

Historical Background to the Women's Movement

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Abstract – Whether it was British or Indian reformers or politicians, they all viewed the position and status of women of India as one of the indices in which measure the area of modernization and traditionalism of action. The light was shed on women's political issues and main point of the argument, controversy, accusations. There only two sides that opposed this trend they were British and the Indians, they both were holding conservative opinion. In order to judge the position of women, the British scholars, missionaries and bureaucrats had tried the European standards and values.

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INTRODUCTION

They viewed the Indian women as those that are always surrounded by tradition, culture and religion. The main aspects of a Hindu women's life attracted the attention of many, such as child marriage, widow remarriage, and uneducated women ratio. The elite Hindus regarded these descriptions as being grossly exaggerated if not complete false Bipin Chandra Pal, one of the early nationalist writers, characterized the remarks of British officials as being prejudiced and that of missionaries as being influenced by the "natural prepossessions of religious propagandist."³⁴ Well true attention of the Indian reformers and nationalists was very protective; they represented Hindu women's life in very different way.

They mentioned that the extended Hindu family gave women chances to have a conversation with women of their class, caste and society. The best chances for women to show their creativity was festivals. The Indian reformers strived to protect Hindu social practices. They knew that the charges of British missionaries and scholars but exaggerated contained an important element of truth. It is obvious that, they did their best in the many reforms to introduce, but unfortunately never openly recognized.

The Admission from the social reformers of women's oppressed situation failed to lessen their resentment towards the criticism of foreigners and aliens of Hindu social practices. They realized that the intimate and personal aspects of a Hindu women's life had become the center of the controversy and argument the reforms, legislation and experiments with new power for females, represented in the 19th and early 20th century, could be seen as the

women's waking up call, even though there was no formal organization. Social reformers of the early 19th century had provided leadership to the women's movement by frankly acknowledging their degraded position in Hindu society. Men Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy compared Hindu practices unfavorable with the treatment of British society of their women, and held the latter up as an example for Indian society to emulate.³⁵

Based on indigenous social institutions and ideology, nationalism had covered the base and intelligent ideas emphasized the need of change. There were a few numbers of reformers that believed the child marriages as morally unacceptable custom and should be prohibited. The social reformers drew a portrait of the Hindu women regarding the mythology, literature and history.

The expectation of this was to do a dual task. The answer to the opposed of Hindu womanhood about its treatment of women was provided by the idealized version. The leaders of the Hindu womanhood in the Smritis looked down on some of the famous Hindu practices and social norms that were being argued at this period. The portrayed described the women that had achieved their goals, such as philosophers, scholars and queen regents. Women really appreciated freedom of movement and expression and were given a place of dignity and admiration in the family and community.

There were living proofs that, women played great roles in every filed in the ancient India. Rationalism like that was utilized by all reformers to create

³⁴ Bipin Chandra Pal, Soul of India (Calcutta: 4th ed., 1958), p.67.

³⁵ Raja Ram Mohan Roy, The English Works of Rammohun Roy (Calcutta; Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, 1945-1948).

public opinion in the side of social reform and to prepare women into political practice. Well the reformers in their attempt to keep the models and traditions from the Smritis had attempted to represent changes with the same social structure of the society which was going on since ages.

Westernization influenced the role of women and brought it from private to public life, it was both directly and indirectly, but the leaders of women and traditionalists debated that the movement surged. Indian did not like the Indian women getting educated and viewed it as product of westernization. They debated over the topic that, the description accepted by the male leaders of women politicians showed the inherent superiority and egalitarianism of Hindu tradition and culture. The perception of elite Hindus to the position of women in the Indian community and the image of the ideal Hindu women was influenced by the Western liberal ideas of the 19th century like humanitarianism, egalitarianism and rationality. It kept close to Hindu values and beliefs that had been going on since ancient India. Westernization as a concept has been excellently dealt with by M.N. Srinivas.³⁶

Outcome of prolonged British rule was seen in the ideology, values and beliefs. An awareness of the oppressed situation of women in Hindu society was formed by Westernization and also showed the necessity of the rationalization and modify traditional customs and convictions worrying them. The English education for elite Indians influenced this new western point of view of women.

What concerned women and their education most was the responses of Hindu society to the criticism of missionaries and British Journalists. The women's movement was discussed notably in the westernization of elite Hindu males. From 19th to 20th century, the male came forward to give a head start to the women's freedom in both family and society as well. The appearance of elite towards the role of women and the oppressiveness and conventions in this matter led the women's movement. Male leaders opened the doors for women in the nationalist movement in the early days, the first came from M.K Gandhi. Even they he was worrying about the women's welfare and position in Indian society but he manipulated women for political reason. The women were prepared for Congress members and executives by the nationalist movement. A position of women like this was not in any position to look male image down in the society but to improve the life stranded of the male members in both family and society. Many members of Nehru's party involved in nationalist activity it could be imagined that their attitudes and views affected their wives, sisters and daughters. A little written evidence is still there that indicates that the women were voice in their political

³⁶ M.N. Srinivas, Social change in Modern India (Bombay: Orient Longman's 1972), p.46-89.

requests or showed their anger about the restriction on their lifestyles.

