

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN'S QUESTION

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The Child Marriage Restraint Act, also known as the Sarda Act, was enacted on October 1, 1929, and took effect in April of the following year. It set the marriage age for girls and boys at 14 and 18 years old, respectively, and made early marriages punishable by jail, fines, or both. Reformist Hindus and women's organisations worked together to bring the Act into being. It demonstrated that Indians can make important decisions.

The architect of this Act, Harbilas Sarda, argued that marriage affects women's lives, more vitally and much more thoroughly than that of a man because it affects the girls' whole future life and removes them entirely from their pre-married life.

The pioneering work on this Act came in 1979¹ where Geraldine Forbes argued that it was the first primary social reform legislation vis-à-vis the age of marriage in the 20th century and the last in the colonial period. She further added that the reformers endeavoured to achieve social change through the emancipation of women and primarily through the issue of raising the age of marriage. It was the first time that women themselves, through several organisations at the provincial and national levels, played a significant role in passing such legislation.

This Act was so important that it secured the attention of the prominent personalities like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Motilal Nehru, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Patel, E.R. Rathbone (English Feminist), Winston Churchill, Katherine Mayo (a journalist from the USA) and others.

Social reform programs moved around the marriage, closely related to women's status in society. Pointing out the connection between marriage and the status of women, in colonial India, the Historians have not paid adequate attention to the Sarda Act. Their focus on the advancement of freedom struggle against British rule has been the leading cause for this negligence. The proposed work undertakes writing about making the Sarda Act part of the broad trend of social reforms during the colonial period. Since there is a lack of much historical

¹Geraldine Forbes, 'Women in Modernity: The Issue of Child Marriage in India' *Women Studies International Quarterly*, 2, 1979, pp.407-409.

work, about the Sarda Act, besides Function as mentioned earlier relates to the larger question of women. Therefore, along with available historiography of the Act, the study of writing on the question of women becomes indispensable.

Studies of gender issues have advanced consistently and acquired a distinguished history of writing in the past thirty years. Everywhere, the preliminary writing on this issue narrated stories of women of different local levels and historical times. This kind of work was important till the 1970s, which evolved into much more profound questions. Gender issues include not the history of women-only but the history of men as well. Feminist writing on the nature of relationship between women, men and the ideology that informed the relations. Simultaneously, there were studies "images" and "self-images", not only of women but also of men. Thus, the construction of "femininity" is integrally bound with 'masculinity', which means both evolve together. Most often, such images appear to be the natural order. However, history compels us to ask uncomfortable questions whenever something is to be considered natural. The radical breakthrough of feminism asserted that inequality between man and woman is social and not natural. After 1975 a lot of feminist writings began to broaden out into investigation into gender. In these years the role of women in the Indian National Movement and the women's organisation has become the vital themes of gender studies. Although the Raja Ram Mohan Roy's efforts bore fruits in 1829 in the form of the Sati Abolition Act, the people of Rajasthan compelled Roop Kanwar to burn at the funeral of her husband in 1987 which intensified the writings on gender in and on Indian women.

One can follow² the serious distraction with sex relations to the 19th century when the Indian social reformers engaged in a convoluted basic exercise³.

This workout included examining control connections inside inborn traditions and conventions, particularly in sexual orientation standards.

The primary era of reformers confronted the intense issue of matrimonial adjustment.

Youthful men who were presently moving into the cities were hitched in their earliest stages. Often, brides were uneducated. Inside littler urban family units, issues such as women's instruction, separation, organized marriage, child marriage, polygamy and the denial of widow remarriage would be beneath their eyes ordinary and hour of their presence.

² Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community, Culture, and Religious Nationalism* (New Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001) pp.23-52

These, in expansion, were issues which the 19th-century comprehensibility would have thought to be inside their reach and remediable, not at all like, say, outside run the show, which they did not touch some time recently the rise of viable centre lesson driven patriotism.

Women's issues, according to Mrinalini Sinha, have created an unfavourable environment for social reforms for women in India.

This neatly overlooked any detrimental impact the colonial state had on women in India by emphasising on Indian traditional traditions.

