

The Gender Question



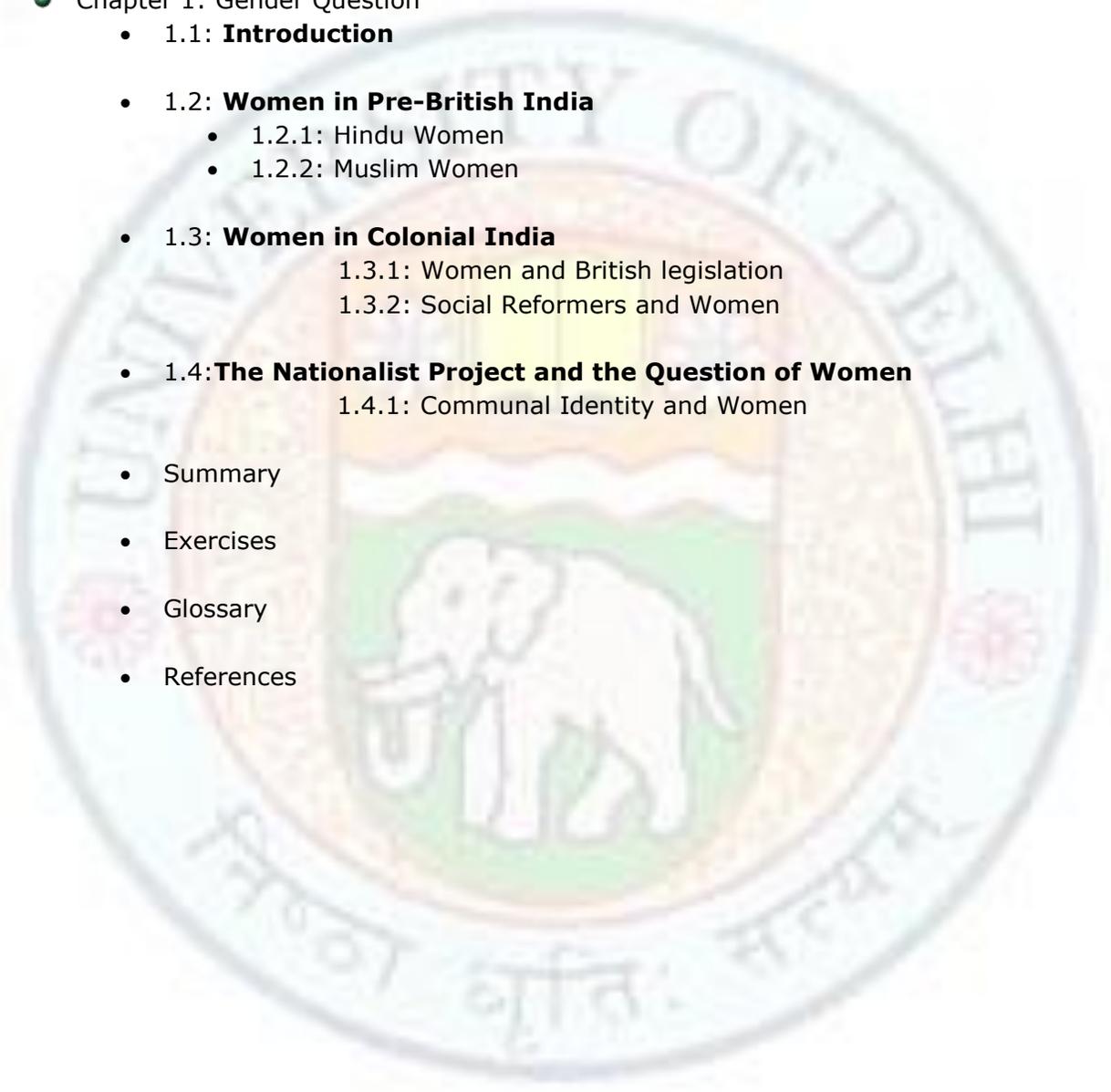
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1.1 Introduction



Figure 1.1:Sati

Source: <http://www.atheism.about.com>

Accessed on 10.09.2013



6th century female goddess in metal works

Figure 1.2 :

Source:<http://www.newdelhi.olx.in>

Accessed on 15.09.2013

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The pictures shown above depict the conflicting position of women in the Indian society. Figure 1.1 -Sati the barbarous practice which negated a woman's existence on her own, tying her with the innate presence of her husband even in his life after death. The second picture(Fig 1.2) shows the other end of the continuum where female goddesses in different forms like Sita-Parvati-Durga or Lakshmi dominated the core of Hinduism and Hinduized way of life, as the ultimate source of strength, wealth and wisdom. These are extreme projections of patriarchy and matriarchy. Even the goddesses themselves and their stories of immense power, always had an overarching presence of elements like respect for husband, sacrifice and one's duty towards the larger society. The Women's question was always answered by others rather than a woman herself.

