

REFORMS, EDUCATION & EMPOWERMENT: GLIMPSES INTO 19TH CENTURY INDIA THROUGH WOMEN'S LIFE NARRATIVES

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Abstract: The first half of the 19th century is an important era in the Indian history not just because of the initiation of the social reforms and nationalist movements, but because these movements brought about a drastic change in the status of women in the society. The roots of feminism in the Indian context can be traced back to this time during which some social practices which demeaned the status of women were questioned and an attempt was made to completely eradicate them. It was the first time that Indian men showed concern towards the improvement in the quality of women's lives. The introduction of education for women further changed the mind sets of families whose only aim till then was to get their daughters married. The nationalist movement almost forced women to work shoulder to shoulder with men and fight against the British to attain independence. However, after independence, there were many Indians who lost their title, position and money. Memoirs are a genre of literature which is close to an autobiography. They offer a glimpse into lives of people and also throw light on the various aspects of a particular society. When a woman writes a memoir, it creates a special interest to a researcher who is interested in understand the lives of women in particular society at a given point in time. The present paper, attempts to analyze the memoir- 'Memoirs of an Indian Woman' by Shudha Mazumdar. Through this memoir, an attempt will be made to study the change in women's lives and to understand the important role that education played in the changing status of women during the 19th century. The memoir will be studied using an interdisciplinary approach to understand how the liberal ideas of social reforms and the nationalist agenda created the ground work to establish a new Indian feminism.

Keywords: feminism in the Indian context, memoirs, nationalist movement, social reforms, women's education.

Introduction: The introduction of English education in India The British formed the East India Company in the year 1600 mainly for trading spices and textiles in India. The first stage of the British conquest of India was marked by the Battle of Plassey in 1757 in which Clive defeated Siraj-ud-Daulah, the Nawab of Bengal, retook Calcutta, gaining immense property, revenue and became extremely powerful in Bengal. Over the next hundred years they extended their control over most of India. Everyone who came to India from England, made a fortune and thus the primary interest of the British which was profit making in India grew by the day. Thus, the British Empire eventually grew all over India. They now felt the need to raise a class of educated Indian men who were well versed in English and who could help the British in the day-to-day administration of the country and to inculcate a sense of loyalty in the minds of the colonized. Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835; 1972; p 249) said, "The great objects of British rule in India ought to be a promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India. We must at present do our best to form a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." This marked the beginning of the installation of English studies in India. **'The women's question'- a crucial**

tool in the colonial ideology In the essay "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi (1989)", Uma Chakravarty discusses in detail the contribution of Europeans to the rediscovery of India's past, among them the Orientalists, William Jones and H.T. Colebrook, who were closely associated with the Asiatic society. With Colebrook the Orientalists focused their attention on the women's question by compiling evidence bearing on women from the ancient texts. The focal starting point of this study was the ritual of sati. The colonial ideology felt compelled to assert the moral superiority of the rulers in many ways. The women's' question thus became a crucial tool in the colonial ideology. Colonial writing during this time focused on pointing the peculiarities of Hindu civilization and the barbaric practices pertaining to women.

Socio- political changes in the 19th century: The 19th Century- The 19th Century was the period of great social and political upheaval for India. It gave rise to the nationalist movement to free India from the British rule. Some important events which contributed to this change in India during this time were: the non-discrimination of castes while imposing the punishment for same type of crime (1817), prohibition of Sati in Bengal (1829), abolition of slavery (1843), construction of the first railway line in the country (1853). Beginning of newspapers and Bombay becoming the center for enlightenment and

education were some other significant developments of this time. The Western educated Indians, who came in contact with liberalism, reflected upon their own value system and examined the inequalities, injustices and oppressions of their own culture. As the century progressed, these educated men brought about social reforms in the country. They also thought that they were capable of running their own country and wanted to free the country from the tyrannical British rule. The cultural consciousness and the seeds of nationalism which dawned in Bengal in 1830's were triggered by the influence of western education, philosophy of liberation and humanism introduced by the British. Thus, the socio-political impact of the 19th century worked for the revival, reconstruction and revolt against the existing structures in society. Many thinkers and social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ranade, Vithal Shinde, Deshmukh, Gokhale that center- staged the gender issues, while many revolutionaries like Tilak, Agarkar, Phule, Subhash Chandra Bose and Gandhi worked extensively during the latter half of 19th century and beginning of the 20th century for the independence of India against the British rule. The removal of practices and customs which led to the subjugation of women was an important agenda in social reform. Thus social and national issues intertwined with each other. It can therefore be said that at a symbolic level the fate of women and the fate of the emerging nation became inextricably linked and intertwined. Debates on women in the context of social practices like sati, widow remarriage, purdah, were not merely about women, but also examples in which the moral challenge of the colonial rule was confronted and negotiated.

