

9 Women, Caste and Reform

Lesson at a Glance

- About two hundred years ago our society was not as it is now. It had imposed many barriers on women. They could not go to school, they could not marry according to their will etc. In some parts of the country, **sati pratha** existed and widows were praised if they chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands.
- The society that existed in those days was also **caste-based**. People were divided along lines of caste. Brahmins and Kshatriyas were considered as upper caste. After them traders and moneylenders were placed. Then came peasants and artisans. At the lowest rung were those whose job was to keep cities and villages clean. There were also untouchables, who were considered inferior by the so called upper-caste people.
- Things have been greatly changed now. Women are now enjoying better position in every field. They are getting high education, and are doing jobs after that. Though caste-feeling is not completely rooted out, but its intensity has been minimized considerably.
- What positive changes we see in our society have not occurred overnight. It took long years to take place.
- From the early 19th century, debates and discussions began to take place in order to root out the evils that had crippled our society for years. These debates were often initiated by Indian reformers and reform groups.
- **Raja Rammohun Roy** was one such reformer. He founded the **Brahmo Samaj** in Calcutta.
- He wanted to spread **Western education** in the country. He advocated for **women education**. He strongly disapproved the system of *sati*. Many British officials also criticised Indian traditions and customs. They supported Raja Rammohun Roy. Finally *sati pratha* was banned in 1829.
- **Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar** was a great social reformer. He favoured **widow re-marriage**. British officials supported his cause and passed a law in 1856 that permitted widows to re-marry.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati, founder of **Arya Samaj**, also supported widow re-marriage.

- These reformers felt that in order to improve the condition of women it was necessary to educate them. For this purpose several schools were opened for girls by the efforts of Vidyasagar and other reformers.
- People reacted sharply against sending girls to schools. Hence, they were taught at homes throughout the 19th century.
- In aristocratic Muslim families in North India, women learnt to read the *Koran* in Arabic. They were taught by women who came home to teach.
- Muslim women like the Begums of Bhopal did a lot for the promotion of education among the women.
- They set up a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
- Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain also opened schools for Muslim girls in places like Patna and Calcutta.
- By the 1880s, Indian women began to take university education. Some of them trained to be doctors while some became teachers. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the status of women in society. For instance, Tarabai Shinde published a book named *Stripurushtulna*.
- **Pandita Ramabai** wrote a book about the pathetic condition of upper-caste Hindu widows. She set up a widow home at Poona in order to give shelter to widows.
- Orthodox Hindus and Muslims became worried about all these changes.
- However, women ultimately began to enjoy greater freedom. And from the 1920s, some of them even joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements.
- **Caste inequalities** had crippled our society. Reformers made sincere efforts to root out these evils from society. In Bombay, the **Paramhans Mandali** was founded in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste.
- During the course of the 19th century, **Christian missionaries** became active. They set up schools for tribal groups and lower caste children.
- But at the same time, the people from low caste, in order to get rid of the exploitation from upper-caste, began to migrate to cities where there was new demand for labour.
- People belonging to lower castes began to organise movements from the second half of the 19th century against **caste**

discrimination. They demanded **social equality** and **justice**. In this connection we can mention the **Satnami Movement** in central India, initiated by Ghasidas who came from a low caste.

- In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur's Matua sect worked among low caste Chandala cultivators. Haridas questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system.
- Jyotirao Phule, also a low-caste leader, attacked the Brahmins, claim that they were superior to others, since they were Aryans.
- He proposed that Shudras (labouring castes) and Ati Shudras (untouchables) should unite to fight against caste discrimination.
- He founded **Satyashodhak Samaj** that propagated caste equality. In 1873, he wrote a book named *Gulamgiri* meaning slavery.
- **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar** and **Ramaswami Naicker** continued the movement for caste reform in the 20th century.
- Ambedkar belonged to a Mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. He remembered how he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground and not allowed to drink water from taps meant for upper-caste children. These systems were very depressing.
- In 1927, he started a **temple entry movement**, which was resented by the Brahman priests.
- The **non-Brahman movement** began in the early 20th century. It was initiated by qualified, and wealthy non-Brahman castes. They challenged Brahmanical claims to power.
- E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, founded the **Self Respect Movement**. He inspired untouchables to fight for their dignity and self-respect. He was also a great critic of Hindi scriptures.
- Several associations were established and movements started by our reformers in order to make Indian society free from all evils. A glimpse of these associations and movements have been given below.
- **The Brambo Samaj** founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1830 to prohibit all forms of idolatry and sacrifice.
- **Derozio and Young Bengal** — Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a teacher at Hindu College, Calcutta initiated the Young Bengal Movement in the 1820s to promote radical ideas and encourage his students to question all authority.
- **The Ramakrishna Mission** and **Vivekananda**. Vivekananda established the Ramakrishna Mission to stress the ideals of salvation through social service and selfless action.

