

Women, Caste and Reform

Q1. How did women involve themselves in their upliftment?

Ans. By the 1880s, Indian women began to enter universities. Some of them trained to be doctors, some became teachers. Many women began to write and publish their critical views on the place of women in society. Tarabai Shinde, a woman educated at home at Poona, published a book, Stripurushtulna, criticizing the social differences between men and women.

Pandita Ramabai founded a widows' home at Poona to provide shelter to widows who had been treated badly by their husbands' relatives. By the end of the nineteenth century, women themselves were actively working for reform. They wrote books, edited magazines, founded schools and training centres, and set up women's associations. From the early twentieth century, they formed political pressure groups to push through laws for female suffrage (the right to vote) and better health care and education for women.

Q2. Who was E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker? What did he do to improve the condition of untouchables?

Ans. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, or Periyar, as he was called, came from a middle-class family. Interestingly, he had been an ascetic in his early life and had studied Sanskrit scriptures carefully. Later, he became a member of the Congress, only to leave it in disgust when he found that at a feast organised by nationalists, seating arrangements followed caste distinctions – that is, the lower castes were made to sit at a distance from the upper castes.

Convinced that untouchables had to fight for their dignity, Periyar founded the Self Respect Movement. He argued that untouchables were the true upholders of an original Tamil and Dravidian culture which had been subjugated by Brahmans. He felt that all religious authorities saw social divisions and inequality as God-given. Untouchables had to free themselves, therefore, from all religions in order to achieve social equality.