On the other side, it elicited defensive Indian reactions by turning specific women's changes into grounds for broad condemnation.

Lata Mani contended³ rankles about on the women begin in the mid Nineteenth century moved around the authenticity of conventions said within the ancient texts. Conventions were reconstituted beneath colonial run the show in several ways. Women and Brahmanical sacred texts gotten to be interlocking grounds for this re-articulation, contended. In other words, the workings of the conventions were looked into fundamentally by debating women's rights and status in society. Women were symbolic of conventions.

Vidyasagar's essay on the evils of child marriage in 1850 marked the total absence of textual exegesis. However, he could not demand the raising the age of marriage due to colonial legal policy. Nevertheless, his humanitarian ideas on child marriage and gender relations are still relevant since, in our present time, wives are regularly burnt for dowry, a lower caste women activist who was campaigning such practices did justify the civilising mission of the imperialist West in India and provide arguments about the barbarity of Indian culture. against child marriage.⁴

Nevertheless, despite the ambivalent record of the colonial government on reforms for women in India, the question of women remained an important pillar in the ideological justification of British imperialism in India. The growth of nationalist feelings were the main feature in the last four decades of the nineteenth century. The question of women was not only the ideological battleground for the imperialist but also for the emerging proto-nationalism and nationalism. The figure of the 'Aryan Woman' of the ancient past was defined as superior to the figure of the Western woman and the lower caste woman in India. This proposition has long occupied a

³ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India,' in Sangari and Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989) pp.88-126.

⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History*, (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997), pp.216-279.

central place in cultural nationalist projects of reconstruction. A golden past was imagined from which contemporary Indian society had allegedly fallen. other words, the figure of this ideal 'Aryan woman' was used alternatively by Indian reformers to argue for the reforms in contemporary Indian society and by the opponents of reform to resist any change in the status quo.⁵

Furthermore, Partha Chatterjee believed that the figure of the Indian woman was also invested as a symbol of Indian autonomy as a result of the official nationalist project's 'derivatives' nature. For Indian nationalism tried to remove its dependency on the west by adopting a handy ideological ethos that accepted India's inferiority to the west in the match.

Recent historical studies situate the question of women in the heart of the militant nationalism of the last part of nineteenth-century nationalism. Particularly the last four decades of the nineteenth-century witnessed the emergence of distinct political formation, which could be loosely called 'revivalist Nationalist', which was the group of newspapers proprietors, Pandits and Modern educated urban intellectuals. These people used nationalist rhetoric against any form of Colonial intervention in the Hindu domestic sphere.

Apart from these developments in the last part of the nineteenth century, one can not ignore the development in the biomedical sciences while studying the question of women in India. Radha Kumar argues ⁶that the rapidly growing natural sciences gave rise to new biological theories which paid attention to the development of the human body. The study of genetic determination and environmental influences contributed to forming an ideology of racial superiority, which asserted that British rule was ordained by nature and Indians were not fit for the 'self-rule'. Katherine Mayo and other imperialists in the 1920's advanced These arguments in aggressive language.

This part will precisely deal with the issue of Child Marriage. Forbes has argued that child marriage had long been a thorny topic in British India. British missionaries and officials expressed their horror of pre-puberty marriage, which many Indian explained as only the first marriage to be followed by the garbhadhan (consummation) ceremony immediately on the attainment of puberty.⁷

⁵ Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to Vedic Dasi' in Sangari and Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989) pp.27-81.

⁶⁶⁶ Radha Kumar, *History of Doing : An illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism 1800-1990*, (New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1990)

⁷ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1998), p.88
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British Government took first step against the child Marriage when Age of Consent Act was passed, in which Age of Consummation was raised from 10 to 12. Forbes is of the view that the controversy around the Age of Consent Act diverted the attention from the helplessness of female child to whether the government should interfere or not in the social affairs of Indians⁸. Charles Heimsath viewed the Age of Consent Act in terms of the nationalist movement. He argued that the controversy provided social reforms within the national attention, and henceforth, the social reform question would become inescapably a part of the nationalist ideology⁹.