In, Indian society the coming of British rule again led to usage of the 'women's question' which figured prominently in their colonial discourses. While British rule used the barbaric and pitiable position of women in India for their supposed role of 'Civilizing Mission', the Indian reformers used the analogy of female goddesses to free Bharatmata from the colonial rapists. The colonized society was considered to be "effeminate" in character, as opposed to "colonial masculinity", which was held to be a justification for its loss of independence. But women role vis a vis the family was looked through the patriarchal lens. The study of gender and colonialism is thus an interface of two independent fields of study, which brings to the surface various conflicting questions leading to a confluence of these two parallel streams. However this journey of confluence and conflict of gender and colonialism in India was multidimensional and multilayered.

To begin with, initially when the studies of colonialism and gender was at an infant stage in India, the focus was more on the women of European origin in the colonies. It brought to fore the contradictions of Indian women and the European women in the colonies. European women, being members of superior race, had the responsibility of safeguarding and perpetuating the moral and cultural values of the British raj. However, these studies were often based on intricate and conservative understanding of European women who contributed necessary labor -"domestic, moral, educational and medical- to imperial enterprise." (G.Durba, 2004, :738-739)

The history of gender and colonialism especially representing the colonial women has over a passage of time widened its ambit and scope. Women's history has involved both the mining of new kinds of sources - Women's writings, correspondences, biographical literature, interviews as well as the reworking of more stranded historical document: organizational and private papers, official reports and correspondent. (Jafri,2012 :280) What has emerged

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is a story of movement within a movement. Indian women contested for their legitimate space in society, challenging the overarching patriarchal set up and also participated in the National Struggle for independence. It was a unique balancing act, where in they had at times to compromise and console themselves with the partial fruits of their long and arduous struggle and other times to sacrifice it altogether. The fight from domestic life to political field was and is a long-drawn battle for women.

An Interesting fact.

European ladies in India: Early nineteenth century.

From the 1820s, many British women started to come to India to accompany their husbands. Similarly many single British women also came with the hope to find prospective grooms in officers. "The growing presence of English ladies altered British social life in India and introduced a minor moral revolution. Before their arrival, British men dined together and enjoyed local entertainments, many keeping Indian women as mistresses. These practices diminished greatly with the arrival and growing presence of British women, who brought with them the 'Victorian morality' of their day."

Source: <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/courses/rschwart/hist151/India/india.htm#mesahibs> accessed on 24.08.2013

1.2 Women In Pre-British India

In pre- British Indian society, with the exception perhaps of early periods of the vedic times, woman was assigned a position subordinate to man. Law and religion did not recognize the equality and equal rights of men and women. Society permitted man to have rights and freedom from which a woman was excluded. Different standards were adopted to judge the individual and social conduct of man and woman.

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Indeed, woman's status in ancient India was never static or uniform. In the words of Romila Thapar, it varied widely from a "position of considerable authority and freedom to one of equally considerable subservience". (Thapar, 1997.) Their plight began to deteriorate decisively with the development of peasant societies and the evolution of states.

1.2.1 Hindu Women

In Hindu society, the central organizing principles of caste hierarchy came to be integrally connected to the ideology of patriarchy. Both shudras and women were debarred from access to Vedic ritual sites. While the public space becomes the space of action for men, women were restricted within the household. Manusmriti – the great ancient Hindu law giver (figure 3)- prescribed a permanent dependent status for women - to be protected by their sons, husband and father at different stages of their lives. Coming down to more immediate pre – colonial period, an eighteenth century text dictates that women were groomed to become good wives, serve their husband as their supreme Gods, and expected to give birth to sons. If they become widows, they were meant to spend their lives in strictest discipline of celibacy, cherishing memories of their dead husband. However, it was also true that "seclusion of women was not a universal practice, as there are evidences of high public visibility of women, both rich & poor in certain regions of eighteenth century. The royal courts of the Mughal successor states were no strange places for ambitious and powerful woman, some of whom exerted considerable political influence. The ideal of secluded women-hood came to be universalized only in the nineteenth century." (O'Hanlon, Rosalind 1994:21-22,48-49)

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MANU

Figure 1.3

Manu and his Manusmriti or *Manav Dharam Shastra* is one of the earliest work on Brahminism and Hindu Dharma. According to Hindu mythology, the Manusmriti is the word of Brahma, and is thus most authoritative statement on Dharma. The status of women as depicted in this text was often construed as Hindu divine law. For example:

“Triya charitram, Purushasya bhagyam, Devo Na Janati, Kuto Manushya...
Translates to – ‘A woman’s character and a man’s destiny even gods can’t gauge...’
(basically women are unpredictable and irrational)”

Source: <http://nirmukta.com>

Accessed on 23-8-2013

1.2.2 Muslim Women

The Muslim society too put similar restrictions on women. Dominated by religious preaching’s, the Muslim women were supposed to follow the constructed “*sharif culture*”. Purdah (A Persian word, literally meaning curtain) was an essential adjunct of women. It meant their physical seclusion behind the veil or the walls of the Zenana (the women’s quarter in the inner part of the house). It signified “the multitudes of complex social arrangements which maintained social, and not just physical, distance between the sexes”.(Jeffrey,1979:4) It “entailed an all-en-compassing ideology and code of conduct based on female modesty which determined woman’s lives wherever they went”.(Engels,1996:2)

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In other words, even when they stepped out of their houses, their morals and conduct were to be contained within these ethical parameters. "By the nineteenth century, the idea of purdah had become "universal for both Hindu and Muslim woman and for both elites and commoner."(Bandhopadyay,2004:383) .

