CHAPTER IV

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORMS AND FEMINIST CRITIQUES

4.1 Introduction

In every religion, one can see many occasions when there had been efforts to revisit and scrutinize the religious beliefs and practices. Whereas a religion does not permit within itself radical changes to its fundamental beliefs and tenets, the religious norms and practices undergo many changes with time, mostly gradually with changing time. However, many times this is seen to happen with conscious efforts of groups and individuals. These attempts are known as the socio-religious reform movements and discourses.

In the first part of this chapter, we will briefly discuss the socio-religious reform movements and discourses in the history of religions in India. We would like to examine how they attempt to reorder the society in the areas of social behaviour, custom, structure or control, especially in the matter of gender relations. We expect that such a discussion not only gives idea of the status of woman in the contemporary society, but also provides valuable information about the reaction of religion towards the efforts for social change.

Many feminist thinkers, both Western and Eastern, have their discourses in the area of the study of religion. Since religion has a great deal of influence in shaping women’s life and on her role and status in different aspects of social life, it would be very unusual if feminists remain indifferent to religion. Many of the feminists have contested the traditional interpretations of sacred texts and offered new interpretations. Resorting to heterodoxy against the prevalent androcentric theology, they have challenged those texts and beliefs which are
considered to be non-normative. They argue that the elite men have been the ones who have primarily determined what constitutes both legitimate religious texts and methods of dealing with these texts. In this section, we briefly look into the prominent feminist discourses of religion. In the second part of this chapter, we endeavour to take a brief look at the picture of feminist movements and critiques relevant to the Indian society.

### 4.2 Buddhism and Jainism as Socio-religious Reforms

Jainism and Buddhism are regarded as reformist movements in the history of Indian philosophy because of their radical critiques of prevalent Brähmanical practices in Hinduism. In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, Jainism and Buddhism appeared as socio-religious movements, began as Hindu cults with revolutionary thinking and moral values, and eventually became separate religions. These two new religions rejected the authority of the Vedas, the use of sacrifice, and the role of Brahman priests. As movements preaching new doctrines, they used the vernaculars rather than Sanskrit, were open to all social classes, including women as well as men, and discarded the current social distinctions. Both of these religious movements found support among a variety of classes: the ruling elite, merchants, artisans, and those at the bottom of the social strata.

Buddhism brought a unique social change through its religio-philosophical ideas. By rejecting caste system in society, treating every individual as an end, and inspiring for self discipline and spiritual achievement, Buddhism established itself as a reformist religious movement. Buddhism opened the door of order for women and introduced them to a new state of religious individuality. Before the Buddhist epoch women were subjugated under various Brähmanic injunctions. That Buddha gave the dhamma to both men and women, can be regarded as a major reformist step in religion.

Buddha’s rejection of the sacramental notion of marriage had a salutary effect on the position of Indian women in general and Buddhist women in particular. No widow was compelled to remain single and live rest of her life mourning her...
dead husband. She could either marry or join the nunnery. Sati was practically unknown at the time of the Buddha and never flourished among the Buddhists. Similarly, only grown up girls were considered competent to marry, marriage, according to Buddhism, being something equivalent to a contract. All told, Buddhism and its secular notions of marriage had held in check sati, child marriage and other pernicious institutions of medieval Hinduism in all parts of India, and only after disappearance of Buddhism from India was the field left free for Brahmanism to enforce these social evils.¹

4.3 Sikhism and Socio-religious Reform

One can perceive the emergence of Sikhism as a religious reform movement. It evolved in the backdrop of conflict between Hinduism and Islam, when each of them was infected by evil practices. The efforts of the sant and sufi traditions for spiritual emancipation for all irrespective of caste, creed and gender culminated in the birth of a new religion which we know now as Sikhism. Though Sikhism emerged through powerful denunciation of both Brahmanism and Islamic religious establishment by the Sikh Gurus, it evolved essentially as an effort to bring religious reform to Hinduism and Islam.

Since Sikh Gurus advocated for spiritual as well as social equality for all across caste, creed and gender, Sikhism took certain steps, at least in principle, towards gender justice. The Gurus enunciated the principle for a new social and religious order and subscribed equal religious status for both men and women and advocated for social justice for women. Sikhism tried to eradicate female infanticide and sati and promote female education and widow remarriage.

Modern Sikhism

The doctrine of Sikh Gurus, which formed during the initial period of Sikhism, could bring some change to the social practices among the Sikhs and thereby somewhat equal religious status for men and women of all caste and creed. However, the guidelines of the gurus concerning social customs and practices remained to large extent only precepts, not practice. The religious, traditional
and cultural practices prevailing under the established religions, mainly Hinduism and Islam, were very deep rooted in the society. Thus, the professed reforms of the Gurus could not have enough impact.

For example, the doctrine of Sikh Gurus could not desist the elite strata of the society from polygamy and sati. Maharaja Ranjeet Singh, one of the most famous Sikh Kings in Mughal India who built the Sikh Kingdom almost single-handedly, was said to have seven wives. When he died on 27 June 1839, after a reign of nearly forty years leaving seven sons by different queens, his cremation ceremony was performed by both Sikh and Hindu priests. His wife Maharani Mahtab Devi Sahiba, the Princess of Kangra, daughter of Maharaja Sansar Chand, the Empress of Punjab, committed sati. Dr. Hoginberger, Maharaja Ranjit Singh’s personal physician, accounts in his recollection Thirty Years in the East, “The Brahmins performed their prayers from the sāstras, the priests of the Sikhs did the same from their holy scriptures called Granth Sahib ...
... Along with the ruler of Punjab, four of his wives and seven slave girls were reduced to ashes”. When Maharaja Kharak Singh died on 5 November 1840, two of his wives are said to have committed sati. However, when Chand Kaur, one of Kharak Singh’s widows, proclaimed herself as Maharanee, the Punjabis were unable to reconcile themselves to being ruled by a woman who could not leave the seclusion of the zenana and soon she was obliged to relinquish her claim to the throne.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Sikhs had lost their independence, their symbol, their temples, and their fortune, notwithstanding the Sikh Gurus’ powerful denunciation of Brahmanism. As noted above, the genesis of this downfall was mainly because Hinduism seemed to be assimilating Sikhism. The religious groupings of Hindus and Sikhs remained fluid and frail. Day-to-day life of Sikhs was influenced by a network of kinship and caste relations. There were hardly any differences between the way Hindus and Sikhs received a child into the world, contracted marriage alliances, or performed funeral rites. In practice, the Sikhs could never come out of the social traditions inherited from the Hindu orthodox society. “Brahmans help them to be born,
help them to wed, help them to die and help their souls after death to obtain a state of bliss.” As a result, the two religions were integrated into a common cultural universe. “However, the Khalsa sub-tradition [of Sikhism] did not blend very well with the amorphous state of the Sikh faith. The Khalsa Sikhs had their own notion of what constituted the Sikh past and more importantly they possessed a distinct life-cycle ritual in the form of ‘Khande da pahul’ or baptism rites. Those who maintained this rite had to maintain the well known symbols of Khalsa and in addition strictly observe the injunctions laid down in the Rehat Maryada”.

To re-establish Sikhism as a distinct identity from Hinduism and to restructure socio-religious ethos for Sikhs, there had been efforts to formulate Sikh code of conduct. There were a number of unsuccessful attempts in the eighteenth century following the death of Guru Gobind Singh to produce an accurate portrayal of Sikh conduct and customs. These attempts turned out to be contradictory and inconsistent with many of the principles of the Gurus and therefore were not accepted by the majority of Sikhs.

