

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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**Lecture-12**  
**Nationalism and the ‘Woman’s Question’**

Hello everyone. In the previous lectures, we delved into the sati abolition and widow remarriage. We saw how these two aspects became instrumental in social reformation. Although, they claimed to be based on women's emancipation, women became secondary. Nationalist deformation created a world showcasing India's past as glorious and more importantly the modern nation-state's ability to retain the good traditions, while discarding the bad ones.

As evident from the long debate between Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and the other pandits on sati and widow remarriage, they provided extensive evidence from the Vedas and the shastras to prove that these practices were damaging barbaric and against the Hindu moral codes. This scientificity and logicity establishes the validity and supremacy of the Vedas and the shastras.

Thus, ironically in both their support and challenge to the practice of sati and imposed widowhood the attempt is to prove the authority and sacrosanctity of the Vedic texts as authentic Hindu ideology. In fact, we have also seen the futility of such endeavor. Sati was not a common practice in India or among all the communities. In case of widow remarriage, it in fact led to material deprivation for women of many communities.

They completely lost any right to ownership and be economically independent. If you have any questions regarding this lecture, you can go back and watch it again. Today we will learn about the construction of new women. I have already mentioned the term briefly in previous lectures, but today we will learn it in detail. Now, before we go into who this new woman was and how she was conceptualized, we need to learn about the conditions, which propelled this creation.

So, the economic and social changes made by the British colonizers brought changes in the social and familial settings of India as well. Under the British rule India transformed from a manufacturing nation into a raw material producer. The assignment of property rights to

zamindars that underwrite their feudal powers and reduced the rights of the tenants. The development of enclaves of capital in plantations and mines the active discouragement of industry.

And the constant effort of the British to widen the circle of indigenous collaborators all these are some of the events that form the context for the period of social reform. So, we see a drastic shift in the economic, agrarian, social and legal spheres in India. These transformations gave birth to new social structures in the form of nuclear family. Added to that; the writings by colonial administrators and missionaries heavily influenced the new intelligentsia.

In order to adjust to the changing times patriarchy also needed to be reoriented. The failures of the sati abolition and widow remarriage grew a sense of disillusionment with the reliance on British rule. As a result, there was a growing demand for nationalist revival. As Tanika Sarkar, mentions nationalist revivalism regarded the household and specifically conjugality as the last independent space left to the colonized Hindu.

To adjust to the changing times the patriarchy also needed to modify itself. This is the reason why we see women given opportunities of education, new responsibilities towards race and nation as bearers of Indian tradition, who is modern but at the same time uncontaminated by any western or material influence. Now you have to remember that all these so-called opportunities came with some conditions.

We will discuss them in detail in the later lectures. Now, as I mentioned earlier the demand for women's education was made to address the rising middle class to adapt its women to a modern westernized form while, keeping the Indian traditional values alive. The colonizers in India made use of the devalued existence of women in the country as a tool to claim that the Indian tradition in its current form was degenerate and barbaric.

Home, instead became a sanctuary. It began to represent the dead weight of the tradition; this degenerate condition of the Indian women is what the nationalists claim to reform, through the concept of fashioning a new woman. The home now had to be reformed to be complementary to the new world order. The late 19th and early 20th centuries were often touted as an era of women's empowerment.

Education for women became necessity to fashion the concept of this new woman that the social reformers of the 19th century strive to achieve. The first school for girls started by English and American missionaries in 1810, by 1827 there were 12 missionary run girls' schools in Hooghly district. In 1828, the lady society for native female education in Calcutta and its vicinity opened schools.

During the mid-19th century unorthodox Hindus and Brahmans in Bengal especially in Calcutta campaigned for women's education. Interestingly, the new trend of education was aimed for the upper class, middle class and upper-caste women. Radha Kumar mentions that while the missionary schools of the early 19th century had been attended largely by girls from poor families, these new schools catered to girls of the upper castes.

During this period women were allowed to go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programs and in time even take up employment outside the home. What functioned as the substratum of women's reformation was their formal education? Formal education was found as the only feasible way for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home.

This motivation was quite different from the earlier times. In her autobiography *Amar Jiban*, which was published in 1867, Rassundari Devi narrates a time when the upper class, upper caste Bengali families were undergoing a transition from tradition to social progress. Rassundari's autobiography written in two parts at the dawning hour of her life reflects these concerns over the education of women and her sentiments about it.