In case of a Muslim woman, who were in any case expected to observe hijab, the Ihtiyat Mustahab did not allow a man, who did not know the woman, to look at her photograph. If he knew her, even then he was not to look at her photograph and keep his eyes cast down, especially if it degraded her stature or if she was not observing hijab.

However we also do hear of few sporadic stories of woman taking on the cudgels of power and politics in an era preceding the European influence. Figure1. 4 and1.5 are example of such valour.

Few politically strong women of pre-British India

Muslim and Hindu queens



Rani Durgavati

Figure 1.4

Rani was a Chandel Rajput born in 1224. Daughter of king Keerat Rai, she stood in defense of Raja Vidyadhar against the attacks by Muslim ruler Mahmud Ghaznavi ,

Source: <http://www.hindujagruti.org>

Muslim Queens, too, could not be pictured.

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Figure1.5

Proclaimed grave of Razia Sultan , near Turkoman Gate, Delhi

Razia Sultan(1205– October 14/15, 1240) was the only reigning queen of India who ever sat on the throne of Delhi. A dynamic, independent, courageous, vivacious, and fearless queen, who fought not only strangers and but also her own brother. There is no true picture of Razia because it is not customary for Muslims (more so for royalty) to keep pictures as it is proscribed by their religion (as Idolatry, that is a sin).

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Razia_Sultana accessed on 29-08-2013

1.3 Women In Colonial India

In the nineteenth century, the women question became a part of the discourses of progress and modernity. Western observers, like James Mill, used it to conduct a 'civilization critique of India'. India's inferior status in the hierarchy of civilizations was often mapped by using the yardstick of the degraded condition of Indian women along with reasons like bad administration, lack of scientific understanding and regressive ideas like superstitions and black magic.

"Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding the British conquer as a state of anarchy, lawlessness and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of British colonial rule was the criticism of the 'degenerate and barbaric' social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by the religious tradition. Alongside the project of instituting orderly, lawful and rational procedures of governance, therefore, colonialism also saw itself as performing a 'civilizing mission'. In identifying this tradition as 'degenerate and barbering' colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men of certain classes

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of men, but by an entire body of scriptural cannons and ritual practices that, they said, by rationalizing such atrocities within a complex framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to be perpetrators and sufferers alike as the necessary marks of right conduct. By assuming a position of sympathy with the un-free and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able of transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and un-free nature of entire cultural tradition of a country.” (Chatterjee,1993: 118)

This civilizing mission, capitalism in the economic field, democracy in the social and political spheres and liberalism in the ideological domain were the principal features of the new society, being established by the British in India. The status of women as a vital aspect of Indian society also reflected similar change. Liberal philosophy stood for the liberation of the individual from the shackle. As Laski describes the essence of the revolution that occurred is thus, in a real sense, the emancipation of the individual, the respect for an individual 's personality become the slogan of the new era. It is on this basis that J.S. Mill took up the problem of women's emancipation. However changes in the status of women during colonial period is not a monolith phenomena for it passed through various phases and was multi layered.

HAVE YOU READ "PASSAGE TO INDIA" ?

An interesting reading : E.M.Foster 'A Passage to India',1924.

This book highlights "that in addition to race, gender also divided colonial society. British colonial society in India, made up as it is of administrators and their wives, is not exactly English society in miniature – it tends to aggravate whatever is most conservative and traditional about English culture, including a traditional attitude toward women as the much weaker sex. Some of the excerpts from the book highlight the position of women in a pre-dominantly patriarchal society"

Quote #1

[The women] disliked [Fielding]. He took no notice of them, and this, which would have passed without comment in feminist England, did him harm in a

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community where the male is expected to be lively and helpful. (1.6.3)

This passage explains Fielding's experience with British India, which had much more conservative attitude toward women than that in England. In British India, women were viewed as weak, requiring the protection of men.

Quote #2

"She was my wife. You are the first Englishman she has ever come before. Now put her photograph away." (1.11.9)

This passage is often cited in support of the view that women were being treated as pawns to be exchanged between men. Significantly, Aziz's wife who is dead - is a thing, basically reduced to a photograph. Aziz shows her picture to Fielding as a way to establish their friendship; Beyond that there is no usage of her.