In the early twentieth century a fresh attempt was initiated by the Siromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee to produce a modern standard Rehat and almost a revivalist movement in Sikhism took shape. The oft-repeated rhetorical statement ‘hum Hindu nahin’ (we are not Hindus’), now had a real basis. Though there was a militant off-shoot of this process, the movement acted as a social reform among Sikhs and facilitated the finalization of Rehat Maryada.

Rehat Maryada

After a long period of development and years of intense deliberations and discussions, the Rehat Maryada came into existence in the present from in 1945. The effort involved a large number of Sikh scholars and theologians throughout the world who worked to produce the final version. The document produced has been accepted as the official version which provides guidelines through which all Sikh individuals and communities around the world can
measure themselves. The Rehat Maryada is the only official Sikh code of conduct authorized by the Akal Takht, the seat of supreme temporal authority for Sikhs.

The Rehat Maryada, the guide to the Sikh way of life, spells out the basic beliefs, principles and practices of an ideal Sikh existence. The document reinstalled and enforced the attitude of the Sikh Gurus towards women, some of which are as follows:⁶

- Sikhism condemns infanticide outright, particularly female infanticide, and Sikhs should have no dealings with any who condone it;
- Sikhs must not commit adultery;
- A Sikh must respect another man’s wife as his own mother, and another man’s daughter as his own daughter;
- A man should enjoy his wife’s company and woman should be loyal to their husbands;
- It is contrary to Sikhism for women to veil themselves;
- A Sikh daughter should marry a Sikh;
- Child marriages are not permitted. A girl should marry only when she has attained physical and mental maturity;
- Neither a girl nor a boy should be married for money;
- There is no prohibition against widows or widowers remarrying if they wish. The ceremony should be the same as that of the first marriage.
- Generally, no Sikh should marry a second wife if the first wife is alive.

The revivalist movement was successful in enabling Sikhs to distinguish themselves from Hindus and people of other religions and in giving an independent identity to Sikhism as a distinct religion. Moreover, the formation of the Sikh code of conduct, Rehat Maryada, was successful in bringing forward once again the doctrines of the Sikh Gurus for uprooting the gender biases from the society.

However, the motivation of formulating Rehat Maryada was to give Sikhs an independent identity rather than to remove gender inequalities which persisted
among Sikhs. Thus, Rehat Maryada was successful in uprooting the gender biases among Sikhs only partially. The general situation of women, problems such as bride burning, dowry, abortion of female foetus among Sikhs are still prevalent.

4.4 Reforms in Hinduism

From the earliest times the history of Hinduism has been marked by repeated endeavours at reform of different kinds. Almost at every epoch there have been efforts to purge and purify the religion. For example, from the times of the rishis of the Upaniṣads, there has scarcely been a generation when in some part of India or other some nobly inspired soul has not raised his protest against the idolatry, unspirituality and ceremonialism. One can see the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism as a result of this process. In relatively modern times Sankardeva, Guru Nanak, Kabir, Chaitanya are only a few of the more prominent and successful spirits amongst a host of religious reformers in the long, mostly unwritten annals of Hinduism.

In the modern period, the challenges before the educated Indian elite in British rule were unprecedented. They discovered to their distress that the society they lived in was not the ideal one, but ridden with many social evils. Towards the early nineteenth century, the Hindu elites who had come to the exposure of western education realized that the entire Indian civilization is looked down upon by the west due to all pervading superstitious and evil practices in Indian society. In particular, the Hindu traditions were often not respected or thought as credible by Western standards as the society was rampanty infected by caste rigidity, polygamy, child marriage, sati, sufferings of widow and various other superstitious beliefs and practices. On the other hand, Christianity propagated by western missionaries in India with a more human face had many takers from the lower strata of Hindus resulting mass scale conversions to Christianity from Hinduism. The Hindu elites realized that this phenomenon was heading towards a crisis of identity for the majority Hindus in India, and
therefore required conscious intervention. The country had seen many efforts for social reform since early nineteenth century.

The leaders who strived for social reform across the religions soon realized that the evils in the Indian society are deep rooted and that they not only have religious sanctions, but also were evolved from the religions themselves. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy had believed that it was possible to bring social reform through bringing out peoples of all religions together and by projecting the basic unity that underlay all religious faiths. However, his attempts met with resistance from the orthodox sections of different religious communities. Moreover, the resistance came also from the ruling power which believed that the security of British supremacy in India depended on keeping the different religious communities separate from each other. It was therefore inevitable that the movement of social reform should develop within the folds of each religion rather than as a unified movement for the transformation of the society as a whole. This realization motivated for religious reforms with a purpose of social reform and forced the educated elites to re-visit and re-examine the whole Indian ancient civilization or their social usages and institutions, their religious beliefs, literature, science, art as also in fact their conception and realization of life. Thus, several socio-religious movements, organized and unorganized, were evolved in the nineteenth century India and women’s issues were raised for the first time in modern India. Hindu religious revivalists and reformers made efforts to improve the status of women by evoking the ancient Indian norms of purity and duty. Most of the Hindu social reformers sought credibility for the ideas and actions in the ancient Sanskrit texts.

The aims of the social and religious reform movements in Hinduism in the nineteenth century were against social and legal inequalities. Abolition of discriminations in society on the basis of caste and gender was the prime focus of these movements. It involved an attack on certain social institutions and practices like child marriage, position and treatment of widows, seclusion and the denial of women’s right to property and education, the roots of which
lay in the religious traditions of different communities. Though there were many such movements, the most significant of them that developed within the Hindu society were the ones spearheaded by Brahmo Sabha, Prarthana Samaj and Arya Samaj. Moreover, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was one of the most prominent and significant reformers who fought untiringly for women education, widow remarriage and against child marriage and polygamy.

**Rammohan Roy, Brahmo Sabha and Brahmo Samaj**

The primal impulse in the Indian religious movements for social reform which prevailed throughout nineteenth century came largely from Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833). He was not only a scholarly and religious man, he was a man of the world and had wide awake human interest and exhibited considerable practical efficiency. He was the first social reformer in the nineteenth century who raised his voice against the prevailing religious and social maladies affecting the conditions of women.

Rammohan Roy's experience working with the British government taught him that Hindu traditions were often not respected or thought as credible by Western standards; this motivated him to revisit the religion. He wanted to legitimize Hindu traditions to his European acquaintances by proving that "superstitious practices which deform the Hindu religion have nothing to do with the pure spirit of its dictates!" The "superstitious practices" Rammohan Roy fought against included sati, caste rigidity, polygamy and child marriages. These practices were often the reasons for the claims of the British officials of their moral superiority over the Indian nation. Ram Mohan Roy's ideas of religion sought to create a fair and just society by implementing humanitarian practices similar to Christian ideals and thus legitimize Hinduism in the modern world. Appealing to the political aspirations of the Hindus he wrote:

> The present system of Hindoos is not well calculated to promote their political interests..... It is necessary that some change should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.
Rammohan Roy had deep concern over women’s issues such as sati, child marriage, female infanticide, widowhood and polygamy. He also made in depth study of the Hindu religious literature so as to gather support for his attempts at ending the evil customs prevailing in the Hindu society.

