UNIT 1 WOMEN’S ISSUES IN 19TH CENTURY

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Structure
1.1 Introduction
1.2 Objectives
1.3 Understanding Reform Movements
1.4 Perspectives on Reform Movements
  1.4.1 The ‘Proactive Reform’ Model
  1.4.2 The ‘Retroactive Reform’ Model
1.5 Reform Movements Related to Women
1.6 Regions and Reform Movements
1.7 Let Us Sum Up
1.8 Unit End Questions
1.9 Glossary
1.10 References
1.11 Suggested Readings

1.1 INTRODUCTION

You read in the MWG-001, Block 1, Unit 1 and 2 about the issues of women in India and the west in the 19th century and 20th century. In this Unit, let us revisit the issues of women from the reformist point of view in the 19th century in order to understand the entry of women from public to private domain. We will study the multiple diversities within reform movement and the different approaches.

1.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Analyze the social reform movements in the 19th century;
- Learn various forms of perspectives in the reform movement; and
- Situate women in reform movements.

1.3 UNDERSTANDING REFORM MOVEMENTS

As you know, the last quarter of 19th century in India saw the growing influence of modern education brought by the British. This led to the growth of a section of Indian society that was educated in modern Western system and was influenced by the ideas of equality, justice, freedom and
rational thought in all aspects of life. These ideas were taught in the European institutions and most Indian intellectuals who comprised this group had learnt them in the European institutions. This led to the development of a thought process in this section of the Indian society that regarded the traditional norms of Indian society as not suitable for a modern, rational society that they wanted India to grow into.

They felt that the traditional caste and gender-based divisions and religious rituals in the Indian society bred inequality, made the existence of free individuals impossible and restricted the growth of rational thought process that was propagated as the hallmark of the European societies. Hence, they wanted to build an India where these traditional norms were done away with, so that a society of free individuals who believed in the ideals of equality, rational thought and justice could be formed in the modern world. The efforts of these people led to the growth of what is termed as the ‘Reform Movements’ related to ‘women in the 19th century India’. In other parts of India, the educated section wanted to emulate the dominant status of the British. Hence, they favoured an education system and lifestyle patterned on the European model, in order to achieve their aim.

Here, it is important to remember that a majority of these efforts were not exclusively related to women. Rather, they aimed at reforming all aspects of Indian society, pertaining to social divisions, religious rituals, gender-based divisions and infusing a political consciousness. Another aspect worth noting is that they did not all belong to the same social, religious, regional or political group. They came from different regions and social groups of India. There were diverse groups of people, who worked for different causes in their own ways. In some cases, the new model actually undermined some of the privileges that women had enjoyed over men in the traditional system. Let us study some of the perspectives on reform movements.

1.4 PERSPECTIVES ON REFORM MOVEMENTS

Various viewpoints have evolved regarding the 19th century reform movements related to women. Some of the major trends in this historiography are the following.

1.4.1 The ‘Proactive Reform’ Model

The most dominant historiography of the 19th century reform movements related to women has been that it attempted to bring improvements in women’s lives, bringing them opportunities of education and greater participation in public life, freeing them from the traditional ritual lifestyle of the pre-modern era. Thus, this discourse presents the reform movement as a constructive phenomenon that uplifted the condition of women in the 19th century.
Some of the main features of this discourse are the following.

- **Ritual Sphere:** This mainly involves a discussion of the efforts made in the 19th and early 20th centuries against the prohibitive practices related to women. The three most prominent issues discussed were as **Sati** system, the custom of child marriage and the restrictions on the widows, including the issue of widow-remarriage.

- **Educational Sphere:** The main focus of this area of the proactive reform discourse is that it discusses the efforts to introduce Indian women to the world outside their domestic spaces. Women were educated and familiarized in Western discourse, either at home or in school. A major stress of this education was on learning English language, especially when the women studied in schools.

- **Social Sphere:** This component of the proactive discourse majorly focuses on the efforts to abolish caste-related mistreatment of women and men. Although this component involves a study of the effects of caste-practices on both men and women, it focuses on the specific circumstances faced by the women related to this issue.

- **Public and Political Spheres:** This component of the proactive discourse explores the efforts made by the women to engage in the public and political spheres.

While discussing the above issues, this historiography focuses on the efforts made by the British to pass laws related to these issues alongside efforts by the social reformers to sensitize the society towards these restrictive practices. The efforts to create an awakening in the society against social and gender issues often drew support by giving evidences from scriptures to show that these practices didn’t have any religious sanction and the efforts made by the women to participate in this reform movement as a constructive process.