Quote #3

"[...] Any man can travel light until he has a wife or children. That's part of my case against marriage. I'm a holy man minus the holiness[...]"
(1.11.64)

Early in the novel, Fielding advocates a bachelor life. As soon as you're tied down with a family, you lose the freedom and flexibility to do adventurous things like leave England to teach in India. Because he doesn't have a family to think of, Fielding is free to do things like go against Anglo-Indian society and defend Aziz later on in the novel. His own courage surprises Fielding at the end of the novel when he finally does get married to Stella Moore.

Source: www.shmoop.com

1.3.1: Women and British Legislation

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In the initial stages, the colonial rule followed a policy of non interference. For example , Warren Hastings, Governor-of Bengal, decreed in 1772, that the basis of all legal laws for Hindus would be Brahmin's written law. This law thus subjected subject lower- caste women to same strictures that earlier was applicable to only the women of higher castes. However by 1864, the Britain brought changes in Indian law. In order to tighten their control over administration and society, they replaced the decrees of religious law as professed by Hindu pundits, with a more scientific and legal interpretation as given by western educated judges.

According to Ruby Lal, scholarly write-up on the "women's question" in India are full of references to "child wives", "child- brides" and "infant marriages". Increasing the age for consent in marriages was another central issue.(Ruby Lal, 2010: 48) "The evidence used by the British to demonstrate the liberalizing influence of Western culture consisted of number of legal initiatives outlawing certain abuses and removing certain restrictions on women. For example sati (widow -burning) was prohibited in 1829(refer to the figure 1.6 and letter written by Bentinck regarding banning of sati) and widow remarriage was allowed in 1856. The age of consummation of marriage was fixed at 10 in 1860 but it was raised to 12 in 1891. Female infanticide was prohibited in the Acts of 1795, 1804 and 1870, and child marriage forbidden in 1929. Various laws improving women's inheritance rights were passed in 1874, 1929 and 1937, culminating in the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act. This gave limited rights to widows only. Additional laws were enacted within particular provinces. On all of these issues, the British had the support of Indian liberals and reformers."(Joanna,L. and Rama,J,1985: 73)

William Bentick and the practice of Sati in British India.

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Lord William Bentinck



Lord William Bentinck (Governor General of India 1833-1835)

Figure 1.6

"India was progressively occupied by the British, through the agency of the East India Company, throughout the 18th century. The company was directed by the government. The British, unlike earlier colonizers in the Americas, decided to practice religious toleration for their new Islamic and Hindu subjects.

This led to a conflict: some Indian religious customs outraged the British - for instance neonatal infanticide. But the most contentious issue was sati (or suttee), the custom whereby widows would burn themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. By the 1820s the East India Company, which had not intervened, had come to the conclusion that sati was not only repulsive but was not necessarily voluntary. There were reports of women being forced to burn themselves, or of being tied to the pyres. William Bentinck, Governor-General of the company from 1828, her addresses the issue of whether to intervene.

This is a very complex issue for those who argue "human rights" are "western" ideals, and not universal. What should the British have done in this situation?

Whether the question be to continue or to discontinue the practice of sati, the decision is equally surrounded by an awful responsibility. To consent to the consignment year after year of hundreds of innocent victims to a cruel and untimely end, when the power exists of preventing it, is a predicament which no conscience can contemplate without horror. But, on the other hand, if heretofore received opinions are to be considered of any value, to put to hazard by a contrary course the very safety of the British Empire in India, and to extinguish at once all hopes of those great improvements-affecting the condition not of hundreds and thousands but of millions-which can only be expected from the continuance of our supremacy, is an alternative which even in the light of humanity itself may be considered as a still greater evil. It is upon this first and highest consideration alone, the good of mankind, that the tolerance of this inhuman and impious rite can in

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my opinion be justified on the part of the government of a civilized nation."

From "Lord William Bentinck on the Suppression of Sati, 8 November 1829," in *Speeches and Documents on Indian Policy, 1750-1921*, ed. Arthur B. Keith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), Vol. 1: 208226.

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lord_William_Bentinck

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1829bentinck.asp> accessed on 24.08.2013

In distinction to these reforms, British policies in certain other areas present a different outlook often highlighting the colonizers' approach to women. Liddle and Joshi have delineated three such examples- "The restitution of conjugal rights, prostitution and female suffrage- which illustrates that their attitudes and actions were far from progressive." (Joanna,L and Rama,J,1985: 73)

1. The restitution of conjugal rights: This ideology was derived from Christian ecclesiastical law and was brought to India from England. Under this law a spouse can sue one's partner if she refuses to fulfill the sexual obligations of marriage. A prison term was imposed for non-compliance. In 1885 one such punitive measure was taken in case of Rukhmabai (refer to the box below). Before this law was passed, a woman's refusal to stay with her husband was penalized by sending her back to her parents' place.

RUKMA BAI'S CHALLENGE TO LAW

The story of Rukmabai and restitution of conjugal rights.

