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Social Reformers of Maharashtra - part 8

LESSON 3 OF 3



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Seva Sadan (1885)

- Behramji Malabari (1853-1912), founded the Seva Sadan in 1885 for the women of all castes.
- The organization specialized in taking care of those women who were exploited and then discarded by society.
- It provided these women with education and medical services.
- The Puna Seva Sadan was founded in 1909 by Mrs. Ramabai Ranade and G.K. Devdhar.

Opposition to Child Marriage:

- Due to the efforts of the Prarthana Samaj, and particularly due to Behramji Malabari the 'Age of Consent Act' was passed in 1891 during the time of Lord Lansdowne
- Behramji Malabari wrote journal "Mahapap Bal vivah" after passing "The Civil Marriage Act" of 1872 in Bengal to keep motion active in Maharashtra.
- According to this act, no marriage could be consummated before the wife had reached the age of 12 years.

- **The background of the 'Age of Consent Act' was as follows:**
- The death of an 11 years old Bengali girl, Phulomnee after being brutally raped by her 35 year old husband, Hari Mohan Maitee, served as a catalyst for above legislation. Hari Mohan Maitee was acquitted on charges of rape, but found guilty on causing death by a rash and negligent act.
- A committee comprising of influential British and Anglo-Indian statesmen established in London had submitted recommendations to the colonial government including the change in age of consent.
- The law was signed on **19 March 1891 by the government (Lord Lansdowne) raising the age of consent for consummation from ten to twelve years.**

- **Support:**
- **Behramji Malabari**, a Parsi reformer and a journalist from Bombay advocated for this legislation. He published his messages in "**Notes on Infant marriage and enforced widowhood**" in 1884. He was also the **editor of the "Spectator"**.
- Though women were not consulted for determining the effect of child marriage, women in Bombay presidency including Rukhmabai and Pandita Ramabai made a cogent case for the ban on childmarriage in their magazines and social reform organizations.
- Anandibai Joshi, a Maharashtrian woman who also happened to be the first female doctor also supported the bill.
- **Opposition:** To the bill in Maharashtra was led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Poona Sarvajanic Sabha in alliance with Poona revivalists who often invoked Hindu, Brahman and Maratha glory.
- Orthodox Hindus argued that it violated Hindu rite "**Garbhadhan**".

- **Battle against the Dowry System:**

- In 1914 teenager girl Snehalata had to commit self-immolation as she was badly shattered by the evils of dowry. The issue was widely discussed all over Maharashtra.
- **Mama Varerkar** could not remain a silent spectator. Hence he based his very first play '**Hach Mulacha Bap**' (1916) on the tragedy of Snehalata, and strongly attacked the dowry system.
- **Jyoti Mhapsekar** along with her team continued to voice the problem of dowry through her play "**Mulgi Zali Ho**".

- **Efforts for Widow Remarriage**

- The site of a widow was regarded as inauspicious.
- Even then, they sometimes fell a prey to the physical passion of male members. This further gave rise to the problem of illegitimate children.
- Social reformers like Pandit Ishvar chandra Vidyasagar, Mahatma Jotiba Phule, Vishnushastri Pandit, M.G. Ranade, D.K. Karve, Pandita Ramabai made relentless efforts for the remarriage of the widows or at least their rehabilitation.

Pandit Ishvarchandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891)

- He submitted a petition to the Government in December 1855.
- In July 1856, J.P. Grant, a member of the Governor General's Council finally tabled a bill in support of the widow remarriage, which was passed on 13 July 1856, during the time of Lord Dalhousie and came to be called the **'Hindu Widow Remarriage Act', 1856.**
- The marriage between **Shrichand Vidyaratna, a professor of Sanskrit College in Calcutta and a ten-year old widow Kalimati Devi** was solemnized in Calcutta on 7th December 1856 under this law.

- However, till the end of the 19th century, this law did not prove to be very effective.
- Many women were driven to commit suicide by men who had exploited them to satisfy their lust and then deserted them.
- Therefore, Savitribai and Jotiba put boards on streets about the “Delivery Home for women on whom pregnancy had been forced”. The delivery home was called "Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha"

- He adopted Yashvant, a son of Kashibai, a Brahmin widow, who was going to commit suicide.
- In 1866, M G, Ranade and Vishnushastri Pandit (1827-1876) founded the “Vidhwa Vivaha Uttejak Mandal” (Hindu Widow Remarriage Association).
- Due to the encouragement of Vishnushastri Pandit, Narayan Jagannath Bhide, a lawyer from Puna married the widowed daughter of Moropant Pendse in 1865.
- In 1869, Pandit took the lead in planning to celebrate publicly the remarriage of a widow called Venubai Narayan Bapat. Despite all opposition, the marriage was solemnized on 15th June 1869.
- Moroba Kanhoba Vijaykar (1813-1871), a Judge in small Causes Court lost his first wife and therefore, on 12th March 1870, married a widow, Sumitrabai. Due to orthodox pressure the couple had to commit suicide.

Condition of Female Education

- It was wrongly believed that the education of girls led to their widowhood. Along with boys, the girls would get spoiled.
- The Missionaries opened separate girls' schools, but there was always the fear of conversion.
- Although from 1813, the Company accepted the responsibility of education, it did not do anything for female education till 1854.

Encouragement to Female Education

- Goalrao Joshi, working in the post office, and though eccentric by nature, taught his wife Anandibai Joshi and even sent her to America to study medicine. Anandibai was the first Indian lady to become a medical doctor.
- D.K. Karve founded the Women's University at Shirol.
- It received donation from Thackersey. So it was named after his mother as "Shrimati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey" SNTD University in 1916. It imparts education through Marathi, Gujarathi and English media.

Eradication of the Devadasi System

- Meant offering girls to the temples in service of God.
- But gradually this custom got associated with temple-prostitution.
- The system was prominently prevalent in Maharashtra, Goa, Karnataka and Orissa.
- In Maharashtra, boys and girls were dedicated to Khandoba of Jejuri.
- These boys were called Vaghya and girls as Murali.
- Jotiba Phule and later on Vitthal Ramji Shinde along with Shivram Janaba Kamble worked for the prevention of the Devadasi system.
- On 15th October 1934, the Government of Bombay passed a law prohibiting the practice of Devadasi.