

# HISTORY

Chapter 8: Women, Caste and Reforms



## WOMEN, CASTE AND REFORMS

### Indian Society in the Nineteenth Century

The Indian society in the nineteenth century was orthodox in nature. Some common societal practices existing at this time were

- There were child marriages as most of the children were married off at an early age.
- Men belonging to any religion could have more than one wife.
- The custom of 'sati' was practiced. A woman was praised if she burnt herself on the pyre of her husband.
- Women had no rights over her father's property.
- Women were mostly denied any sort of education.
- The caste system was prevalent in India where the high class enjoyed all the privileges. People belonging to the lower caste could not enter into temples, draw water from public wells or bath in ponds which were used by the upper class Brahmins.
- Gradually, many people began to realise the evils of these practices in society and began to oppose them.

### Beginning of Debates in Society

In the nineteenth century, many debates and discussions began to be held among intellectuals who wanted to reform Indian society. Development of communication sparked various discussions and debates in society. Newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets began to be published. People expressed their ideas in these means of communication which began to be read widely influencing the people's thoughts.

### Raja Rammohun Roy

- Raja Rammohun Roy was a major reformer from Bengal. He founded the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 in Calcutta. He advocated Western education in the country.
- He worked for the upliftment of Indian women. He wanted greater freedom and equality for women.
- He is known for his campaign against the practice of sati. He had knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and many European languages. Through his writings, he tried to prove that a practice such as sati was not legal in the ancient period.
- Because of his efforts, the British passed an Act which made the practice of sati punishable by law. Raja Rammohun Roy
- Later, many reformers used the strategy of Rammohun Roy. They took the help of ancient scriptures to prove the futility of a practice which they wished to challenge.



**Raja Rammohun Roy**

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also used ancient scriptures for advocating remarriages of widows. The British in 1856 legalised remarriages of widows. In the Madras Presidency, Veerasalingam formed an association for widow remarriages. Dayanand Saraswathi also supported widow remarriages. However, at the same time, many people were also opposing the work of reformers.

### **Reforms in Female Education**

- Women education was advocated by several reformers. Vidyasagar set up a girls' school in Calcutta.
- The Arya Samaj set up by Dayanand Saraswathi opened many schools for girls in Punjab. Jyoti Rao Phule, a noted reformer, established girls' schools in Maharashtra.
- In Muslim families, girls were taught to read and write the Koran. Reformers such as Mumtaz Ali cited many verses from the Koran arguing in favour of women education.
- However, many people were still not ready to send girls to schools. They thought that schools would prevent girls from learning household work. Girls also had to travel through public places in order to reach schools. This was disliked by their parents. Thus, many girls and women were taught by the male members at home.
- The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed in 1929 according to which no man below the age of 18 and woman below the age of 16 could marry. Later, the age limits were increased.



Ishwar Chandra  
Vidyasagar

### Women Reformers

- Women at this time also began to advocate female education. Begums of Bhopal played an important role in promoting education among girls. They also founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh.
- Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain established many schools for Muslim girls in Calcutta and Patna.
- Tarabai Shinde wrote Stripurushtulana which criticised social differences which were existing between men and women.
- Pandita Ramabai was a prominent woman reformer. She was a great scholar of Sanskrit. She claimed that the Hindu religion was responsible for the subordinate position of women. She also wrote about the miserable condition of the upper caste Hindu women.
- She established a widows' home at Poona which provided shelter to the widows. The organisation trained women in various arts so that they could support themselves.
- Many nationalist leaders such as Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose were in favour of giving greater equality and freedom to women. They also promised to give women the right to vote. Till then, they asked women to carry on the anti-British struggles.



Pandita Ramabai

### Caste Reforms

Many reformers at this time had begun to question caste inequalities. Raja Rammohun Roy criticised the caste system. The Prathana Samaj and the Paramhans Mandali worked for achieving greater caste equality. Christian missionaries set up schools for educating the children of tribal and lower castes. Many lower caste people left their villages to find work in the cities. They worked in municipal corporations—building roads and digging drains. Many of them also went to find work in plantations and mines in Assam, Bihar, Trinidad and Mauritius. This was an opportunity for them to move away from the hold of the upper caste people residing in villages. They also found opportunities in the army. Many people belonging to the Mahar caste found work in the Mahar Regiment

### Movements for Demanding Equality and Justice

By the second half the nineteenth century, even the people belonging to lower caste began demanding equal rights.

