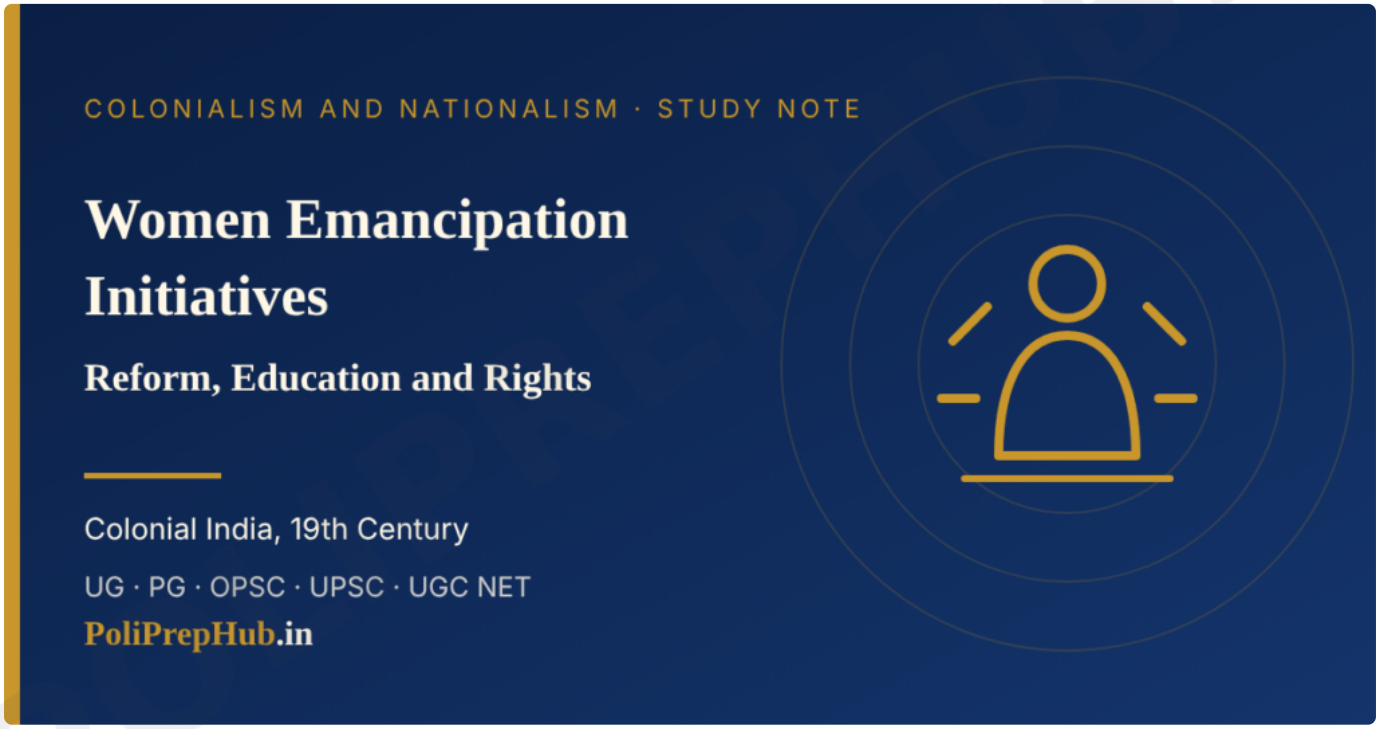
COLONIALISM AND NATIONALISM IN INDIA

Women Emancipation Initiatives in Colonial India: Reform, Education and Rights

By **Brajabandhu Mahanta** • November 9, 2026 • 24 min read



In the early nineteenth century, the position of women in most parts of India was very low. Girls were married young, often before puberty. Widows, especially among the upper castes, were not allowed to marry again and lived a life of hardship, and in some regions, especially Bengal, a widow could be burnt on her husband’s pyre in the practice of sati. Girls had almost no chance of schooling, women of many communities were kept behind the veil (purdah), and women had little right to property. Daughters were seen as a burden, and in some communities female infanticide was practised.

