 for girls and 21 for boys according to Hindu Marriage Act 1955.

### d) Sati

Sati was social evil that prevailed in Indian society especially among the Rajputs. Earlier it was a voluntary act but later by the relatives forced the widow to sit on the funeral pyre. The Italian traveler, Niccolo Conti, who visited Vijayanagar about the year A.D. (C.E) 1420, notes that 'the inhabitants of this region marry as many wives as they please, who are burnt with their dead husbands'.

In the early years of 19<sup>th</sup> century, sati was in practice in various Parts of Bengal, western India and southern India. In 1811, Jagan Mohan Roy, brother of Rammohan Roy, passed away and his wife was burnt along with him. Rammohan Roy was moved to the extreme at the sight of it and took an oath that he would have the cruel practice abolished by law. He carried on a continuous agitation through press and platform for the abolition of Sati.

Raja Rammohan Roy published his tracts in 1818-20, making the point that the rite of Sati was not enjoined by the Sastras. This material was used by the Serampore missionaries to shatter the generally accepted view that Sati was an integral part of the Hindu religion. Orthodox



Hindu opinion against the abolition was advocated by Radhakanta Deb, and Bhawani Charan Banerji.

When Lord William Bentinck took up the question of Sati, he found that the abolition had been recommended by the judges of the criminal courts. He passed Regulation XVII on December 4, 1829 'declaring the practice of Sati or burning or burying alive the widow of Hindus, illegal and punishable by Criminal Courts'. Similar legislative measures were enacted soon after in Bombay and Madras.

### e) Devadasi System

The word Devadasi (Sanskrit) or Devar adiyal (Tamil) means "servant of God" dancing girl dedicated to the service of god in a temple. Devadasi system was a social evil. There was also tradition of dedicating one daughter to the temple. In addition to taking care of the temple, they learnt and practiced Bharatha Natiyam and other classical traditional Indian arts.

Later on they were ill treated and humiliated. The Devadasis lost their dignity, sense of pride, self-respect and honour.

Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar who was the first woman doctor in India, dedicated herself for the cause of abolishing the cruel practice of Devadasi system from Tamil Nadu. Appreciating her role in the agitation against Devadasi system she was nominated to the Tamil Nadu legislative council in 1929. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was instrumental in passing the "Devadasi abolition bill". Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar proposed the bill to the Madras legislative council in 1930.

Moovalur Ramamirdham was yet another woman who fought for the emancipation of the Devadasi. With the continuous moral support

The Madras Devadasi Act was a law that was enacted on 9th October 1947. The law was passed in the Madras presidency and gave Devadasis the legal right to marry and made it illegal to dedicated girls to Indian temples.

rendered by Rajaji, Periyar and Thiru.Vi.Ka, she raised slogan against this cruel practice. As a result the government passed the "Devadasi Abolition Act".

## Role of Social Reformers

From the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of social reformers and social reform movements sought to promote the upliftment of women by giving



them education, raising their marriageable age and taking care of widows, as well as to remove the rigidity of caste and raise the suppressed class to a status of equality. The reformers who led the movements were the forerunners of modern India.

### a) Raja Rammohan Roy

There were some enlightened Indians who supported the British attempt to reform the oppressive social order of India. The first was the abolition of sati by law, on humanitarian grounds. Raja Rammohan Roy, the pioneer of Indian social reform movement was a casteless crusader of sati after having seen this practice in the case of his own sister-in-law. He started his campaigning against this inhuman evil practice. Influenced by the ruthless attack of the movement led by Rammohan Roy the British government declared this act as "culpable Homicide". Raja Rammohan Roy is most remembered for helping Lord William Bentinck to declare the practice of Sati a punishable offence in 1829. He also protested against the child marriage and female infanticide. He favoured the remarriage of widows, female education and women's right to property. Thus the evil practice of sati on any scale was wiped out.

### b) Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar

Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar carried on the movement for female education, widow remarriage and abolition of polygamy in Bengal. He submitted petitions to this effect to the Indian Legislative Council and to the passing



of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856. His son Narayanachandra set an example to others by marrying a widow of his choice. To promote female education, Vidhyasagar founded several girls' schools in the districts of Nadia, Midnapur, Hugli and Burdwan in Bengal.

