



THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN 19TH CENTURY INDIAN SOCIETY

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Abstract:

In ancient times, the status of women in India was very high. They enjoyed equal status with men in personality development, education, marriage, and property. Women were considered the goal of all prosperity. The Rig Veda states, "Wife is the home." Manu wrote in this context, "Yatra naryastu pujoyante ramante tatra devata," meaning, "Where women are worshipped, gods reside there." As a daughter, she was called "Duhita," meaning milkmaid, and as a wife, she was called "Dampati," meaning co-owner of the household. Learned women like Gargi and Maitreyi were seers of mantras. Women had full rights to education. No yajna or religious ceremony was considered incomplete without them. They had the right to choose their own husband; marriage was not compulsory.

Key Words: *Nari*, Colonial society, India

Introduction:

Over time, their status deteriorated. Their condition declined during the post-Vedic and Smriti eras. By the medieval period, their condition had deteriorated, their independence was lost, and their sphere of influence was confined to the four walls of their homes. Disgusting and evil practices such as purdah, child marriage, female infanticide, female infanticide, polygamy, and sati became part of life. Widow remarriage ceased to take place. Education for women became unnecessary. Inter-caste marriages were almost completely banned. Polygamy was prevalent among the elite in Bengal. Mahatma Gandhi described this plight of women as a "paralysis" within the social structure.

The condition of women was not good in the global context either. Their condition also declined during the medieval and modern periods. They were also backward in various areas of life. For example, in 558 AD, the Synod, a meeting of Christian priests, raised the question of whether women were human or not. From ancient times, Aristotle to modern thinkers like Milton and Rousseau, they considered women inferior to men. In 19th-century

Britain, the conditions of women working in factories and factories were poor. They lagged behind in education. Despite the enactment of three important suffrage laws, British women were deprived of the right to vote.

Major evils prevalent among women:

Many evils and practices were prevalent among women. Some of these are:

Purdah system: The practice of purdah generally began during the period of Muslim invasions in India. Women's freedom to go outside the home was destroyed, and their sphere of activity was confined to the four walls of the home. Muslim rulers and nobles had a harem system. To prevent invaders from forcibly taking beautiful girls into their harems, society considered it appropriate to keep women and girls at home. In fact, this fear even encouraged child marriage. However, this practice of purdah did not exist among the lower castes. Women in South India were free from this evil practice. This evil practice stunted women's mobility and personality development, and increased illiteracy and ignorance. A modern writer believes that it also led to the rise of many diseases among women, especially the dreaded disease of tuberculosis¹.

Female infanticide: This evil practice was prevalent among the wealthy and upper classes. It was primarily prevalent among the Jarija Rajputs of Banaras, Kathiawar, and Kutch, the Rathores of Jodhpur, the Kachhwaha Rajputs of Jaipur, the Bedis of Jalandhar, certain tribes, and Muslims such as the Mewatis. The reasons for this were fear of foreign invasions and the high cost of dowry. Among many Rajputs, bowing one's head at a wedding was considered a disgrace to their dignity. Therefore, to prevent this opportunity, the girl child was killed. Upon birth, the mother was killed by applying opium or poison to her breast. In Punjab, sometimes, if there were multiple female children in a household, they would be killed with the vow, "Go, send your brother." But this evil practice was often kept secret and was not easily known.

Child Marriage: While in ancient times, girls had the right to choose their own husbands, and some could even remain celibate throughout their lives, by the Middle Ages, these rights were no longer available. Furthermore, the age of marriage gradually declined. Security, social, and moral reasons can be cited for child marriage. Society considered it a moral obligation to marry girls before they reached adulthood. Some people were also keen on early marriage for economic reasons. The joint family system also encouraged this practice. Grandparents, grandparents, or elders often desired to see their grandchildren married. This evil practice caused Indian girls to age prematurely, leaving many child widows, and making their lives extremely difficult.

¹ Bose P.N., A History of Hindu Civilization during the British Rule, Vol. II

Polygamy: This evil practice was prevalent among both Hindus and Muslims. Generally, the followers of this practice were wealthy and affluent. In the 19th century, it was prevalent among the Brahmins of Bengal and Mithila, known as the Kulin. Under this system, a Brahmin could have multiple wives. There were also parents who would give all their daughters in marriage to a Kulin. Polygamy had already been accepted among Muslims. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar tried to stop it, but this abhorrent practice remained very prevalent in Bengal.