Rukhma Bai was married to one Dadaji Bhikhaji. During their 11 years of marriage they had never lived together. Though she had been married as a child, she obtained education from college and at 19 refused to join her husband. In 1884 Dadaji made a legal claim to company of his wife. Rukhma refused on grounds of his poverty and bad health. She also questioned the validity of her marriage at 11. The judge's verdict in 1885 rescinded Dadaji's claim of restitution of conjugal right. However, later in 1888 a compromise was reached by both the parties which freed Rukhma of cohabitation after paying some monetary compensation to her husband.

Source: Source:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4404742> Accessed on 24-08-2013

2. Regarding prostitution, the soldiers in the army were provided with Indian prostitutes by the official military authorities. These prostitutes had to get themselves registered and carried a licensed card with them. They also had to undergo compulsory medical

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examination. Philippa Levine shows that the “regulating prostitution was a transnational problem, central to the ways in which the British government at home and abroad managed the sexual demands of British soldiers without exacerbating the problem of venereal disease, which was imaged to emanate from the native sex workers. The Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868, following the English legislation, had regularized these provisions.” (Joanna, Land Rama, J, 1985: 74) From the time the Contagious Disease Acts were enacted, they were contentious. There were efforts of feminists like Josephine Butler (see the box below: Figure 1.7) who fought to stop this state-regulated prostitution. Feminists called the State-backed prostitution as an immoral act which was also very detrimental and painful for women. Between 1869 to 1883, various groups started their campaign to oppose the

Early feminist movement against prostitution



Figure 1.7

Josephine Elizabeth Butler (13 April 1828 – 30 December 1906) was a British feminist. Butler worked towards welfare of the prostitutes and successfully led the campaign against the offensive Contagious Diseases Acts .

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephine_Butler Accessed on 24-08-2013

Contagious Disease Act. For example - National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act and the Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts. Their efforts bore fruit and the act was finally repealed in 1884. However by 20th century more white women started being imported to serve as prostitutes. These white

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prostitutes, it was hoped would be an adjunct to an imagined and believed racial superiority over the colonized men. However it also gave rise to fear of dilution of their purity of race because of the sexual intercourse between colonized males and white women.

3. Women's suffrage that is the right of women to vote and to stand for office was granted to Indian women in a very limited sense in 1921 in Madras presidency. This franchise was given to those women and men who were educated and wealthy. This was due to efforts of Women's Indian Association (WIA). WIA was founded in 1917. It stood for women's suffrage. It was continued agitation led by Sarojini Naidu that could pave way for sexual equality. While 'The Representation of the People Act 1928' in UK extended the voting franchise to all women over the age of 21, granting women the vote on the same terms as men, in India universal adult franchise could be provided only by the Constitution of free India.

Hence, it can be easily assessed that the British passed legislations, though they had favorable implications for women in general, came with various restrictive clauses, which failed to solve the problem in its entirety and left lots to be desired. Secondly, they brought into affect only those legislations which were not in conflict with their own material and political interest.

Despite these attempts by the colonial rulers, the Hindu system continued to retain and hold their grip over the women's question. The position of Indian women continued to toggle between patriarchy and matriarchy. Heinous practices like suppression of widows, polygamy, female infanticide and child marriages, etc. coexisted with prevalent worship cults of the mother goddess in the form of female deities. And many literature and rituals, in scriptural and popular versions, further eulogized women's position as fountain of all strengths. Infact, towards the end of the nineteenth century, this mother-worship was transferred to the emerging consciousness of the nation visualized as Mother India, With the rise of nationalist agenda this imagery of Mother India became an acceptable idiom to all, both Hindu and non-Hindu.

1.3.2: Nationalist Agenda for Social Reformers and Women

The coming of British rule brought in western modern ideas like secularism, democracy, equality and rights to the individual. Alongside, there also developed indigenous ideas of nationalism. Both these developments led to an introspection of one's own society. This

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paved the way for social reform movements especially related to gender relation in early nineteenth century. In contrast to western feminist movement, in India the movement was initiated by men. The initial efforts included banning sati, increasing the age of child marriage, abolishing the practice of ill-treating of widows and banning the marriage of upper caste Hindu widows. Positive efforts included promotion of women's education, realizing legal rights for women to own property, and necessitating the law to recognize women's rights by granting them basic rights for example in matters such as adoption. The 19th century was the period that saw a majority of women's issues come under the spotlight and reforms began to be initiated. By the late nineteenth century many woman reformers also joined the movement for women's upliftment. These were generally protégées of western education and its liberating influence.

The film clipping below is an extract from Doordarshan production "Bharat ek Khoj". It is a telling saga of the pain and anguish of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, witness to an incident of the practice of 'sati' in his own family, who pioneered the cause of the eradication of 'sati'. Click on the film below to view the dramatized version of unfolding of truth behind the ill practices against woman that had percolated the Hindu religion.



Picture clipping : Permission has been sought by ILLL, University of Delhi, from the copyright owner 'Doordarshan', for use of the above clipping for educational purposes.