### c) Kandukuri Veeresalingam

K a n d u k u r i Veeresalingam Pantulu was the earliest champion in South India of women's emancipation. He published a journal viveka vardhani. He opened his first girls' school in 1874 and made widow remarriage and female education the key points of his programme for social reform.



**Kandukuri Veeresalingam**

### d) M.G. Ranade and B.M. Malabari

In Bombay presidency, M.G. Ranade and B.M. Malabari carried on the movement for the upliftment of women. In 1869, Ranade joined the Widow Remarriage Association and encouraged widow remarriage and female education and opposed child marriage. In 1887, he started the National Social Conference, which became a pre-eminent institution for social reform. In 1884, B.M. Malabari, a journalist, started a movement for the abolition of child marriage. He published pamphlets on this subject and appealed to the government to take action.

### e) Gopal Krishna Gokhale

In 1905, Gopal Krishna Gokhale started the Servants of India Society which took up such social reform measures as primary education, female education and depressed classes' upliftment. The spread of female education further led to the participation of women in the freedom struggle.



**Gopal Krishna Gokhale**

### f) Periyar E.V.R.

Periyar E.V.R. was one of the greatest social reformers of Tamil Nadu. He advocated women education, widow remarriage and inter-caste marriages and opposed child marriages.

### g) Women Reformers

Most of the reform movements like Brahma Samaj (1828), Prarthana Samaj (1867) and Arya Samaj (1875) were led by male reformers who set the limit of the freedom and development of women. Women reformers like Pandita Ramabai, Rukhmabai and Tarabai Shinde tried to extent further. In 1889, Pandita Ramabai opened Sarada Sadan (Home of Learning) for Hindu widows in Bombay. It was later shifted to Poona. Her greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows. Theosophical society was established at Chennai and Dr. Annie Besant who came from Europe and joined it. It also developed general social reform programme.

Dr. S. Dharmambal was another reformer who was very much influenced by the ideas of Periyar. She showed great interest in implementing widow remarriage and women education. Among 'Moovalur Ramamirdham Ammaiyar' raised her voice against Devadasi system along with Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar. In her memory, the government of Tamil Nadu has instituted the "Moovalur Ramamirdha Ammal Ninaivu Marriage assistance scheme", a social welfare scheme to provide financial assistance to poor women as poverty was the root cause for all these evils. Thus women reformers also contributed a lot for winning their own rights.



**Moovalur Ramamirdham**

Leading women realized the need of forming their own associations in order to safeguard their interests. As a result three major national women's organizations – Women's India Association, National Council of Women in India and the All India Women's Conference were founded.

## Women in the freedom movement

In the early anti-colonial struggle women played major roles in various capacities. Velunachiyar of Sivaganga fought violently against the British and restored her rule in Sivaganga. Begum Hazrat Mahal, Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi led an armed revolt of 1857 against the British.



In the freedom struggle thousands of women came out of their homes, boycotted foreign goods, marched in processions, defied laws, received lathi charges and Courted jails. Their participation in the struggle added a new dimension of mass character.

## Impact of reform movement

- Significant advances were made in the field of emancipation of women.
- It created of national awakening among the masses.

- It created the feeling of sacrifice, service and rationalism.
- The practice of sati and infanticide were made illegal.
- It permitted widow remarriage.

## Women in Independent India

Women in India now participate in all activities such as education, politics, medical, culture, service sectors, science and technology.

The constitution of India guarantees (Article 14) equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work.

The National policy for empowerment of women was passed under the National Policy on Education (1986), new programme was launched called Mahila Samakhya, its main focus was on empower of women. Reservation of 33 percent to women envisaged an improvement in the socio-political status of women.

The National Commission for women was set up January 1992. Its main functions is to review women related legislation and intervene in specific individual complaints of atrocities and denial of rights.

**The following legislations have enhanced the status of women in matters of marriage adoption and inheritance.**

Legislation	Provisions
Bengal regulation of XXI, 1804	Female infanticide was declared illegal
Regulation of XVII, 1829	Practice of sati was declared illegal
Hindus Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856	It permitted widow remarriage
The Native Marriage Act, 1872	The Child Marriage was prohibited
The Sharda Act, 1930	The age of marriage was raised for boys and girls
Devadasi abolition Act, 1947	It abolished Devadasi system

## Recap

- The Position of women was not uniform in all periods and differed with regional variations.
- There were many social evils in Indian society
- A number of social reformers and social reform movements sought to promote the upliftment of women by giving them education
- Woman in India now participate in all activities.