- Ghasidas, a person belonging to lower caste, founded the Satnami Movement in central India. Haridas belonging to the Matua sect worked for improving the social condition of Chandala cultivators.
- Sri Narayan Guru from Kerala advocated equality of all people within a sect. All these leaders and sects tried to instil pride and respect among the people belonging to low castes.

### Jyoti Rao Phule

- He was one of the most noted reformers from Maharashtra. He criticised the Brahmins who had dominated society. He claimed that Brahmins who call themselves the Aryans were actually, foreigners who came to the country and subjugated the natives of the land. These

natives were actually the low-caste people who were looked down upon by the Brahmins.

- Phule believed that a golden age existed before the advent of the Aryans where peasant warriors cultivated the fields and ruled the land. He wanted all the shudras to unite to challenge the domination of the Brahmins.
- Phule founded 'Satyashodhak Samaj' which advocated caste equality.
- In 1873, he wrote the book Gulamgiri. In this book, he found similarities between the Jyotirao Phule condition of slaves in America and the condition of low-caste people in India. Both communities were dominated and subjugated.



Jyotirao Phule

### Dr B. R. Ambedkar

- Dr B. R. Ambedkar was born into the Mahar caste which was an untouchable caste. In his childhood, he faced various discriminations in society.
- After he returned from the US, he wrote about the domination of the upper caste people in society.
- In 1927, he started a temple entry movement in which lower castes also used water from the temple tank. This created friction between the upper and lower castes.

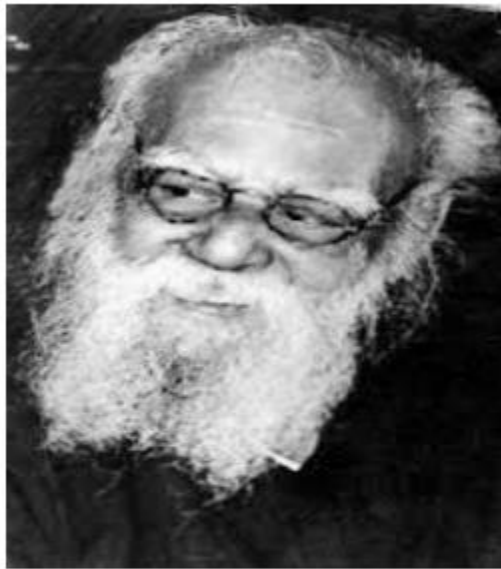
### E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar)

- The non-Brahmin movement started by the early twentieth century. The movement was started by the non-Brahmins who had obtained education and wealth.
- They contended that Brahmins were the heirs of the Aryans who had invaded north India. They later moved to south India and suppressed the Dravidians-the original inhabitants of the land.
- E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker or Periyar had joined the Congress when he was young. He however left the organisation when he noticed separate seating arrangements for the people belonging to lower castes.
- He then founded the Self-Respect Movement. He said that the people of the lower caste

were the original upholders of the Tamil and Dravidian culture

- Periyar criticised Ramayana, Bhagvad Gita and the Codes of Manu. According to him, these texts were used for establishing the authority of the Brahmins over the people of lower castes.

We find that the work of the reformers led to a change in thinking of many people. Many people began to advocate the establishment of casteless societies. However, the orthodox section of society also reacted to these reform movements by founding Sanatan Dharm Sabhas, Bharat Dharma Mahamandal and Brahman Sabha Bengal.