SOCIAL REFORMER

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Raja Rammohan Roy



Figure 1.8 Source : en.wikipedia.org Accessed on 24-08-2013

Figure 1.8 is of the pioneer of and champion of women cause - Raja Rammohan Roy.

The edifice on which the civilizational critique of India was laid bare was that of Women's question. Mill and his voluminous history, condemned India as an inferior civilization. The concern with "domesticity" was essentially the backdrop critique of India. The idea of 'civilization' was a product, as Lucien Febvère has shown. In 1760's the European scholars witnessed the world as united and hierarchical at the same time. The Indian social reformers also developed a strong desire to participate in this world-community of countries, peoples or nations. The first census, that of 1881, showed that one-fifth of the women of all cases were widow. Raising the age of marriage and education were sought to be remedy for improving the condition of widows. It was thus this desire to be part of world civilization that drew nationalists ideology to this idea of "Improvement". Improvement, like charity, was to begin at home in the domestic sphere.

"There cannot be any improvement in the state of the nation without improvement first in the domestic and political spheres." (Arnold and Hardiman, 2010: 55-56)

The women folk and their plight vis a vis family and society became the main focus of the reforming project of modernizing India intellectuals of the nineteenth century. In their response to the damning critique of the west they, especially the modernists or the revivalists, for example Arya Samajists, imagined a golden past where women were treated

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with dignity and honour; they urged reforms of those customs, which they considered to be distortions or aberrations. In all these reforms no women were ever involved. The male reformers treated women as subjects of their modernizing efforts and were unable to visualize them as equal partners having same urge to fight for their own emancipation. For example the Age of Consent bill 1891, which tried to raise the consummation of marriage for women from 10 to 12 years, was interpreted as virulent attack on Hinduism and also a restraint on the domain "native masculinity" by an alien state. Thus by the end of the nineteenth century there was a shift from the modernizing project to a Hindu conservative assertion of patriarchal control over the women's domain, which now constituted an essential part of the nationalist agenda.

Thus the social reform movements of the nineteenth century became the background for growth of both nationalism and also feminism in India. The reform movements, though initiated by the Indian intelligentsia class it soon spread to other sections of society especially the new emerging middle class.

"As an Indian bourgeois society developed under western domination, this class sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a pre-modern or primitive identity. All the reformers stressed on woman's education. Though foreign missionaries had promoted schooling for girls (and Christianity) from the early part of the century, efforts by Indian social reformers could start by mid nineteenth century. Non-Orthodox Hindus and members of the reform movement Brahmo Samaj opened own schools as alternative to mission schools." (Kumar, 1999: 148-150).

Main protagonists for the spread of women's education among Hindus were reformists and their families and also by the elites of the society. Zenana education was encouraged through the establishment of private institutions both for girls and women. In Bengal the growth of girls education also saw the development of vernacular literature (i.e. in local languages). Colleges for the training of female teachers were also set up in 1870. By 1882, there were 2,700 schools and colleges for girls and women in India. It had around 127,000 students. Women also started graduating from Universities. Education for Muslim girls came later. In comparison to Hindus the Muslim reformers had to face conservative challenges when it came to women's education. They could not surpass the essence of their traditions, but they did manage to create institutions for western education. Lahore and Aligarh emerged as nodal center for education. Vernacular centers of learning attracted

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Muslim youth, including girls, in Bengal, United Provinces and Bihar. Amina Tyabji founded the first Muslim girls school in 1895. In 1906 Begum Abdullah and the Begum of Bhopal opened a girls' school at Aligarh despite of opposition from the local Urdu press. These educated women went on take up the challenges of women emancipation. Figure 1.9 is an example of one such reformer.

Women social reformer.



Fig 1.9

Cornelia Sorabji (15 November 1866 – 6 July 1954) was “the first female barrister from India, a social reformer, and a writer. She was the first female graduate from Bombay university, and in 1889 became the first woman to read law at Oxford University, and also the first Indian national to study at any British university. Later she became the first woman to practise law in India and Britain. In 2012, her bust was unveiled at Lincoln's Inn, London.”

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cornelia_Sorabji Accessed on 24-8-2013

In addition to the modernists and revivalists there few more leaders who made progressive impact on gender question in India during the colonial period.

COLONIAL INDIA AND THE GENDER QUESTION.

Few leaders who made an impact on the Gender Question.

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Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) was neither a modernist nor revivalist. It was his mother who inspired him to campaigns for women cause like widow remarriage. He did not believe in revivalists' views of women's status having been high in ancient India. His attitude to women was humane. As a nonbeliever he abhorred the elite domination of education, rejected the caste system and religious rituals. He was the champion of mass education – equal both for men and women.

Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) from Maharashtra identified that the existing modes of hierarchy in the society perpetuated and thrived on women's subordination. Phule and his wife, Savitri Bai, were pioneers of women's education in India. They had a radical stance and worked for emancipation of women of different castes.