- **The Prarthana Samaj.** Established in 1867 at Bombay, the Prarthana Samaj worked for removing caste restrictions, encouraging the education of women, etc.
- **The Veda Samaj.** It was established in 1864. It worked to abolish caste distinctions and promote widow remarriage and women's education.
- **The Aligarh Movement.** Sayyid Ahmed Khan founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 at Aligarh. It later became famous as the Aligarh Muslim University. The institution offered modern education. It is known as the Aligarh Movement.
- **The Singh Sabha Movement.** This movement sought to free Sikhism from superstitions, caste distinctions and practices seen by them as non-Sikh.

■ TEXTBOOK QUESTIONS SOLVED ■

Let's Recall

Q. 1. What social ideas did the following people support:

Rammohun Roy

Dayanand Saraswati

Veerasalingam Pantulu

Jyotirao Phule

Pandita Ramabai

Periyar

Mumtaz Ali

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar

Ans. These people supported the following ideas:

- (i) Spread of education among women.
- (ii) Widow remarriage.
- (iii) Caste equality and justice.
- (iv) Abolition of child marriage.
- (v) Social equality for untouchables.

Q. 2. State whether true or false:

- (a) When the British captured Bengal they framed many new laws to regulate the rules regarding marriage, adoption, inheritance of property, etc.
- (b) Social reformers had to discard the ancient texts in order to argue for reform in social practices.
- (c) Reformers got full support from all sections of the people of the country.

(d) *The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1829.*

Ans. (a) True, (b) False, (c) False, (d) True.

Let's Discuss

Q. 3. *How did the knowledge of ancient texts help the reformers promote new laws?*

Ans. The reformers tried to convince people that widow burning, caste distinctions, child marriage, etc had no sanction in ancient texts. Their knowledge of ancient texts gave them immense confidence and moral support which they utilised in promoting new laws. They did not get feared when people raised voice against the reforms they had brought.

Q. 4. *What were the different reasons people had for not sending girls to school?*

Ans. In fact people afraid of the schools that were opened in the mid-19th century. They had their own reasons.

(i) They feared that schools would take girls away from home and prevent them from doing their domestic works.

(ii) As girls had to travel through public places in order to reach school, many people began to feel that this would have a corrupting influence on them.

(iii) Several people were of the opinion that girls should be stay away from public spaces.

Q. 5. *Why were Christian missionaries attacked by many people in the country? Would some people have supported them too? If so, for what reasons?*

Ans. People suspected that Christian missionaries were involved in forced conversion of the poor and tribal people from Hinduism to Christianity. If some people have supported them, it must be due to the reason that the poor and the tribal people, converted to Christianity, would get a golden opportunity of going to school. The school would equip them with some resources to make their way into a changing world.

Q. 6. *In the British period, what new opportunities opened up for people who came from castes that were regarded as "low"?*

Ans. With the expansion of cities new demands of labour created. Drains had to be dug, roads laid, buildings constructed and cities cleaned. This required coolies, diggers, carriers, bricklayers, sweepers, rickshaw pullers, etc. This labour came from people belonged to "low" caste. They left their villages and small towns and shifted to the cities to get work.

Some went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. Although it was not easy to work in the new locations, poor people saw this an opportunity to get away from the exploitations of the upper-caste.

Q. 7. *How did Jyotirao, the reformer, justify their criticism of caste inequality in society?*

Ans. Jyotirao attacked the Brahmans, claim that they were superior to others because they were Aryans. Phule argued that the Aryans were outsiders. They came from outside the sub-continent, and defeated and subjugated the true children of the country—those who had lived here from before the coming of the Aryans. These Aryans established their dominance and began looking at the defeated population as low-caste people. Phule opined that the 'upper' castes had no right to their land and power. The land, in fact, belonged to the natives, who were considered as low-caste people.

Q. 8. *Why did Phule dedicate his book **Gulamgiri** to the American movement to free slaves?*

Ans. Jyotirao Phule wrote a book in 1873. He named the book *Gulamgiri* meaning slavery. 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. He did this in order to establish a link between the conditions of the lower castes in India and the black slaves in America.

Q. 9. *What did Ambedkar want to achieve through the temple entry movement?*

Ans. Ambedkar led three temple entry movements between 1927 and 1935. His sole purpose behind these movements was to make people see the power of caste prejudices within society.

Q. 10. *Why were Jyotirao Phule and Ramaswami Naicker critical of the national movement? Did their criticism help the national struggle in any way?*

Ans. They were critical of the national movement because the nationalists often made seating arrangements following caste distinctions at feasts. The lower castes were made to sit at a distance from the upper castes. Their criticism helped the national struggle to a great extent. Ramaswamy Naicker inspired the untouchables to fight for their dignity by initiating the Self Respect Movement.

