CHAPTER VIII

THE MODERN ERA - 20TH CENTURY
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Women's Education:

The spread of education among women made them eager for improving their rights, privileges and status and they took an active part in the social conferences. A ladies section was added to the Indian National Social Conference since 1903, and under its auspices a Woman's Conference was held in 1909. It resolved to organize a separate association for women and held another Conference in Allahabad in 1910 with Mrs. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani as Secretary.

However, government was averse to any change and thus indirectly lent its support to the orthodox views. This is best illustrated by the efforts to increase the age-limits of marriage. Upto 1908 the social conferences put the minimum age limits at 12 years for girls and 18 for boys, but these were raised next year to 16 and 25. There was vigorous agitation all over India, both by men and women, in support of enforcing it by legislation. However, twenty years were required to introduce a Bill in the
legislature. In 1927 Har Bilas Sarda introduced a bill for preventing child marriages and it was passed in 1929 with a proviso that it should not come into effect till 1930. The Act applicable to all communities, penalised parties to a marriage in which the girl was below 14 or the boy below 18 years of age.

**Intercaste marriage:**

In 1918 Vithalbhai Patel introduced a Bill to validate intercaste marriage. It was referred to select committee where a majority supported the bill and recommended amendments enforcing monogamy and insisting on both parties being above 18 years of age; but it was decided to defer the bill till the reformed councils came into existence. Dr. Hari Singh Gaur's Civil Marriage Bill was defeated on 2nd February 1922 and was passed only in a very modified form in October 1923. In 1921, a Bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly for giving rights of succession to certain categories of women. The Act was passed in 1929 which gave the son's daughter, the daughters daughters, a sister and her son their natural place in the order of her inheritance. In 1937 the Indian Legislature
passed the Hindu Women's Rights to Property Act, which conceded to the Hindu widow a share in her husband's property and the right to demand partition.

Institution of Devadasi:

As a result of vigorous agitation, an Act was passed in 1925 which extended to the Devadasis the Sections of the penal code which made traffic in minor girls a criminal offence.

Establishment of Institutions:

Prof. D.K. Karve founded 'The widows' Home at Poona, it promoted remarriages of widows. A high school for girls and a Social Service Centre was established. Finally a Women's University was formed on 20th June 1916. Sevasadan in Bombay, was established in 1908.

Dowry and Purdah system:

Among other items of promoting women's condition may be mentioned the abolition or limitation of dowry and marriage expenses. The evil was denounced in successive conferences. But there was no legislative act. Regarding the Purdah (पुर्दा, बुर्खा) system, Gandhiji said in 1917, "what harm this pernicious system does to their health and in how
many ways they are deprived of the privilege of helping their husbands", the sight of the screen made me sad. It pained and humiliated me deeply .... Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed. What we are doing to our women and what we are doing to the untouchables recoils upon our heads with a force thousand times multiplied. It partly accounts for our own weakness, indecision, narrowness and helplessness. Let us tear down the purdah with one mighty effort".

The All-India Women's Conference denounced purdah. As per appeal made by Gandhi to participate in satyagraha, and to take up the work of picketing and spinning. In Delhi alone 1600 women participated in national movement and were therefore, arrested and imprisoned.

Employment of women and social changes:

The second World War, led to the expansion of Government departments and gave scope for the employment of women in large numbers. This economic freedom, along with the national struggle for freedom, wrought such changes upon the intellectual, moral and
social outlook of Hindu women of upper classes during a period of thirty years as were not witnessed during the preceding seven hundred years. The abolition of Purdah, free social intercourse between men and women, co-education, use of public transports along with men, increase in marriageable age of boys and girls and practical monogamy of men, these and many other revolutionary changes were carried out almost imperceptibly and without any protest. Even inter-caste marriages took place without any serious consequences, though they were very few in number.