Along with Dwarkanath Tagore, Rammohan Roy founded the Brahmo Sabha in Calcutta in 1828. The objective of this Sabha was in one hand to publicize the true Vedanta, which according to them had been corrupted by Buddhist and Brähmanical influences, and the other, strive for a movement in Bengal to fight against social evils.

To realize the desired social reforms, Roy tried to mobilize the state for appropriate legal enactments. His early efforts in this direction against the custom of sati were not successful. But around 1818 he succeeded in convincing the state and as a result of that he could seek the cooperation of the then government in his attempts to abolish the evil practice of sati. He forcefully pointed out that the ancient Hindu scriptures did not prescribe sati. This strengthened the hands of Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India. In 1829, the British Government abolished sati and declared it as a crime.

Moreover, Rammohan Roy fought in favour of granting the right to property to women. In favour of his argument, he pointed out the property right and inheritance provisions for women advocated by the laws given in Dāyabhāga.

“In his pamphlet, modern encroachment on the ancient rights of female, he pleaded for a change in the Hindu law of inheritance so as to improve the lot the Hindu widows.”

Rammohan Roy argued that the abolition of the custom of sati was not just enough for the emancipation of women. In fact, it also necessitated the acceptance of widow remarriage which was largely forbidden at that time. Consequently, Roy and his Brahmo Sabha strongly advocated for widow remarriage.
Though Brahmo Sabha initiated a series of socio-religious movements in India in the nineteenth century, after the death of Ram Mohan Roy in 1833 the Sabha became defunct. However, the followers of this movement claimed to have created a separate religion when the Brahmo religion was founded in 1849 at Calcutta by Debendranath Tagore with the publication of “Brahmo Dharma”. The Brahmo Samaj was founded at Lahore in 1861 to propagate the Brahmo religion. The objective of the Samaj was to create a casteless Vedic Arya society and to rescue Christian converts to the fold of Hinduism. The Brahmo Samaj was successful to initiate the implementation of provision of Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 by accomplishing Brahmo marriages of several widows. However, because Brahmo Dharma was projected and perceived as a separate religion from Hinduism, these isolated cases could not serve the desired purpose of reform in Hinduism.

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Reform endeavours

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891), one of the most glowing figures of the nineteenth century Renaissance of Bengal, consolidated the efforts of Raja Rammohan Roy for socio-religious reforms in Bengal. A versatile personality, Vidyasagar, was an academician, philosopher, educator, entrepreneur, writer, translator, reformer and philanthropist, all at a time, not by choice, but because his worldview demanded him to be. He devoted his life for betterment of the society, devoted his tireless efforts for woman education and fought for the cause of widow remarriage with courage. He was pioneer in setting schools for women and used hymns of ancient Hindu texts that sanction female education to motivate people for sending their daughters to schools.

Vidyasagar campaigned for the introduction of a Bill to legalize widow remarriage in India. In favour of widow remarriage he argued taking help of the texts of Parāśara. Seeking for a larger support from the society, he published a pamphlet in Bengali in January 1855. There he argued quoting Parāśara that the sāstras had sanctioned widow remarriage in the contemporary age, Kali Yuga. Vidyasagar’s pamphlet set off a major debate throughout the country and met with confrontation from the orthodox Hindu society. The opponents of
widow remarriage mounted bitter campaign against him also using the sāstras to back up their position. Vidyasagar continued his endeavour incessantly, and apart from relying on the sāstric sanction for widow marriage, he also combined rationalist-humanist arguments to counter his opponents and to gather support for the cause. The result of the campaign by Vidyasagar and other likeminded section of the society convinced the British to pass the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act in 1856. In fact, before passing the Bill, 56,000 persons petitioned against it and 55,000 for it.¹⁰ It can surely be termed as an impressive achievement of gathering support, taking the prevailing influence of orthodox Brahmanism in the contemporary society into consideration.

**Prarthana Samaj**

Inspired by the socio-religious movement spearheaded by the Brahmo Samaj, a similar movement for religious and social reform emerged in Maharashtra in mid-nineteenth century. A secret society named Paramahamsa Sabha was formed in 1849 by Ram Balkrishna Jaykar and others. Its meetings used to be held in secret in order to avoid the wrath of the powerful and orthodox elements of society. “Meetings were for discussion, the singing of hymns, and the sharing of a communal meal prepared by a low-caste cook. Members ate bread baked by Christians and drank water brought by Muslims”.¹¹ There were about a thousand members of the Sabha spread throughout the western India. However, orthodox opposition resulted in Sabha’s documents being stolen in 1860 and the names of the members being made public. Some of the members became Christian, while others held to their convictions and later became the founders of a new movement for religious and social reform, called the Prarthana Samaj.

Prarthana Samaj was founded in Bombay in 1867 and had many distinguished personalities like Dr. Atmaram Pandurang, Bal Mangesh Wagle, Vaman Abaji Modak, Sir Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Narayan Chandavarkar and Justice Mahadev Govinda Ranade as members. It propounded belief in one God, supported Bhakti and opposed idolatry. The Prarthana Samaj was inspired by the Brahmo Samaj but was milder and less radical in its principles.
The members of the Prarthana Samaj were followers of the great religious tradition of the Maratha Sant Mat like Namdev, Tukaram and Ramdas. The Brahmo Samaj founders examined many world religions, including ancient Vedic texts, which subsequently were not accepted to be infallible or divine. Although the adherents of Prarthana Samaj were devoted theists, they also did not regard the Vedas as divine or infallible. They drew their nourishment from the Hindu scriptures and used the hymns of the old Marathi "poet-saints" in their prayers. Their ideas trace back to the devotional poems of the Vitthalas as part of the Vaishnava bhakti devotional movements of the thirteenth century in southern Maharashtra. Though their theism is based on ancient Hindu texts, they had practically given up the inspiration of the Vedas and belief in transmigration.

Beyond religious concerns, the primary focus of the Prarthana Samaj was on social and cultural reform. It critically examined the relations between contemporary social and cultural systems and religious beliefs and formed opinion on social reform. This exercise brought forward the issues for social and cultural reform such as the improvement of the lot of women and depressed classes, an end to the caste system, abolition of child marriage and infanticide, educational opportunities for women and remarriage of widows. In fact, under the influence of liberal thought of the west, the members of the Samaj recognized the individuality of women and the Prarthana Samaj made a forceful effort to prove that Hindu religious traditions were not the source of legitimacy for the pitiable condition of women.

Although, as a body Prarthana Samaj did not engage itself in organizing movements for social reform except sponsoring education for women, some of its leading members were active in the women's cause. Mahadev Govinda Ranade, the chief exponent of the Prarthana Samaj, incessantly stressed its ideal, "Religion was inseparable from social reform, as love to man is inseparable from love to God…. That the life could not be shut up, as it were, into watertight compartments, cut off from one another, but that religion must give unity to all spheres of human activity." This spirit manifested itself in
various activities designed to bring about social and religious reforms. Ranade wanted ‘reform from within’. For social reform Ranade prescribed studying ancient religious scriptures, interpreting them so as to suit the new requirements of the time, and appealing to human conscience and persuading for social reform. His concept of reform essentially was the preservation of ancient Indian virtues and simultaneous and gradual assimilation of appropriate and useful contributions from other cultures.