The introduction of education for women in India: The introduction of education for women in India can be traced to the Christian missionary schools which were opened for the daughters of British officers. A few Indian girls, basically the ones who belonged to the privileged class of society and whose families showed affinities towards the British, were the first beneficiaries who received formal education. Educational institutions were set up by Christian missionaries all over Maharashtra and Bengal. The Indian social reformers too actively engaged in improving the status of women not just through their tireless efforts to abolish practices like sati, the customs of child marriage and dowry, advocacy of widow remarriages but were actively engaged in women's education. The imperial rulers were unwilling to interfere with Indian customs and religious practices for fear of arousing wrath amongst the native population. They left it to the Indian reformers to take up the many issues of social change. There was an emergence of a political movement led by Jotirao Phule in the second half of the 19th century.

The mass mobilization led by Phule also brought in the issues of gender through his pioneering efforts for women's education and rehabilitation of widows. It was believed that the power of education could liberate women from the clutches of ignorance and lead to the enrichment of the Indian society.

The roots of feminism in India: The introduction of education for women in India can be traced to the 19th century through the efforts of newly awakened woman, exposed to education, opportunities and the compulsions to work out of a radical change in their own status and position through a conception of modernity. The traditional roles of a woman demanded a role reversal as they would no longer suffice to the crisis that the nation faced at that time. The threatened moral and social order, the political upheavals demanded a new woman for whom the old model was too passive. Women began to identify with the new cultural nationalism and its symbols. The nationalist ideology also tried to handle the women's question by confronting the new social and cultural problems with regards to the position of women in the emerging consciousness. Education of women became a tool for the cultural refinement of women who now became subjected to new patriarchy. According to Partha Chatterjee the new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women a new social responsibility by associating "emancipation of women" with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood and bound women to a new, but entirely legitimate subordination (p 248). This was the nationalist construction of reform for emancipation of women in which men and women were equal partners. Feminist consciousness was aroused in the 20th century through the efforts of a newly awakened woman, exposed to education and opportunities. The traditional roles of women confined to domesticity and wifely duties would no longer do in a crisis which the nation faced at that time. Thus, women began to identify themselves with the new cultural nationalism and its symbols. The end of the 19th century witnessed women from Bengal and Maharashtra like Sarla Devi Chaudharain, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Anandabai Joshi, Frenana Sorabjee and Ramabai Ranade who crossed the borders of familial and cultural restrictions of a patriarchal society. Thus, the issue of women's education was intertwined with women's liberation to take the form of a social agitation.

The loss suffered by some sections of society after India attained freedom: Although, the independence of India was a matter of joy of many, there were some sections of the Indian society who were lost their status, money, land, property and titles and were reduced to the status of an ordinary Indian. The nationalist movement proved to be a bane for such people. These people were the ones

whose loyalties were towards the British and who prospered during the British rule in India.

Reflections of women's experiences of the 19th century through memoirs: It is said that literature is the mirror of society. The socio-political, nationalist and feminist concerns of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have been expressed through several Indian literary forms like poetry, novel, play, life narratives etc. The English word memoir has been derived from the French word 'mémoire' which means memories or reminiscence. It is a literary non-fiction genre which is considered to be a subcategory of autobiography. The social reformers and nationalist movements discussed in this paper have been reflected in the memoirs of Shudha Mazumdar's 'Memoirs of an India Woman.' Shudha belonged to a zamindar's family. The zamindari system was abolished after India attained independence. This memoir is not just a reflection on the socio-political society of the late 19th and early 20th century, but also a journey of emerging strong despite losing the glory that one enjoyed in the past.

