

Chapter 8: Women, Caste and Reform

Activity:1

Question: Can you think of the ways in which social customs and practices were discussed in the pre-printing age when books, newspapers, and pamphlets were not readily available?

Answer: The social customs and practices might be discussed in the following ways:

- By organizing regular social meetings and gatherings.
- By hand-written letters on palm leaves, etc.
- By giving speeches to the general public.
- By discussions among intellectuals and learned persons of different areas.

Activity:2

Question: This argument was taking place more than 175 years ago. Write down the different arguments you may have heard around you on the worth of women. In what ways have the views changed?

Answer:

(1)

- Women have the same worth as men. They are doing very well in all aspects of life. They are performing well in studies, politics, army, etc. They are becoming engineers, doctors, scientists, army officers, political leaders, etc. Now, society recognizes their ability in every field.
- However, even today, there are some people who believe that women are inferior to men.

(2) With the increase in the level of education, the views gradually changed. In the course of time, Indian women began to enter schools, colleges, and universities. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the status of women in society.

Activity:3

Question 1: Imagine that you are one of the students sitting in the school veranda and listening to the lessons. What kind of questions would be rising in your mind?

Answer: The following type of questions would be rising in my mind:

- Do the people sitting in the classroom have any moral value?
- How unjust the social system is!
- Why are they dividing the society in the name of caste?
- Is it not a hindrance to the social and economic welfare of a country?

Question 2: Some people thought this situation was better than the total lack of education for untouchable people. Would you agree with this view?

Answer: Yes, I do agree with the statement that this situation was better than the total lack of education for untouchable people. It is rightly said that something is better than nothing.

Activity:4

Question : Carefully read source 3. What do you think Jyotirao Phule meant by, "me here and you over there again"?

Source: 3

"Me here and you over there"

Phule was also critical of the anti-colonial nationalism that was preached by upper-caste leaders. He wrote:

The Brahmans have hidden away the sword of their religion which has cut the throat of the peoples' prosperity and now go about posing as great patriots of their country. They ... give this advice to ... our Shudra, Muslim and Parsi youth that unless we put away all quarrelling amongst ourselves about the divisions between high and low in our country and come together, our ... country will never make any progress ... It will be unity to serve their purposes, and then it will be me here and you over there again.

Jyotiba Phule, *The Cultivator's Whipcord*.

Answer: By "me here and you over there again", Jyotirao Phule meant untouchability. He wanted to say that the call for unity by the upper castes had a hidden purpose. In his view, the upper castes wanted first to win over the Britishers by the strength of unity and then to sing a song of untouchability again.

Activity:5

Question : Why does caste remain such a controversial issue today? What do you think was the most important movement against caste in colonial times?

Answer:

- Caste remains such a controversial issue today mainly due to dirty politics by some political leaders and parties.
- In my opinion, the most important movement against caste in colonial times was the Temple Entry Movement.

Let's imagine

Question : Imagine you are a teacher in the school set up by Rokeya Hossain. There are 20 girls in your charge. Write an account of the discussions that might have taken place on any one day in the school.

Answer: I am a Social Science teacher in Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain Muslim Girls School, Patna. One day, some Muslim leaders came to my school and began to argue against women's education, particularly going outside the home. A hot discussion started on this topic between the teachers and the leaders. Begum Hossain was also present in the school. She commented that it is the religious leaders of every faith who were responsible for the inferior position of women in society.

Let's recall

Question 1: What social ideas did the following people support?

Rammohun Roy

Dayanand Saraswati

Veerasalingam Pantulu

Jyotirao Phule

Pandita Ramabai

Periyar

Mumtaz Ali

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

Answer:

Rammohun Roy (1772-1833): was the founder of Brahmo Sabha (Brahmo Samaj) in Calcutta. He supported the ideas to spread the knowledge of western education in the country and bring about greater freedom and equality for women. As a result of his efforts, the practice of Sati was banned in 1829.

Dayanand Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj in 1875 and supported widow remarriage

Veerasalingam Pantulu formed an association and supported widow remarriage.

Jyotirao Phule supported education for girls. He established schools for girls in Maharashtra. He opposed all forms of inequality, including the caste system.

Pandita Ramabai supported the equality of women with men. She opposed the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women. She also founded a widows' home at Poona.