Ranade, like his other contemporaries, tried to abolish child marriage. According to him, the age of a girl at marriage should be at least twelve years though he suggested sixteen years for sexual relationship. He acted as the spokesman of the educated people and moderate reformers, and strengthening the hands of the British government in passing the Age of Consent Bill in 1891. Ranade strongly advocated for widow remarriage and education for girls. Criticizing Manu, he argued that a child widow, who does not know even the duties of a wife, cannot be a lifetime worshipper after her husband’s death. Ranade and Bhandarkar were among the participants when Sankaracharya was challenged to a public debate to decide whether or not the sāstras sanctioned widow remarriage. Supported by Prarthana Samaj, the first widow remarriage was arranged by Bombay Widow Reforms Association in 1869.

**Jotiba (Jotirao) Phule**

A strong critique of Hinduism, specifically centered on the position of women in Hindu society was developed by Jotiba (Jotirao) Phule (1827-1890) in Maharashtra. Phule was a fierce critic of Brāhmanical interpretation of religion and strongly put forward the view that every religious book is a product of its time and the truths it contains have no permanent and universal validity. All religions and their religious texts are man-made and they represent the selfish interest of the classes, which are trying to pursue and protect their selfish ends by constructing such books. As a sociologist or a humanist, Phule was much ahead of his contemporaries with such revolutionary ideas.
Phule put forward his untiring efforts to eradicate caste oppression and untouchability, and for upliftment of women including widows. He argued that education of women and the lower castes was a vital priority in addressing social inequalities. He, after educating his wife Savitribai Phule, opened a school for girls in India in August 1848. Writing on the most delicate subject of enforced widowhood upon Brahmin women, Phule says:

The partial Aryan institution inconsiderately allows polygamy to males, which causes them to fall into new habits of wickedness. When his lust is satisfied with his legal wives, he for novelty's sake haunts the houses of public women. . . . In old age in order to obliterate the stigma upon his character, the shameless fellow becomes a religious man and hires public harlots to dance and sing in the temples with a view to venerate the stone idols, for his own satisfaction. After the death of this wicked man, his young and beautiful wife is not allowed by the same Aryan institution to remarry. She is stripped of her ornaments; she is forcibly shaved by her near relatives; she is not fed well; she is not properly clothed; she is not allowed to join pleasure parties, marriages or religious ceremonies. In fact she is bereaved of all the worldly enjoyments, nay she is considered lower than a culprit or a mean beast.\(^{13}\)

In 1873, Phule formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) with the main objective of liberating the Bahujans, Shudras and Ati-Shudras and protecting them from exploitation and atrocities. For his fight to attain equal rights, justice and opportunities for women and downtrodden section of the society, Phule sometimes is termed as “the father of Indian social revolution”.\(^{14}\)

**Dayananda Saraswati and Arya Samaj**

A powerful religious and social reform movement in northern Indian was started by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. A Hindu revivalist and social reformer, Dayananda Saraswati (1824 – 1883) believed in the existence of only One Supreme Reality which should be worshipped in spirit and not in form. He said the all knowledge was contained in the Vedas and the social
problems of India could be solved by studying the Vedas. His philosophy was - “Go back to the Vedas”.

Swami Dayananda’s study of the Vedas had recovered verses which suggested that both men and women had the right to study, that women had once chanted Vedic mantras and that men and women were intended to practice religious duties together. It was moreover argued that thus engaging women fully in their Aryan heritage would make them better Aryan mothers enabled in this way to produce more enlightened Aryan daughters and sons.

Dayananda Saraswati attacked decadent socio-religious customs and practices. He opposed child marriage and was in favour of education of women. He strongly attacked caste distinctions which perpetuated social inequalities. He also started the Shuddhi Movement to reconvert those Hindus who had been converted to other religions.

When Dayananda Saraswati visited Bombay in 1874, the members of the Prarthana Samaj attended his lectures with great interest. However, difference between Prarthana Samaj and Dayananda on their opinions about the Vedas stopped the members of Prarthana Samaj from joining him in his crusade for socio-religious reforms. Thus, the Prarthana Samaj continued as an independent reform movement in Western India.

In April, 1875 Dayananda Saraswati formed the Arya Samaj at Bombay. It was a Hindu reform movement, meaning “society of the nobles”. The purpose of the Samaj was to move the Hindu religion away from the fictitious beliefs. 'Krinvanto Vishvam Aryam" was the motto of the Samaj, which means, "Make this world noble". Among the religious reform movements of the nineteenth century, the Arya Samaj occupied a very important place. Its coverage was much wider than that of other reform movements and it had considerable impact on women education and against child marriage.

Ten basic principles were agreed on by the members of the Samaj at the time of formation of Lahore Arya Samaj in June 1887. The first three principles are
seen as comprising the doctrinal core of the Arya Samaj, as they summarize the members’ beliefs in regard to God, the nature of Divinity and the authority of the Vedas. The remaining seven principles reflect the reformative ambitions of the Samaj in regard to both the individual and society at large.

Drawing what are seen to be the logical conclusions from these principles, the Arya Samaj unequivocally vowed for fight against social practices such as polytheism, iconolatry, animal sacrifice, ancestor worship, pilgrimage, priest craft, the belief in Avatars or incarnations of God, the hereditary caste system, untouchability and child marriage on the grounds that all these lack Vedic sanction. For this reason, the early Samaj proved to be attractive to individuals belonging to various religious communities, and enjoyed a notable degree of converts from segments of the Hindu, Sikh, Christian and Muslim populations of Indian society.

**Swami Vivekananda**

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the chief disciple of the nineteenth century mystic Ramakrishna Paramahamsa and the founder of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission, was the most esteemed Hindu revivalist of the modern times. He is considered a key figure in the introduction of Hindu philosophies of Vedanta and Yoga to the "Western" world. He is also credited with raising interfaith awareness and bringing Hinduism to the status of a major world religion during the end of the nineteenth century. Vivekananda is considered to be a major force in the revival of Hinduism in modern India. A spiritual genius of commanding intellect and power, Vivekananda crammed immense labour and achievement into his short life. To exhort his nation to a spiritual greatness, he endeavoured to awaken India to a new national consciousness.

According to Swami Vivekananda, the Vedanta declares that one and the same conscious self is present in all beings. In the highest truth of the Parambrahma, there is no distinction of sex. Therefore, though outwardly there may be differences between man and woman, in their real nature there is
He cited precedents from the Upanishads for training women in religious lore; the stories of Gārgi, who challenged the distinguished philosopher Yājñavalkya in philosophical debate at the court of king Janaka and of Maitreyi, the wife of this same philosopher, whom Yājñavalkya had accepted as his disciple after deciding to leave the household life. The term Brahmavādini - she who knows the teachings of Brahma became Vivekananda’s justification for assuming that female instruction was normal. The very sparse references to educated women in the ancient texts became in his expansive imagination, a “complete … equality of boys and girls in our old forest universities”. When Swami Vivekananda envisioned a system of women’s schools to transmit his own version of a revitalised Hinduism, he would cite with approval such Vedic interpretations by Dayananda, asserting that true Aryan ideals had always upheld women’s partnership with men in matters of religion. It was the later period of degradation instituted by rapacious (greedy) Purānic priests which had deprived women of their originally exalted functions.

Child Marriage versus Widow Remarriage

The main reason behind the reform movement for widow remarriage was the prevalence of large number of child widows who were tormented by the high caste section of the Indian society. This was the inevitable consequence of marriage of girls at very young age to relatively older men. Thus, the dismal situation of the widows to a large extent linked to child marriage prevailed in Hinduism. The provision of widow remarriage given by the act of 1856 was hardly of any significance, because there was a strong resistance from the Hindu orthodox society and not many Hindu male, even those who were widowers, came forward to marry any widows. Even the Age of Consent Law of 1891, which raised the marriageable age for girls as 12, could not curb the menace of child-marriage in India.

