

CBSE Class 8 Social Science History Notes

Chapter 8 - Women, Caste and Reform

CBSE Class 8 Chapter 8 of History deals with the concepts related to Women, Caste and Reform. It explains elaborately about the condition of women, how people were discriminated against based on their caste, education for girls, the Non-Brahman movement, etc. This chapter will make students understand how things were different two hundred years ago. To help students score well in their History exam, we at BYJU'S provide CBSE Class 8 Social Science History notes for Chapter 8 to understand the concepts better and also perform excellently and score higher grades in the examination.

Overview

In today's modern world, girls go to school and study with boys. After growing up, they go to colleges and universities and take up jobs after that. Before getting legally married, they have to be adults and can marry anyone they like, irrespective of their caste and community, and widows can remarry too. All women can vote and stand for elections. But these rights were not enjoyed by poor people as they had little or no access to education.

But, things were different two hundred years ago. At an early stage, most children were married. In some parts of the country, women were forced to practice sati. Women's rights to property were also restricted and there was no access to education.

According to the caste system, Brahmins and Kshatriyas were considered as "upper castes". Others, such as traders and moneylenders (often referred to as Vaishyas) were placed after them. Then came peasants, and artisans such as weavers and potters referred to as Shudras. The lowest rung were those who laboured to keep cities and villages clean or worked under upper castes. The upper castes considered these groups as "untouchable".

Working Towards Change

Debates and discussions about social customs and practices took on a new character. One important reason was the development of new forms of communication like books, newspapers, magazines, leaflets and pamphlets. All kinds of issues like social, political, economic and religious could be debated and discussed by men and sometimes by women in the new cities.

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) founded the Brahmo Sabha (later known as the Brahmo Samaj) in Calcutta. Rammohun Roy felt that changes were necessary in society, and unjust practices needed to be done away with. He was keen to spread the knowledge of Western education in the country and bring about greater freedom and equality for women.

Changing the lives of widows

Rammohun Roy began a campaign against the practice of sati. He tried to show through his writings that the practice of widow burning had no sanction in ancient texts. In 1829, sati was banned. Later reformers adopted the strategy of Rammohun to challenge a practice that seemed harmful and tried to find a verse or sentence in the ancient sacred texts that supported their point of view.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, through ancient texts, suggested that widows could remarry. In 1856, a law was passed permitting widow remarriage. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the

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movement of widow remarriage spread to other parts of the country. Swami Dayanand Saraswati founded the Arya Samaj, to support widow remarriage.

Girls begin going to school

Education for girls was necessary to improve their condition. In the mid-nineteenth century, the first schools were opened. Many feared that schools would take girls away from home and prevent them from doing their domestic duties. To reach schools girls had to travel through public spaces. Many people felt that girls should stay away from public spaces. So, most educated women were taught at home by liberal fathers or husbands.

In the latter part of the century, Arya Samaj established schools for girls in Punjab and Jyotirao Phule established schools in Maharashtra. In aristocratic Muslim households, women learnt to read the Koran in Arabic taught by women who came home to teach. The first Urdu novels began to be written from the late nineteenth century.

Women write about women

In the early twentieth century, Begums of Bhopal played a notable role in promoting education among women. They founded a primary school for girls at Aligarh. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain started schools for Muslim girls in Patna and Calcutta. Indian women started going to universities, by the 1880s where they were trained to be doctors and some became teachers. Pandita Ramabai wrote a book about the miserable lives of upper-caste Hindu women.

Many Hindu nationalists felt that Hindu women were adopting Western ways and that this would corrupt Hindu culture and erode family values. By the end of the nineteenth century, women wrote books, edited magazines, founded schools and training centres, and set up women's associations. They also formed political groups to push through laws for female suffrage (the right to vote) and better health care and education for women. In the twentieth century, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose extended their support to demands for greater equality and freedom for women.

Caste and Social Reform

The Prarthana Samaj adhered to the tradition of Bhakti that believed in spiritual equality of all castes. The Paramhans Mandali founded in Bombay in 1840 worked for the abolition of caste. During the course of the nineteenth century, Christian missionaries began setting up schools for tribal groups and "lower"-caste children.

At the same time, the poor from the villages and small towns, people from low castes, began moving to the cities where there was a new demand for labour. Some also went to work in plantations in Assam, Mauritius, Trinidad and Indonesia. For the poor and the people from low castes, it was an opportunity to get away from the oppressive hold that upper-caste landowners exercised over their lives and the daily humiliation they suffered.

Demands for equality and justice

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By the second half of the nineteenth century, Non-Brahman castes began organising movements against caste discrimination and demanded social equality and justice.

The Satnami movement was founded by Ghasidas who worked as the leather workers and organised a movement to improve their social status. In eastern Bengal, Haridas Thakur questioned Brahmanical texts that supported the caste system. Shri Narayana Guru proclaimed the ideals of unity for his people. He argued against treating people unequally on the basis of caste differences.

Gulamgiri

Jyotirao Phule was born in 1827, who developed his own ideas about the injustices of caste society. According to him, Brahmins were Aryans considered as foreigners, came from outside the subcontinent, and defeated and subjugated those who had lived here from before the coming of the Aryans. Phule said that the upper castes had no right to their land and power.

He claimed that before Aryan rule there existed a golden age when warrior-peasants tilled the land and ruled the Maratha countryside fairly. He proposed that Shudras and Ati Shudras should unite to challenge caste discrimination. The Satyashodhak Samaj, founded by Phule, propagated caste equality.

In 1873, Phule wrote a book named *Gulamgiri*, meaning slavery. Ten years before this, the American Civil War led to the end of slavery in America. He dedicated his book to all those Americans who had fought to free slaves. Phule was concerned about the plight of upper-caste women, the miseries of the labourer, and the humiliation of the low castes.

Who could enter temples?

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

The Non-Brahman movement

The non-Brahman movement started initiated by those non-Brahman castes that had acquired access to education, wealth and influence. They argued that Brahmins were heirs of Aryan invaders from the north who had conquered southern lands from the original inhabitants of the region – the indigenous Dravidian races.

E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or Periyar, joined Congress and left it when he found out that the lower castes were made to sit at a distance from the upper castes. Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement and argued that untouchables were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by Brahmins.

Periyar was a critic of Hindu scriptures, especially the Codes of Manu, the ancient lawgiver, and the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana. According to him, these texts had been used to establish the authority of Brahmins over lower castes and the domination of men over women.

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These assertions did not go unchallenged which lead to rethinking and some self-criticism among upper-caste nationalist leaders. But orthodox Hindu society reacted by founding Sanatan Dharma Sabhas and the Bharat Dharma Mahamandal in the north, and associations like the Brahman

Sabha in Bengal. The objective of these associations was to uphold caste distinctions as a cornerstone of Hinduism, and show how this was sanctified by scriptures.