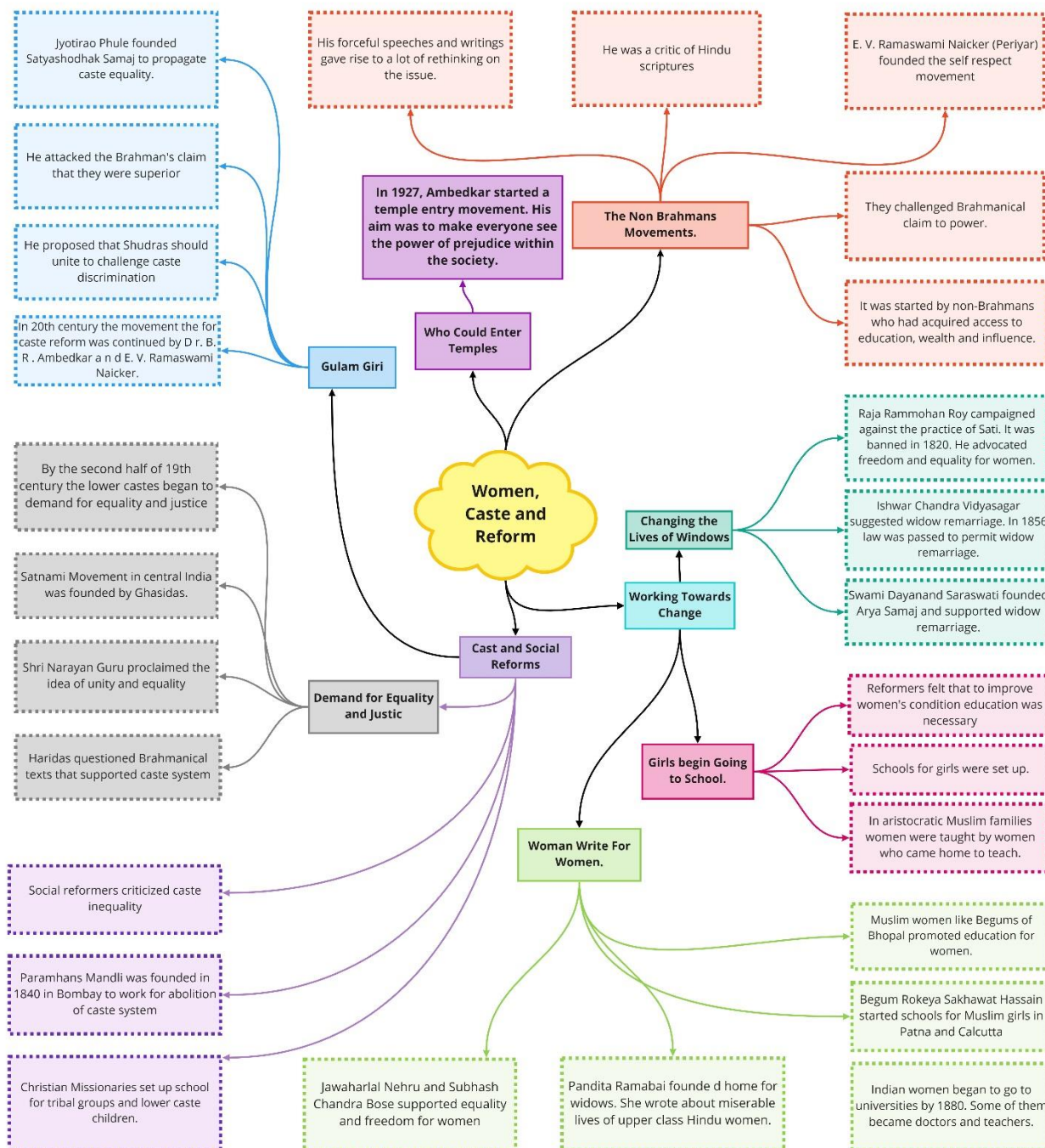


**E.V. Ramaswamy  
Naicker (Periyar)**

### Names of Some Famous Organisations and their Founders

Name of the Organisation	Name of the Founder/Leader	Principles
<b>The Brahmo Samaj</b>	Raja Rammohum Roy	Prohibited idolatry and sacrifices
<b>Young Bengal movement</b>	Henry Louis Vivian Derozio	Demanded education for women and advocated freedom of speech and expression
<b>Swami Vivekanand</b>	Ramakrishna Mission	Believed in the ideal of salvation through social service
<b>Prathana Samaj</b>	Dr Atmaram Pandurang	Advocated removal of caste restrictions, ban on widow remarriage and promoted women education
<b>The Veda Samaj</b>	Sridharalu Naidu and Keshab Chandra Sen	Demanded abolition of caste restrictions and promoted widow remarriage
<b>The Aligarh Movement</b>	Sayyid Ahmad Khan	Supported western education
<b>The Singh Sabha Movement</b>	—	To rid Sikhism of superstitions, caste distinctions and non-Sikh practices