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1952), from Maharashtra had intellectual upbringing same as that of most nineteenth century reformers. She belonged to Hindu upper caste. She had both Sanskrit and western education. Having an enlightened mind she challenged patriarchic society, by her personal life as also by the causes that she espoused. Self-improvement, self-reliance and participation of women in the public field, including political arena, were the guiding lights of Ramabai's initiatives. Her vision of an Indian woman was far ahead of her fellow nineteenth century reformers.

Source: Author.

However the approach to women's education by revivalists, reformers or the British was restricted and guarded. For girls and women, it was thought that education should encompass those basic skills and training which makes them better mothers and wives. The creative and nurturing facets of women's nature were consistently stressed and undertaken. This was done to promote the welfare of family, reinforcing the stereotypes and definitely not to liberate women's minds or out of concern for women's rights. The curriculum revalidated the family as the most important social influence. "The ' bhadramahila' was a fine blending of self sacrificing Hindu wife and the Victorian helpmate. Education thus, far from being an emancipator, further confined woman to idealized domestic roles."(Bandhopadyay, 2004:384)

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Regardless of restrictions on woman's access to equal education, limited education proved to be a true tool for emancipation in the long run. It exposed woman to new ideas of equality and broadened their intellectual horizon of self, society and the world. This new woman had better understanding of their rights and dignity.

However, the growth of education among women, had its own limitations. The modernizing movement did work for the betterment of the middle class women but it left behind the bulk of the women of dispossessed sections of the society. Education could not bring in a democratizing movement, encompassing woman from all sections.

Furthermore, feminists like Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have maintained that measures taken by both, the colonial administration and the reformist movement, strengthened the system of patriarchy. For example the domestic sphere was the sphere of the woman. Woman to be Lakshmi in a true sense needed to have education and training. "It was lack of knowledge and education that made women of this 'country' uncivilized, lazy, quarrelsome and therefore bad for domestic happiness. However education itself could also be dangerous. It could produce its own variety of Alakshmis women who were allegedly arrogant, lazy, immodest, defiant of authority and neglectful of domestic duties. Thus the proper aim of education should be to correct these faults." (Arnold and Hardiman: 61) Education was aimed at domestic duties and even if one had to step out of home in public it had to for bear the perceived signs of virtuosity, religiosity and femininity. Thus education carried within itself certain broad restrictions.

Women social reformer and activist : Sarojini Naidu

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Fig 1.10

Also called 'nightingale of India'(1879-1949)

Sarojini Naidu 's speech to Indian Social Conference in Calcutta In 1906 "Therefore, I charge you, restore to your women their ancient rights, for, as I have said, it is we, and not you, who are the real nation builders, and without our active co-operation at all points of progress all your Congressses and Conferences are in vain. Educate your women and the nation will take care of itself, for it is as true today as it was yesterday and will be to the end of human life that the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world"(quoted in Kumar 1993: 50) Source: (photo)<http://www.google.co.in>

Sarkar says "In colonial India, male claims to power depended very largely on their intellectual achievements, since most other forms of 'manly' and masterful enterprise were closed to them. Educated women, therefore, posed a threat to the very basis of masculinity'. (Sarkar:1997) The emphasis of education of women was to make them better mothers and wives so as to they are able to educate their children thus contribute to nation-building at large.

With the rise of the debates of nationalism and nationhood, the Gender question got absorbed within the restrictive parameters of Nation making. Partha Chatterjee explains this trend .He says that the Nationalist leaders solved the gender issues by separating the material aspect of life from the spiritual aspect .While the material aspect of life the West needs to be cultivated , "the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence had to be preserved, protected and strengthened allowing no encroachments into this 'Inner sancturn'. That is Western modernity was to be selectively appropriated. There was

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dichotomy between the 'material' and the 'spiritual' world and between the 'outer' and 'inner' life. Applied to day-to-day living this dichotomy separated social space into the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material: the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation.” (Chatterjee, P, 1993: 116-117)

According to Chatterjee, nationalism was not simply a political struggle for power. On the other hand, “it related the issue of independence to every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people.” Nationalists, in fact, selected from the West, and also preserved their own 'self-identity'. Woman in home was the part of this inner spiritual domain, which had to be kept away from western impact. Thus nationalism “resolved the women’s question in complete accordance with its preferred goals. This new patriarchy of nationalism gave women a new social responsibility of associating female emancipation with the goal of sovereign nationhood-to a new legitimate subordination-thus women’s question disappeared from political negotiation with the colonial state.”(Chatterjee,P,1993:120-121)

