

# Behramji Malabari

Behramji Malabari was a poet, author, publicist and social reformer who would advocate ardently against child marriage and for better protection of the rights of women.

Amongst his social causes, he is known for fighting for India's 1st woman doctor and arguing for a raise in the age of consent for females. His advocacy for the latter led to the passage of the Age of Consent Act, 1891.

This article will give details about the life and achievements of Behramji Malabari within the context of the IAS Exam.

## Early Life of Behramji Malabari

Behramji Merwanji Malabari was born on 18 May 1853 at Vadodara. His father Dhanjibhai Mehta passed away when Behramji was six or seven. His mother shifted to Surat where he was educated at an Irish Presbyterian missionary school.

Behramji was adopted by Mewarnji Nanbhai Malabari, who married Behramji's mother. A childless owner of a drugstore, Nanabhai Malabari traded in sandalwood and spices from the Malabar Coast, hence the name 'Malabari'.

Behramji's mother, Bhikibai was always ready to help out the poor in the neighborhood, running from house to house to tend to sick children with medicinal herbs, with little Behramji often accompanying her.

She would help out anyone regardless of caste or religion. Bhikibai passed away when Behramji was 12 years old. This would have a profound effect as in his own words "I became an old man. All my past associations were discarded".

Following the completion of his schooling at the Irish Presbyterian Mission School, he made his way to Bombay at the age of 15. There Behramji took up a teaching job to support himself. He had an avid interest in Literature and Poetry.

He would publish some of these poems under the title "The Indian Muse in English Garb" which caught the attention of many stalwarts in the literary world such as Alfred Tennyson and Max Muller.

Despite the attention, he would stick to writing for local newspapers. His career in journalism began when he was introduced by Sir Cowasji Jehangir to Martin Woods, then editor of Times of India. Following his stint in Times of India he would become the editor of The Indian Spectator

Through his work, he advocated the rights of widows, the reason for abolition of child marriage, and other such issues through his written work and meetings with senior politicians.

## Work as a Social Reformer

To put forth his ideas, Behramji Malabari penned his thoughts on the issues faced by Hindu women in a series of letters compiled in a long document named *Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood*.

The long document was sent to many Englishmen and Indians in positions of authority such as Lord Ripon and other members of the British government. He listed out all the social evils such as child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage that affected Indian women. In his letters he blamed the priestly class for misinterpreting the scriptures for their own selfish reasons.

It was in 1885, that would make him well known as a social reformer. In that year, a girl named Rukhmabai was ordered by a judge to return to her husband or go to jail.

However, Rukhmabai had no intention of going to her husband, as she had every desire to complete her education. She flatly refused her husband's demands to live with him and in return he filed a case in the Bombay high court for restitution of conjugal rights of a husband over his wife.

Her refusal caused quite a stir, catching attention among many Indian and English reformers, among them, Behramji Malabari. He wrote many editorials that supported Rukhmabai's case. His detailed editorials gave the Rukhmabai case the prominence it needed.

Behramji travelled to London for the first time around the same time and set up a series of meetings with leaders to appeal for the "rights of Indian daughters". When he returned from London he met with the advocate Kashinath Trimbak Telang to discuss the amendment of the Penal Code which would raise the age of consent. It was agreed that the age of consent was raised from 10 years to 12.

Thanks to Behramji's consistent efforts since Rukhmabai's case first came to light (which he himself played a role in), the government passed the Age of Consent Act in 1891, which raised the age of consent for girls in both Britain as well as India. He also played a similar role in the passage of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1885 in the UK, where the age of consent was raised from 13 years to 16 years of age.

## Legacy of Behramji Malabari

Behramji Malabari would pass away in 1912 at Shimla. He would be conferred the following honours:

After serving society and country as a reformer for many decades, he died in 1912 in Simla.

- Behramji Malabari was felicitated with the Kaiser-e-Hind gold medal in 1900 AD for his immense services in social reforms.
- 'The Indian Eye On English Life' and 'Gujarat and the Gujaratis' were great literary works by Behramji Malabari.
- Being a top journalist of that time, he served 'The East and West' paper as an editor.
- In 1880 he acquired the Indian Spectator paper and edited it for 20 years. Later the Indian Spectator got merged in The Voice of India.
- Behramji founded Seva Sadan in 1885 with an objective to fight against social evils in a more organised and effective way.

## Frequently Asked Question about Behramji Malabari

### **Who was Behramji Malabari?**

Behramji Malabari was a Parsee journalist and writer. He was an advocate of women's social reform in India and a champion of women's suffrage in India. He met Mary Carpenter on one of her visits to India in 1875 and dedicated The Indian Muse in English Garb, published in 1876, to her.