In the course of the century, this began to change. Indian reformers, Christian missionaries and some British officials began to speak against these evils and to open schools for girls. By the early twentieth century, women themselves had formed associations, written books, started schools, joined the national movement and demanded the vote. These efforts are together called the women emancipation initiatives. This note studies the main social evils, the reforms and laws against them, the work of reformers and of women themselves, and the debate among historians about how far these efforts really freed women.

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1. The condition of women and the causes of the initiatives

Condition of women in the early nineteenth century. Women were expected to be obedient daughters, wives and mothers. Marriage was arranged by the family, and a girl's value was often measured by her purity and her service to her husband's family. Among the upper castes, a widow had to shave her head, wear plain clothes, eat simple food and stay away from all festivities. Education, if any, was given at home and was limited to religious and household matters. Among lower castes, women worked in the fields and the market and moved more freely, but they faced caste and economic oppression. In the Muslim community, purdah and the rules of inheritance and divorce shaped women's lives, and in Hindu families the joint family often controlled a woman's life completely.

Causes of the initiatives.

1. **English education and new ideas.** The new education brought the ideas of liberty, equality and the rights of the individual. Educated Indian men began to ask why women should be denied these rights. Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and Ranade were all influenced by such ideas, and used them in their writings.
2. **Christian missionary work.** Missionaries opened the first schools for girls, started zenana teaching (teaching women inside their homes) and criticised practices like sati and child marriage. This pushed Indian reformers to act, since they did not want foreigners alone to lead the improvement of their society.
3. **Colonial criticism of Indian society.** British writers like James Mill and later missionaries argued that the low status of women proved that Indian civilisation was backward. This stung educated Indians, who then tried to show that Indian tradition could be reformed and was not opposed to women's progress.
4. **The reform movements.** The Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj and later the Aligarh and other Muslim reformers all made women's education and the end of evil customs a part of their programme. These groups gave the reformers an organised base.

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5. **Revival of ancient texts.** Reformers appealed to the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Smritis to show that women had been educated and honoured in ancient India, as in the examples of Gargi and Maitreyi. This gave a respected reason for change, and Vidyasagar and Dayananda both used it.
6. **The press.** Newspapers, journals and books for and by women spread new ideas widely. Journals such as *Bamabodhini Patrika* in Bengal (1863) and later women's magazines helped women to read and to write.
7. **The role of the colonial state.** Governors-General like William Bentinck passed laws against sati and, later, against child marriage and for widow remarriage when reformers asked them to do so. The state's laws gave legal backing to the efforts.
8. **Rise of a new middle class.** The educated middle class in towns wanted educated wives and a new kind of family life. This gave support to girls' schools and to the idea of the companion wife, though it also set new limits on women.
9. **Growth of women's own voices.** A small number of educated women, such as Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule, Begum Rokeya and Sarojini Naidu, began to write and speak on their own behalf, which led to women-led organisations.
10. **The national movement.** The freedom struggle drew many women into public life, especially from the 1905 Swadeshi days and the non-cooperation movement, and this made the question of women's rights a national issue.
11. **Social evils that shocked public conscience.** Cases of sati, of child widows and of very young brides who died after early marriage, like the case of Phulmoni Dasi in 1889, led to public anger and helped to bring reform laws.
12. **Influence of the women's movements abroad.** Reports of the suffrage movement in Britain and other countries, and of the work of women like Annie Besant, encouraged Indian women to ask for the vote and equal rights.

2. Social evils and the reform efforts

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Year	Measure or event	Leader or authority	Subject
1829	Bengal Sati Regulation (Regulation XVII)	William Bentinck, with Ram Mohan Roy	Abolition of sati
1848	School for girls at Poona	Jotirao and Savitribai Phule	Girls' education
1849	Bethune School, Calcutta	J. E. D. Bethune, Vidyasagar	Girls' education
1856	Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act	Vidyasagar	Widow remarriage
1870	Female Infanticide Prevention Act	Colonial government	Ban on infanticide
1872	Native Marriage Act	Keshab Chandra Sen and others	Civil marriage, minimum ages
1882	*Stri Purush Tulana*	Tarabai Shinde	Critique of male double standards
1887	*The High Caste Hindu Woman*	Pandita Ramabai	Condition of widows
1891	Age of Consent Act	B. M. Malabari and others	Age of consent raised to 12
1917	Women's Indian Association	Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins	Women's rights, franchise
1927	All India Women's Conference	Margaret Cousins and others	Education and social reform
1929	Child Marriage Restraint (Sarda) Act	Harbilas Sarda	Minimum ages of marriage
1937	Hindu Women's Right to Property Act	Central Legislature	Widow's share in property