Prohibition of widow remarriage: In ancient times, widow remarriage was not a problem, but Gradually Widow remarriage became disrespected. By the 11th century, widow remarriage became less common. Alberuni described the prohibition on widow remarriage. In fact, this prohibition was prevalent among the upper classes. According to the 1891 census, 19 percent of Hindu women in India were widows. In his book, P.N. Bose analyzed widows from the age of 5 to 30. With the increasing number of widows, their plight also worsened. At an 1892 social conference, Kashinath Govindnath described their wretched condition. When a widow was born, the barber would shave her head; she would cry and sob, but no one paid any attention to her.² For a year, she could not leave her house. It was considered bad for her to be on the road. According to one writer, her only wish was to go to Banaras and leave her body in the Ganges. Many widows in Bengal ate only one meal a day. Undoubtedly, a widow's life was full of hardship and suffering. Sati: The practice of Sati was prevalent in India since ancient times. Numerous examples of this practice are found in ancient history. However, this practice was completely voluntary. It was not part of any religious activity, but it gradually took on a rigid and rigid form. This practice was generally prevalent in Rajputana and Bengal, with only a few exceptions in other regions. According to this custom, upon the death of a husband, his wife would immolate herself, either along with his body or separately. Some medieval scholars have described the nature of Sati in detail. Usually, the woman would be taken to the cremation site in a procession and burned to the sound of drums. Sati was considered a symbol of her chastity, or of her unwavering love for her husband. Such women were revered, and sacred places named after them, known as "Sati Sthals," were established. Emperor Akbar, the Sikh Guru Amardas, and the Maratha Peshawars attempted to stop the practice of Sati. This horrific practice made life difficult for women. Most women were forced to burn themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres. In fact, this practice was also prevalent based on ancient superstitions and orthodoxies. It is noteworthy that a recent scholar, based on research into Rajasthan history, has stated that there is not a single instance where all the surviving queens or

² Puri B.N. and Chopra, P.N., Social, Cultural, and Economic History of India History (New Delhi, 1996)

concubines of a ruler committed sati upon his death. On the contrary, it is known that many queens lived long after their husbands' deaths. They were granted estates for their maintenance, so this practice was not originally mandatory.

Prostitution: Prostitution has been prevalent in India since ancient times. Many texts in ancient literature describe it in detail. Kautilya used the term "Ganika" to describe them. Prostitutes also received government patronage for singing, dancing, and playing instruments. Their performances were also organized on special occasions. The Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj contributed to the awareness against it. Keshav Chandra Sen made special efforts in this direction. In 1875, he met with Josephine Butler of England and pledged to help stop it, but the situation remained largely unchanged throughout the 19th century. Later, in the 20th century, the League of Nations formulated a plan to stop it. The first major legislation in India was the Bombay Prevention of Prostitution Act in Bombay in 1923, and many subsequent laws followed.

Devdasi System: The practice of Devdasi in temples is also very ancient. It is not known when this practice began. It was prevalent in South India, especially in Orissa and Tamil Nadu. It is possible that some people would dedicate their daughters to temples to fulfill a vow. By the 19th century, it had become a horrific and despicable practice. In the words of scholar Satyendra Tripathi, "It was used by the abbots to satisfy their lust." Christian missionaries also made efforts to stop this practice. Governor Vanlock of Madras (1890-1896) banned it. In the early twentieth century, further attempts were made to eradicate it through regulations³.

Dankini, or witch-hunting, was a practice based entirely on superstition and prevalent not only in India but also in England and some European countries. In many Indian villages, two or three women were often considered witches whose gaze was considered destructive to children, newlywed brides, or pregnant women. These witches were often ugly, elderly, and of lower castes. These witches were usually killed or beaten to death. Thus, hundreds of women in various villages across India fell victim to superstition.

