

## 1. Details of Module and its structure

Module Detail	
Subject Name	Sociology
Course Name	Sociology 03 (Class XII, Semester - 1)
Module Name/Title	Women's struggles and disability – Part 4
Module Id	lesy_10504
Pre-requisites	Sociology, caste and tribes, stratification
Objectives	After going through this lesson, the learners will be able to understand the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Women's struggle</li><li>2. 19<sup>th</sup> Century reforms</li><li>3. Constitution reforms</li><li>4. Changing women issues</li><li>5. Differently abled – Inequalities &amp; Struggle</li></ol>
Keywords	Indian society, social stratification, social inequality, social exclusion, marginalization, disability, women's movements and struggles.

## 2. Development Team

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## **STRUGGLE FOR WOMEN'S EQUALITY AND RIGHTS**

### **Gender Inequalities**

Because of the obvious biological and physical differences between men and women, gender inequality is often treated as natural. However, despite appearances, scholars have shown that the inequalities between men and women are social rather than natural. For example, there are no biological reasons that can explain why so few women are found in positions of public power. Nor can nature explain why women generally receive a smaller or no share in family property in most societies. But the strongest argument comes from the societies that were different from the 'normal' or common pattern. If women were biologically unfit to be inheritors and heads of families, how did matrilineal societies (as the Nairs of Kerala used to be, and as the Khasis of Meghalaya still are) work for centuries? How have women managed to be successful farmers and traders in so many African societies? There is, in short, nothing biological about the inequalities that mark the relations between women and men. Gender is thus also a form of social inequality and exclusion like caste and class, but with its own specific features. In this section we will look at how gender inequality came to be recognised as inequality in the Indian context, and the kinds of responses that this recognition produced. The women's question arose in modern India as part of the nineteenth century middle class social reform movements. The nature of these movements varied from region to region. They are often termed as middle class reform movements because many of these reformers were from the newly emerging western educated Indian middle class. They were often at once inspired by the democratic ideals of the modern west and by a deep pride in their own democratic traditions of the past. Many used both these resources to fight for women's rights. We can only give illustrative examples here. We draw from the anti-sati campaign led by Raja Rammohun Roy in Bengal, the widow remarriage movement in the Bombay Presidency where Ranade was one of the leading reformers, from Jyotiba Phule's simultaneous attack on caste and gender oppression, and from the social reform movement in Islam led by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan.

### **Middle-class reform movements - 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Raja Rammohun Roy's attempts to reform society, religion and the status of women can be taken as the starting point of nineteenth century social reform in Bengal. A decade before establishing the Brahmo Samaj in 1828, Roy undertook the campaign against "sati" which was the first women's issue to receive public attention. Rammohun Roy's ideas represented a curious mixture of Western rationality and an assertion of Indian traditionality. Both

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trends can be located in the over arching context of a response to colonialism. Rammohun thus attacked the practice of *sati* on the basis of both appeals to humanitarian and natural rights doctrines as well as Hindu *shastras*.

The deplorable and unjust treatment of the Hindu upper caste widows was a major issue taken up by the social reformers. Ranade used the writings of scholars such as Bishop Joseph Butler whose *Analogy of Religion* and *Three Sermons on Human Nature* dominated the moral philosophy syllabus of Bombay University in the 1860s. At the same time, M.G. Ranade's writings entitled the *The Texts of the Hindu Law on the Lawfulness of the Remarriage of Widows* and *Vedic Authorities for Widow Marriage* elaborated the *shastric* sanction for remarriage of widows.

While Ranade and Rammohun Roy belonged to one kind of nineteenth century upper caste and middle class social reformers, Jotiba Phule came from a socially excluded caste and his attack was directed against both caste and gender discrimination. He founded the Satyashodak Samaj with its primary emphasis on "truth seeking". Phule's first practical social reform efforts were to aid

the two groups considered lowest in traditional Brahmin culture: women and untouchables. (See Chapter 3)

#### ACTIVITY 5.4

1. Find out about a social reformer in your part of the country. Collect information about her/ him.
2. Read an autobiography/ biography of any social reformer.
3. Can you see any of the ideas they fought for existing today in our everyday lives or in our constitutional provisions.



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## ACTIVITY 5.5

1. Make a list of professions in which women are involved today.
2. Can you think of any educational field where women are barred today? Perhaps the recent discussion on women in the Indian armed forces may throw some light on this.