Sati and its abolition. Sati was the practice of a widow burning herself on her husband's funeral pyre. It was often not truly voluntary, since the widow could be pressed by her family and by the fear of a life of misery. Raja Ram Mohan Roy began a campaign against it after seeing his own sister-in-law burnt, and he argued from the texts that sati was not required by the scriptures. Governor-General William Bentinck passed Regulation XVII on 4 December 1829, making sati illegal and punishable in Bengal, and it was extended to Madras and Bombay in 1830. Orthodox groups appealed to the Privy Council, which rejected their appeal

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in 1832. The law was a landmark, but it needed support in society to be effective.

Widow remarriage.

- **Vidyasagar's campaign.** Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91), a Sanskrit scholar and principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta, argued from the Parashara Smriti that widows could remarry. His petition of 1855 had thousands of signatures, and the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (Act XV of 1856) legalised the marriage of widows and gave legitimacy to their children. The first such marriage was held in Calcutta in December 1856, and Vidyasagar paid for many of them himself.
- **Other regions.** Vishnu Shastri Pandit in Maharashtra and Kandukuri Veeresalingam in Andhra worked in the same cause, and Veeresalingam held the first widow remarriage in the Telugu region in 1881.
- **Care and training of widows.** Dhondo Keshav Karve opened a Widows' Home at Hingne near Poona in 1896 and founded the first women's university, the SNDT Women's University, in 1916. Pandita Ramabai's Sharada Sadan (1889) and Mukti Mission (1896) also sheltered widows.
- **Result.** The law did not change practice quickly. Remarried widows were often ostracised and the numbers remained very small for decades.

Child marriage and the age of consent.

- Child marriage was common in many communities, and early motherhood harmed the health of girls. The Brahmo Samaj and the Native Marriage Act of 1872 set minimum ages of 14 for girls and 18 for boys among those who married under it.
- Behramji Malabari, a Parsi social reformer, started a public campaign in 1884 with his *Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood*.
- The case of Phulmoni Dasi, a girl of about eleven who died from the injuries caused by her husband in 1889, led to public anger. The Age of Consent Act of 1891 raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse from 10 to 12 years. Orthodox leaders, including Bal Gangadhar Tilak, opposed it as interference in religion, while reformers supported it.

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- The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, known as the Sarda Act, fixed the minimum age of marriage at 14 for girls and 18 for boys, and came into force in 1930.

Female education.

- **Early efforts.** Missionaries opened the first girls' schools. The Phules opened a school for girls at Poona in 1848, and J. E. D. Bethune, with Vidyasagar's support, opened the Calcutta Female School (later Bethune School) in 1849. Vidyasagar also opened many girls' schools in Bengal in the 1850s.
- **State policy.** Wood's Despatch of 1854 recommended the support of female education, and the Hunter Commission of 1882 asked for more grants for girls' schools.
- **Reform movements.** The Arya Samaj founded the Kanya Mahavidyalaya at Jalandhar in 1896, and the Aligarh circle started a girls' school in 1906 under Sheikh Abdullah and his wife.
- **Higher education.** Women gained entry to universities in the 1880s. Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu were among the first women graduates of the University of Calcutta in 1883, and Anandibai Joshi qualified as a doctor in the United States in 1886. The Lady Hardinge Medical College for women opened at Delhi in 1916.
- **Gap.** By 1921 only a small fraction of Indian women could read, and in the 1931 census women's literacy was still very low.