Illiteracy among women: Since the Medieval era, the mobility of women's education had almost ceased. Only a few royal families and high officials were provided with education behind the curtains in their mansions; women were denied even primary education. While government reports from 1822-1835 detail the development of indigenous primary and higher education in the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay presidencies, there is no mention of the

³ Gupta, Shiv Kumar, Social and Economic History of Modern India (Jaipur, 1999)

education of girls. The plight of women can be gauged from the description of the above-mentioned prevalent social evils. Besides these, other practices such as the sale of girls, slavery, human sacrifice, the prohibition of inter-caste marriage, and the right of women to own property were also prevalent. Many inconsistent practices, such as the lack of ownership of property, were prevalent.

Efforts to Improve the Condition of Women in the 19th Century

In the latter half of the 19th century, some efforts were made to improve the condition of women in India. Many prominent reformers and various reform movements played a key role in this. The British government also contributed to some extent in curbing these evil practices. Some of the major reforms were as follows:

1. **Prohibition of Female Infanticide:** British administrators took the initiative to curb this evil practice. In 1789, Duncan, the British Resident of Banaras, took notice of this issue. He discovered that this practice was prevalent among princes and royal Rajputs. Therefore, under Section 21 of the Bengal Act of 1795 and later Section 3 of the Act of 1804, female infanticide was declared illegal and unlawful in British territories. Under pressure from British administrators, it was outlawed in several states of Rajputana between 1831 and 1844. In 1870, a law was passed to this effect, making birth registration mandatory for every child.
2. **Acceptance of Inter-Caste Marriages:** Due to the complexities of the caste system, inter-caste marriages had almost ceased. Brahma Samaj leader Keshav Chandra Sen made efforts in this direction, and in 1872, the Civil Marriage Act was passed, which recognized inter-caste marriages, but it was not very effective.
3. **Married Women's Property Law:** Until now, women had no rights over their husband's property. Therefore, their widowhood after their husband's death was very painful. In 1874, the Married Women's Property Law was enacted, which somewhat improved the condition of women and improved their economic situation.
4. **Movement against Sati:** Many government and non-government efforts were made to stop the practice of Sati. Raja Rammohan Roy undoubtedly played a significant role in this. This evil practice became known and efforts were made against it in the last decades of the 18th century. Christian missionaries described its cruelty in their reports, but the East India Company was reluctant to interfere with Indian social customs. However, British officials increasingly urged the Governor-General to enact legislation against it. Lord Cornwallis, Sir John Shore, and Lord Wellesley were pressured, but their policies remained unchanged. During 1813-1817, some efforts were made to curb the practice of sati. An 1813 regulation empowered magistrates and other officials to prevent any woman from committing sati if she was forced to do so, or if she was a minor or pregnant. This could lead to police action. The 1817 regulation also included regulations for the use of force, for

the presence of minor children, or for the absence of childcare. Under these regulations, it was mandatory to report a woman's act of sati to the police, otherwise her relatives could be fined or imprisoned. However, these regulations were merely orders and did not have formal legal sanction. Therefore, these regulations by British administrators can be considered initial efforts made during the reign of Lord Hastings. Even during Lord Hastings' tenure, the demand for legislation against the practice of sati grew stronger. In 1824, judges of the Nizamat courts pressed for legislation. Similar efforts were made in 1826 and 1827, but Governor-General Amherst believed that the above restrictions and the development of education would end the practice, but public opinion was still not in favor.

The decisive step in this direction was taken by Lord William Bentinck, who became Governor-General of India in July 1828. Even before his arrival, the Court of Directors had granted the Company the right to legislate in this regard. On the other hand, Raja Rammohan Roy, through non-governmental efforts, launched a vigorous campaign against it. In fact, in 1811, his elder brother Jagmohan died. His wife was forced to commit sati by society. Throughout his life, Raja Rammohan Roy could not forget his sister-in-law's plight. It is said that whenever he attended a funeral procession, whenever someone said "Ram Ram Satya," he would chant, "Sati Pratha, Ban!" Thus, banning sati became a central part of his life.⁴

