

8th Social Science Lesson 19 Notes in English

19. Status Of Women In India Through The Ages

Introduction

- Generally human society is constantly changing with additions, assimilations and omissions from within and outside.
- Women constitute half of the population. This is imperative to have a historical understanding of the **status of women through ages**.
- The position of women was not uniform in all periods, differed with regional variations. In ancient India particularly early Vedic period women, enjoyed equal rights.
- But with the passage of time their status in the society found deteriorated as a result of frequent foreign invasions.
- They were subjected to subjugation and subordination. New social practices, customs and systems which crept into the society in turn put limitations and restrictions on the liberty of women.
- During the British Raj, many socioreligious reformers like Raja **Rammohan Roy**, **Dayananda Saraswathi**, **Keshab Chandra Sen**, **Iswara Chandra VidyaSagar**, **Pandita Ramabai**, **Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar**, **Jyoti rao phule**, **Periyar E.V.R**, **Dr. Dharmambal** were the prominent leaders who fought for the uplift ment of women.
- Raja Rammohan Roy's efforts led to the abolition of sati in 1829.
- Vidya sagar's crusade for the improvement in the condition of widows, led to the passing of **Widow Remarriage Act in 1856**.
- The reformers rightly realized that female education as an emancipating agent in eradicating social evils.
- So they started girls' schools in various parts of the country, which brought significant changes in the lives of women.
- Women played an important part in Indian Freedom struggle. Until independence, there was no radical changes in the status of women.
- In independent India, last few decades have witnessed the all round development of women. Women are now making their presence felt in every walk of life.

The position of women

Ancient Period

- In the ancient Indus civilization of India, evidences show the worship of the mother goddess. Hence, the adoration for the mother is evident during that period.
- During the **Rig Vedic period**, it is believed that the position of wife was honoured and women's position was acknowledged, especially in the performance of religious ceremonies.

- During later Vedic age witnessed a transitional development in the status of women restricting her role in the social life except in the performance of religious sacrifices.
- Her social and political freedom was restricted.
- Sati became popular during **the later Vedic period** where the widows either chose for themselves or were forced to jump into the pyre of their husbands.
- The patriarchal system became rigid. Women were denied to study Vedic scriptures.

Medieval Period

- The position of women in the society further deteriorated during the medieval period and they suffered from many social evils such as **sati, child marriages, female infanticide, Purdah system and slavery.**
- Normally monogamy was in practice but among the rich polygamy was prevalent. 'Sati' was in practice particularly among the royal and upper strata of the society. Widow re-marriage was rare.
- Devadasi system was in practice in some parts of India. Among **the Rajputs of Rajasthan, the Jauhar was practiced.**
- Purdah system became popular as a result of Muslim invasion. The condition of widow became miserable during the medieval period.
- But we don't ignore the fact that the Mughal ruler Akbar attempted to abolish sati. In fact very little attention was paid to female education.
- In spite of general determination, we can find some exceptions **Razia sultana, Queen Durgavati, Chand bibi, Nurjahan, Jahan nara, Jijabai and Mira bai.**
- The system of education in medieval times was still at a rudimentary stage. Women's education was not completely ignored, though no regular separate school seems to have existed.
- Female education was informal. Girls usually had their lessons from their parents in their childhood.
- The rich appointed tutors to teach their daughters at home. The daughters of Rajput chiefs and Zamindars studied literature and philosophy.

British Period

- For centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The major effect of national awakening in the nineteenth century was seen in the field of social reform.
- The enlightened persons increasingly revolted against rigid social evils and outdated customs.
- Numerous individuals, reform societies and religious organisations worked hard to spread education among women, to encourage widow remarriage, to improve the living conditions of widows, to prevent marriage of young children, to bring women out of the Purdah, to

enforce monogamy and to enable middle-class women to take up professions or public employment.