## GLOSSARY

zamindar	a landowner	பெரு நிலக்கிழார்
manicipation	free from social, or political restriction	விடுதலை
enlightenment	the state of being enlightened	அறிவொளி
polygamy	the custom of being married to more than one person	பலதார மணம்
reformer	a person who makes changes to something in order to improve it	சீர்திருத்தவாதி



### Evaluation

#### I Choose the correct answer

- \_\_\_\_\_ society is constantly changing with additions, assimilations and omissions from within and outside.  
a) Human                      b) Animal  
c) Forest                      d) Nature
- The First women doctor in India was  
a) Dharmambal  
b) Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar  
c) Moovalur Ramamirdham  
d) Panditha Ramabai
- The practice of sati was abolished in \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) 1827    b) 1828    c) 1829    d) 1830
- B.M Malabari was a  
a) teacher                      b) doctor  
c) lawyer                      d) journalist
- Which of the following was/were the reform movement(s)?  
a) Brahma Samaj  
b) Prarthana Samaj  
c) Arya Samaj  
d) all the above



- The Bethune school was founded in \_\_\_\_\_ by J.E.D. Bethune.  
a) 1848    b) 1849    c) 1850    d) 1851
- Which commission recommended to start primary schools for girls in 1882 ?  
a) Wood's                      b) Welby  
c) Hunter                      d) Muddiman
- Sarada's child Marriage Bill fixing the minimum marriageable age for girls at \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) 11    b) 12    c) 13    d) 14

#### II Fill in the blanks

- \_\_\_\_\_ society was setup by the Christian missionaries in 1819.
- \_\_\_\_\_ of Sivaganga fought bravely against the British.
- Servants of India Society was started by \_\_\_\_\_.
- \_\_\_\_\_ was the one of the greatest social reformer of Tamil Nadu.
- Kandukuri Veeresalingam published a journal called \_\_\_\_\_.

#### III Match the following

- Theosophical society - Italian traveler
- Sarada Sadan - Social evil
- Wood's Despatch - Annie Besant
- Niccolo Conti - Pandita RamaBhai
- Dowry - 1854



#### IV State True or False

1. Women were honoured in Rig Vedic period.
2. Devadasi system was a social evil.
3. Raja Rammohan Roy, was the pioneer of Indian social reform movement.
4. Reservation of 23% to women envisaged an improvement in the socio-political status of women.
5. The age of marriage was raised for boys and girls by the Sharda Act of 1930.

#### V Choose the correct statement

1. Find out the correct pair.
  - a) Women's university - Prof. D.K. Karve
  - b) Justice Ranade - Arya Samaj
  - c) Widow Remarriage Act - 1855
  - d) Rani Lakshmi Bai - Delhi
2. Find the odd one out.
  - a) child marriage
  - b) sati
  - c) devadasi system
  - d) widow remarriage
3. Consider the following Statements
  - i) Begum Hazarat Mahal, Rani Lakshmi Bai led an armed revolt against the British
  - ii) Velunachiyar of Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu fought bravely against the British

Which of the statement (s) given above is/or correct?

- a) i only
  - b) ii only
  - c) i and ii
  - d) neither i nor ii
4. **Assertion (A):** Raja Rammohan Roy is most remembered by all Indians  
**Reason (R):** He wiped out the evil practice of Sati from the Indian Society
    - a) A and R are wrong
    - b) A is correct and R is Wrong
    - c) A is correct and R explains A
    - d) A is correct and R does not explain A

#### VI Answer the following in one or two sentences

1. Name the prominent leaders who fought for the upliftment of women.
2. List out some social evils.
3. Who were the notable women during the medieval period?
4. Mention the important women freedom fighters of India.
5. Give a note on Sati.

#### VII Answer the following in detail

1. Trace the role of women in freedom struggle.
2. Explain the contribution of the Social Reformers for the eradication of social evils.
3. Give a detailed account on the Impact of reform movement.

#### VIII Project and Activity

1. Prepare an information package of the social reformers contributed in the development of women. (Choose any one reformer and collect information related to him).
2. Group Discussion: Participation of Women in Freedom Movement.



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