Before enacting a law against sati, Lord William Bentinck secretly spoke with numerous government officials, judges, military officers, Christian missionaries, and local notables, garnering their support. Lord William Bentinck also consulted Raja Rammohan Roy. Roy expressed concern about the conservatives' support for the practice and was reluctant to abolish it entirely. He feared that its abolition might lead to an organized rebellion. In fact, Raja Rammohan Roy was astonished by the courage of Lord William Bentinck. There is no doubt that he was completely dedicated to ending the practice of Sati and had made various efforts to achieve this. Seeing the favorable atmosphere of opposition to the practice of Sati, Lord William Bentinck proposed its abolition before his council on November 8, 1829, which was unanimously passed by Rule 17 on December 4, 1829. The prohibition of Sati became a law. Under this law, any assistance in the act of Sati was declared a punishable offense. The same decree was also promulgated in Bombay and Madras by 1830. This law ended this centuries-old evil practice, but Occasional examples of this are still seen today. The law announced by Lord William Bentinck provoked a strong reaction. Conservative leaders Raja Radhakanta Dev, Maharaja Kali Krishna, and other supporters opposed it, calling it "against the scriptures." On January 14, 1830,

⁴ Mukherjee, Rabindranath Modern Social Institutions (Delhi, 1975)

they collected 800 signatures and submitted a memorandum to the Governor General. A religious assembly was held at the Sanskrit College in Calcutta to protest the law, and an appeal was made to the Privy Council. Raja Rammohan Roy, who was in England at the time, spoke against the practice of Sati in the Privy Council. As a result, Raja Radhakanta Dev's appeal to the Privy Council was rejected on July 11, 1832. Consequently, the law came into effect in 1833. Through the efforts of government officials, laws were enacted in various states. Between 1836 and 1848, laws were enacted in various states, but it has not been completely abolished. Early Efforts for Widow Marriage Two great reformers made significant efforts to promote widow marriage. They were Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Pandit Vishnu Shastri. However, some efforts were made in this regard even in the 18th century.

In 1756, Raja Rajvallabh of Dhaka wished to marry off his widowed daughter, but the Pandits did not approve. However, widow marriage remained prevalent in some forms in some parts of India, and the Peshwas revived it. Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur and Rana Zalim Singh of Kota recognized widow marriage. The renowned reformer Raja Rammohan Roy founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1814 and discussed widow marriage. Widow marriage became a major topic of discussion in 1819. In 1822, Raja Rammohan Roy made society aware of the plight of widows. By 1835, the issue of widow marriage had taken the form of a movement.

The question was, if a husband can remarry after his wife's death, why can't a woman remarry after her husband's death? Samachar Darpan detailed their enslaved condition, and thus, the question became a major topic of newspapers and magazines like Samachar Darpan, Bangali Harkari, Courier, and Englishman. Many enlightened figures in Bengal, such as Babu Shyam Charan Das and Babu Nilkamal Bandopadhyay of Calcutta, raised their voices to eradicate this evil. In 1845, the Dharma Sabha, affiliated with the British Indian Society, and the Tattwabodhini Sabha of Bengal raised this issue. Ramchandra Vidyavaggis (1788-1845), the first secretary of the Brahma Samaj, supported widow remarriage and formed a committee headed by Shri Devendranath Tagore. Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar's efforts were the most significant contributors to widow remarriage. He published his first book on widow remarriage. His second book was published in October 1855. The book cited numerous examples to prove that widow remarriage was appropriate. The first edition sold out in a week. Soon, 3,000 copies of the second edition and 10,000 copies of the third edition were sold. Several petitions were submitted in this regard. Signatures were also collected and presented in major districts. The Tattwabodhini Sabha published two of Vidyasagar's articles. Some also protested against it. Raja Radhakant Dev collected 37,000 signatures against widow remarriage, declaring it against the scriptures and against the welfare of society.

Finally, in July 1856, a bill was introduced in this regard, and it was soon enacted into law. Even after the law was passed, it faced intense opposition. The greatest opposition came from women themselves, who refused to accept it mentally. O'Malley writes, "Even after the law was passed, it remained a dead letter because it was contrary to the general sentiment that marriage was considered to end with death." The greatest opposition to this came from women themselves, whose views were expressed in these words: "We are born once, we die once, and we marry only once."