- In the beginning of nineteenth century female literacy was extremely low when compared to male literacy.
- The Christian missionaries were the first to set up the **Calcutta Female Juvenile Society in 1819**.
- The Bethune school was founded in **1849** by **J.E.D. Bethune**, who was the president of the council of education in Calcutta.
- Charles Wood's despatch on education in **1854** laid a great stress on the need for female education.
- Indian **Education Commission (Hunter)** of **1882** recommended to start primary schools for girls and teacher-training institution and suggested special scholarships and prizes for girls.
- In 1880's Indian women began to enter universities. They were also trained to become doctors and teachers. They began to write books and magazines.
- In **1914** the women's medical service did a lot of work in training mid-wives. In the **1890s D.K. Karve** established a number of female schools in Poona.
- **Prof D.K. Karve, Pandita Rama bai**, made sincere effort to emancipate women through education was really remarkable.
- The Indian women's university was started by **Prof. D.K. Karve in 1916**. It was an outstanding institution imparting education to women.
- In the same year Lady Harding Medical College was started in Delhi.

Major Social Evils

Female infanticide

- Female infanticide was another inhuman practice afflicting the nineteenth century Indian society.
- It was particularly in vogue in **Rajputana, Punjab and the North Western Provinces**.
- It was mainly to avoid economic burden. Factors such as family pride, the fear of not finding a suitable match for the girl child were some of the major reasons responsible for this practice.
- Therefore, immediately after birth, the female infants were being killed.
- The company administration in India took steps to ban this practice by passing the **Bengal Regulatory Act XXI of 1795, the Regulating Act of 1802 and the Female Infanticide Act of 1870**.

Female Foeticide

- Female foeticide is also an inhuman practice which cuts across the caste, creed, class and regional boundaries.
- Whether it is female infanticide or female foeticide the prime motive remained the same.

- In order to ban the female foeticide and sex-determination the central Government passed various Acts.

Child marriage

- The practice of child marriage was another social disgrace for the women. Child marriage was prevalent among the tribes.
- In **1846**, the minimum marriageable age for a girl was only 10 years. **The native marriage Act was passed in 1872.**
- It fixed the minimum marriageable age of girls at 14 and boys at 18. In 1930, the Central Legislative Assembly passed **Rai Saheb Harbilas Sarada's child Marriage Bill** fixing the minimum marriageable age for boys at 18 and 14 for girls.
- It was later amended to 18 for girls and 21 for boys.

Sati

- Sati was social evil that prevailed in Indian society especially among the Rajputs.
- The feudal society of the time encouraged "sati" which meant self-immolation of the widow on the funeral pyre of her husband.
- Earlier it was a voluntary act but later by the relatives forced the widow to sit on the funeral pyre.
- The Italian traveler, **Niccolo Conti**, who visited Vijayanagar about the year **A.D. (C.E) 1420**, notes that 'the inhabitants of this region marry as many wives as they please, who are burnt with their dead husbands'.
- In the early years of 19th century, sati was in practice in various Parts of Bengal, western India and southern India.
- In 1811, Jagan Mohan Roy, brother of Rammohan Roy, passed away and his wife was burnt along with him.
- Rammohan Roy was moved to the extreme at the sight of it and took an oath that he would have the cruel practice abolished by law. He carried on a continuous agitation through press and platform for the abolition of Sati. Raja Rammohan Roy published his tracts in 1818-20, making the point that the rite of Sati was not enjoined by the Sastras.
- This material was used by the Serampore missionaries to shatter the generally accepted view that Sati was an integral part of the Hindu religion.
- Orthodox Hindu opinion against the abolition was advocated by **Radhakanta Deb, and Bhawani Charan Banerji.**
- When Lord William Bentinck took up the question of Sati, he found that the abolition had been recommended by the judges of the criminal courts.
- He passed Regulation XVII on **December 4, 1829** 'declaring the practice of Sati or burning or burying alive the widow of Hindus, illegal and punishable by Criminal Courts'.
- Similar legislative measures were enacted soon after in Bombay and Madras.