In 1888, Ramabai Donge Medhavi (1858-1922), highlighting the prevailing Brāhmanical patriarchy, presented a coherent and convincing argument on the double standards of morality with biasness against women. There she also
argues against the undue emphasis on remarriage of widows in a situation where most men were reluctant to remarry widows and those who did faced ostracism.

Mahatma Gandhi, with a moderate and pragmatic view on the matter of child marriage and widow remarriage, suggested the following:

1. No father should get a daughter under the age 15 married.
2. If a girl below this age has already been married and has become a widow, it is the father’s duty to get her married again.
3. If a fifteen-year old girl becomes a widow within a year of her marriage, her parents should encourage her to marry again.
4. Every member of the family should look upon the widow with the utmost respect. Parents or parents-in-law must provide her with the means of improving her knowledge. (Navajivan, 4 May, 1924).

### 4.5 Islam and Reform

**Sufism**

After the emergence of Muslims as a strong religious community in India, the first reform movement Islam saw in India was brought by Sufism. This was a subtle but effective movement which was acting on the gender issues in medieval Muslim society in India. “The Sufi orders spread throughout India from the twelfth century onwards. Relatively little known about the impact of Sufi practices on Muslim women, but it is clear that Sufi practices, and religious poetry made their impact on the spiritual lives of women. The great Sufi writer of Spain, Ibn ul Arabi, said that two of his teachers in spiritual wisdom were women. Ibn ul Arabi’s writings were, and still are, widely read among Indian Sufis. Sufism sometimes gives spiritual guidance to women, not the least because the first famous and influential Sufi poet was a woman, Rabia. The influence of Sufism on Indian Muslim women was emphasized by Richard Eaton. He showed that Sufis used their poetry as popular literature and traditional forms of folk singing as a way of transmitting values and practices.
Influenced by Sufis, Muslim women in medieval India tended to live by following the patterns of behaviour coming from the early Islamic societies.

**Modern reform discourses**

Starting from the early nineteenth century, due to the increasing exposure to the modern societies and outlooks, a section of Muslims tended to reinterpret many aspects of the application of their religion in their life. There had been an attempt to reconnect with the original message of Islam, untouched by different cultural influences. Many of these people were described as liberal, progressive or reformist, though in application but not in the tenets of the faith.

Nineteenth century India had seen a thrust of modern thinking in revisiting the religion and religious practices among Indian Muslims. Islamic scholars and thinkers felt the necessity to analyze Islam from inside driven by the consciousness about the loss of political power to a foreign rule. The new realities forced introspection and analysis of the causes of the decline and loss of religious and cultural vitality. Initiated by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898), the forerunner of the modern Islamist thinkers in India, a galaxy of scholars devoted their energy to revitalize Islamic traditions in India.

One among the scholars was Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali (1837-1914), an Urdu and literary critic of great influence. Hali was for a new start in politics and society as much as in literature. He wrote the famous “Musaddas-e-Hali”, a narrative on the rise and fall of Muslims that was published in 1879. In his novel, Majalis-un Nisan (Assemblies of Women), Hali, emphasized the need of educating women. The heroine, Zubaida Khatun, is taught the Qur’ān, Arabic, Persian and Urdu as well as mathematics, geography and history by her father. This was at a time, when studying “British” subjects such as geography and mathematics was a taboo even for Indian Muslim men.

A social reformist movement, prompted by the contemporary political urge of the Muslim community in India, was taking its rise in the utterances of Sir Allama Mohammad Iqbal (1873-1938). Sir Iqbal is generally known as a poet and philosopher, but he was also a jurist, a politician, a social reformer, and a
great Islamic scholar. Iqbal's contribution to the Muslim world as one of the greatest thinkers of Islam remains unparalleled.

The distinguished scholar in this sequel who was most vocal for gender equality in Islam was Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935). He is chiefly known for his pioneering role in Urdu journalism for women. He founded the weekly newspaper Tahzib un-Niswan in Lahore in 1898 together with his second wife, Muhammadi Begam. Mumtaz Ali was well educated and had thorough and profound knowledge in the Islamic literature. In 1879 he had begun corresponding with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who was impressed by the young man and eventually invited Mumtaz Ali to visit him to discuss religious matters. However, on their meeting it turned out that there are lot of disagreements between them on women issues. Mumtaz Ali’s treatment of women’s right in Islam was considerably more advanced in spirit, compared to not only his contemporary reformers, but also many of the recent Muslim scholars who speak for gender reform in Islam. In his revolutionary work “Huquq- un-Niswan” (Women’s Rights) he argued that Qur’ān had been grossly misinterpreted in regard to the attitude towards women and on their rights. He argued in favour of equal religious and social status of women, women’s education and against purdah and polygamy through his liberal interpretation of Qur’ān and Hadith.\(^{23}\) It is seen that most of the Islamic scholars of the present time use Sayyid Mumtaz Ali’s analysis of Qur’ān for arguing for gender reform in Islam as well as for establishing superiority of Islam in relation to women’s right.

At the outset of twentieth century, Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad (1888 - 1958) was a very young scholar at that time that moved for religious reconstruction of Islamic thought. He started two weeklies in Urdu: Al-Hilal and Al-Balagh, which although started in a moment of political stress, served as vital instruments of religious reform. As the Chairman of the Central Advisory Board of Education in the independent India, he gave thrust to adult illiteracy, universal primary education, free and compulsory for all children up to the age of fourteen, girl’s education, and diversification of secondary education and vocational training.
Azad’s work for education and social upliftment in India made him an important influence in guiding India’s economic and social development.

Starting from the early twentieth century when women gradually started appearing in the struggle for Indian national independence, Muslim women, though sporadically, started raising their voice in the religious and political forums. The first woman who publicly articulated such demands was Chand Begum. She spoke out against the dire conditions faced by Muslim women and their lack of education at the Mohammedan Educational congress in Bombay in 1903 when, speaking from behind the curtain, she “hailed the Reform Party, a group of Muslim supporters of female education, and hurled bitter invectives on reactionary maulvis. She called upon the Muslim women to follow fervently the female reform movement which was advocating modern education amongst Muslim women, and to say goodbye to the immovable maulvis”\(^\text{24}\). As a consequence of the efforts by various quarters, a normal school for training Muslim women teachers was opened at Aligarh in 1913. The first Muslim Ladies’ Conference was held in 1915 where promotion of education for women was emphasized. In 1971, a group of leading Muslim women activists passed a resolution against polygamy which caused controversy in Lahore.\(^\text{25}\)

**Reinstatement of Shari’a Law**

Islam came to Indian subcontinent through the trade routes of the Arabs via the Arabian sea in the early years of its inception. The Islamic community which grew from the traders settled down in the Malabar coast in eighth century adopted the local customs and practices for several centuries. They did not follow the Shari’a law.\(^\text{26}\) The Shari’a law, as interpreted by the Ulamas in their royal courts, was established by Muslim Sultanates in India. The Muslim rulers implemented the Muslim law in India through the appointment of kanzis. However, the Imperial British rulers abolished the post in 1864 and the organization of Muslim law and the restrictions within it was left to individuals. This had an adverse impact on women. On the one hand it made women vulnerable to the whims of men in the family, and on the other hand, it encouraged an increased dependency on the kanzis, who had no official
authority and were perhaps less well trained, and therefore carried less clout with the community to enforce compliance with some of the injunctions.\textsuperscript{27} The application of Customary Law by the British on various family matters further deteriorated the conditions of women across the religious communities. The Muslim women were deprived even from the limited rights given to them by Shari’\textasciiacute;a Law.