Periyar or E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker advocated for social equality. He founded the Self Respect Movement and challenged Brahmanical claims to power.

Mumtaz Ali supported women's education.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar supported widow remarriage, education for girls and set up schools for girls.

Question 2: State whether True or False:

Answer:

1. When the British captured Bengal they framed many new laws to regulate the rules regarding marriage, adoption, the inheritance of property, etc.
2. Social reformers had to discard the ancient texts in order to argue for reform in social practices.
3. Reformers got full support from all sections of the people of the country.
4. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1829.

Answers:

- (a) True
- (b) False, In fact the Social reformers used the ancient texts to justify their point of view.
- (c) False, Reformers were opposed by the orthodox Hindus and Muslims.
- (d) False, The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929.

Let's discuss

Question 3: How did the knowledge of ancient texts help the reformers promote new laws?

Answer: This strategy was first adopted by Raja Rammohun Roy and later by other reformers. Whenever they wished to challenge a practice that seemed harmful, they tried to find a verse or sentence in the ancient sacred texts that supported their point of view. They then suggested that the practice as it existed, at present, was against early tradition.

Question 4: What were the different reasons people had for not sending girls to school?

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

- They feared that schools would take girls away from home and prevent them from doing their domestic works.
- 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.
- Several people were of the opinion that girls should stay away from public spaces.

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

Answer:

- The Christian missionaries were attacked by many people in the country because they feared that the missionaries would change the religion of tribal groups and lower caste children.
- Yes, some people would have supported them too.
- This has the following reasons:
 1. The missionaries were setting up schools for tribal groups and 'lower' caste children.
 2. These children were thus equipped with some resources to make their way into a changing world.

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

Answer: During the British period, several new opportunities were opened up for the people who came from castes that were regarded as low. The following account reveals this:

- The poor began leaving their villages to look for jobs that were opening up in the cities. There was work in the factories and jobs in municipalities.
- Drains had to be dug, roads laid, buildings constructed, and cities cleaned. This needed coolies, diggers, carriers, bricklayers, sewage cleaners, sweepers, palanquin bearers, rickshaw pullers.
- Some of them also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad, and Indonesia.
- The poor, and the people from low castes, saw this as an opportunity to get away from the oppressive hold of the upper-caste landowners.
- There were other jobs too. The army, for instance, offered opportunities.
- Numerous Mahar people, who were regarded as untouchable, found jobs in the Mahar Regiment.
- The father of B.R. Ambedkar, the leader of the Dalit movement, taught at an army school.

Question 7: How did Jyotirao the reformer justify their criticism of caste inequality in society?

Answer: Jyotirao Phule attacked the Brahmins' claim that they were superior to others since they were Aryans. He argued that the Aryans were foreigners, who came from outside the subcontinent, and defeated and subjugated the true children of the country. Aryans began looking at the defeated people as inferiors, as low-caste people. Phule further said that the upper castes had no right to their land and power. In reality, the land belonged to indigenous people, the so-called low castes.

Question 8: Why did Phule to dedicate his book Gulamgiri to the American movement to free slaves?

Answer: In 1873, Phule wrote Gulamgiri. It means slavery.

- Some ten years before this, the American Civil War resulted in the abolition of slavery in America.
- Phule dedicated his book to all those Americans who fought to abolish slavery. Thus this book set up close relations between "lower" castes in India and the black slaves in America.

Question 9: What did Ambedkar want to achieve through the temple entry movement?

Answer: In 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar started a Temple Entry Movement. He led three such movements for temple entry between 1927 and 1935 in which his Mahar caste, followers participated. Ambedkar wanted to make everyone see the power of caste prejudices within society.

Question 10: Why were Jyotirao Phule and Ramaswamy Naicker critical of the national movement? Did their criticism help the national struggle in any way?

Answer:

1. They were critical of the national movement run by upper-caste leaders because they held that this would serve the purposes of upper-castes. After the movement, these people would again talk of untouchability. Again they would say "Me here and you over there". Periyar left Congress in the reaction of an incidence of untouchability.
2. Yes, their criticism helped the national struggle as unity. The forceful speeches, writings, and movements of such lower caste leaders did lead to rethinking and some self-criticisms among upper-caste nationalist leaders.