Devadasi System

- The word Devadasi (Sanskrit) or Devar adiyal (Tamil) means “servant of God” dancing girl dedicated to the service of god in a temple.
- Devadasi system was a social evil. There was also tradition of dedicating one daughter to the temple. In addition to taking care of the temple, they learnt and practiced **Bharatha Natiyam** and other classical Indian arts; traditional and enjoyed a high social status.
- Later on they were ill treated and humiliated. The Devadasis lost their dignity, sense of pride, self-respect and honour.
- **Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar who was the first woman doctor** in India, dedicated herself for the cause of abolishing the cruel practice of Devadasi system from Tamil Nadu.
- Appreciating her role in the agitation against Devadasi system she was nominated to the Tamil Nadu legislative council in **1929**. Periyar E.V. Ramasamy was instrumental in passing the “Devadasi abolition bill”.
- Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar proposed the bill to the Madras legislative council in **1930**.
- Moovalur Ramamirdham was yet another woman who fought for the emancipation of the Devadasi.
- With the continuous moral support rendered by Rajaji, Periyar and Thiru.Vi.Ka, she raised slogan against this cruel practice. As a result the government passed the “**Devadasi Abolition Act**”.

Role of Social Reformers

- From the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of social reformers and social reform movements sought to promote the upliftment of women by giving them education, raising their marriageable age and taking care of widows, as well as to remove the rigidity of caste and raise the suppressed class to a status of equality.
- The reformers who led the movements were the forerunners of modern India.

Raja Rammohan Roy

- There were some enlightened Indians who supported the British attempt to reform the oppressive social order of India.
- The first was the abolition of sati by law, on humanitarian grounds. **Raja Rammohan Roy**, the pioneer of Indian social reform movement was a casteless crusader of sati after having seen this practice in the case of his own sister-in-law.
- He started his campaign against this inhuman evil practice. Influenced by the ruthless attack of the movement led by Rammohan Roy the British government declared this act as “**culpable Homicide**”.
- Raja Rammohan Roy is most remembered for helping Lord William Bentinck to declare the practice of Sati a punishable offence in **1829**.
- He also protested against the child marriage and female infanticide.

- He favoured the remarriage of widows, female education and women's right to property. Thus the evil practice of sati on any scale was wiped out.

Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar

- Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar carried on the movement for female education, widow remarriage and abolition of polygamy in Bengal.
- He submitted petitions to this effect to the Indian Legislative Council and to the passing of the **Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856**.
- His son Narayanachandra set an example to others by marrying a widow of his choice.
- To promote female education, Vidhyasagar founded several girls' schools in the districts of Nadia, **Midnapur, Hugli and Burdwan in Bengal**.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam

- Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu was the earliest champion in South India of women's emancipation.
- He published a journal viveka vardhani. He opened his first girls' school in **1874** and made widow remarriage and female education the key points of his programme for social reform.

M.G. Ranade and B.M. Malabari

- In Bombay presidency, **M.G. Ranade and B.M. Malabari** carried on the movement for the upliftment of women.
- In **1869**, **Ranade** joined the Widow Remarriage Association and encouraged widow remarriage and female education and opposed child marriage.
- In **1887**, he started the National Social Conference, which became a pre-eminent institution for social reform.
- In **1884**, **B.M. Malabari**, a journalist, started a movement for the abolition of child marriage.
- He published pamphlets on this subject and appealed to the government to take action.

Gopal Krishna Gokhale

- In 1905, Gopal Krishna Gokhale started the Servants of India Society which took up such social reform measures as primary education, female education and depressed classes' upliftment.
- The spread of female education led to several other social reforms of great consequences, such as the **abolition of Purdah**, which further led to the participation of women in the freedom struggle.
- Kandukuri Veeresalingam Gopal Krishna Gokhale

Periyar E.V.R.