The early twentieth century had seen the emergence of groups of women activists in both Hindu and Muslim communities coming forward to fight for women’s cause and rights. From the platform of several woman organizations like the Women’s Indian Organization and the All India Women’s Conference, women from both Hindu and Muslim communities raised their voice for women’s cause including female education, rising of marriage age and the removal of restriction of purdah. The women’s movement was concerned more about the legal disabilities of women irrespective of religious boundaries and worked together to remove these disabilities despite the political differences that were amongst the men of the two communities. Many Muslim women were becoming aware of an all India sisterhood in which Muslim women could support Hindu women in their campaign to raise the age of marriage, while calling upon Hindu women to support their efforts to lessen the restriction of Purdah.

However, the desire for the recognition of the Shari’\textasciiacute;a as Muslim personal law was an issue which separated Muslim women from their Hindu counterparts. If the Shari’\textasciiacute;a were in force instead of customary law, Muslim women felt, then their rights to property, inheritance, and choice in marriage would be affirmed. Hence, in the matter of legal reform, Muslim women’s sense of separate community identity was articulated and recognition of the Shari’\textasciiacute;a as the operative Muslim personal law became a matter of concerned for Muslim women.\textsuperscript{28}

On the other hand, the religious and political leaders of the Muslim community too felt the need of a personal law for the Muslims. There were several reasons for striving for enactment of a personal law for the Muslims based on
Sharia. First, the Muslim scholars had been opining for a long to implement uniform religious and social practices for all Muslims in the country, so that Islam is freed from the non-uniform social customs and practices. Second, it was felt that this would be useful for attaining a legitimate identity to the Muslims as a nation. Lastly, to realize a separate nation for Muslims, it was important to bring the Muslim women’s movement to the political platform of the Muslims. Thus, both males and females of the Muslim community for different reasons strived for Muslim Personal Law (Shari’a) which was materialized in 1937. The enforcement of this law brought some relief to the miserable lives of the Indian Muslim women. However, the law exempted inheritance of agricultural land, which constituted about 99.5 per cent of all property available in India, from the ambit of Shari’a law, and thereby limiting its scope extremely so far as women’s inheritance is concerned.

Despite the efforts of a galaxy of reformers and critics, the desired religious reforms in regards to status of woman in Islam is far from being achieved. The rigidity to reform in Islam in India seems to be due to the fact that “in the turmoil of poverty and greed that is the social reality of modern India, religion has become radically politicized. For many Muslims, as for many Hindus, strict adherence to conservative beliefs is the only sure sign of fidelity to one’s own kind”. Nevertheless, an increasing number of scholars and activists have been continuing their efforts with renewed vigour. The noted scholar Asghar Ali Engineer argues:

The Islamic theologians (known as the ‘Ulama) often point out that women were treated like chattel before Islam and they acquired great dignity because of the Qur’anic teachings. But what the ‘Ulama do not realize is that what was done by the Qur’an to improve women’s situation was, to a great extent undone, by the ‘patriarchization of Islamic law’ in later centuries.

4.6 Feminist Critiques

The emergence of feminism with a revolutionary opinion on women’s emancipation from discriminations in various fields in the society can be seen
as early as late eighteenth century. Mary Wollstonecraft, a brilliant British writer and philosopher and an advocate of women's rights, challenged the prevalent attitude that denied women as rational beings through her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. She boldly argued against the treatment of women as irrational beings and pointed out how freedoms and privileges were accorded only to men by the society and the Christian theology.

According to the feminist thinkers, religion provides and legitimates the superiority of men in family and society. Most feminists contend that sexism (discrimination between male and female) has permeated deeply the human psyche and most of this sexism could be derived from religious notions and practices. However, not all feminists reject the value of religion and would contend that there is a human need for spirituality, ritual, symbol and myth.

Feminism in the study of religion has at least a one and half century history, when the first wave of feminists attacked religion as a source of sexism. In the early nineteenth century, advocates of women's rights began to counter the arguments used against women founded on traditional interpretations of Biblical scriptures. Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony were all leaders of this early women's rights movement. In 1849, Lucretia Mott wrote *Discourse on Woman* which discussed Adam and Eve, and the activities of various women who appear in the Bible, and argued that the Bible indeed supported woman's right to speak aloud her spiritual beliefs. Independently from Mott, Lucy Stone determined for herself that the male-dominant interpretations of the Bible must be faulty and she worked to learn Greek and Hebrew and thereby gain insight into the earlier Bible translations. She believed that the original scriptures must have contained wording more favourable to women's equality. The Women's Bible, conceived and developed by Elizabeth Cadystanton in 1895, challenged the Church's interpretations of the teachings of Christ and that of the Bible. There, Elizabeth gave the Scriptures a feminist rereading that underscored the ignorance, arrogance and hypocrisy of the male-dominated Church hierarchy that had denied women their equality and dignity.
Two of the most significant feminist theologians of the nineteen seventies were Mary Daly and Rosemary Redford Ruether, both from a Catholic tradition, and both writing at the creative edge of feminist thought. Daly’s second book Beyond God the Father still stands as a comprehensive and radical critique of patriarchal religion and all its secular derivatives. In this book she challenged Catholic theology, pointing to its discriminatory attitude towards women. Daly put forward a systematic analysis of androcentric theological interpretation of the religion. For example, she argues that the notion of “woman born of man” in the Genesis 2 creation story is simply a reversal aimed at appropriating women’s power of creation by placing it in the hands of men and a male deity.

Rosemary Ruether sees that all religions are androcentric. She says that feminists must begin analysing whether and how women can appropriate the androcentric stories and traditions of the patriarchal religions in such a way as to empower and affirm women as subjects of their own histories.

Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza puts woman at the centre of her analysis. She shows early Christianity as a “discipleship of equals” in which women played a central role. Through historical research and also by the silences in androcentric texts she reconstructs the communities as they must have been before they were recorded by male writers, from an androcentric perspective. Fiorenza shows that the Bible and the Biblical tradition have always had both a liberating and an oppressive power and it is communities of women that have the authority to interpret it through a process of critical evaluation. The early Daly, Ruether and Fiorenza all at times argue that it is important for feminists to transform patriarchal religious language, symbols and structures because otherwise their destructive power will continue to silence and oppress all women. Other feminists reject the traditional religions and are exploring new ways of expressing the religious dimensions of their lives through analysing aspects of their own experience and the religious experience of other women, past and present.

Contemporary feminist critiques of religion range from those who try to revise to those who reject the religious traditions. Feminist critiques of Eastern
religious traditions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism, are few compared to the studies on Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Critiques which exist of both Western and Eastern religions detailed the subordination of women which has been created in part by the image of womanhood developed over centuries.

Several contemporary feminists such as Leila Ahmed, Carolin Walker Bynum, Naomi Goldenburg, Rita Gross, Ursula King, Karen McCarthy Brown, Fatima Mernissi, Rosemary Redford Ruether and Delores Williams hold that religion should be analysed through feminist outlook which will make the position of woman within the religious traditions more visible. They also suggest new readings and interpretations of theology.

