
SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT : SPECIAL REFERENCE TO WOMEN

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Abstract—

Society in Western India, as already noted, on the eve of the British rule in 1818, was "hide bound" and stagnant. A hundred year of the Peshwa administration had made little significant change the condition of the people. Economically Maharashtra was poorer than Bengal. In Agriculture industry, trade and commerce also it lagged behind. Though there was homogeneity between its parts elsewhere in India was Custer hidden. people in general were tradition – bound and superstitious, despite the progressive teachings of saints like Tukaram and Namdeo. There was little movement in thought, no progress in beliefs and institutions, including in the developing city of Bombay. Not only the orthodox people and priests were opposed to any social change, but also the economically rising section of each caste and groups, who had prospered in Bombay under the British presence.

Keywords— Society , Agriculture industry , economically.

INTRODUCTION

The status of women was equally bad. As S.Natarajan has pointed out, the social customs and laws relating to marriage, family-property, inheritance, position of widows, etc. were loaded against women. Women were the most sufferers in the social system.

This plight of women attracted the attention of some European Christian missionaries and a handful of western educated persons including Brahmins and parsis. Bombay gave the lead to rest of Maharashtra. Great social reformers like Mahadeo G.Ranade, B.M.Malabari, S.S.Bengali, Karsondas Mulji, jyotiba phule, pandita Ramabai and D.K.Karve rendered woman service to the cause of the emancipation of women. For instance, Ranade and his Indian national social conference wored steadily (with some success) against such glaring social evils as child marriage, and the prohibition of widow re-marriage.

The establishment of the prarthana samaj gave the empetus necessary for reform. It is true, as R.C. Majumdar writer, "in Bombay presidency the women led a comparatively freer life as there was no purdah among the Marathas", yet, like their counter- parts in other presidencies, women in Western india were not encouraged to receive education. Naturally, some English-educated young men launched a determined movement to spread female education. The lead was taken by the members of the Gujarati Dnyan Prasarak Mandali. Parsi reformers, like Dadabhai Naoroji, realized that only support from the leading businessmen (Shetias) of the community would provide the money and the pupils with which they could start schools for girls. F.C. Banaji and the Cama family showed the way by giving education to their daughters and money

to the schools, despite opposite from orthodox parsis. By 1852 there were four schools with 371 pupils. In 1857, S.S. Bengali and his friends started the magazine stri Bodh.

The initial success of the parsi schools led to the establishment of similar schools by the Marathi and Gujarathi , Hindus in 1849, with the financial support of businessmen such as jagannath Shankar set. The parsi and Gujarathi girl's schools were able to get financial support from the businessmen (shetias) of thir communities. How ever, the Marathi schools were starved of funds because of Maharashtrian Hindu community possessed no really affluent shetias, apart from Jagannath shankerseth. Hence, their school were supported by monthly contributions from Elphinistionians like Bhau Daji. Thus, a beginning though creaky, had been made in female education.

In 1851, Jyotiba Phule established a private school for girls education at poona. An Association of India Youngmen also started girls schools in Bombay and in some other parts of the Deccan Division of the Bombay Presidency. The prejudices against female education were fast disappearing and "there will be no more difficulty found in establishing female schools than there is in those for boys" wrote capt. Lester, then Acting Educational Inspector of the Deccan Division.

As for higher education for women, there was no separate institution either in Bombay or at Poona. Nevertheless, premier colleges like the Elphintone College, Wilson College and St. Xavier's College in Bombay, the Fergusson College at Poona and the Wellington College at Sangli always kept their doors open for female education. Reformers like M.G.Ranade, D.K.Karve and pandita Ramabai also made significant contribution to female education in Maharashtra. G.K.Gokhale's Servants of India Society generated very powerful forces for the advancement of female education.