Purdah and seclusion. Reformers argued that the seclusion of women stopped them from learning and working. The Brahmo Samaj encouraged women to appear in public, and in the Muslim community Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) was a fierce critic of purdah. Her satire *Sultana's Dream* (1905) imagined a land where men were secluded and women ran society. She opened the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta in 1911 and formed the Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam in 1916.

Devadasi system. Devadasis were women dedicated to temples who were often exploited. Reformers such as Muthulakshmi Reddi (1886–1968), the first woman member of a legislature in British India, called for ending the practice. The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act was passed in 1947, after independence was in sight.

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Property and legal rights. The Hindu Law of Inheritance (Amendment) Act of 1929 gave some rights to certain female heirs, and the Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1937 (the Deshmukh Act) gave a widow a limited share in her husband's property. The larger reform of Hindu personal law was attempted after 1947 in the Hindu Code Bill, drafted by a committee under B. N. Rau and taken up by Ambedkar.

Major reformers.

Reformer	Region	Main contribution
Ram Mohan Roy	Bengal	Campaign against sati; women's property rights
Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar	Bengal	Widow remarriage; girls' schools
Jotirao and Savitribai Phule	Maharashtra	Girls' schools; widows' and children's homes
M. G. Ranade and R. G. Bhandarkar	Maharashtra	Widow remarriage; women's education
Behramji Malabari	Bombay	Campaign against child marriage
K. Veeresalingam	Andhra	Widow remarriage; girls' education
D. K. Karve	Maharashtra	Widows' home; women's university
Dayananda Saraswati	Punjab and North India	Girls' schools; widow remarriage
Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Sheikh Abdullah	Aligarh	Muslim women's education

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3. Women's own initiatives and organisations

Women writers and thinkers.

- **Savitribai Phule (1831–97).** She taught girls at Poona with her husband Jotirao, faced abuse from orthodox neighbours who threw dirt and stones at her, and ran a home for the care of widows' children. She also wrote poetry and worked during the plague of 1897, in which she died.

- **Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910).** In her Marathi pamphlet *Stri Purush Tulana* (A Comparison of Women and Men, 1882), she answered a newspaper article which had abused a widow. She attacked the double standard of a society that blamed women for what men did, and she is seen as an early Indian feminist writer.
- **Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922).** A Sanskrit scholar from Maharashtra, she wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887), travelled to England and America, founded the Sharada Sadan for widows at Bombay (1889), later moved it to Poona, and set up the Mukti Mission (1896). She converted to Christianity, which brought her criticism, but her work for widows and famine victims was widely respected.
- **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932).** In Bengal, she wrote against purdah and for girls' education, and set up a school and a women's association.
- **Others.** Swarnakumari Devi, Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, who formed the Bharat Stree Mahamandal in 1910 at Allahabad, and Rassundari Devi, whose autobiography *Amar Jiban* (1876) is among the first by an Indian woman, are also remembered.

Women's organisations.

- **Women's Indian Association (1917).** Founded at Madras by Annie Besant, Margaret Cousins and Dorothy Jinarajadasa, with Indian women such as Malathi Patwardhan, it worked for female education, the vote and the end of social evils, and it published the journal *Stri Dharma*.
- **Deputation to Montagu (1917).** A delegation led by Sarojini Naidu and Annie Besant met the Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu, to ask for the vote for women. The Government of India Act of 1919 did not give it directly but allowed provincial councils to decide. Madras gave women the vote in 1921, and other provinces followed.
- **National Council of Women in India (1925).** It linked Indian women's groups with the International Council of Women.
- **All India Women's Conference (1927).** It was founded at Poona on the call of Margaret Cousins, with Sarojini Naidu, Rani Rajwade and others. At first it dealt with education, and soon it took up child marriage, purdah and women's legal rights. It

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supported the Sarda Act and later raised the demand for a uniform civil code and equal rights.

- **Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam and other Muslim women's groups.** These groups worked for education and against the abuse of the rules on divorce and polygamy.

Women in the national movement.

