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WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS DURING THE EIGHTEENTH AND NINETEENTH CENTURIES IN INDIA

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Abstract

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries witnessed significant transformations in Indian society, particularly in the fields of religion, education, caste relations and women's rights. The emergence of socio-religious reform movements challenged several established social customs, including sati, child marriage, female infanticide, the prohibition of widow remarriage, caste discrimination and the denial of educational opportunities to women. Although these movements were initially dominated by male reformers, women gradually emerged as active participants, intellectual contributors, educators and social activists. Figures such as Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Rashsundari Devi, Begum Rokeya (at the turn of the nineteenth to twentieth century), and the women associated with the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj played important roles in transforming the position of women in Indian society. Their participation was not merely confined to accepting reforms initiated by men; they increasingly articulated their own experiences, questioned patriarchal authority and demanded social, educational and religious equality. This paper examines women's participation in major socio-religious reform movements during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, highlighting their contributions, challenges and the long-term significance of their efforts in the development of women's emancipation in India.

Keywords: Women, Socio-Religious Reform Movements, Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Women's Education, Social Reform, Widow Remarriage, Women's Emancipation, Nineteenth-Century India.

1. Introduction

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represent an important phase in the social and intellectual history of India. During this period, Indian society experienced considerable changes under the influence of colonial rule, Western education, the spread of modern ideas, the growth of print culture and the emergence of new intellectual movements. Several traditional social practices came under criticism from Indian reformers who sought to reconstruct society on the principles of rationality, humanitarianism, equality and religious reinterpretation.

Women occupied a particularly disadvantaged position within the prevailing social structure. Their lives were frequently governed by patriarchal customs and religious interpretations that restricted their educational, economic and social opportunities. Practices such as sati, child marriage, enforced widowhood, polygamy and the denial of property and educational rights reflected the unequal position of women in many communities. The situation varied considerably according to caste, class, region and religious community, but restrictions on women's autonomy remained a significant feature of nineteenth-century Indian society.

The emergence of socio-religious reform movements created opportunities to question these practices. Reformers began to advocate women's education, widow remarriage, the abolition of sati and improvements in women's social status. However, women's participation in these movements gradually extended beyond the role of beneficiaries. Women began establishing educational institutions, writing autobiographies and reformist literature, organising associations and challenging the authority of patriarchal institutions.

The participation of women in these movements must therefore be understood as an important development in the history of Indian social reform. It marked the gradual transition of women from passive subjects of reform to active agents of social transformation.[1]

2. Historical Background: Position of Women in Eighteenth-Century Indian Society

During the eighteenth century, the position of women in India was influenced by religious traditions, caste hierarchies, regional customs and the economic structure of society. Women's access to education was extremely limited, particularly among communities where formal learning was largely controlled by men. Marriage at an early age, restrictions on widowhood and limited freedom in matters of property and inheritance contributed to women's dependence on male members of their families.

The practice of sati, although never universal and varying across regions and communities, became one of the most controversial issues in subsequent social reform debates. Similarly, restrictions on widow remarriage, female infanticide in certain communities, polygamy and the preference for male children attracted increasing criticism during the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, it would be historically inaccurate to suggest that women were entirely absent from public, religious or intellectual life before the emergence of nineteenth-century reform movements. Women had participated in devotional traditions, literary activities, religious institutions and local networks of social influence. The Bhakti tradition, for example, had provided women with opportunities for spiritual expression and the questioning of certain forms of social hierarchy. Figures such as Mirabai had demonstrated that women could assert an independent religious identity.

The eighteenth century also witnessed the political and cultural activities of influential women such as Ahilyabai Holkar, who exercised administrative authority and supported religious and public works. Although these examples did not constitute a modern women's rights movement,

they demonstrate that women's agency existed before the organised socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century, however, introduced new organisational and intellectual platforms through which women's questions could be discussed more systematically.

3. Major Socio-Religious Reform Movements and Women's Participation

3.1 Brahmo Samaj and the Question of Women's Rights

Established in 1828

The Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in Calcutta in 1828, became one of the earliest organised movements advocating religious and social reform in nineteenth-century India. It opposed idolatry, religious superstition and several social practices considered harmful to society. One of its most significant contributions was its campaign against sati and its advocacy of women's education and social dignity.

Raja Rammohun Roy argued that the practice of sati could not be justified through a proper understanding of Hindu religious texts. He actively campaigned against the custom and supported its legal abolition. His efforts contributed to the enactment of Bengal Sati Regulation XVII of 1829 under Governor-General Lord William Bentinck.[2]

Although the early leadership of the Brahmo Samaj was predominantly male, women gradually became involved in its educational and organisational activities. The movement encouraged female literacy and the participation of women in religious and intellectual discussions. The establishment of institutions for female education and the promotion of women's access to modern learning helped create opportunities for women to enter public life.