Partha Chatterjee argues ¹⁰that towards the end of the 19th century, the rise of nationalism resolved the Women's question, Consequently, their question was disappeared from the public agenda. He argues that the "question regarding the position of women in society did not arise the same degree of enthusiasm and acrimony as they did only a few decades before. ¹¹The overwhelming issues now are directly political ones concerning the politics of nationalism.

Sumit Sarkar has argued that the inability of nationalist ideology in pushing forward a campaign for liberal and egalitarian social change could not be seen as a retrogression from an earlier radical reformist phase. Those limitations were, in fact, present in the earlier phase as well. Further, he added that the reformers were highly selective in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe. "Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as the maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of the sanctity of the Shashtra (ancient scriptures)", preference for symbolic rather than a substantive change in social practices all of them were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century¹².

Geraldine Forbes has observed the beginning of the 20th century as the rise of 'social feminism' in India. She argues that the educational experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a "new woman" with interests that went beyond the household who would organise the women for raising the question of women by themselves.¹³

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalisms and Hindu Social Reforms*, (Princeton, 1960)

¹⁰ Partha Chatterjee, 'Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in Sangari and Vaid eds. *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989) pp233-253.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Sumit Sarkar, *The Critique of Colonial India*, (Delhi, 1983)

¹³ Ibid.

Forbes has traced the history of the question of women from the nineteenth century. She looks at the question of women in the nineteenth century as a response by Indian men to utilitarian writings. The British used women's status in the Hindu religion to indicate a moral superiority over Indians and explain India's lack of military might. Therefore Forbes sees the efforts at "reform" in the 19th century as expressions of Indian men's understanding of how women should be modernised.

Forbes has argued about the Sarda Act, in which the reformers imagined they would bring modernity through raising the age of marriage, but it was not necessarily meant to modify women's social position. 14

Moreover, Sinha has also discussed¹⁵ the Sarda Act. She sets the Sarda Act given Mayo's Mother India controversy. She argues¹⁶ that the CMRA was the product of an alliance between new emerging feminist movements and nationalism because revivalist nationalists joined the feminist movement and women's organisations to secure the support for their purpose to eradicate the British since the feminist movement was in its 'childhood' in India; therefore, Response of Nationalist front-runners were wanted particularly to respond to Mayo's Mother India.

In the 1920s, the entry of Gandhi into the field of mass struggle provided a new dimension to the question of women. Gandhian scholars have categorised Gandhi as the social reformers, though his views regarding social affairs, particularly women's status, were different from his predecessors. Gandhi considered Western civilisation as the main enemy of Indian society.¹⁷ B.R. Nanda has argued that Gandhi's views on non-violence, industrialisation, sex, and marriage were odd and old fashioned to the English educated elite class. So far as the status of women was concerned, Gandhi's views were radical rather than liberal. According to Gandhi, the question of women should not be contextualised based on ancient texts because no book was sacred. Therefore ancient texts could not be understood within the framework of a single interpretation since the meaning, and the significance of the text was not independent of time and space. Not only did Gandhi call upon women to break all the hurdles and join the freedom struggle, but he also had advanced ideas above marriage and motherhood. He equated modern women with ancient women icons like Sita, Damayanti and others. Nevertheless, he insisted that society should treat women as individuals in their rights and not merely as sex symbols.

¹⁴ Forbes, Ob.Cit.

¹⁵ Sinha, 1998, Op.Cit.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* used the women's question to justify the imperial rule in the twentieth century. The attitude of the orthodox community moved around the authenticity of religious text, and women were the carriers of cultural practices. However, the most critical change in the nineteen twenties was mass nationalism and the growth of an organised female voice.

In recent days, the issue of marriage and conjugal relations has attracted cinema, television, popular magazines, and newspapers, reflecting different aspects of conjugal relations and family life in popular TV serials. Sexual relations between husband and wife or wife's consent in the family life have focused on recent popular Hindi films like *Astitva*, *Saathiya*, *Chalte Chalte* and *Jism* and others. Iswarchand Vidyasagar and other social reformers discussed Many of these problems 150 years back, which reveal the vitality of marriage even in the modern social system. Besides, more strikingly, newspapers and magazines are still reporting on child marriage's issue and the female infanticide.