- **Early phase.** Annie Besant became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1917, and Sarojini Naidu in 1925, the first Indian woman to do so. Madame Bhikaiji Cama unfurled a version of the Indian flag at Stuttgart in 1907 and campaigned abroad.
- **Gandhian movements.** From the non-cooperation movement, women took part in picketing liquor shops and foreign cloth, in spinning and in processions. In the Salt Satyagraha of 1930 and the Civil Disobedience Movement, thousands of women, including Kasturba Gandhi, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Sarojini Naidu, joined and went to jail.
- **Revolutionary movement.** In Bengal, women such as Pritilata Waddedar, who led an attack on a European club at Chittagong in 1932, and Kalpana Dutta took part in armed action.
- **Quit India Movement.** Aruna Asaf Ali raised the Congress flag at Bombay in August 1942. Usha Mehta ran a secret Congress radio, and Matangini Hazra was shot dead while leading a procession in Bengal.
- **Odisha.** Rama Devi, Malati Choudhury and Sarala Devi were prominent in the national movement in Odisha, joined the Salt Satyagraha and Quit India and worked for social upliftment. Their work links the all-India story with the local one.
- **Tribal women.** Rani Gaidinliu of Manipur and Nagaland led a movement against the British and was jailed for many years.

Political rights and the Constitution. The Government of India Act of 1935 increased the number of women voters and reserved some seats for women in the provincial legislatures. The Karachi Congress resolution of 1931 promised equality before the law without regard to sex. After 1947 the Constitution gave equal citizenship and universal adult franchise to

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women, and Articles 14, 15 and 16 gave equality and the possibility of special provisions for women.

Comparison of the main organisations.

Organisation	Year	Founders	Main work
Bharat Stree Mahamandal	1910	Sarala Devi Chaudhurani	Women’s education and organisation
Women’s Indian Association	1917	Besant, Cousins, Jinarajadasa	Franchise and social reform
National Council of Women in India	1925	Mehribai Tata and others	Link with the international movement
All India Women’s Conference	1927	Margaret Cousins and others	Education, legal rights, social reform
Anjuman-e-Khawateen-e-Islam	1916	Begum Rokeya	Muslim women’s education

4. Characteristics, importance and limitations

Characteristics.

1. **Beginning with men, then led by women.** In the first phase, from Ram Mohan Roy to Vidyasagar and Ranade, the reformers were mostly men who spoke on behalf of women. From the 1880s, and especially after 1917, women such as Ramabai, Rokeya and Sarojini Naidu spoke and organised for themselves. This change of leadership is the most important feature of the story.
2. **Focus on social evils first.** The earliest efforts attacked sati, child marriage, the ban on widow remarriage and infanticide. These were visible and cruel practices, and it was easier to build public opinion against them than against the whole system of patriarchy.
3. **Education as the key to change.** Almost all reformers believed that education would end other evils. They opened schools, colleges and later a women’s university, and they argued that an educated woman would raise better children. The Phules, Bethune and

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Karve are examples.

4. **Use of scripture and reason together.** Vidyasagar used the Parashara Smriti, Roy used the Vedas and the Upanishads, and others used the ideas of natural rights and humanity. The two methods were used to win both orthodox and modern audiences.
5. **Reliance on the colonial state's laws.** Many reforms were enacted by the colonial government, such as the Acts of 1829, 1856, 1872 and 1891. Reformers asked for legislation because social opinion alone was slow, though this also tied reform to the colonial state.
6. **Link with the reform movements and nationalism.** Women's emancipation was part of the larger socio-religious reform movements, and later joined the national movement. Leaders like Gandhi called on women to join civil disobedience, which brought thousands of women into public life.
7. **Middle-class and upper-caste base.** Most reformers and the first women beneficiaries belonged to the educated middle class and the upper castes. The issues they chose, such as widow remarriage and purdah, were mainly the problems of these groups.
8. **Ideal of the educated companion and mother.** Many reformers wished to make women better wives and mothers, and did not question their role at home. The new woman was to be educated, but still responsible for the household.
9. **Regional variety.** The movement took different forms in Bengal, Maharashtra, Madras, Punjab and elsewhere, according to local customs and leaders. The Bengal reformers stressed widow remarriage, the Maharashtra reformers stressed education and the Muslim reformers stressed education and the limits of purdah.
10. **Moderate and constitutional methods.** Petitions, public meetings, journals, schools and laws were the main tools. There was little mass agitation by women on women's issues until the 1920s.
11. **Rise of women's organisations.** From 1910, women's associations such as the Women's Indian Association and the All India Women's Conference gave the movement a permanent base and a voice in public debates.