'Memoirs of an Indian Woman' by Shudha Mazumdar-Introduction: Memoirs of an Indian woman' is a memoir written by Shudha Muzumdar that has been edited with an introduction by Geraldine Forbes. The book deals with long and rambling memoirs which begin with Shudha's birth and discuss various memories of hers between the period of 1900 and the early 1930s.

The Zamindari system in Bengal: The Zamindari system was introduced by Lord Cornwallis. The whole country was in the possession of zamindars whose position bore at least a superficial resemblance to that of English landlords. They were usually hereditary aristocrats who held enormous tracts of land and ruled over (and taxed) the peasants who lived on it. Shudha belonged to a rich family of zamindars. Her father, Tara Pada Ghosh, was a landlord-a zamindar as they were then called in Bengal. He held considerable powers within his territories: magisterial, army recruitment, revenue collection and taxation, amongst others. Shudha's father was highly westernized, in outward appearance as well as philosophy and habits.

A privileged childhood for Shudha: During a time when marriage and childbearing was the only sacrament for an Indian woman to gain a respectable status in society, as the daughter of a high caste, wealthy landowner, Shudha enjoyed various privileges like dining at her father's European-style dining room, a convent education at St. Teresa's convent, where she was the only girl student and free access to her father's library with shelves of Indian and English books. Shudha recollects a memory of her childhood, "One day my father had returned from his travels, I learnt that I would be going to school.

Mother packed a small tiffin box with pastries and sweets and it was duly packed in Father's landau. Bursting with importance, I brushed my close-cropped hair, put on a clean frock and pinafore, and took my place opposite my father. Soon we arrived at St. Teresa's Convent School, and here I was admitted as a day scholar." (pg 15) These opportunities that Shudha got during early ages in her father's house helped her in pioneering many social activities like forming Mahila Samitis which she undertook after she got married. She got immense opportunities to go abroad, for self-appraisal, improvement, exercising her choices, enlightenment, respect, responsibility, financial management and entertaining her husband's official guests. Such opportunities were rare in those times and not every woman was fortunate to enjoy them.

Dependence on her father's family even after Shudha got married: A part of her husband's income had to be sent to his ancestral house in Calcutta and this left the young couple with very little money which they could spend on themselves. Hence, throughout her life, Shudha's personal needs were supplied through her parents' home. When she went to Kidderpore, her mother would replenish her wardrobe sufficiently to see her through the year. Whenever she was ill, her medical expenses were taken care of and she also received a small allowance each month from her father. Thus, even after her marriage her dependence on the father's family (and indirectly on the zamindari system) continued.

Abolition of the zamindari system post-independence: The zamindari system created one of the worst exploitative land relations in India and strengthened the feudal socio-economic system. Zamindars became staunch supporters of British rule in India. This annoyed the Congress party, which was mobilizing the Indian masses against British rule. After independence the Congress government, under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, abolished the zamindari system. As a result of the abolition of the zamindari system, about 26 lakhs intermediaries and 20 lakhs tenants got proprietary rights of lands i.e. they became the land owners.

A feminist understanding of the memoir: For the contemporary reader, certain questions may arise about the commitment of this memoir to feminism. Although Shudha respected the nineteenth century reformers and credited them for improving the position of women in society, she accepted the traditional guardianship of her father, husband and son. Like many women of her generation, she lived within the roles prescribed for women and tried to do what she could to improve the quality of life for herself and for many other women through education, medical care and through efforts to ameliorate the harshness of social prejudices.

Conclusion: The reading of Shudha Mazumdar's memoir, not just helps a reader in understanding the social reforms and political movements of the 19th century but also women's issues during this period. The question of feminist historiography becomes extremely important in this context. Thus, digging up women's stories and their history, becomes a starting point in understanding history from a woman's perspective. The history of a period can be best studied through experiences of women who were left out of history. The Western narrative of women's history is inadequate as a model for understanding women's issues in the Indian context. The westerner's

image of women of Shudha generation of Indian women was that they were victims. But this memoir is a story of a very strong woman who was not a victim at all. The new emerging definitions of feminism honed by African-American women like Bell Hooks and Indian women like Gita Sen, it is apparent that pitting women against men are no longer central issues in these memoirs. This story contributes to the deeper understanding of Indian history. The most valuable documents for understanding the texture of people's lives of a certain period are life narratives like diaries, letters, autobiographies and memoirs.

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