The relationship between ‘Western’ and ‘Indian’ feminisms has been one of intense debate within the Indian women’s movement. In fact, many Indian women scholars and activists involved in the struggle for women’s rights are uncomfortable with the term feminism. For example, Madhu Kishwar, the editor of the women’s journal Manushi, rejects the term feminism because she feels that all "isms" are inadequate, and because the term is closely linked with the Western women’s movement, though she has no quarrel with western feminist movements in their own context. The Indian scholars who dissociate themselves from western feminist ideology look into the Indian women’s movement on the backdrop of the colonial rule and the Indian independence movement. On the other hand, there are many others involved in women’s movements in India that have no problems with the label. Feminists such as Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan are less troubled by the foreign origin of the term, but more concerned about what it stands for. There are many other Indian feminists who simultaneously participate in international feminist solidarity, with groups and individuals worldwide, together with a specific ‘Indian’ sensitivity. In the 1970s, the rise of liberal and radical feminism in the west meant that the focus of the international decade of women (1975–1985) was around demands for equal opportunities in education and employment and on ending violence against women. In India, the newly emerging feminist movement based its appeal to these varied values and concepts, while
examining the ways in which women in India had not benefited from international development.\textsuperscript{37}

Most of the debates on Hindu social reform in the nineteenth century India revolved around women issues. There were several inflections in these debates, with contrasts in terms of intent and understanding. In one hand the prevailing disgraceful condition of women provided the colonial rulers pretexts to their moral supremacy and to rule. In the 1920s, Katherine Mayo, the American author of \textit{Mother India}\textsuperscript{38}, launched a polemical attack against Indian self rule, arguing centrally that the sexual depravity of the Hindu was at the root of India’s problems, drawing on the realities of child marriage, sati, the \textit{devadāsi} system (dedicating young women and girls to temples, literally by marrying them to the deity), untouchability, and so on. This school of thought held the view that the Indian women, in particular the Hindu women, were completely marginalized and far from the understanding of their human rights.

In 1947, Margaret Cousins\textsuperscript{39}, in stark contrast to Mayo, depicted a glowing picture of the position of Indian women enhanced through Indian nationalist movement. In her book “\textit{Indian Womanhood Today}” one finds portrayal of Marwari girls riding on horseback in a procession of Marwari women on their way to an Anti Purdah Women’s Conference in 1941, women workers of the cotton mills in Madras Presidency meeting to demand a ban on polygamy, an office bearer of the All India Women’s Conference persisting in her public duties a fortnight after the death of her husband, a Brahmin woman conducting afternoon classes for ladies in adult literacy, a Brahmin woman who could in her child’s and her own interests go through legal divorce proceedings because the marriage had also been registered (under secular law in addition to the religious ceremony), 700 women - Hindus (Brahmins, and non-Brahmins), Muslims, Christians and Parsees - dining together in a school courtyard in Bangalore, and women participating in the noncooperation movement after convincing their husbands of their commitment to the cause of freedom.\textsuperscript{40}
Many of the narratives of Indian women in the colonial period, such as that of Cousins, focus on men’s efforts at social and religious reforms. However, these undermine the fact that there was a growing subculture of resistance that was fashioned and nurtured by women themselves, rarely spoken about. These radical and spontaneous subcultures in women’s movement were invisible to Mayo’s colonial imperialist eye and to Cousins’ nationalist eye.

Tarabai Shinde was a key architect of the transition to a new womanhood in a predominantly Hindu caste-ridden society. In her essay “A Comparison between Women and Men: An Essay to Show Who’s Really Wicked and Immoral, Women or Men?” written in 1882, Shinde expressed her fury over the conviction to death (later reduced to transportation to a penal settlement outside the state) of a young widow for the murder of her infant, and she wrote “God brought this amazing universe into being, and he it was also who created men and women both. So is it true that only women’s bodies are home to all kinds of wicked vices? Or have men got just the same faults as we find in women?” Through her critique, Shinde marks a moment in the process of genealogy formation of a new womanhood. Naturally, the sharp polemic piece of writing by Shinde, which was unique such of that time, met with angry response from the male critique. Shinde never wrote anything else thereafter.

Hinduism had seen heterodox sects and devotional movements such as the Bhakti movement that allowed women to transcend the physical constraints imposed on them by institutions of caste, marriage and female seclusion. Mirabai, Avvaiyar, Bahinabai, and Lal Dhed are examples of women who challenged the notions of subservient wifehood and conjugality central to the practice of orthodox Hinduism. Their pursuit of a larger devotion meant they would inhabit a public space and not be subject to normal restrictions of caste or patriarchy. This struggle was far from easy and met with often violent opposition from the conservatives, but they survived in their own lifetime and through their work for posterity. These women and others like them opened a whole new world to women of their times and later - a world they were free to inhabit on their own terms.
Women’s experience in Hinduism was problematized during the colonial period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Practices of female infanticide, sati (widow immolation), enforced widowhood (the prohibition of remarriage for widowed women), child marriage (prepubescent marriage, especially for girls, wherein girls were married by age six), purdah-pativrata (seclusion-chastity), restitution of conjugal rights, and marital rape were central to the debates on the position of women within Hinduism. Today these themes continue to be central, despite an intervening period of reform, resistance, and prohibition through legislation.

The first widow remarriage in the Andhra region of southern Indian was performed in the year 1881. If remarriage itself was resistance, there were other strategies that women developed as well - refusing to wear the traditional white clothes of the widow, refusing the traditional practice of tonsure for widows, marrying across caste, conducting marriages without Brahmans, starting shelters for pregnant widows (thus recognizing sexual abuse in the family) and homes for their children, and assisting births. In all this, they risked and braved social ostracism.

The other side of the norm of enforced widowhood, especially in western and southern India, was the devadāsi system, the practice of dedicating young women and girls to temples, literally by marrying them to the deity, thereby calling them nityasumangali (“eternal wife,” one who can never be widowed). The most significant positions on devadāsi abolition were taken by Muvalur Ramamirthammal and Bangalore Nagarathnamma, both women from the community of devadāsīs. Ramamirthammal was an ardent reformer who wrote a novel to propagate reform, apart from personally campaigning to stop the practice of temple dedication in the 1920s and 1930s, and saw the system as exploiting women in the name of religion. Ramamirthammal’s critique of Brāhminical Hinduism, in contrast, saw caste differences, untouchability, enforced widowhood, and prostitution as the creation of religion and God (both terms by implication Aryan and Brahmin). “If Brahma was such a great god with a sense of equality then he would have made man and woman equal
partners. Is it right for him to tie the knot between a sixty year-old man and a six-year-old girl? If that was all right then he should have also married a sixty-year-old woman to a six-year-old boy. That would have been justice. Both these arguments were powerful signifiers of change within and around Hinduism.