As in the case of other reformers, a similar trend of drawing upon both modern western ideas as well as the sacred texts characterised Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's efforts to reform Muslim society. He wanted girls to be educated, but within the precincts of their homes. Like Dayanand Saraswati of the Arya Samaj, he stood for women's education but sought for a curriculum that included instruction in religious principles, training in the arts of housekeeping and handicrafts and rearing of children. This may appear very stereotypical today. One has to however realise that once rights such as education for women were accepted it started a process that finally made it impossible to confine women to only some kinds of education.

### Women reform

It is often assumed that social reform for women's rights was entirely fought for by male reformers and that ideas of women's equality are alien imports. To learn how wrong both these assumptions are, read the following extracts from two books written by women, *Stree Purush Tulana* written in 1882 and *Sultana's Dream* written in 1905.

*Stree Purush Tulana* (or Comparison of Men and Women) was written by a Maharashtrian housewife, **Tarabai Shinde**, as a protest against the double standards of a male dominated society. A young Brahmin widow had been sentenced to death by the courts for killing her newborn baby because it was illegitimate, but no effort had been made to identify or punish the man who had fathered the baby. *Stree Purush Tulana* created quite a stir when it was published. Begum **Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain** was born in a well-to-do Bengali Muslim family, and was lucky to have a husband who was very liberal in outlook and

### BOX 5.6

From *Stree Purush Tulana* 1882

...Who are these women you give such names to? Whose womb did you take your birth in? Who carried the killing burden of you for nine months? Who was the saint who made you the light in her eye, ...How would you feel if someone said about your

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mother, “That old chap’s mother, you know, she’s a gateway to hell’. Or your sister, “That so-and so-s’ sister, she’s a real storehouse of deceit’. ...Would you just sit and listen to their bad words?.....Then you get blessed with a bit of education and promoted to some important new office- and you start feeling ashamed of your first wife. Money works its influence on you and you begin to say to yourself, what does a wife matter after all? Don’t we just give them a few rupees a month and keep them at home like any other servant, to do the cooking and look after the house? You begin to think of her like some female slave you’ve paid for....If one of your horses died it wouldn’t take long to replace it, and there’s no great labour needed to get another wife either. ..The problem is Yama hasn’t got time to carry off wives fast enough, or you’d probably get through several different ones in one day!

### **BOX 5.7**

From *Sultana’s Dream* (1905)

...”What is the matter, dear?” she said affectionately. “ I feel somewhat awkward,” I said, in a rather apologising tone, “as being a purdahnishin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.” “You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm...” ...I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man. “Where are the men?” I asked her. “In their proper places, where they ought to be.” “Pray let me know what you mean by ‘their proper places.’” “Oh, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut our men indoors.” “Just as we are kept in the zenana?” “Exactly so.” “How funny.” I burst into a laugh. Sister Sara laughed too.

### **ACTIVITY 5.6**

Find out the names of a few women’s organisations that emerged both at the national level and in your part of the country.

1. Find out about any woman who was part of a tribal or peasant movement, a trade union or one of the many strands of the freedom movement.
2. Identify a novel, a short story or play in your region which depicted the struggle of women against discrimination.

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encouraged her education first in Urdu and later in Bengali and English. She was already a successful author in Urdu and Bengali when she wrote *Sultana's Dream* to test her abilities in English. This remarkable short story is probably the earliest example of science fiction writing in India, and among the first by a woman author anywhere in the world. In her dream, Sultana visits a magical country where the gender roles are reversed. Men are confined to the home and observe 'purdah' while women are busy scientists vying with each other at inventing devices that will control the clouds and regulate rain, and machines that fly or 'air-cars'.

Apart from the early feminist visions there were a large number of women's organisations that arose both at the all India and local levels in the early twentieth century. And then began the participation of women in the national movement itself. Not surprisingly women's rights were part and parcel of the nationalist vision.

### **Women's organizations – Political role**

In 1931, the Karachi Session of the Indian National Congress issued a declaration on the Fundamental Rights of Citizenship in India whereby it committed itself to women's equality. The declaration reads as follows:

1. All citizens are equal before the law, irrespective of religion, caste, creed or sex.
2. No disability attaches to any citizen, by reason of his or her religion, caste, creed or sex, in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and in the exercise of any trade or calling.
3. The franchise shall be on the basis of universal adult suffrage.
4. Woman shall have the right to vote, to represent and the right to hold public offices.