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12. **Concern across religions.** Hindu, Muslim, Parsi, Sikh and Christian reformers all worked on women's issues, though each in their own community and with different problems.

Importance and contributions.

- **End of cruel customs.** Sati was banned, infanticide made a crime and widow remarriage made legal. These changes protected the lives of many women and gave them a legal footing.
- **Spread of female education.** Girls' schools, colleges and later universities, medical colleges and teacher training institutions produced the first generation of educated women, who became doctors, teachers, writers and leaders.
- **Rise of women's public voice.** Women's journals, writing and organisations gave women a voice in public affairs and made women's questions part of political debate.
- **Political participation.** The movement led to the vote for women in the provinces from 1921 and to larger numbers of women voters and legislators under the Act of 1935, and finally to universal franchise in 1950.
- **Legal reform of marriage and property.** The Native Marriage Act, the Sarda Act and the property laws of 1929 and 1937 set new minimum standards for marriage and gave some rights to women over property.
- **Women in the national movement.** The movement prepared women to take part in the freedom struggle, from picketing to prison, and the national movement in turn accepted women's equality as a goal, as in the Karachi resolution of 1931.
- **Change in public attitude.** Over time, the idea that women should be educated and should have rights became more acceptable, and this changed the way many families treated daughters.
- **Foundation for the Constitution.** The Constitution's guarantee of equality, its ban on discrimination by sex and its special provisions for women owe much to these struggles.
- **Link to wider social reform.** Women's movements also supported other reforms, such as the fight against caste, the temperance movement and the demand for labour rights.

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- **Models for later movements.** The work of the first reformers and women's groups became the basis for the later feminist and women's movements of independent India.

Limitations.

- **Narrow social reach.** The reforms touched mostly upper-caste, urban and middle-class women. Dalit, tribal and rural women were hardly affected, and their issues such as labour and caste violence were seldom addressed.
- **Limited effect of laws.** The laws against sati, child marriage and for widow remarriage were weakly enforced, and the age limits were often ignored, so many girls were still married early after 1930.
- **Men set the agenda.** For most of the century, men decided which issues were important and how far to go. Women's own experience was rarely the starting point.
- **Focus on the roles of wife and mother.** Reform often aimed to improve women's usefulness in the household, not to question the division of labour in the family or the control of women's bodies.
- **Little change in economic position.** Property rights remained very limited and women's work outside the home was rarely discussed, so economic dependence continued.
- **Dependence on the colonial state.** Reliance on foreign rulers for laws meant that reform became slow whenever the state feared a reaction, as after 1857.
- **Resistance from orthodoxy.** Orthodox groups opposed the laws and the schools, as in the protests against the Age of Consent Act, and many reformers retreated under pressure.
- **Revivalist and communal elements.** Some reformers used the image of the ancient Hindu woman as a model, and others spoke of their own community's honour, which limited the equal treatment of women and sometimes fed community differences.
- **Slow change in education.** Even in 1931, only a small share of women could read, and in many parts of the country, girls' schools were few.

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- **Difficulty of reaching Muslim and other minority women.** Purdah and community rules slowed change, and the reform groups of each community often worked apart.
- **Franchise limited by property and education.** The vote given in 1921 and 1935 was limited by property and education qualifications, so only a small fraction of women could use it before 1950.

5. Perspectives, critical analysis and scholars

Perspectives on the women's question.

Perspective	View of women's emancipation	Representative writers
Colonial and missionary	Indian society was backward and women needed rescue by Western rule	James Mill, missionary writers
Liberal reformist	Women's progress as part of social reform and modernisation	Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar, Ranade
Nationalist	The women's question settled by placing women as guardians of the inner, spiritual domain of the nation	Partha Chatterjee's analysis of nationalist thinking
Marxist and social history	Women's status linked to class, property and the family; reform as limited by the middle class	Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid
Feminist	Reform focused on women as objects; women's own voices and experience must be recovered	Uma Chakravarti, Tanika Sarkar, Padma Anagol
Subaltern and Dalit feminist	Upper-caste women's reform ignored caste; Dalit women faced both caste and gender oppression	Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru

Critical analysis. The first question is how far the reformers truly freed women. The reformers did remove some cruel practices and opened the door to education. But, as Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar point out, reform was often aimed at making women better wives and mothers in a new middle-class household. Women gained schooling, but the structure of the patriarchal family was left largely untouched.