Class : 8th Social Studies (History)  
Chapter 8 Women, Caste and Reform



## Important Questions

### Multiple Choice Questions-

1. Paramhans Mandali was founded in 1840 to work for the:
  - a. Demands of Labour
  - b. Labour
  - c. Plantation Workers
  - d. Abolition of Caste
2. The Satnami Movement in central India was founded by:
  - a. Jyotirao Phule
  - b. Ghasidas
  - c. Dr. Ambedkar
  - d. Pandit Rama Bai
3. Rammohan Roy founded a reform association that was known as:
  - a. Brahmo Samaj
  - b. Arya Samaj
  - c. Home Rule League
  - d. Socialist Party
4. Who was the founder of Arya Samaj?
  - a. Rammohan Roy
  - b. Swami Dayanand
  - c. Balgangadhar Tilak
  - d. Vivekananda
5. Stripurushtulna is a book that was written by.
  - a. Tarabai Shinde
  - b. Pandita Ramabai
  - c. J.L. Nehru
  - d. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar
6. Who formed the 'Brahmo Samaj'?
  - a. Raja Ram Mohan Roy
  - b. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

- c. Keshav Dutt  
d. Rabindranath Tagore
7. Who founded the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College?
- a. Muhammad Ali  
b. Shaukat Ali  
c. Sayyid Ahmed Khan  
d. Deoband School
8. Who founded the Satyashodhak Samaj?
- a. Sri Narayan Guru  
b. Jyotirao Phule  
c. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar  
d. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker
9. Which low caste did the Sri Narayan Guru belonged to?
- a. Ezhavas  
b. Mahar  
c. Madigas  
d. Agarias
10. Who wrote these words "Isn't a woman's life is a dear to her as yours is to you. Her face is not be seen, a widowed woman is a bad woman"?
- a. Pandita Ramabai  
b. Tarabai Shinde  
c. Begum Rokeya Shekhawat Hossain  
d. Rashsundari Devi
11. What was the occupation of Madigas?
- a. Plantation  
b. Sewing Sandals  
c. Cleaning work  
d. None of these
12. Name the countries where the lower caste people went for plantation work.
- a. Mauritius  
b. Trinidad

- c. Indonesia
- d. All of these

13. What did Raja Ram Mohan Roy do to oppose the caste system?

- a. Translated an old Buddhist text
- b. Translated an old Mughal text
- c. Wrote an Autobiography
- d. None of these

14. What formed the basis for the division of Indian society?

- a. Gender
- b. Castes
- c. Colour
- d. None of these

15. Name any two religious communities in India that allowed men to marry more than one wife in the early 19th century?

- a. Hindu
- b. Muslims
- c. Both a and b
- d. None of these

### Very Short:

1. Why are social reformers described so?
2. How did reformers bring changes in society?
3. What do you mean by 'sad'?
4. Who were known as Vaishyas?
5. Who was Raja Rammohun Roy?
6. What was hook swinging festival?
7. Who was Mumtaz Ali?
8. Who published the book named Stripurushtulna? What is it about?
9. How did widow's home at Poona help the widows?
10. What was the contribution of Christian missionaries in spreading education among tribal groups and lower castes?
11. Why do people view leather workers with contempt?

## Short Questions:

1. What did Raja Rammohun Roy do to end the practice of sati?
2. Give an account of the movement that spread in different parts of the country in favour of widow remarriage. Did the movement get success?
3. What do you know about Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai? What did they do for improving the condition of women?
4. Give a brief description of movements that were organised by people from within the lower castes against caste discrimination.
5. Who was E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker? What, did he do to improve the condition of the untouchables?
6. What was the childhood experience of Dr Ambedkar because of his belonging to the Mahar Community?
7. What was the argument of E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker about the untouchables?