(Report of the Sub-Committee, 'Woman's Role in Planned Economy', 1947: 37-38).

### **Women issues after Independence**

Two decades after Independence, women's issues re-emerged in the **1970s**. In the nineteenth century reform movements, the emphasis had been on the backward aspects of tradition like sati, child marriage, or the ill treatment of widows. In the 1970s, the emphasis was on 'modern' issues – the rape of women in police custody, dowry murders, the representation of women in popular media, and the gendered consequences of unequal development. The law was a major site for reform in the 1980s and after, specially when it was discovered that many laws of concern to women had not been changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As we enter the twenty-first century, new sites of gender injustice are emerging.

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You will recall the discussion of the declining sex ratio in Chapter 2. The sharp fall in the child sex ratio and the implicit social bias against the girl child represents one of the new challenges of gender inequality.

Social change whether on women's rights or any other issue is never a battle won once and for all. As with other social issues the struggle is long, and the women's movement in India will have to fight to defend hard won rights as well as take up new issues as they emerge.

### ACTIVITY 5.7

Divide your class into groups. Each group can choose a topic relating to women's rights on which they must collect information from newspapers, radio, television news or other source. Discuss your findings with your classmates. Possible examples of topics could be :

1. 33 per cent reservation for women in elected bodies
2. Domestic violence
3. Right to employment ... there are many other topics of interest, choose the ones which interest you.

### 5.4 THE STRUGGLES OF THE DISABLED

**The differently abled are not 'disabled' only because they are physically or mentally 'impaired' but also because society is built in a manner that does not cater to their needs.** In contrast to the struggles over Dalit, adivasi or women's rights, the rights of the disabled have been recognised only very recently. Yet in all historical periods, in all societies there have been people who are disabled. One of the leading activists and scholars of disability in the Indian context, Anita Ghai, argues that this invisibility of the disabled can be compared to the *Invisible Man* of Ralph Ellison. Ellison's novel of that name is a famous indictment of racism against African Americans in the USA.

*I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in the circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, figments of their imagination. Indeed everything and anything except me (Ellison, 1952:3).*

The very term 'disabled' is significant because it draws attention to the fact that public perception of the 'disabled' needs to be questioned.

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Here are some common features central to the public perception of ‘disability’ all over the world —

1. Disability is understood as a biological given.
2. Whenever a disabled person is confronted with problems, it is taken for granted that the problems originate from her/his impairment.
3. The disabled person is seen as a victim.
4. Disability is supposed to be linked with the disabled individual’s self perception.
5. The very idea of disability suggests that they are in need of help.

In India labels such as ‘disability’, ‘handicap’, ‘crippled’, ‘blind’ and ‘deaf’ are used synonymously. Often these terms are hurled at people as insults. In a culture that looks up to bodily ‘perfection’, all deviations from the ‘perfect body’ signify abnormality, defect and distortion. Labels such as *bechara* (poor thing) accentuate the victim status for the disabled person. The roots of such attitudes lie in the cultural conception that views an impaired body as a result of fate. Destiny is seen as the culprit, and disabled people are the victims. The common perception views disability as retribution for past *karma* (actions) from which there can be no reprieve. The dominant cultural construction in India therefore looks at disability as essentially a characteristic of the individual. The popular images in mythology portray the disabled in an extremely negative fashion.

The very term ‘disabled’ challenges each of these assumptions. Terms such as ‘mentally challenged’, ‘visually impaired’ and ‘physically impaired’ came to replace the more trite negative terms such as ‘retarded’, ‘crippled’ or ‘lame’. The disabled are rendered disabled not because they are biologically disabled but because society renders them so.

*We are disabled by buildings that are not designed to admit us, and this in turn leads to a range of further disablements regarding our education, our chances of gaining employment, our social lives and so on. The disablement lies in the construction of society, not in the physical condition of the individual (Brisenden 1986 :176).*

### **ACTIVITY 5.8**

Find out how different traditional or mythical stories depict the disabled. You can draw from any of the innumerable regional sources of folklore, mythology, and traditional storytelling in India, or from any other part of the world.