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The second question is the role of the colonial state. Laws against sati and for widow remarriage came from the colonial government, and so reformers could point to state power as a friend of women. Lata Mani argues in *Contentious Traditions* that in the sati debate both the British and the Indian reformers used women as ground for an argument about scripture and tradition, and that women's own experience was lost. Historians who stress the positive side note that without these laws, many women would have remained at risk.

The third question is the nationalist solution of the women's question. Partha Chatterjee, in his essay on the nationalist resolution of the women's question, argues that nationalist leaders divided the world into an outer domain of politics and the economy, where the West was to be copied, and an inner domain of home and culture, which was to remain Indian. Women were made the guardians of the inner domain. This explains why nationalists supported education for women, but resisted changes in family and religion that seemed to threaten Indian identity. Other historians say that this view is too simple, because many women entered the outer world of politics and work.

The fourth question is class and caste. Most of the early reform was about upper-caste concerns such as widow remarriage and purdah. Women of the lower castes had always worked outside the home and faced other forms of exploitation. Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar linked caste and gender, and Dalit feminists later stressed that the experience of Dalit women cannot be understood by looking at gender or caste alone.

The fifth question is the link with communalism. Some reformers used the image of the ancient Hindu or the pure Muslim woman to define the identity of their community. This could help women's education in some cases, but could also tie women to the honour of the community. Tanika Sarkar's study of the Hindu wife and the nation explores this complex link.

Taken together, the women emancipation initiatives made a real beginning. They ended some cruel customs, opened schools and public life to women, and gave rise to women's own organisations that later fought for the vote and legal equality. Their limits lay in the narrow base, the stress on the roles of wife and mother, the weak enforcement of laws and

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the neglect of lower-caste and poor women.

Scholar	Work	Main contribution
Uma Chakravarti	*Gendering Caste* (2003); *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (1998)	Caste and gender together; Ramabai's life
Lata Mani	*Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (1998)	Study of the sati debate and the position of women in it
Partha Chatterjee	"The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question" (in *Recasting Women*, 1989)	Inner and outer domains in nationalist thought
Tanika Sarkar	*Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2001)	Women, religion and nationalism
Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.)	*Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (1989)	Collection on women and reform in colonial India
Geraldine Forbes	*Women in Modern India* (1996)	General history of the women's movement
Radha Kumar	*The History of Doing* (1993)	History of the women's movement in India since 1800
Meera Kosambi	*Crossing Thresholds* (2007)	Pandita Ramabai and women of western India
Padma Anagol	*The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920* (2005)	Women's own voices in the nineteenth century
Gail Minault	*Secluded Scholars* (1998)	Muslim women's education and reform

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6. Practice questions

Long questions (15–20 marks).

1. Discuss the main social evils affecting women in colonial India and the efforts made to remove them.

2. Assess the role of reformers and the colonial state in improving the condition of women in the nineteenth century.
3. Examine the contribution of women themselves to the emancipation movement in India.
4. Critically analyse the nationalist approach to the women's question.
5. "Women's emancipation in colonial India was shaped by middle-class and upper-caste concerns." Discuss.
6. Evaluate the role of women in the national movement.
7. Compare the contributions of Ram Mohan Roy, Vidyasagar and Phule to women's emancipation.
8. Examine the achievements and limitations of the women emancipation initiatives in colonial India.

Medium questions (10 marks).

1. Explain the campaign against sati and its abolition in 1829.
2. Discuss the role of Vidyasagar in the widow remarriage movement.
3. What was the significance of the Age of Consent Act, 1891?
4. Assess the contribution of Pandita Ramabai.
5. Explain the role of the All India Women's Conference.
6. Discuss the efforts for female education in the nineteenth century.
7. How did the Muslim reformers address women's education and purdah?
8. Explain the role of women in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Short notes (5 marks).

1. Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856
2. Savitribai Phule
3. Women's Indian Association
4. Sarda Act, 1929

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5. Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain
6. *Stri Purush Tulana*
7. D. K. Karve and the SNDT Women's University
8. Muthulakshmi Reddi

Very short and objective questions.

1. Who was the Governor-General under whom sati was abolished?
2. Which Act of 1856 legalised widow remarriage?
3. Who wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman*?
4. In which year was the Women's Indian Association founded?
5. Who became the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress?
6. Which Act raised the age of consent to 12 years in 1891?
7. Name the author of *Sultana's Dream*.
8. Who founded the first school for girls at Poona in 1848?
9. Which Parsi reformer started a campaign against child marriage in 1884?
10. Who raised the Congress flag at Bombay in August 1942?

Analytical and essay prompts.

1. Did the reform movements free women or only reform patriarchy? Discuss with reference to Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar.
2. How far does Partha Chatterjee's idea of inner and outer domains explain the nationalist view of women?
3. Examine the contribution of the women of Odisha to the national movement and social reform.

7. Key takeaways and further reading

Key takeaways.

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- Women’s emancipation began with men’s campaigns against sati, child marriage and the ban on widow remarriage, and then grew with women’s own writing and organisations.
- The main legal landmarks are the Acts of 1829, 1856, 1872, 1891 and 1929, and the property laws of 1929 and 1937.
- Education was the central tool, from the Phules’ school of 1848 to the first women’s university in 1916.
- Women’s organisations such as the Women’s Indian Association and the All India Women’s Conference, and women’s part in the national movement, led to the vote and to constitutional equality.
- The efforts were limited by their narrow social base, weak enforcement and the stress on the role of wife and mother.

Twenty books for further reading.

1. Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* (Stree, 2003).
2. Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Kali for Women, 1998).
3. Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (University of California Press, 1998).
4. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (Permanent Black, 2001).
5. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (Kali for Women, 1989).
6. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).
7. Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing* (Kali for Women, 1993).
8. Meera Kosambi, *Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History* (Permanent Black, 2007).
9. Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920* (Ashgate, 2005).
10. Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

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11. Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India* (Kali for Women, 1996).
12. Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference* (Manohar, 1990).
13. Maitrayee Chaudhuri, *The Indian Women's Movement: Reform and Revival* (Radiant, 1993).
14. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds.), *Women Writing in India* (Feminist Press, 1991).
15. Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Oxford University Press, 1991).
16. Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste, Writing Gender* (Zubaan, 2006).
17. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India 1885–1947* (Macmillan).
18. Bipan Chandra and others, *India's Struggle for Independence* (Penguin).
19. Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).
20. Jana Everett, *Women and Social Change in India* (Heritage, 1979).

Frequently asked questions.

1. Who is called the pioneer of women's education in India? Jotirao and Savitribai Phule, who opened a school for girls at Poona in 1848, are often given this credit, along with Vidyasagar and Bethune in Bengal.

2. When was sati abolished and by whom? Sati was made illegal in Bengal by Regulation XVII of 1829 under Governor-General William Bentinck, after a long campaign by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and others.

3. What did the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 do? It made the remarriage of Hindu widows legal and gave legal status to the children of such marriages. It was passed after Vidyasagar's campaign.

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4. When did Indian women get the right to vote? Women gained a limited vote in the provinces from 1921, beginning with Madras, and the franchise was enlarged under the Government of India Act of 1935. Universal adult franchise came with the Constitution in 1950.

5. Why is Pandita Ramabai remembered? She was a scholar who wrote about the condition of high-caste widows, set up the Sharada Sadan and the Mukti Mission, and showed that women could lead the work of social reform.

6. What were the main limits of the women's reform movements? They reached mostly upper-caste, urban and middle-class women, relied on laws that were weakly enforced, and often kept women in the role of wife and mother.

Category: Colonialism and Nationalism in India

Tag: Women Emancipation

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