



Mains Practice Question

Q. Pre-Independence Women's Movements were led and dominated by men. Critically examine. (250 words)

11 Nov, 2019 GS Paper 1 Indian Society

Approach

- Introduce the answer by mentioning conditions prevailing in India in the pre-independence era.
- Mention the reasons for the eruption of women's movement.
- Mention some women's movements initiated by men and women.
- Conclude the answer by highlighting the role played by women.

Introduction

Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism. The priests exercised an overwhelming and, indeed, unhealthy influence on the minds of the people and their monopoly of scriptural knowledge imparted a deceptive character to all religious systems.

The major reform movements for women in the 19th century were led by men as men were exposed to western education and thought earlier on. However, women became actively involved in the process towards the end of the 19th century.

Body

Reason for Eruption of Women's Movement

- The social reform movements for women mainly erupted due to the encounter between tradition and modernity i.e. Indian and British respectively.
- A significant aspect of this encounter was the difference in the condition of the women in the two cultures.
- Certain social customs and practices existing during the time came to be looked down upon as barbaric and inhumane which includes sati, child-marriage, female infanticide etc.

Social Reforms Movement for Women led by Men

- **Sati Movement:** Raja Ram Mohan Roy described 'Sati' as "**murder according to every shastra**".
- It was only due to ardent effort of Raja Ram Mohan Roy that **Bengal Sati Regulation Act** was passed to criminalize the practice of Sati in 1829.
- **Widow Remarriage Movement:** The movement for widow remarriage was led by Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar. In 1856, the Widow Remarriage Act was passed to protect the isolation of Hindu widows.
- Karsondas Mulji started the Satya Prakash in Gujarati in 1852 to advocate widow remarriage.
- In the 1850s, Vishnu Shastri Pandit founded the Widow Remarriage Association.
- **Controlling Child Marriage: The Age of Consent Act (1891)** forbade the marriage of girls

below the age of 12, was passed due to relentless efforts of **B.M. Malabari**.

- **Women Education:** The Bethune School, founded by **J.E.D. Bethune**, in 1849, was the first fruit of the powerful movement for women's education.
- Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was associated with no less than 35 girls' schools in Bengal and is considered as one of the pioneers of women's education.
- The Indian Women's University imparting education to women, was set up by Professor **D.K. Karve** in 1916.

Several initiatives taken by women are:

- The first major Indian women's organisation was set up by **Sarla Devi Chaudhrani** in 1910 in Allahabad.
- Its objectives included promotion of education for women, abolition of the purdah system and improvement in the socio-economic and political status of women all over India.
- **Pandita Ramabai Saraswati** founded the Arya Mahila Samaj to serve the cause of women. She pleaded for improvement in the educational status of Indian women before the English Education Commission which was referred to Queen Victoria. This resulted in medical education for women which started in Lady Dufferin College.
- In 1925, the **National Council of Women in India**, a national branch of the International Council of Women, was formed.
- Mehribai Tata played a vital role in its formation and advancement. She opined that the purdah system, caste differences and lack of education prevented women from working to solve societal problems.
- The **All India Women's Conference (AIWC)**, founded by Margaret Cousins in 1927.

Conclusion

Though women were not actively associated with reform movement in early phase, but as education advances in the later phase of the 19th century, women became actively involved. When the nationalist vibes got deeply entrenched, they went on to play a significant role in freedom struggle.

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