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Make a list of popular sayings or proverbs that show negative attitudes towards the disabled.



### ACTIVITY 5.9

Have you seen the film Iqbal? If you have not do try and see it. It is an exemplary story of the grit and determination of a young boy who cannot hear and speak but who has a passion for cricket and finally excels as a bowler. The film brings alive not just Iqbal's struggles but also the many possible concrete meanings of the phrase 'differently abled'.

The social construction of disability has yet another dimension. There is a close relationship between disability and poverty. Malnutrition, mothers weakened by frequent childbirth, inadequate immunisation programmes, accidents in overcrowded homes, all contribute to an incidence of disability among poor people that is higher than among people living in easier circumstances. Furthermore, disability creates and exacerbates poverty by increasing isolation and economic strain, not just for the individual but for the family; there is little doubt that disabled people are among the poorest in poor countries.

### BOX 5.8

Shastri Bhawan,

New Delhi

Dated: 15.06.2005

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Sub: - Invitation of suggestions/ comments on Draft National Policy for Persons with Disabilities.

1. According to the Census, 2001, there are 2.19 crore persons with disabilities in India which constitute 2.13 per cent of total population. This includes persons with visual, hearing, speech, locomotor and mental disabilities. Seventy five per cent persons with disabilities live in rural areas.
2. A comprehensive legal and institutional structure has already been put in place for the welfare of persons with disabilities. The Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act of 1995 was enacted...
3. Rehabilitation of persons with disabilities requires multisectoral collaborative approach of various central government ministries, state Governments, UT administrations, members of civil society, organisations of persons with disabilities and non-government organisations working for the welfare of persons with disabilities so that better synergy in delivery of services is achieved.

Director, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Room No. 253, A-Wing,  
Shastri Bhawan,  
New Delhi-110001 Tele fax-011-23383853

Significantly, efforts to redress the situation have come from the disabled themselves. The government has had to respond as the notification in the box 5.8 shows.

It is only recently with the efforts of the disabled themselves that some awareness is building in society on the need to rethink 'disability'. This is illustrated by the newspaper report on the next page.

Recognition of disability is absent from the wider educational discourse. This is evident from the historical practices within the educational system that continue to marginalise the issue of disability by maintaining two separate streams – one for disabled students and one for everyone else.

### **BOX 5.9**

#### **'Disabled-unfriendly' Courts**

Describing the non-consideration of handicapped persons for Judge posts as an "exclusive" policy of the higher judiciary, a senior jurist says by continuing to ignore the handicapped, the judiciary is violating a statutory mandate. "The High Court

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building itself is far from disabled-friendly.” All entrances to the actual court complex are preceded by staircases and none of them has a ramp. Even to access the limited elevator facility, one has to climb several steps. The condition of the City Civil Court, where many handicapped or injured persons come to depose before courts hearing accident claims cases, is worse. One can see disabled, injured or old people being carried up the stairs by their companions, says an advocate. The Hindu Wednesday 2 August 2006.

In this chapter we have looked at caste, tribe, gender and disability as institutions that generate and perpetuate inequalities and exclusion. However, they also provoke struggles against these inequalities. Historically, the understanding of inequality in the social sciences has been dominated by notions of class, race and more recently, gender. It is only later that the complexities of other categories like caste and tribe have received attention. In the Indian context, caste, tribe and gender are now getting the attention they deserve. But there remain categories that are still in need of attention, such as those who are marginalised by religion or by a combination of categories. More complex formations like groups defined by religion and caste, gender and religion, or caste and region are likely to claim our attention in the near future, as shown, for example, by the Sachar Committee Report on the Muslim community.

#### **BOX 5.10**

In a country where half the children in the age group of 5-14 are out of school how can there be space for children with disabilities, especially if a segregated schooling is being advocated for them? Even if the legislation optimistically tries to make education available to every disabled child, parents in a village do not see this as instrumental in achieving any autonomy for their disabled child. What they would prefer is perhaps a better way of fetching water from the well and improved agricultural facilities. Similarly, parents in an urban slum expect education to be related to a world of work that would enhance their child's basic quality of life.

*Source: Anita Ghai 'Disability in the Indian Context', 2002:93*

#### **ACTIVITY 5.10**

Read the quote above and discuss the different ways in which the problems of the disabled are socially constituted.