## Long Questions:

1. Why were changes necessary in Indian society?
2. How did women involve themselves in their upliftment?
3. Explain the Singh Sabha Movement in brief.
4. How challenging was the life for Dr B.R. Ambedkar during his childhood when he experienced caste prejudice in everyday life? How did he challenge the problems faced by low caste people?

## Answer Key:

### MCQ:

1. (d) Abolition of Caste
2. (b) Ghasidas.
3. (a) Brahmo Samaj
4. (b) Swami Dayanand
5. (a) Tarabai Shinde
6. (a) Raja Ram Mohan Roy
7. (c) Sayyid Ahmed Khan
8. (b) Jyotirao Phule
9. (a) Ezhavas

- 10.(b) Tarabai Shinde
- 11.(b) Sewing Sandals
- 12.(d) All of these
- 13.(a) Translated an old Buddhist text
- 14.(b) Castes
- 15.(c) Both a and b
- 16.(c) William Jones

### **Very Short Answer:**

1. Social reformers are described so because they felt that some changes were essential in society and unjust practices needed to be rooted out.
2. They brought changes in society by persuading people to give up old practices and adopt a new way of life.
3. Widows who chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands were known as 'sati', meaning virtuous woman.
4. Traders and moneylenders were known as Vaishyas.
5. Raja Rammohun Roy was a learned social reformer. He was well versed in Sanskrit, Persian and several other Indian and European languages. He raised voice against the practice of sati and got it rooted out.
6. It was a popular festival in which devotees underwent a peculiar form of suffering as part of ritual worship. With hooks pierced through their skin they swung themselves on a wheel.
7. Mumtaz Ali was a social reformer who reinterpreted verses from the Koran to argue for the education of women.
8. Tarabai Shinde published Stripurushtulna. It is about the social differences between men and women.
9. It trained them so that they could manage financial support for themselves.
10. These missionaries set up schools for tribal groups and lower caste children. Here, they were equipped with some skills to make their way into a new world
11. Leather workers work with dead animals which are seen as dirty and polluting. Hence, people see them with contempt.

### **Short Answer:**

**Ans: 1.** Raja Rammohan Roy was a great social reformer. He moved to see the tyranny of old practices that were deeply rooted in the Indian society. Burning of widows on the

funeral pyre of their husbands was one such old practice which, Rammohan Roy felt, needed to be rooted out immediately. He began a campaign against this. As he had deep knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and several other Indian and European languages, he tried to show through his writings that the practice of sati had no sanction in ancient texts. He got support from the British officials who had also begun to criticise Indian traditions and customs by the early 19th century. Finally, in 1829, the practice of sati was banned.

**Ans: 2.** The movement in favour of widow remarriage spread in different parts of the country by the second half of the 19th century. Veerasalingam Pantulu formed an association for widow remarriage in the Telugu-speaking areas of the Madras Presidency. Around the same time young intellectuals and reformers in Bombay pledged themselves to work for the same cause. In the north the founder of the Arya Samaj Swami Dayanand Saraswati also supported widow remarriage.

However, the movement did not get much success. The number of widows who actually remarried remained low. Those who remarried were not easily accepted in the society. The conservative people never approved the new law

**Ans: 3.** Tarabai Shinde was a woman who got education at home at Poona. She is better known for publishing a book named *Stripurushtulna* meaning a comparison between women and men. She, in this book, criticises the social differences between men and women. Pandita Ramabai was a great scholar of Sanskrit. She found Hinduism very oppressive towards women and wrote a book about the pathetic condition of Hindu women belonging to upper caste. She started a widow's home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been maltreated by their husband's relatives. Here women were given training to make them self-dependent.

**Ans: 4.** By the second half of the 19th century, people from within the lower castes began to raise voice against caste discrimination. They organised movements against this practice and demanded social equality and justice. The Satnami movement became famous in Central India. It was initiated by Ghasidas, who came from a low caste, worked among the leather workers and 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 discrimination. Shri Narayana Guru belonged to Ezhavas, a low caste in present-day Kerala. He proclaimed the ideals unity of all people within one sect, a single caste and one god. By organising these movements the leaders coming from low-caste tried to create awareness amongst the lower castes.