Before we conclude, it is necessary to note the remarks of Bipin Chandra Pal, made in 1881: "Bombay was socially far ahead of Bengal... Female education and the freedom of social intercourse and movement of respectable Maharatta ladies was a new and inspiring experience which I had in Bombay." But, as S.D.Javdekar has pointed out, in Poona and other interior places among even educated jpersons, belonging to the sardar and Brahmin castes, one could find nothing but orthodoxy. Social reformers like Ranade, Agarkar and Phule, and institutions like the sarvajanik sabha has to carry an relentless struggle to clear the cobwebs of antiquated, anachronistic social customs and traditions, relating especially to women, though in those days Poona was considered itself the real intellectuall and political capital of the Bombay Presidency".

The Hindu Joint family was accompanied by property laws which were devised to emphasize the family, rather than the individuals as a unit. Inheritance was either withheld from women or greatly modified against their interest. The Hindu system of marriage ensured that property remained within the family. The worst affected were the Hindu windows.

But there was no legal protection for women against the arbitrary action of their husbands in marrying other women. Moreover, they could not re-married a widow or an already married woman was held of begamy, and it was punishable offence. The only way to escape from this

arbitrary and cruel custom was through conversion to islam or Christianity. It was against this evil that enlightened Western-educated social reformers raised their banner of revolt as was being done by the Brahma samaj in Bengal.

In Bombay, young Elphinstonians, including Dadabhai Naoroji, Dadoba Pandurang, Balshastri Jambhekar, Karsondas Mulji, Baba padamji and the militant Hindu Vishnubuva Bramhachari, advocated widow re-marriage. In Poona, reformers like “ Gopal Hari Deshamukh, Vishnu Shastri Pandit and M. G. Ranade Intensified the widow re-marriage.

Opposition to widow re-marriage also increased. A number of inhabitants of Poona submitted two petitions to the Government opposing the widow Marriage Legislation of 1856. A Society for the protection of the Hindu Dharma was established. The Shastris, Pandits and other of orthodox views ganged up against the movement for widow re-marriage. But the initiative rested with the reformers. Vishnu Shastri not only translated Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s writings on the subject into Marathi and published in the Indu Prakash, but also brain stormed the principal towns of the Deccan on a lecturing tour and initiated a heated discussion in the Marathi press and meetings. Vishnu shastri also challenged the orthodox to a public debate on the question of widow re-marriage.

Maharshi Karve also rendered great service to the cause of widow re-marriage. He himself set the example by marrying Godubai, sister of his friend, in 1883, braving hostile criticism of orthodox Hindus and their journals. With the co-operation of some friends, including R.G.Bhandarkar, he revived the widow Marriage Association. He utilized his vacations for lectures on behalf of the Association in order to educate the public on widow re-marriage. In 1896, he started the widow Home Association, inspired by Pandita Ramabai’s Sharada Sadan. Justice Ranade and Dr. Bhandarkar were also associated with it. Earlier, he had established the Hindu widows Home which was aimed at teachers, midwives or nurses. Since its establishment in 1889 until 1915, the Hindu widows’ Home got 25 Maharashtrian widows married.

Thus, the untiring efforts of reformers of Bombay and Poona, journals like Indu Prakash, and the activities of widow Remarriage Association of Vishnu shastri and of social conference of Karve began to bear fruit. By the turn of the 20th Century they had succeeded in focusing attention of the Hindu community on the irrational attitude towards the question of widow re-marriage, based on wrong interpretation of the Vedic Literature.

Child marriage was one of the cruel customs prevalent in india among different communities since ancient times. It became a social practice after the medieval period due to the alleged fear that unmarried Hindu girls would be taken away by the Muslim nobles or would be molested by anti-social elements. Though child marriage seemed to solve some social and economic problems, it was harmful to the society and degraded women in several ways. Nevertheless , pre-puberty marriage became a social tradition in all parts in India. B. M. Malabari, M. G. Ranade, Dr. R. G. Bhandarkar and some others challenged this socially and ethically degrading custom and launched a determined struggle against it. As a result of the efforts of reformers of Maharashtra, the British Government of india had been persuaded to pass Act 3 of 1872 abolishing “early marriage “ making polygamy a penal offense, sanctioning

widow remarringe and intercaste marriages for “parties not coming under any of the existing marriage laws and not professing any of the current faiths.” Inspite of the law, the evil of child marriage continued to be widely practiced among people, including those in Maharashtra.

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