- Periyar E.V.R. was one of the greatest social reformers of Tamil Nadu.

- He advocated women education, widow remarriage and inter-caste marriages and opposed child marriages.

Women Reformers

- Most of the reform movements like **Brahma Samaj (1828)**, **Prarthana Samaj (1867)** and **Arya Samaj (1875)** were led by male reformers who set the limit of the freedom and development of women.
- Women reformers like **Pandita Ramabai**, **Rukhmabai** and **Tarabai Shinde** tried to extent further.
- In 1889, **Pandita Ramabai opened Sarada Sadan** (Home of Learning) for Hindu widows in Bombay.
- It was later shifted to Poona. Her greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows.
- Theosophical society was established at Chennai and Dr. Annie Besant who came from Europe and joined it.
- It also developed general social reform programme. Dr. S. Dharmambal was another reformer who was very much influenced by the ideas of Periyar.
- She showed great interest in implementing widow remarriage and women education. Among '**Moovalur Ramamirdham Ammaiyar**' raised her voice against Devadasi system along with Dr. Muthulakshmi Ammaiyar.
- In her memory, the government of Tamil Nadu has instituted the "**Moovalur Ramamirdha Ammal Ninaivu Marriage assistance scheme**", a social welfare scheme to provide financial assistance to poor women as poverty was the root cause for all these evils.
- Thus women reformers also contributed a lot for winning their own rights. Leading women realized the need of forming their own associations in order to safeguard their interests.
- As a result three major national women's organizations – Women's India Association, National Council of Women in India and the All India Women's Conference were founded.

Women in the freedom movement

- In the early anti-colonial struggle women played major roles in various capacities.
- **Velunachiyar of Sivaganga** fought violently against the British and restored her rule in Sivaganga.
- **Begum Hazrat Mahal**, **Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi** led an armed revolt of 1857 against the British.
- In the freedom struggle thousands of women came out of their homes, boycotted foreign goods, marched in processions, defied laws, received lathi charges and Courted jails.
- Their participation in the struggle added a new dimension of mass character.

Impact of reform movement

- Significant advances were made in the field of emancipation of women.
- It created of national awakening among the masses.
- It created the feeling of sacrifice, service and rationalism.
- The practice of sati and infanticide were made illegal.
- It permitted widow remarriage.

Women in Independent India

- Women in India now participate in all activities such as **education, politics, medical, culture, service sectors, science and technology**.
- The constitution of India guarantees (Article 14) equal opportunity and equal pay for equal work.
- The National policy for empowerment of women was passed under the National Policy on Education (1986), new programme was launched called **Mahila Samakhya**, its main focus was on empower of women.
- Reservation of **33 percent** to women envisaged an improvement in the socio-political status of women.
- The National Commission for women was set up **January 1992**.
- Its main functions is to review women related legislation and intervene in specific individual complaints of atrocities and denial of rights.

Legislation	Provisions
Bengal regulation of XXI, 1804	Female infanticide was declared illegal
Regulation of XVII, 1829	Practice of sati was declared illegal
Hindus Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856	It permitted widow remarriage
The Native Marriage Act, 1872	The Child Marriage was prohibited
The Sharda Act, 1930	The age of marriage was raised for boys and girls
Devadasi abolition Act, 1947	It abolished Devadasi system

More to Know:

1. The Madras Devadasi Act was a law that was enacted on **9th October 1947**. The law was passed in the Madras presidency and gave Devadasis the legal right to marry and made it illegal to dedicated girls to India temples.
2. Akbar prohibited child marriage and made it obligatory for the parents to obtain the approval of both the bride and the bridegroom before the marriage. He prescribed 14 years as the age of constant for girls and 16 years for boys.

3. Jauhar refers to the practice of collective voluntary immolation by wives and daughters of defeated Rajput warriors, in order to avoid capture and dishonor.