



## **Position of Women in Colonial Era**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In Colonial India, the social status of women seemed to be dependent on their men (Mill, 1840). The religious tradition ascribed for their humility and subordination to men in all matter. They were denied the opportunity of education and refinement . Except a few women of the upper classes, the life of general women was not worth living. In short, the access to social justice and equality were denied to them. They were unaware of their basic rights as individuals due to illiteracy, ignorance and economic subordinate through the age.(Manu Smriti with six commentaries, 1886).

Strange is the fact that when the christian missioneries saw the deplorable condition of women in traditional Indian society. They were amazed and emotionally moved. The Christian missionaries aimed to spread their religion in India. Therefor they opened school, asylums, dispensaries and orphanage to give relief to the poor and the needy Indian people. They succeeded in converting mostly the lower classes of Indian people. They failed to understand as to what should they do to save the women from burning alive. They desired to undertake from some “Culturally Motivated” performance to end their crime.

The first and foremost social problem that attracted enlightened opinion was the need for a better deal for women in society. In the abolition of the cruel rite of sati and infanticide, in the condemnation of child marriage and polygamy and popularization of widow remarriage in the abolition of purdha in provision of education facilities for women and economic opening to make them self-supporting and finally an equal share for women in the political life of the country by enfranchisement.

### **SATI ABOLITION ACT (1820)**

The term sati literally means a “Pure and Virtous Women”. It was applied in case of a devoted wife who contemplated perpetual and uninterrupted conjugal union with her husband life after she had proof as thereof burnt herself with the dead-body of her husband. Enlightened Indian ruler like Akbar, the peshwas has imposed restriction on its performance.

Though the East India Company broadly adhered to its declared policy of non-interference with the social custom of the people, yet early Governor General like Cornwallis, Minto and Lord Hasting had taken some step to restrict the practice of Sati by discouraging compulsion forbidding administration of intoxicating drugs to the sorrow stricken widows, putting a ban of the sati of pregnant women out widows below the age of 16 years and above-all making compulsory the presence of police official at the time of sacrifice who were to see that no compulsion proved inadequate and achieved limited success.

Mr. Loushington, a Magistrate in Madras Presidency wrote to the Colonial Government in 1813 that a legal abolition of Sati would provide a “Universal Satisfaction” except a few conventional Purohit who earned a lot of presiding over the rites of Sati.

The Father of Indian Renaissance Raja Ram Mohan Roy had already taken up the issue of Sati and he consistently made effort to convince the Hindu that the custom had no sanction of religion. In 1822 the Raja Ram Mohan widely circulated his “bring remark regarding modern encroachment on the ancient rights of female according to Hindu Law of Inheritance. The court of the Director encouraged William Bentick to enact legislation to suppress sati.

Regulation XVII of the Colonial Government of 4 December 1820 declared the practice of Sati, on burning or burying alive of widow illegal and punishable by criminal court as culpable homicide. Bentinck sought the help of Ram Mohan Roy and asked him to Publicize the good point of new act. Raja Roy popularized the act of 1829 and created a mighty public opinion in its favour through his writing and speeches. He removed the misconceptions of the people about the act of 1829.<sup>(8)</sup> The regulation of 1829 was applicable the first instance of Bangal Presidency alone, but was extended in slightly modified form to Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1830.

#### **WIDOW REMARRIAGE ACT (1856)**

The deplorable condition of upper cast Hindu widows forced them to hold that death was preferable choice for them because it made them once for all, free from all sorrow, sin and suffering of life. It was a tradition in India that lower cast widows could marry the brother or father of the deceased husband. It was generally believed that remarriage of widows was a sin according to Hindu sastras "as it involved guilt and disgrace on earth and exclusion from heaven."

The Barama Samaj debated the question of widow remarriage and popularized it among the Brahmas. The effort of Pt. Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar (1820-91) dug up old sanskrit reference and proved that vedic text sanctioned widow-remarriage. He sent a petition signed by 987 person to the Government of India urging it for legislative action. His effort were rewarded when the Hindu-remarriage Act (Act XV of 1856) legalized marriage of widows and declared issues from such marriage as legitimate. Many widows became its beneficiaries.

#### **EDUCATION OF WOMEN**

Hindu society in the 19th century suffered from false religion illusions that Hindu scripture did not sanction female education that education of girls wrought wrath of Gods leading to their widowhood. The christian missionaries, whatever their motive, were the first to set up the Calcutta female Juvenile Society in 1819. Pt. Vidya Sagar established no less than 35 girl's school in Bangal. Charles Wood's dispatch on education (1854) laid great stress on the need for female education (Jones, 1994). In the broad perspective, women education became a part of the general campaign for amelioration of the plight of women in society (Heimsath, 1964).

#### **BAN ON FEMALE INFANTICIDE (1870)**

Another horrible and cruel rite particularly common among the Bangalis and Rajput was a killing their infant daughter at birth, taking female children to a great economic liability. Some socially backward tribes followed the practice of killing their infant daughter at their birth. Maharaja Dalip Singh, son of Ranjit Singh, mentions that "He had actually seen when he was a child at Lahore, his sister put into sack and thrown in to the river." (Jones, 1994).

Enlightened British and Indian opinion was unanimous in condemning infanticide. When persuasion alone could not help, in Bengal regulation XXI of 1775 and III of 1804 declared infanticide illegal and equivalent to committing a murder as a precautionary measure, the Government of India passed an act in 1870 (Pamphlet on the Right of Women, 1975). It making compulsory for parents to register the birth of all babies and providing for verification of female child for some year after birth.

#### **NATIVE MARRIAGE ACT II (1872)**

In 1819 the colonial administration declared rap as an offence under the Indian Penal Code. In 1846 rap was redefined to cover the husband who consummated marriage with under age wife. Many reformers like Vidya Sagar and Kashub Chandra Sen were condemning the custom of child marriage in their speech and writing. In 1872, the colonial Government enacted the native marriage act II which was fixed the age of marriage for girls at 14 and for boys at 18 (Sharma, 1985). It also contained provision to ban Polygamy, the progressive section of Indian intelligentsia welcomed the provision of this act.

#### **MARRIED WOMEN'S PROPERTY ACT III (1874)**

This act legislated by the British was the most revolutionary in the sense that it provided for the Indian Women, the right to possess and manage their own “Handed Property” and estate and the guardians of their children. The women were authorized by this act, to acquire and manage their property. It was first time that the wages and earning of a married women were exclusively their own.

#### **ABOLITION OF DEVDASI SYSTEM (1929)**

The central legislature of India enacted this law in 1928 for the degenerated system of Devdasis. The Bombay legislature also passed a legal enactment to stop the immoral practice of prostitution.

In twentieth century, the period of national movement, more increment in the field of “Women Enhancement Movement”. Women had taken a great part in freedom movement after 1920, the women had starting attempting of their own right and in 1927, the established of A.I.W.C. (All Indian Women Congress) was a great effort by women.

Yet, after the attainment of Indian independence in 1947, the status and position of women in India remained more or less the same. In spite of the reform enunciated in colonial India and their acknowledge bravery in the freedom the equality granted to them by constitution could not take a concrete shape. But the position of women in Colonial Era were more progressive than the past era's. These progressive position have a great role in the Women's empowerment.

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