An Ardent supporter of women's education her autobiography captures moments of unique sensibility about the world changing around her. Rassundari likens her married life to being in a prison. She writes people imprison birds for their own delight. My condition is the same. I was also locked within the cage for the rest of my life. Antahpur or the secluded domestic realm was a vital location which helped sustain the male world and also organized a rigid gendered internal hierarchy.

In order to escape this prison, she finds solace in her reading and writing. But it was not allowed in her house. So, in her autobiography, she mentions how she used to hide pages of *Chaitanya Bhagvat* in the kitchen and read them. Her situation was in fact quite different from *Vimla* in

Tagore's Ghare Baire. As we have discussed earlier Vimla was highly encouraged by her husband to study English.

Now, why was this insistence on education was it to make women go out in the world and proclaim their agency or was it something else? In order to achieve complete transformation women were actually included within the progressive agenda. Along with legal abolition of widow immolation, child marriage and so on, the social practices that were considered to be backward and detrimental to progress, education was introduced to complete the curriculum of progress.

Education however was propounded among women keeping the boundaries of public and private intact. Keshab Chandra Sen in an address to the Victorian discussion society in London. In 1870, where he appealed to English women to educate Indian women said at the present moment a thousand Hindu houses are open to receive and welcome English governesses.

Well-trained, accomplished English ladies capable of doing good to their Indian sisters, both by instruction and by personal example. And what sort of education do we expect and wish from you? An unsectarian, liberal, social, useful education that will not be subservient or subordinated to the views of any particular religious community, an education free and liberal and comprehensive in its character and education calculated to make Indian women good wives, mothers, sisters and daughters.

Keshab Chandra Sen's speech highlights the dominant sentiment of the times, which intended to so-called rescue the Antahpur of his ignorance but only to become the suitable companions to the men in the house. Educating women was therefore deemed necessary to keep up with the changing status of men. As Malavika Karlekar points out new occupational roles for men and changing expectations of women in the home necessitated the development of new ethics and behaviour pattern.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak, in Mahratta, writes the object of female education is not to make women equal of men, it must also be remembered that women having to perform the wifely and maternal duties require a fund of energy to perform them satisfactorily. Their energies in other directions must be spent very sparingly indeed and therefore their education should to be so planned as to give to their minds a minimum amount of useful culture.

As part of this new ethics the bhadralok community created a distinction amongst women based on class. Sumanta Banerjee in his article marginalization of women's popular culture in 19th century Bengal describes that the traditions of Andarmahal was reformed to match the bhadralok elite culture. He points out that this exclusive focus on women in the Anthapur, which he calls Andarmahal hides a vast majority of working women in the 19th century.

Who were either self-employed women like naptenis, sweepers, owners of stalls selling vegetables or fish, street singers and dancers, maidservants or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed production, mustard, linseed etcetera. The four forms of art such as kirtans, panchalis, kathakathas were all considered to be low. And therefore, unfit for the new intelligentsia.

Active effort was made to differentiate the bhadramahilas from such common wantonness and vulgarity. Women's education was a way to detach upper caste women from any contact with the common vulgar masses and to cure them of their latent vulgarity. Such observation was solidified through the ideals of Victorian morality. We should also remember that such assumptions created tremendous divide amongst women based on their class and also caste identities.

At this juncture it is pertinent to note that the image of a thoroughly westernized woman was also considered an unsuitable model for the new woman or bhadramahila to follow. A bhadramahila was always contrasted with the image of the western woman. The ideal woman should unfoldingly strive not to become a memsahib. The upper caste Indian women were advised by the likes of Kundamala Devi.

If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to memsahib like behaviour. The criticism was mostly based on the manners of the women in the west of the use of western cosmetics and jewelry, of needlework, considered a useless and expensive pastime; of riding in open carriages and so on. What made the ridicule stronger was the constant suggestion that the westernized woman was fond of ideal luxury and cared little for the well-being of the home.

It is very interesting to see, how education of a controlled kind and positions of protected dignity within the family and the community were argued as necessary to enroll women as custodians of traditional cultural values, against the onslaught of westernization. Now let us summarize today's lecture. Formal education did not provide women with ultimate agency and independence.

The purpose of formal education was only to equip women to run the new modern household based on the burja values. Such as orderliness, thrift, cleanliness and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene. Now in other words through the formal education the women were expected to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world or as we know the public sphere.

Women could enjoy freedom in such a manner that they do not need to overstep or compromise on their essential feminine qualities. Educated women were thought to be competent in both child care and housework with greater regulation and discipline. Thus, increasing happiness within the home and facilitating the progress of their nation. In the next lecture we will talk about the ideologies that were associated with this new woman and the ways in which they were fashioned. Thank you.

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