### 1.4.2 The ‘Retroactive Reform’ Model

In the last decades of the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st century, there has developed a critique of the proactive reform historiography presented above. This critique called as ‘Retroactive Reform’ mainly recasts the 19th century reform movements to present them as retrogressive in some sense. According to critique, it didn’t encourage the women to emerge as independent individual identities. Thus, this critique underlines this reform movement as not really a feminist movement that could liberate the women from their traditional structures.

The main arguments of retroactive reform discourse are -

- **Strategy to Maintain the Family in the Modern World:** A prominent argument of the critical discourse on the 19th century reforms has been
that the efforts made by the reformers were not aimed at uplifting women’s conditions. Rather, they wanted to resolve the problem of continuing their family system against the changes and critiques brought by India’s encounter with Europe in the 19th century. This discourse argues that the women were expected to become educated and modernized because it was thought that these women would be able to perform the obligations of their child-rearing and homemaking well. Thus, the personal advancement of women was not the focus of this movement. It is worth noting that this thought process has survived to this day in many most parts of India, especially in the context of women’s education.

- Reaction against the Imperialist Eurocentric Criticism of India: The retroactive reform discourse contextualizes the reform movements in the light of the critique that many Eurocentric visitors from Europe were making of the Indian society. In the 19th century, many Europeans saw the Indian society as backward, ignorant, following false religions and restrictive practices. Hence, they felt that it was the responsibility of the European rulers to ‘civilize’ the Indian society. They felt that the integral part of this ‘civilization process’ was to teach them the ideas of rationalism and modernity. This Eurocentric argument provided legitimacy to the Colonial rule by presenting the Europeans as superior to the Indians. Hence, this Eurocentric discourse served to maintain British Imperialism in India. English education was a part of this modernization process. The retroactive critical discourse of the 19th century argues that the reformers of the 19th century were mainly involved in responding to this critique of the Imperialistic Eurocentric ideologues. They translated the ancient texts to argue that Hinduism was as much monotheistic and the Vedas didn’t sanction any of the evil practices that afflicted the society. The Muslim reformers also tried to show that Islam did not sanction the restrictions on women. Accordingly, the reformers advocated for the women to come out of these restrictive strongholds and become modernized. Thus, according to this model of historiography, the reform movements were made as a response to the Imperialistic critique from Europe and not as a conscious attempt to modernize the women or to make them liberated.

- Continuation of Masculine Dominance: The retroactive reform discourse further argues that whatever reforms related to women were made in the 19th century; they were in fact defined by the men, not by the women themselves. Hence, according to this historiography, these reforms again reflected the changed aspirations and notions of femininity of the educated men, not of the women. The women were expected to follow the fresh normative standards set by the men, rather than evolving their own standards according to their own perceptions and aspirations.
The final verdict thus, rested with men, not with women. The retroactive reform historiography thus argues that these 19th century reforms maintained the masculine dominance in the society, while setting new standards of feminine behaviour according to the changed context of their own times. In this sense, these reforms were not of a high value from a feminist perspective.

While expounding the above arguments, the retroactive reform discourse uses notions from the Western feminist theory and deals with issues such as women’s perceptions and aspirations, control of women over their own body, mind and thought. Besides this, issues such as women’s role in the professional arena are important in this model of historiography.

1.5 REFORM MOVEMENTS RELATED TO WOMEN

Both of the above historiographical models are useful in understanding the 19th century reform movements in their own ways. They both present two different but related dimensions of these reforms and hence, it is necessary to be aware of both of these models, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of these reform movements. At the same time, it is also necessary to critically reflect over both of these discourses. Only by critically looking at these arguments can the discipline go further and new perspectives and researches evolve.

Some of the critical perspectives on the above two models are:

- Homogenous presentation for a diverse society - both of these models present evidences from mostly the four major regions of India, to present a more or less homogenous picture for the whole of the country. Thus, the picture that emerges out of these arguments appears common for the whole of the country. There is no discussion in either of these models and their various arguments about the vast diversity that exists in the Indian subcontinent. Especially in the 19th century, when the Western influences had not yet begun to weave a common influence over the Indian society, these diversities were even more pronounced than they appear today in the 19th century.

Following are main points of this dimension:

1) So far, not much effort has been made to understand the contrasting and complex diverse ways in which different groups of the Indian society approached the issue of modernity and the traditional ways of living in the context of women. Precisely because of this complex diversity of the South Asian sub-continent, it is not possible to have a single theoretical or historiographical model for the entire region. Very often, what is true in one region, social group or sometimes even within a family is not true in another.
2) At the same time, sometimes the same equations, conflicts and dominance forms emerge in diverse situations, but their appearances are different. So, it is essential to understand any social and historical phenomenon on the terms of the specific patterns in which modes of restrictions that are prevalent in each region, group or micro-unit.