Despite all this they happily accepted the male domination in the family and viewed it as a natural process which has been like since who knows when. In the mid- 19th century the advantages of English education for men were generally acknowledged by the upper and middle-classes. The attitude of Indian men towards English education was purely pragmatic; it enabled one to get a prestigious job in the government bureaucracy and law courts. The first generation of English-educated men lived in two distinct and contradictory Environments of work and family.³⁷

English conduct code governed their professional life; rationalism was taught to them by their education, and important and made them view the ideas and beliefs which are so much different from their own. The work environment is totally on based of westernization which has been affecting women's traditional role in the home but Men came back to their homes in which they environment is not influenced by the western culture. The unfairness in the work world and the family gave a wakeup call to the education women that traditional customs could not be kept on along with the rational and humanistic lines if women do not become modern. The educated groups did more than expected; they gave sympathetic and positive response to such activities. They fought against many issues that concerned the women most like Sati, child marriage; prohibition of widow remarriage, this movement of them attracted the most educated men, not only that, it also affected many castes and classes of families.

The elite of the westernization and their words to bring a change in the lifestyle of women, they believed that new ideas should be added in their personal lives. It demanded a great bravery for a man to change the current moral of his family. He had to give detailed answer to his wife but if the matter was too big then in front of the Whole community and his relatives. Often a reformer could not show in his personal life his commitment to social reform, therefore seriously looking down on the movement. Throughout the 19th century, the movement to improve the life of Hindu women showed a very slow speed. Educated women and progressive families made it to convincing the women of their household to help them in their attempt to reorder social mores on a more rational basis which was necessary. Those families were alienated from the orthodox milieu of their society but as part of a modern and modernizing group, it was not very big, but they were capable of introducing measures such as sending their daughters to schools, delaying their marriage at

³⁷ Evidence of similar situation can be found throughout the nineteenth century and twentieth century

least a or more years, and bringing them to prayer meetings such as the Brahma Samaj and giving them a chance to join the formal social events. In the 19th century, the society started showing interest in the social reform and the educating women. The reflection of the desire of this society was very clear for the intellectual elite to form a different identity for itself.

The expectations from this new identity to distinguish the elite from the colonial government and its institutions. The movements started by these groups were modern, progressive and reflected their political and social. Several features from the western culture were seen in the reform societies in the early part of the 19th century. The century revivalism had been popular and there came up societies such as the Arya Samaj that were staunchly Hindu.

The Brahma Samaj was discovered in 1928, incorporated several features of Christianity, refused contemporary Hinduism and had interest itself in improving women's life by condemning oppressive conventions and by providing them education. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was the founder of the Brahma Samaj, respected western learning social ethics and institutions. He criticized the evil customs very enthusiastically for rights of the women and for proscribing the practice of Sati. Raja Ram Roy did some arguments that were based on humanitarianism and rationality. Reformers were aware that whatever the origin of their own notions, in personal and intimate cases, especially those relating to the precepts of Hindu religion and tradition. There would have no effect on the society of the movement that suggested western ideas or behavior for women. Rich Hindus, well westernized, were very not openly accepting the modernization for their women especially the ones suggested by the western culture. The main motive of the program of the reform was to defend and give the needs of Hindu women. They saved women by modifying conventional use that were thought to be oppressive by the contemporary level and gave for their improvement through education. The community like Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj found educational centers for females. The main purpose of these schools was to save their girls from the effects of the missionaries. The Christian missionaries who had tried to popularize schools for Hindu females had started the very first schools for the women in India and the lower class and castes students joined these centers.

The upper class Hindus suspected the missionaries attempt and their efforts to educate women. They were scared that the schools are used by them to spread their own ideas. Rich families were in dilemma to face the missionaries. Reform societies such as the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj opened schools for girls to stem the tide of conversion and to meet the need of women's education. In schools such as the Arya Kanya

Pathshala established in 1890 by the Arya Samaj, Hindu girls could be educated without being exposed to the threat of conversion and westernization.³⁸ There was barely any chance when Hindu women faced a British or western women apart from the missionaries.

Not to mention, while arguing the Hindu women's movement or their education, one must be thinking that it must have been the effect of the presence of women in India that is changing the course. The both women kept living unaware of each other's issues, the British and Indian

The only company in which the British women lived was of own country and preoccupied by the social entertainment given by the pubs. They saw the Indian women from the perspective of the missionaries and journalists who wrote articles about Indian women and described them as backward, oppressed and religious. On the other hand the Indian women viewed the British women as aggressive and bold against the moral values. Hindu and British women occasionally came together for charitable or philanthropic work. Wives of important government officials and Viceroys interested themselves in the welfare of Indian women and children. Women from elite and progressive families or women heads of state were similarly involved. Lady Reading and Begum of Bhopal meet occasionally to discuss the political problems of the Begum as well as their mutual concern and interest in the welfare of women and children.³⁹

There were many barriers which were preventing both areas women to be familiar with each other; they were like Purdah, family classes, rules of caste, lack of a common language. Even when their paths cross on social events, they did not try to have a short conversation with each other and remained unaware of each other's lifestyle. In order to Judge the position of women, The British period Scholars, missionaries and bureaucrats had tried the European standard and values. They viewed the Indian Women as those that are always surrounded by tradition, culture and religion. The main aspects of a Hindu Women's life attracted the attention of many, such as child marriage, widow remarriage and uneducated Women ratio. The portrayed described the women appreciated freedom of movement. Both areas women to be familiar with each other, they were like purdah family classes, rules of caste, lack of a common language. Even, When their paths crass on social events, they did not try to have a short conversation with each other and remained unaware of each other's lifestyle.

³⁸ Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharam, Hindu Consciousness in 19th century Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California press, 1976)

³⁹ Iris Butter, *The Viceroy's Wife: Letter of Alice, Countess of Reading from India, 1921-25* (London: Hodder and Stoughton).

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