The Self-Respect Movement, launched in Tamilnadu in 1925 as a resistance to Brāhminical Hinduism, imagined a new womanhood and a new world built around mutuality where women would be equal to men. The major elements in the Self-Respect critique of Hindu religion were the critique of the Brahmin priest and Brāhminism as ideology; a rationalist and subversive critique of the Vedas, Itihāsas and Purāṇas; a criticism of religion as worldview; a critique of religious doctrine; and a critique of religious practices, rituals, and festivals. Periyar E. V. Ramasami, the architect of the Self-Respect Movement, had a distinctive treatment of the question of masculinity. In an article titled “Masculinity Must Be Destroyed,” Ramasami observed that the term *masculinity* itself degraded women because it was built on the assumption that courage and freedom inhered in the man, with its obverse femininity implying subservience. The very existence of the norm therefore ensured that men and women would constitute themselves within its parameters. Despite constraints that women face, they had to begin reconstituting themselves as equal partners with men instead of remaining as dependent subjects.

The National Federation of Dalit Women, formed in 1995, brings together the various perspectives in Dalit assertion and resistance, encapsulating a history of two hundred years. On one hand the federation interrogates upper-caste, Brāhminical hegemonies in inter-caste relations, particularly the antagonistic, often violent relations between upper castes and Dalit women. On the other hand, it attempts to address the challenges of Dalit women inside the patriarchy of the Dalit castes.

Although many Western feminists are sceptic about the attainability of women’s equal status within Islam, there are many scholars who challenge these feminists for their sectarian perception. Many scholars and activists in
the Muslim world have taken up the issue of women questioning the nature of the relationship between gender construction, religion (focusing on Islam) and society.

Islamic feminist scholars Fatima Mernissi and Leila Ahmed approach their discourses from within the religion. The works of them involve rereading, reconceiving and reconstructing Islamic texts and traditions. Both scholars challenge male interpretations of the Qur’ān and Islamic law based on Qur’ānic readings. Both of them challenge male views of women, especially of female sexuality. They underscore the role of significant women such as A’isha, Prophet Mohammad’s youngest wife who was an intelligent and vocal advocate for Islam in its emergent period. Mernissi and Ahmed do not suggest that for reconceiving Islam the religious tradition be abandoned by Islamic women, rather that the history of Islam should be approached critically:

Even as Islam instituted, in the initiatory society, a hierarchical structure as the basis of relations between men and women, it also preached, in its ethical voice (and this is the case with Christianity and Judaism as well), the moral and spiritual equality of all human beings. Arguably, therefore, even as it instituted a sexual hierarchy, it laid the ground, in its ethical voice for the subversion of the hierarchy. 49

Mernissi challenged the age-old conservative focus on women’s segregation in Muslim society. She starts her celebrated book The Veil and the Male Elite 50 with these words:

Muslims suffer from a mal du present just as the youth of Romantic Europe suffered from a mal du siècle. The only difference is that the Romantic youth of Europe experienced their difficulty in living in the present as a disgust with living, while we Muslims experience it as a desire for death, a desire to be elsewhere, to be absent, and to flee to the past as a way of being absent. A suicidal absence.

Mernissi claims that women’s seclusion in Islam, “a structural characteristic of the practice of power in Muslim societies”, is a mere institutionalization of authoritarianism achieved by way of manipulation of sacred texts. In Mernissi’s
reading of Qur’ān and Hadith, Mohammad’s wives were dynamic influential and enterprising members of the community, and fully involved in Muslim public affairs. The women were Mohammad’s intellectual partners. Accompanying him on his raids and military campaigns, “(they were) not just background figures, but shared with him his strategic concerns. He listened to their advice, which was sometimes the deciding factors in thorny negotiations.”

Mernissi’s own feminist model of the Prophet’s wives immensely helped her in ascertaining the timeframe and socio-political circumstances of Qur’ānic revelations and in selection and interpretation of traditions, including discreditation of some textual items as inauthentic.

In her book Mernissi asserts that Muhammad’s vision of Islamic society was egalitarian and he lived this ideal in his own household. However, the male members of the community were not ready to accept such dramatic changes and therefore organized an opposition movement under the leadership of the stern Omar ibn al-Khattab. Finally, during extended periods of military and political weakness, the Prophet had to sacrifice his egalitarian vision for the sake of communal cohesiveness and the survival of the Islamic cause. To Mernissi, the seclusion of Mohammad’s wives from public life (the hijab, Qur’ān 33:53) is a symbol of Islam’s retreat from the early principle of gender equality, and so is the “mantel” (jilbab) verse (Qur’ān 33:59) which relinquished the principle of social responsibility, the individual sovereign will that internalizes control rather than place it within external barriers.

Concerning A’isha’s involvement in the battle of the camel after the Prophet’s death, an occurrence much criticised in Hadith and religious literature as a whole, Mernissi engages in classical Hadith criticism to prove the unauthenticity of the tradition “a people who entrust their command to a woman will not thrive” because of historical problems relating to the date of its first transmission and also self-serving motives and a number of moral deficiencies recorded about its first transmitter, the Prophet’s freedman Abu Bakra. She writes:

What a strange fate for Muslim memory, to be called upon in order to censure and punish! What a strange memory, where even dead men and women do not escape attempts at assassination, if by chance they threaten to raise the hijab
that covers the mediocrity and servility that is presented to us as tradition. How did the tradition succeed in transforming the Muslim woman into that submissive, marginal creature who buries herself and only goes out into the world timidly and huddled in her veils? Why does the Muslim man need such a mutilated companion? … It remains to be asked why today it is the image of the woman of the "Golden Age" - a "slave" who intrigues in the corridors of power when she loses hope of seducing - who symbolizes the Muslim eternal female, while the memory of Umm Salama, A’isha and Sukayna awakens no response and seems strangely distant and unreal.55

Many Indian Muslim feminists subscribe to the ideology of distinguishing the normative and non-normative verses in the Qur’ān and establishing gender equality discarding the non-normative verses. The approach of these scholars towards the religion is almost the echo of the discourses of Sayyid Mumtaz Ali (1860-1935), the distinguished Indian scholar who was vocal for gender equality within Islam. His treatment of women’s right in Islam was the torchbearer for the fight for women’s right in Islam not only in India, but throughout the Islamic community. Muslim feminists follow mostly the argument of Mumtaz Ali as built in his revolutionary work “Huquq un-Niswan” (Women’s Rights) for their struggles and discourses for gender equality in Islam, which include equal religious and social status of women, women’s education and against purdah and polygamy through his liberal interpretation of Qur’ān and Hadith.56 Many of them discard Hadith as untrustworthy and argue that Qur’ān had been grossly misinterpreted in regard to the attitude towards women and on their rights. Several contemporary Indian scholars like Asghar Ali Engineer use this methodology for their endeavour for establishing that Islam in its basic tenet supports gender equality and therefore women’s rights can be achieved inside Islam.

4.7 Conclusion

The socio-religious movements which were centred around woman issues added some new dimensions to the existing religious sphere of Indian society. The main concerns of such reform movements are to redefine the role of
women, establish the right to education, grant the equality that included marriage customs and relief from the restrictions and ritual pollutions. Above all, the prime concern of these socio-religious reform movements was establishment of an egalitarian society with gender equality.

Notes & References


17. Ibid, p.28.


23. Ibid.


32. Mott, Lucretia, *Discourse on Woman*, December 17, 1849, Website.
42. Chakravarty, Uma *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 73.
48. Ibid. p. 389.
51. Ibid., p. 104.
52. “O you, who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that [behaviour] was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of [dismissing] you. But Allah is not shy of the truth. And when you ask [his wives] for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not [conceivable or lawful] for you to harm the Messenger of Allah or to marry his wives after him, ever. Indeed, that would be in the sight of Allah an enormity.” – Surah 33:53.

53. “O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful.” – Surah 33:59.