3) In a diverse region like India, there is also a diversity of equations related to women and these diverse groups also resolve these equations in diverse ways. Hence, any discussion on the reforms related to women should take into account the diverse ways in which these different social groups approach their specific situations.

Further sections in this Unit make some attempt to show the regional diversity regarding women’s history in the 19th century. We’ll read about them after the current section.

- **Marginalisation of many regions** - In both the homogenous models, there is excessive stress on the four major regions of India - East, West, North and South. These are regions that were close to the four centres of British power in the 19th century. Because of their proximity to power, the British focused on the educational upliftment of these regions first. Hence, they gained from their proximity to power and also, most of the history of the Colonial period has been focused on these dominant regions.

Because it has been presumed that the evidences coming from these dominant regions are homogenously uniform for the whole of the country, the other regions of the country have become severely marginalised in the writing of the history of Colonial India. Almost no efforts have been made so far to collect historical data about these marginalised regions and to reconstruct their history of the Colonial period. The problem is so severe that now, the generation that knew about the late 19th century is almost dying out and no effort has been made to collect information from this generation. This is especially true of the women’s history. Hence, some effort has been made in this Unit to collect the information about women’s history about these regions. We’ll read about them in the next section.

- **Women as Agency for Patriarchy** - It is often seen that patriarchal structures are perpetuated by women themselves. This is because often women are socially conditioned to believe in and perpetrate the traditions that are detrimental to the growth of women as intelligent and independent beings at par with men. This is true now and it was true in 19th century India in many social groups. The above two models make a simplistic contrast between men versus women, rather than bringing out the complex ways in which unequal relations between men and women are negotiated in a society.
Check Your Progress:

Write about the “Proactive Reform” Discourse.

What are the marginalised regions in context of women’s history of the 19th century?

1.6 REGIONS AND REFORM MOVEMENTS

We have discussed in the previous section that the historiography of reforms related to women in the 19th century focuses largely on the four major regions of India. On the other hand, many regions have been neglected from this historiography. In this section, we will study in detail about these developments. This will give us an idea of the changes that were taking place under direct influence of the British rule in these regions and also about the issues related to women in other regions that were not directly
under British influence. We should remember that the British played a major role in initiating these changes by passing laws, opening schools for women and by initiating discussions in the society regarding women’s roles. The following sections explore some of these aspects.

Major Regions of the British India

The British had established their Presidencies or power-centres along the coastline of India. They established the Madras Presidency in 1640, Bombay Presidency in 1687 and Bengal Presidency in 1690. They acquired Punjab in 1849 after the two Anglo-Sikh wars. Finally, they shifted their centre to Delhi in 1912. But throughout this time, Simla served as their capital for eight out of twelve months of the year since 1864. Thus, the major part of the British India’s administration was actually carried out from Simla in the 19th century. Here, we will study some of the developments related to women in and around these areas in all the four corners of India that were the core regions of British power.

- North and North-West - British colleges and schools had been opened in the 19th century in Lahore, Delhi and Jalandhar to create a modern educational influence. It was in this environment that in 1875 Swami Dayanand Saraswati founded his Arya Samaj. His organization had a long-lasting and profound influence on the population of Punjab, Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Western Uttar Pradesh of today. Arya Samaj advocated for women’s education and widow-remarriage. It prohibited its large number of followers from practicing caste hierarchy, unnecessary religious rituals, and restrictions on women and was against marriage of the girl child. Kanya Mahavidyala, a prominent women’s educational centre was opened at Jalandhar in 1891 as a school first and grew into a college later. The system of education in Arya Samaj institutions was Anglo-Vedic, thus deriving influences from both traditions.

- West - Bombay had been under British rule since 1687. Besides, the Parsi population in the Western India had always given importance to education and the Parsi women enjoyed a high status in their society, running households and also managing commercial ventures. Even though a small community in numbers, Parsis have made significant contribution in the development of every sphere of modern Indian society. Hence, the region around Bombay received modern education early and the women there also participated in the political process. The Bombay University decided in 1883 to admit women in Arts, Medicine, Civil Engineering and Law on the same terms as men. The first woman to graduate from the Bombay University was Cornelia Sorabji in 1888. Some other women to graduate at this time were Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Kashibai Kanitkar and Sharada Mehta. Pandita Ramabai was
as learned as the men in her times and became a Professor at the Chettenhom Women’s College in England and went on to learn Maths, Science, Geography and Greek. Kashibai Kanitkar learnt both Marathi and English literature at home. Anandibai Joshi began her education at home, but finally received a Doctorate in medicine from Philadelphia. These educated women wrote autobiographies and edited journals.

