

CHAPTER 8

WOMEN CASTE AND REFORM

HAND OUT MODULE II

India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy.

Some of the Social reformers also criticized caste inequalities

Caste and Social Reform:

Raja Rammohun Roy quoted the ancient Buddhist text to criticize the caste system. Prarthana Samaj followed the Bhakti tradition which believed in spiritual equality of all castes. The Paramhans Mandali was founded in Bombay in 1840 to work for the abolition of caste. Most of these reformers and members of these associations were from upper castes. They usually violated caste taboos regarding food and touch in secret meetings.

During nineteenth century, Christian missionaries started setting up schools for tribal groups and lower caste children. Education gave them a tool to change their world. At the same time, many poor began to migrate to cities in search of jobs. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. Work in the new locations gave them an opportunity to get rid of the oppression which they suffered at the hands of upper-caste people back in their villages.

Demands for Equality and Justice:

- By the second half of the 19th century, people from within the 'lower' castes began organizing movements against caste discrimination and demanded social equality and justice.
- The **Satnami movement** in Central India was founded by Ghasidas who came from a low caste, organised a movement to improve their social status.
- In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur's Matua sect worked among low caste; Chandala cultivators. Haridas questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system.
- Shri Narayan Guru, a guru from Ezhava caste given his views on caste system as "one caste. one religion, one god for humankind".

Gulamgiri:

(i) **Jyotirao Phule**, born in 1827 was known as one of the 'low-caste' leaders.

(ii) He attacked the Brahmins claim that they were superior to other, since they were Aryans.

(iii) According to Phule, the 'upper' caste had no right to their land and power, the land belonged to indigenous people who were called as low castes.

(iv) Phule proposed that Shudras and Ati Shudras should unite to challenge caste discrimination.

(v) The **Satyashodhak Samaj** was founded by Phule to propagate caste equality.

(vi) Phule wrote a book named “Gulamgiri”, meaning slavery. He established a link between the conditions of the “lower” castes in India & the black slaves in America.

(vii) In 20th century, the movement for caste reform was continued by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker.

Who Could enter Temples:

- Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family. As a child he experienced caste prejudice; In school, he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground & was not allowed to drink water from taps that upper-caste children used.
- In 1919, when he came back from the USA, he wrote about “upper” caste power in contemporary society.
- In 1927, Ambedkar started a temple entry movement. His aim was to make everyone see the power of caste prejudices within the society.

The Non-Brahman Movement:

(i) The Non-Brahman Movement in the early 20th century was initiated by non-Brahman castes that had acquired access to education, wealth and influence. They challenged Brahmanical claims to power.

(ii) E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar was from middle-class family. He founded the **Self Respect Movement**.

(iv) He inspired the untouchables and asked them to free themselves from all religions in order to achieve social equality.

(v) Periyar was an outspoken critic of Hindu scriptures.

(vi) The forceful speeches, writings and movements of lower caste leaders led to rethink and self-criticism among upper caste nationalist leaders.

Debates and struggles over caste continued beyond the colonial period and are still going on in our own times.
