

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-10
Social Reformation–Part 1

Hello everyone. In the previous lecture we talked about how women came to be the central argument in social reformation. The social reformist movement in India profounded the narrative of progress by incorporating ‘women’ as essential components of transformation, for this purpose the reformist movement focused on two major evils that affected women namely, the practice of Sati and the imposed widowhood.

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid in their introduction to the volume recasting women essays in colonial history divide the social movements into two parts, one with the intention to modernize women and another to democratize gender regulations. They mentioned that the modernizing movements do not question patriarchal power relations. The nativist and nationalist movements claim to provide a more liberal space for the middle-class women in the form of educating them.

This attempt however remains restricted within the domestic sphere. In Rabindranath Tagore's Ghare Baire we see how Vimla is learning English at the insistence of her husband. Even though, she is initially reluctant to be exposed to western ways of learning she has to give in. Her emancipation happens under the supervision of her husband. The democratizing movement on the other hand is defined by Sangari and Vaid as social movements which try to change, to whatever degree.

Both the base that is the sexual division of labour in production and property relations and the ideologies of a specific patriarchal formation. The difference between the two is that the democratizing movements seek to alter class relations and view class as intrinsically linked with gender. An example of such movement would be the SEWA organization established by Ela Bhatt. If you want to know more about it you can go back to the lectures and refresh your memory. Modernizing movements on the other hand addressed gender partially without questioning the

patriarchal structure. As part of the modernizing mission two issues that were immediately taken up were, Sati and widow remarriage. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who came to be known as one of the most prominent critics of Sati or widow immolation.

One interesting factor is that since the 18th century British missionaries had viewed the practice of Sati as an example of Hindu barbarism. In fact, they saw Sati as a way to promote their civilizing mission. Later when anti-sati sentiments were on the rise the British parliament refused to abolish it to avoid religious interference. In 1817, Mrityunjaya Vidyalamkara, the chief pundit of the supreme court, announced that Sati had no shastric sanction.

In 1818, the provincial governor of Bengal, William Bentinck prohibited Sati in his province. The Sati Abolition Act was passed in 1829 when Bentinck was the governor general of India. The 1829 regulation mentions that the practice of Sati or burning or burying alive the widows of Hindus, is revolting to the feelings of human nature. It is hereby declared illegal and punishable by the criminal courts.

While, discussing about Sati it is also necessary to know about the debates that emerged during this time. As I have already mentioned the British administration before Bentinck took a passive approach to Sati so, that religious sentiments are not disturbed. Now Sati was taken up by nationalists like Ram Mohan Roy to show that India is capable of getting rid of its bad qualities. For missionaries it served as a way to fulfill their civilizing mission.

However, there was considerable protest from Hindu orthodox members as well. In 1830, the orthodox Hindus in Calcutta formed the Dharma Sabha to campaign against the abolition. They also wrote a petition to the governor general Bentinck. Ram Mohan Roy also provided evidence to his support. Now the advocates of Sati cited Ungira and argued that women who on the death of her husband ascends the burning pile with him, is exalted to heaven, as equal to Uroondhooti.

Uroondhooti or Aundhati is the wife of the sage Vashistha. The Vedas and the Puranas depict her as signifying chastity and wifely devotion. They further mentioned from Ungira that “the good deed earned by burning on the pyre with the dead husband expiates the sins of three races; her

father's line, her mother's line and the family to whom she was given a virgin. Ram Mohan Roy on the other hand cites from Manu and Yajnavalkya to argue that the true lawmakers do not support the burning of widow.

And instead direct her to live an ascetic life till death for giving all injuries, performing harsh duties, avoiding every sensual pleasure and cheerfully practicing the incomparable rules of virtue which have been followed by such women as were devoted to one only husband. He further maintained that the promise of heavenly joy ultimately allows deliberate female murder. Especially in the way, the widow is tied along with the corpse of her husband and such a quantity of wood is heaped on her that she cannot even raise.

He also challenged the assumption of immorality for the widow. He mentions that in the absence of the protection of a widow of a husband a widow can return to her paternal home and is properly guarded there and that it is men who bring disgrace at their lifetime by opting for matters such as polygamy. Ram Mohan Roy also draws attention to the miseries of Widow as linked with her property-lessness an issue that does not appear anywhere in the discussions by conservatives.