A special mention needs to be made of Savitribai Phule, who opened a school for untouchable girls on 1 May 1847. She learnt to read and write from her husband Jyotirao Phule. They both were strong advocates of women’s education, caste equality, widow remarriage and spoke against child marriage. Savitribai Phule became the first woman teacher of the first girls’ school in Maharashtra. She composed a collection of 41 poems, published in 1854 as Kavyaphule. She also published a biography of her husband.

Mary Carpenter, a British woman, opened the branches of National India Association across India in 1975. This association was the first of its kind in India and debated on various social issues, especially those related to women. Pandita Ramabai also opened Sharda Sadan on 11 March 1889. Apart from imparting learning, it also provided some professional training to women, especially widows. Organizations such as these encouraged women to come out in public and participate in the political process, helped by the political leaders, both men and women.

- South - Christian Missionaries were very active in the Madras Presidency. By 1840s there were six girls’ schools run by the Scottish Churches alone in Madras. By 1850s, the number of girls enrolled in these schools came up to 8000. Most of these were Christian girls and the girls from the upper class Hindu families. The British government started girls’ schools in 1871 in Madras. By 1891, more than 48,000 girls began to go to schools. Many of them went to co-educational schools, which was a rare phenomenon in the 19th century. Educated women in Madras played a vital role in organizing other women to join the freedom struggle and in engaging in social work to spread awareness about the education and upliftment of women. Some of these women like Durgabai Deshmukh, Paturi Balasaraswattiamman, Ammu Swaminathan and Lakshmi Sehgal became political leaders. The Theosophical Society under Annie Besant also played a vital role in awakening the social and political consciousness amongst the men and the women in Madras Presidency, as its headquarters was located at Adyar in Madras. It was started by Colonel Olcott and Madame Blavatsky in 1886.

- East - John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, the Law Member and President of the Executive Council and President of the Council of Education,
opened the first schools for girls at Calcutta in Bengal Presidency in 1849 and maintained it from his own pocket. Following him, Lord Dalhousie also continued to maintain it and for some time spent his own money towards this cause. The spread of education in Bengal was directly linked to the British efforts. The 19th century was also the period when the British passed some important laws about women's lives, at the behest of educated Indians. Although the Sati system had been banned as early as in 1798, Lord William Bentinck succeeded in imposing a formal ban on Sati in Bengal on 4 December 1829. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, born on 22 May 1772, is regarded as the pioneer in spreading awareness regarding women’s rights in Bengal. He advocated for women’s education, widow remarriage, their right to inherit property and spoke against child marriage. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a strong advocate of women’s education. Rabindranath Tagore worked extensively against mistreatment of widows, child marriage, Sati and dowry.

At this time, the British passed acts against child marriage in 1891 and sanctioned inter-caste and inter-communal marriage in 1872. These acts went a long way in helping the cause of the women.

The above discussion shows a varied pattern even in the four major regions of 19th century India. We’ll discuss this more in the summary at the end. At this juncture, it is essential to see what kind of information we can get about the other regions of India, about which almost no study has been done.

1.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, you read the category of reform from the historical point of view and the possibility of vast variations. For example, there were innumerable reformers in Bengal working for the women’s cause. But it’s remarkable that most of the prominent figures were men, unlike the Bombay and Madras Presidencies discussed above, where women were visibly active in public sphere. Again, it is to be remembered that Sati was a specific problem prevalent in Bengal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and less frequently in Tamil Nadu and coastal Andhra Pradesh. It was not practiced in many other parts of India. Hence, a history of Sati in Bengal cannot be a history of the whole of India. Bringing more information from other parts of India will further modify the history of reform movements in India.

1.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) What differences do you see in the reform movements in the four major areas?

2) Discuss some of the features of the regions in women’s reform.
1.9 GLOSSARY

Eurocentric Discourse: It seeks to place Europe as the standard index against which all other regions and cultures of the world are to be judged. It is a theoretical model that argues for the superiority and legitimate dominance of the European civilisation and power.

Historiography: A critical presentation of the manner in which the history of a particular topic has been discussed by many scholars. It's not the direct history, but a critical presentation of many different kinds of historical writings, discussing their different viewpoints.

Homogenous: The model that attempts to show uniformity across time and space while presenting diverse evidences from society and time-scale.

Imperialism: It is an ideology that argues to establish the dominance of one power over other regions and cultures as the ultimate sovereign, using economic, politic and socio-culture arguments as its support-base.

Proactive reform: Reform that is argued as a positive and constructive development.

Retroactive reform: Reform that is argued as somewhat negative that seeks to maintain the society in a backward level, though in a new form.

1.10 REFERENCES


### 1.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

