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Q18

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? (250 words).

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2017 · GS I · 15 marks · Indian Heritage and Culture

Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Core demand of the question

- Place the women's question inside nineteenth-century Indian social reform
- Set out the major issues and the debates over who may reform women, and for whose honour

Revision summary

The women's question grew inside social reform, not as a separate suffrage movement at first.

Sati (1829), widow remarriage (1856), age of consent (1891), education, and purdah were the core issues.

Reformers reread shastra; conservatives and some nationalists treated law as an insult to community honour.

Missionary and colonial 'civilising' claims competed with Indian male reform of the home.

A few women writers and teachers insisted they were subjects, not only symbols.

Introduction

The women's question in modern India did not begin as a mass feminist party. It arose inside nineteenth-century social reform, where Indian men, a few women, missionaries, and the colonial state argued over sati, the widow, the child wife, and the schoolgirl. The issues were real; the debates were also about tradition, nation, and colonial power.

Body

Major issues

- Sati, especially in Bengal, became the first public test; Rammohan Roy's campaign and the **Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829**, treated the burning of the widow as a crime, not as a sacred duty.
- Widow remarriage, pressed by **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856**, attacked enforced widowhood, tonsure, and social death.
- Female infanticide, child marriage, and the age of consent-raised sharply by the **Age of Consent Act, 1891**, after the Phulmoni case-put the girl child's body at the centre of law.
- Women's education, from missionary schools to Bethune School, Savitribai and Jyotirao **Phule's** work in Pune, and later **Pandita Ramabai**, asked whether the Hindu or Muslim woman might read without losing virtue.
- Purdah, polygamy, property, and the right to move in public were debated in both Hindu and Muslim reform, including Sir Syed's cautious modernism and later Begum-led efforts.

- The Brahmo, Prarthana, and Arya Samaj, and reformers such as M.G. Ranade and Behramji Malabari, tied women's uplift to a purified religion and a modern household.

Major debates

- **Tradition versus reform:** opponents said shastra and custom forbade change; reformers reread texts, as Rammohan and Vidyasagar did, to claim that true dharma did not need sati or the imprisoned widow.
- **Colonial law versus community honour:** the 1891 age-of-consent controversy saw Bal Gangadhar Tilak and others attack state intrusion into Hindu marriage even when they were not defending child rape as such; the nation was said to be shamed if the Raj legislated the bedroom.
- **Civilising mission versus Indian agency:** missionaries and officials used women's suffering to justify Empire; Indian reformers answered that they would reform their own homes, which both helped women and limited women's independent voice.
- **Woman as symbol versus woman as subject:** the educated companionate wife was often designed by men for a new middle-class home; Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, and Savitribai named caste and conversion in ways that embarrassed that script.
- **Caste and region:** Phule linked women's bondage to Brahmanic rank; Bengal's bhadralok debate was not the same as western-Indian or Muslim-ashraf debates, yet all used 'woman' to define community.

What the period settled and left open

- Law banned sati and allowed widow remarriage on paper; practice lagged, and property, vote, and work remained twentieth-century fights.
- The nineteenth-century question still taught the later national movement that swaraj without the home would be incomplete.

Way forward for the answer

- List sati, widowhood, consent, education, and purdah, then show the honour-versus-law and symbol-versus-subject debates.

Flow diagram

Sati widow child marriage -> Reformers Rammohan Vidyasagar Phule
 Reformers Rammohan Vidyasagar Phule -> 1829 1856 1891 laws
 1829 1856 1891 laws -> Honour vs colonial law
 Education Ramabai Savitribai -> Woman as subject
 Honour vs colonial law -> National middle-class home
 Woman as subject -> National middle-class home

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century reform put sati, the widow, the child wife, and the schoolgirl on the public stage. The debates were about scripture, colonial law, community honour, and whether women were symbols of the nation or persons with a voice. Those issues created modern India's women's question; they did not finish it.

Facts & figures

Bengal Sati Regulation, 1829

Colonial law, after Rammohan's campaign, that criminalised widow burning in the Bengal Presidency.

Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856

Statute associated with Vidyasagar that legalised widow remarriage among Hindus.

Age of Consent Act, 1891

Raised the age of consent after the Phulmoni case and triggered a major nationalist-reform clash.

Savitribai Phule

Pioneer of girls' schooling in Pune who tied women's education to anti-caste reform.

Pandita Ramabai

Scholar and activist whose work on Hindu widowhood and later conversion sharpened debates on women's agency.

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