The first widow remarriage took place on December 7, 1856. Three more marriages followed, but Hindu society did not show much enthusiasm for this. The first marriage was between Sri Chandra Vidyaratna, a teacher at the Sanskrit College in Calcutta, and Kalimani, daughter of Laxmandev of Burdwan district. The marriage was celebrated as a festival. On this occasion, the weavers of Shantipur made saris for the women, embroidered with the words "Long live Vidyasagar for ages." Fireworks continued for a week, and Vidyasagar himself attended the wedding.

Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar took the task of widow remarriage as his life's mission. He also married his only son, Narayan Chandra, to a widow named Bhavasundari. Due to his constant involvement in the widow remarriage movement, he became heavily indebted. He even considered taking up a government job to repay the debt. Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar himself wrote, "Widow remarriage is the most important good deed of my life. There was no possibility of any greater good deed in my life. I became poor for it, and if necessary, I would not hesitate to sacrifice my life for it." Other efforts for widow remarriage In addition to Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, many organizations and individuals made efforts for widow remarriage. The Arya Samaj emphasized widow remarriage. In Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj worked for this cause and helped arrange many marriages. He also helped. Several pamphlets were published in this regard in Bombay. Vishnu Shastri carried on the work that Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did in Bengal. He translated Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's book on widow remarriage into Marathi and disseminated it. Mahadev Govind Ranade and D.K. Karve promoted this reform movement in Western India. In 1870, a book defended widow remarriage as being in accordance with the scriptures. In May 1900, the first Bombay Provincial Social Conference was held in Satara, where the above topic was discussed. Pandit Ramabai spread this message.

In South India, the Andhra social reformer Veera Salingam supported it. He is known as the 'Pandit Vidyasagar of South India.' The Widow Remarriage Society was formed, and the first marriage took place in Rajahmundry in December 1881. The widow remarriage movement continued at a rapid pace until the end of the 19th century. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was undoubtedly its leading figure. At the same time, it faced opposition from some traditionalists, and therefore, it lacked the success it could have

achieved. However, it is noteworthy that this movement was a completely Indian movement and paved the way for progress and against future social evils in India.

The system of child marriage in the early 19th century. Child marriage was unknown in ancient times. While some examples exist until the time of Yagyavalkya, this evil practice spread primarily after the Muslim invasion of India. Akbar made unsuccessful attempts to stop this practice. Naturally, this practice fostered many social evils and malpractices. It led to girls becoming mothers at a young age. It hindered the physical development of both girls and boys, and encouraged population growth. Its biggest drawback was the high number of child widows and the lack of education for children. It is noteworthy that this practice was prevalent primarily among the upper class.

Efforts to Prevent Child Marriage: Social reformers, especially the Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj, made every effort to prevent child marriage. Efforts to prevent child marriage began primarily after 1850. The first publication of the magazine "Sarvasya Shubhkari" published articles opposing this practice. In 1856, some enlightened scholars from Bengal, including Rasik Krishna Malik, Pyarechand Mitter, Radhanath Shikdar, and others, presented a memorandum to the government, urging legislation to address this issue. In 1860, through the efforts of Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and other social reformers, the minimum age for marriage was set at 10 years, although this age had already been fixed in the 1846 Act. In 1870, Sir Henry Manson, the legal member of the Viceroy's Council of India, introduced a bill, the "Native Marriage Bill." On November 2, 1871, Keshav Chandra Sen, a prominent leader of the Brahma Samaj, founded the Indian Reform Association and emphasized the need for medical advice regarding child marriage. Renowned Bengali doctors Dr. Norman Chambers, Dr. J. Fayar, Dr. Day, and Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar declared child marriage "extremely harmful" from moral, social, and physical perspectives. Doctors generally recommended 14 years as the ideal age for marriage, and 14-18 years for girls. Dr. Mahendra Lal Sarkar, expressing his opinion, said, "Early marriage, in my humble opinion, is the greatest evil of our country."⁵

In 1872, Sir Henry Manson's successor, the new legal advisor, Fitzjames Stephen, introduced the Brahma Marriage Bill, which recommended 14 years for girls and 18 years for boys. This bill was introduced on March 19, 1872, and abolished child marriage. This bill was opposed, and calls were made to reject it, calling Brahmaism a part of Hinduism. In 1873, an organization was formed under the leadership of Nabhakant Chatterjee to oppose child marriage. A monthly magazine, "Mahapaap Bal Vivah," was also published.