The argument surrounding Sati remain centered on the patriarchal anxiety over female sexuality. Now one thing you must remember is that although Ram Mohan Roy criticized Sati, he did so to revive the great Hindu tradition. The practice of Sati gets utilized by both Roy and the conservatives to prove their respective readings of the shastras. He establishes the supremacy of the Vedas and the shastras by claiming to highlight their accurate preaching.

The scientificity and logicity establishes the validity of and supremacy of the Vedas and shastras. Therefore, ironically in both their support and challenge to the practice of Sati the conservatives as well as Ram Mohan Roy attempted to prove the authority and sacrosanctity of the Vedas. It is also important to remember that Sati was neither common nor widespread. In fact, the 1829, regulation mentions that by a vast majority of people throughout India the practice is not kept up, nor observed: in some extensive districts it does not even exist.

The irony is that by making anti-sati law it was assumed that Sati is a common practice. Moreover, it also gave a Brahminical sanctity. And as Radha Kumar observes after the abolition many places started adopting the tradition of Sati to show their religious inclination. As Ashish Nandy terms it, Sati abolition was an assertive defensive reaction to the colonial rule aroused by divided state of feeling among the Hindus.

This dichotomy is highlighted by Sen and Dhawan with reference to widow remarriage. The social reformation such as ideas of companion at marriage the removal of the worst physical abuses against women, such as Sati access to education, employment and finally induction into nationalist politics benefited only the middle- and upper-class women. The legalization of Hindu Widow remarriage deprived the widows of their property after marriage.

In certain lower caste communities where widows had unconditional rights of remarriage without compelling them to give up their property, this law caused enormous economic deprivation. The 1856 bill on Hindu Widow remarriage specified that a widow on her remarriage should forfeit all that the law gives her of the right in her deceased husband's estate, but that she should retain whatever she has acquired by way of gift.

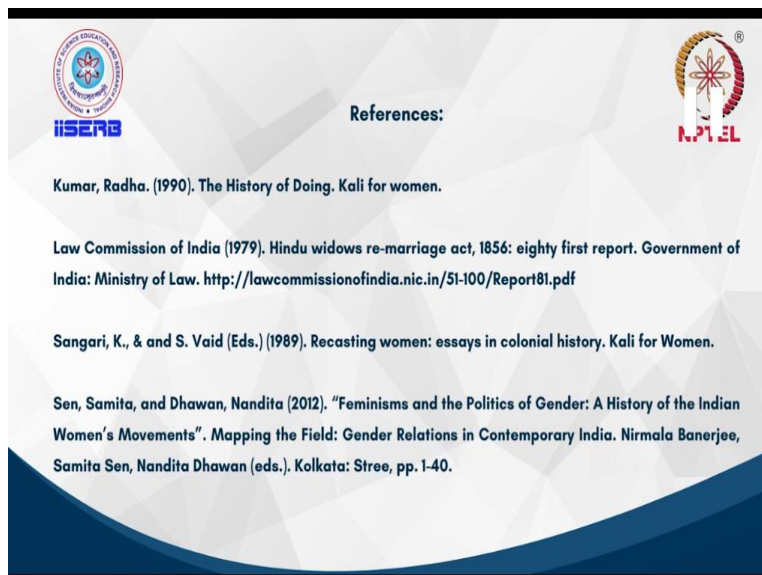
Whether the gifts were testamentary or by act inter vivos. The reason for distinction was that the very peculiar interest which the Hindu law of inheritance gave to a widow in her deceased husband's estate was really, if the texts were examined intended to be no more than an interest *durante viduitate* the conditions on which it is given to her, were inconsistent with the second marriage.

And though she was entitled to the unrestricted possession of the estate, she could not except in certain exceptional cases, alienate any part of it. So, in other words the entire property upon remarriage went to the husband's property. Now let us summarize today's lesson. We have seen how and why women's issues were made central to the Nationalist movement. It was primarily to show that India is capable of getting rid of its bad aspects and emerge as a glorious nation.

It served as a way to create unity and celebrate it. We can see that if Sati was cited as an example of primitive barbarism of the orient it was also cited to exemplify wifely devotion and spiritual strength of the oriental woman. In both these instances the woman as a subject became secondary. Only the representation of woman as a component of the nationalist discourse became important.

Especially, in case of India where women self-sacrifice is often claimed to be one of the greatest strengths, it is interesting to see how the debate around Sati grew. Such unity however was necessarily Brahmanical and Hindu. As we have seen Sati or widowhood was not a common factor among all places and all communities. So, legalizing these processes often deprived other women. We will discuss these aspects in detail in the next lectures. Thank you.

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