**Ans: 5.** E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker belonged to a middle-class family. He had been an ascetic in his early life and had studied Sanskrit scriptures carefully. Afterwards, he became a member of the Congress but quit it when he found that at a feast organised by nationalists, seating arrangements followed caste discrimination, i.e., the lower castes were made to sit at a distance from the upper-castes. He founded Self Respect Movement

which inspired untouchables to fight for their dignity. He argued that untouchables were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by Brahmans. He felt that all religious authorities saw social divisions and inequality as God-given. Untouchables had to free themselves from all religions to achieve equal social status.

**Ans: 6.** Dr Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. In school he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground. He was not even allowed to drink water from taps that upper-caste children used.

**Ans: 7.** E.V. Ramaswamy argued that untouchables were the upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by Brahmans. He felt that all religious authorities saw social divisions and inequality as God-given. Untouchables had to free themselves from all religions in order to achieve social equality.

### Long Answer:

**Ans: 1.** Indian society had been a prey to many evil practices for a long time. Men and women were treated differently. Women were subjected to many restrictions. They were not allowed to go to schools. They were not allowed to choose their husbands. Child-marriage was an established custom in the society. Most children were married off at an early age. Both Hindu and Muslim men could have many more than one wife. In some parts of the country, sati was in practice. Those widows were praised who chose death by burning themselves on the funeral pyre of their husbands. Women's rights to property were also restricted.

One more evil practice that had crippled Indian society was that all people did not enjoy equal status. The upper-caste, consisted of Brahmans and Kshatriyas, availed all privileges. But other than these people were subjected to exploitation. The untouchables, who did menial works, were considered polluting. They were not allowed to enter temples, draw water from the well used by the upper castes. They were seen as inferior human beings.

These evil customs and practices had eclipsed the progress of society. Hence, debates and discussions began to take place from the early 19th century, with the development of new forms of communications. For the first time, books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets were printed. They spread awareness among the common mass.

Social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, came forward and took initiatives to bring changes in society by abolishing the evil practices one after another.

**Ans: 2.** By the end of the 19th century, Indian women themselves began to work for their upliftment. They began to get higher education in universities. Some of them trained

to be doctors, some became teachers. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the status of women in society. The name of Tarabai Shinde is worth-mentioning here. She got education at home at Poona. She published a book, *Stripurushtulna*, meaning a comparison between men and women. She criticised the social differences between men and women. Another woman, Pandita Ramabai, was a great scholar of Sanskrit.

She criticised Hinduism which was so oppressive towards women. She wrote a book about the miserable lives of uppercaste Hindu women. She established a widow home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been ill-treated in their families. From the early 20th century, Muslim women such the Begums of Bhopal and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain played active role in spreading education among Muslim girls. They founded schools for them. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossairi fearlessly criticised the conservative ideas. She argued that religious leaders of every faith accorded an inferior position to women.

The orthodox Hindus and Muslims got alarmed to see all this. Several Hindu nationalists felt that Hindu women were adopting Western ways which would corrupt Hindu culture and erode family values. Orthodox Muslims were equally worried about the impact of these changes. Unaware of all these, women, from the early 20th century, began to form political associations, pressure groups to push through laws for female suffrage and better health care and education for them. Some of them even joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements from the 1920s.

**Ans: 3.** The Singh Sabha Movement is a reform organization of the Sikhs, the First Singh Sabha were founded at Amritsar in 1873 and at Lahore in 1879. The Sabhas aimed to rid Sikhism of superstitions, caste distinctions and practices seen by them as non-Sikh. They promoted education among the Sikhs, often combining modern instruction with Sikh teachings.

**Ans: 4.** Ambedkar was born into a Mahar family. As a child he experienced what caste prejudice meant in everyday life. In school he was forced to sit outside the classroom on the ground and was not allowed to drink water from taps that upper caste children used.

After finishing school, he got a fellowship to go to the U.S. for higher studies. On his return to India in 1919, he wrote extensively about upper caste power in contemporary society.

In 1927 Ambedkar started a temple entry movement. The movement of temple entry was participated by Mahar caste followers. Brahman priests were outraged when the Dalits used water from the temple tank. Ambedkar led 3 such movements for temple entry between 1927 and 1935. His aim was to make everyone see the power of caste prejudices within the society.