⁵ Narayan, V.A., Social history of Modern India: 19th Century (Meerut, 1972)

During this period, Swami Dayanand also strongly opposed child marriage through the Arya Samaj. In his famous book "Satyarth Prakash," he advocated for a minimum age of 25 years for a boy and a minimum age of 16 years for a girl.

In 1884, the renowned social reformer and Parsi scholar Shri Behramji M. Malabari wrote a famous book, "Infant Marriages in India and Enforced Widows." Malabari also toured the country and transformed it into a movement. He visited Lahore, Agra, Aligarh, Lucknow, Allahabad, and other places. He passed resolutions against child marriage and created public opinion. He called this practice a "curse of India." Max Muller wrote a letter to Malabari on October 26, 1886, calling this practice a "heinous torture" and urging him to seek the help of women in England to oppose it. Malabar's supporter, M.C. Ranade, K.T. Telang, R.C. Bhandarkar, Narayan Chandravarkar, Vipin Chand Scholars like Dr. Pal etc. did this.

Ranade proposed raising the minimum age of marriage for girls from 10 to 12. Contrary to expectations, Lokmanya Tilak opposed this through his newspapers Kesari and Maratha. It is noteworthy that he actually opposed not the suggestion itself, but any kind of government interference in this matter. He believed that there should be no government interference in India's social life. An incident in 1890 accelerated this movement. An 11-year-old woman, Phulamani, died after having sexual intercourse with her husband, and her husband was charged with murder. The husband was acquitted as the legal age of marriage was 10 years. On June 11, 1890, Malabari also published "An Appeal on Behalf of the Daughters of India." Finally, in 1890, the Age of Consent Bill was introduced. The only opposition to the bill came from Sir Ramesh Chunder Mitter, an Indian member of the Council. Finally, on March 19, 1891, the Tenth Act of 1891 became law, raising the minimum age for marriage from 10 to 12 years. This was a significant achievement in terms of the thinking of 19th-century Indian society, paving the way for reforms in the 20th century. The marriageable age was raised to 14 years in 1930, 15 years in 1949, and 18 years in 1978 for girls and 21 years for boys. In addition to laws, the Western environment, the problem of earning a living, the breakdown of the joint family system, and the development of education also discouraged the practice of child marriage. The Arya Samaj also played a significant role in this, but the above system has not been eradicated completely; it remains prevalent in states like Rajasthan.

Polygamy was not generally prevalent in Indian society. The practice of monogamy dates back to the Rigveda. Manusmriti prescribes the practice of having a second wife, with some exceptions. While examples of this practice are found among some upper castes, it was also a regular practice among the Bengal nobility and the Brahmins of Mithila. It became prevalent primarily among the Bengal nobility in the 12th century, when King Vallala Sen of Bengal designated the "nobles" based on nine qualities. These nine qualities

were: good behavior, humility, study, prestige, pilgrimage, faith in God, a specific occupation, dedication, and charity. During Vallala's time, only 56 Brahmin families, descended from five Brahmins from Kannauj, fell into this category. Of these, only 19 individuals from eight families possessed all of the above qualities. Among these eight families, the Bandopadhyays, Chattopadhyays, Mukhopadhyays, and Ghoshals were prominent. They were often referred to as "nobles." This aristocratic tradition was virtually destroyed by Muslim domination in the early 13th century, but in the 16th century, the nobility was reclassified. They were traced back to the original aristocrats based on their bloodline. Some were even called "broken-nobles," those whose social status had declined.

