Modern History · GS - I

The women’s questions arose in modern India as a part of the 19th century social reform movement. What are the major issues and debates concerning women in that period?

EXAM YEAR	PAPER	SUBJECT
2017	GS - I	Modern History

MARKS	WORD LIMIT
15	~250 words

Answer Hint

Sati abolition; widow remarriage; women's education; child marriage; age of consent; social reform; colonial intervention

Model Answer

Introduction

The nineteenth-century social reform movement brought women's status into public debate in colonial India. Reformers questioned oppressive customs and advocated changes in education, marriage practices and women's rights, although reform efforts also faced social resistance.

Major Issues and Debates

1. Sati and Women's Right to Life

Raja Ram Mohan Roy campaigned against sati, which was prohibited in 1829 under Governor-General William Bentinck. The debate raised questions about religious customs, women's autonomy and state intervention.

2. Widow Remarriage

Widows often faced social exclusion and economic hardship. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed widow remarriage, leading to the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. Orthodox groups opposed the reform.

3. Women's Education

Reformers such as Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule promoted education for girls. Opponents feared that education would undermine traditional gender roles.

4. Child Marriage and Age of Consent

Child marriage and its harmful consequences became subjects of public debate. The Age of Consent Act, 1891, raised the age of consent for girls within marriage, but generated controversy over colonial interference and social authority.

5. Women's Property and Social Status

Reformers debated women's inheritance, dependence and restricted participation in public life. Women's organisations and early women writers increasingly contributed to these discussions.

Limitations

Many reforms remained concentrated among particular social groups and did not eliminate caste-based oppression, poverty or gender inequality.

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century debates challenged established patriarchal practices and laid foundations for later women's movements. Their legacy lies in expanding education, legal reform and public recognition of women's dignity and rights.

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