1.4 The Nationalist Project and the Question of women

When modern nationalism developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, it addressed the gender question within the restrictive parameters of domesticity. With the progress of nationalism the Indian national movement, which was largely secular in its objectives, is also known to have used communal consciousness. This has usually been identified with revivalism of Hinduism. Communalism became an instrument of colonial policy to resist the growth of Indian national movement. In 1920's communal antagonism grew and Acts of 1909 and 1919 further added to this antagonism. While the Act of 1909 created separate electorates for Muslims, the Act of 1919 extended this to other communities. Religious and cultural symbols were used to create separate Muslim identity. Hindu and Muslim women organized themselves in separate organizations. However, in this period they continued to work together on questions of suffrage, education, legal rights and purdah system. But with the intensification of communal divisions, Hindu feminists began to

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believe that purdah is a custom brought to India by Muslim invaders and Muslims were responsible for the fall of status of women from the golden age. On the other hand Muslim women began to defend the Quran, especially about female modesty due to fears that they would be subsumed as a minority in India (Forbes,1998: 189)

With Gandhi arriving on the scene in the nationalist movement, women were drawn into politics by using Hindu symbolism. In the Non Cooperation Movement women claimed for themselves greater active role ranging from Boycott, Swadeshi to violent revolutionary movement. The trend that was set here continued into the 1930's and 1940's and women's active role in the public space became accepted in society. However their politicization did not lead to any significant change in their domestic or family relations nor did it alter the power structure within the traditional Hindu family. Credit goes to Gandhi for broadening the base of the congress nationalism to include the Muslims. But this effort did not pay much since his use of religious terminology alienated the Muslims. (For example, his idea of Ramrajya). However, Gandhi continued to evoke the idea of collective sisterhood especially when it came to partition and the violence against women of Hindu and Muslim community. (refer figure 1.11 and 1.12)

1.4.1: Communal Identity and Women

Thus, as you can see, the women's question in colonial India hardly received the priority it deserved. Irrespective of the fact whether it was Hindu or Muslim women, the issue of women's emancipation was always treated as subordinate to that of national liberation, community honour or class struggle. According to Sumit Sarkar, it was women and peasants who represented the ultimate site of purity unspoiled by the modern world and western education. This form of purity, chastity of the female body has been linked to the nation state. It's for reasons like this that women have been seen as the symbol and repositories of group or communal national identity. The link between honour of community leads to two forms of control over women's labour, their fertility, their sexuality and their mobility. The first is internal form of control by their own community itself since the loss of control over their own women is seen as threat to their masculinity, their family and their community. Secondly women find themselves more vulnerable to violence by other community. Since they are seen as repositories of their community honour and their rape, control and other forms of violence against them is seen as a more effective manner of humiliating and subjugating that community. Women, thus, become more vulnerable to violence in communal riots. The partition of India in 1947 revealed a similar story when women from both sides became victims of sexual aggression and control in order to avenge the hurt and

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injury on the community in question. Thus communal violence has seen the participation of women thereby proving that women are not necessarily a collective but are well entrenched in their own caste and community identities.

To conclude, refer figure 1.10 , and words by Annie Besant which epitomizes the question of women within the larger human question!

Women's social reformer:- Annie Besant



Fig 1.10

Anne Besant went to India in 1893, an advocate for social reforms and a critic of British colonialism. "...the Rights of Man have become an accepted doctrine, but unfortunately that are only the rights of man, in the exclusive sense of the word...until they become human rights, society will never rest on a sure, just foundation"

Source: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91786293/>

Fig 1.11- Women of India carry on Gandhi's salt campaign

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Fig 1.11

Source: http://www.ARS_womenIndia.doc

Women participating in rallies during Quit India Movement 1942



Fig 1.12

Source :<http://en.wikipedia.org>

Summary

- In pre British Era the Indian culture both for Muslims and Hindus was religion based.

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- The position of women was subordinate to men and many ill practices had furthered completely subjugated women.
- British era did bring changes in the status of women but it came in distinct phases.
- Initial phase was of non interference, followed by an era of touching those practices which highlighted the uncivilized notion of Indian culture.
- Practices like Sati were banned thus providing an ideological justification of civilizing mission. Further legislations ably supported by Indian reformers attempted to alleviate the position of Indian women.
- However, patriarchal society did not allow woman related issues to move out of the domestic sphere. All efforts of emancipation and empowerment like education of women always blended with the needs of the patriarchal society.
- Nationalist movement did usher in political freedom for the country but freedom for woman had to face movement within the movement.

Exercises

- 1.1 How did colonial policies affect women as persons and did it have an impact on their status vis a vis their family?
- 1.2 Did India's Swaraj led to the freedom of women?
- 1.3 Discuss the role of Indian reformers in the 'Gender question' in India.
- 1.4 Discuss British legislations that were gender related.

Glossary

Sati – derived from Sanskrit term *sat* –pure or chaste. However it came to signify both the act of immolation of a wife on the funeral pyre of her husband and the victim herself rather than its original meaning of a virtuous woman.

Feminist Movement- The movement which began in the western world in the late 19th century has gone through three waves .This movement focuses on various issues such as reproductive rights, equality of pay, women's voting rights, sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Bhadramahila- Bengali gentle woman

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