The aristocratic system described above also had many flaws. Ward, in his book "View of the History, Literature, and Religion of Hinduism," described the horrific nature of these aristocrats and cited no other practice as cruel as this in human history. According to him, while the Turks married based on wealth, the Hindu Brahmins of Bengal could have multiple wives based on a simple piece of clothing and a sacred thread. Family lineage alone was sufficient to qualify as a noble. Buchanan also depicted these aristocrats. Young women were married to a noble Brahmin, even if he was old. Describing the plight of these aristocrats, he stated that they often did not live with their wives. Many nobles occasionally visited their father-in-law's home. According to Buchanan, in 1805, the king of Darbhanga, the leader of the Mithila Brahmins, imposed a restriction prohibiting a noble from having more than five wives. However, their dominance in Bengal persisted for a long time. Bharat Chand detailed the plight of the nobles, the practice of polygamy, dowry, and other matters. He described the plight of many women and their wives in their own tragic terms. For example, "I am a beautiful singer, but my husband is deaf and ugly," "I am young, but my husband is old," and "I have spent my entire life yearning to be a noble bride." Many newspapers and magazines also spoke out against this horrific practice. Samachar Darpan called it "mischievous" and "destructive." In an 1836 issue, Dnyaneshwar Patrika described 27 nobles who had 818 wives. Raja Rammohan Roy described the suffering of women at the hands of the elite in the Atmiya Sabha, stating that this was contrary to ancient religious texts. Efforts were also made to petition for this. He also published small booklets opposing the practice of polygamy. Similarly, in 1842, Akshay Kumar Dutt wrote a few articles in the magazine "Vidyadarshan." Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar wrote articles in the Sarvashubhakari Sabha. In 1854, a memorandum (petition) was submitted with signatures to abolish the practice of polygamy. Subsequently, several petitions were submitted to the government. On December 27, 1855, Maharaja Burdwan Mahtab Chand Bahadur also submitted a petition. A bill was drafted in 1857, but it was not passed. On April 23, 1863, Raja Devnarayan Singh of Banaras submitted another petition and also had a bill drafted.

Simultaneously, efforts were made to preserve the practice of polygamy. The leader of this support was Raja Radhakant Dev. In 1866, he urged against enacting a law prohibiting polygamy. He believed that if a law were enacted to prohibit polygamy, it should apply to both Hindus and Muslims. Maharaja Burdwan continued to make efforts to prohibit polygamy. He collected the signatures of 21,000 Bengali Hindus and submitted another petition for a law. In 1866, the government appointed a committee consisting of H.C. Hobhouse, H.T. Prinsep, Digambar Mitra, Ramnath Thakur, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, and Raja Satyasharan Ghoshal, but due to legal difficulties, it failed to achieve sufficient results. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar remained undeterred. In 1871, he wrote a book, "Considerations whether polygamy should be abolished?" and in 1873, he wrote a second book on the subject. In 1871, he published a list describing 133 nobles who lived in 76 villages and had five to eight wives. He published a detailed list in the Sanjivani magazine after surveying 426 villages. This list included a maximum of 107 wives for a man. A similar list was also presented at the Sixth National Social Conference in 1892. Ras Bihari Mukhopadhyay wrote two famous treatises: "Vallabh Sanshodhan" in 1868 and "Kulin Sanshodhan" in 1873.

No law was passed to abolish polygamy until the end of the century, but with education and awareness, the practice gradually ended. Social and religious pressure also contributed to its end.

In addition to efforts and movements to oppose various social evils, widespread efforts were made in the field of education. The Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ram Krishna Mission, and Aligarh Movement all emphasized women's education. The Arya Samaj established numerous girls' schools. Satyarth Prakash emphasized the importance of girls' education. Swami Vivekananda emphasized women's education. He stated, "Our duty is to educate and civilize every segment of society, whether male or female. Once the public is educated, they will consider their own benefits and losses and eliminate such evils. Then there will be no need to impose anything on society through pressure." Mahadev Govind Ranade emphasized women's education. Pandita Ramabai made numerous efforts for women's education and presented some proposals for the development of women's education to the Hunter Commission in 1882. The British government paid attention to women's education from the Wood Dispatch of 1854 to the Hunter Commission in 1882, achieving considerable success in primary education. According to statistics, the number of girls receiving primary education in 1882 was 124,491, which increased to 348,510 in 1902.

Conclusion:

The contributions of many women to the development of various fields in the 19th century are noteworthy. During this period, there were some queens who gave women a special place during their reign, such as Gauri Parvati Bai of Travancore (1810-1829), Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi (1835-1857), and Maharani of Mysore. Tarun Dutta was an eminent Bengali writer. Pandita

Ramabai performed significant work in the field of social reform, and in the religious field, the names of Mother Sarada Devi and Sister Nivedita are significant. Overall, some efforts were made to improve the condition of women in the 19th century. The 20th century also achieved some success, but these were still very limited. Much scope for improvement remains.