An important personality associated with the Brahmo reform tradition was **Swarnakumari Devi (1855–1932)**. A novelist, editor and social reformer, she contributed to women's intellectual development through literary and organisational activities. In 1886, she established the Sakhi Samiti, an organisation concerned with the welfare of women, particularly widows and disadvantaged women. Her activities demonstrated that women could independently organise social initiatives rather than remain dependent upon male reformers.

Similarly, women from Brahmo families increasingly participated in education, literature and public discussions. Kadambini Ganguly, who became one of the first women graduates of the British Indian Empire and a pioneering woman physician, represented the possibilities created by the educational environment encouraged by reformist circles.

The Brahmo Samaj thus contributed to the development of women's public participation, although its influence remained particularly strong among educated urban and middle-class communities.[3]

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3.2 Prarthana Samaj and Women's Social Advancement

Established in 1867

The Prarthana Samaj was established in Bombay in 1867 under the influence of the Brahmo Samaj and the reformist ideas of Keshab Chandra Sen. Its leading personalities included Dr. Atmaram Pandurang, Mahadev Govind Ranade and R. G. Bhandarkar. The organisation advocated monotheism, social equality, female education and the removal of harmful social customs.Women's participation in the activities associated with the Prarthana Samaj gradually increased, particularly in the fields of education, widow welfare and social service. The organisation supported the establishment of schools for girls and encouraged greater public acceptance of women's education.

Ramabai Ranade (1862–1924) emerged as an important woman reformer associated with the wider reformist environment created by the Prarthana Samaj. She worked for female education and women's self-reliance. After her marriage to Mahadev Govind Ranade, she received encouragement to pursue education and public activities. She subsequently became an influential organiser of women's associations and worked towards improving the condition of women through education and social service.In 1882, Ramabai Ranade became associated with the establishment of the Hindu Ladies Social Club in Bombay, which provided women with opportunities for learning, discussion and intellectual development. She later played an important role in the Seva Sadan movement, which promoted vocational education and economic independence among women.

The contribution of the Prarthana Samaj and its associated reformers was significant because it gradually legitimised women's participation in public activities and challenged the traditional belief that women's responsibilities should remain restricted to domestic life.[4]

3.3 Arya Samaj and Women's Education

Established in 1875

The Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Bombay in 1875. It sought to reform Hindu society through a return to what it considered the original teachings of the Vedas. The organisation opposed caste discrimination based solely on birth, religious superstition, child marriage and several other social practices. It also advocated women's education and argued that women possessed the right to acquire religious and intellectual knowledge.

The Arya Samaj played an important role in promoting female education, particularly in northern India. Its members established educational institutions for girls and encouraged women's participation in religious and social activities. The establishment of Arya Kanya Pathshalas and other educational institutions provided opportunities for women to receive formal education.

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An important aspect of the Arya Samaj's contribution was its attempt to reinterpret religious traditions in favour of women's education and dignity. Swami Dayanand argued that women should have access to the knowledge of the Vedas and should not be deprived of education on account of their gender.Women associated with the broader Arya reform environment contributed to educational and social initiatives. **Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922)** participated in reformist intellectual circles and founded the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune in 1882. However, her later religious and intellectual journey developed independently of the Arya Samaj, and she should not be regarded simply as an organisational representative of that movement.

The Arya Mahila Samaj sought to promote women's education, oppose child marriage and improve the condition of widows. It provided a platform through which women could discuss their problems and articulate their demands. The organisation was particularly important because it encouraged women to participate in reform activities as independent members rather than merely as recipients of social assistance.[5]

3.4 Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule: Women's Education and Anti-Caste Reform

Satyashodhak Samaj established in 1873

The contributions of Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule represent one of the most significant dimensions of nineteenth-century Indian social reform. Unlike several reform movements that concentrated primarily on the customs of upper-caste Hindu society, the Phule movement connected women's emancipation with the struggle against caste oppression, social inequality and Brahmanical domination.

Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule established a school for girls at Bhide Wada, Pune, in 1848. Savitribai became one of the first modern Indian women teachers and played a pioneering role in providing education to girls belonging to different castes. Her educational activities challenged the prevailing assumption that women, particularly those from lower castes, were unfit for formal learning.Savitribai faced considerable opposition from conservative sections of society. She was reportedly subjected to verbal abuse and harassment while travelling to teach. Despite these difficulties, she continued her educational work and became a powerful symbol of women's determination and resistance.

The establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873 further strengthened the movement for social equality. The organisation opposed caste-based discrimination and advocated the dignity and rights of oppressed communities. Savitribai actively participated in its activities and worked towards improving the condition of women and marginalised sections of society.

Another important initiative was the establishment of the Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha, a home intended to provide support to pregnant widows and protect their children from infanticide and social abandonment. This initiative addressed the severe difficulties experienced by widows who were subjected to social stigma and restrictions on remarriage.Savitribai was also an important literary figure. Her poetry collection *Kavyaphule*, published in 1854, reflected her

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commitment to education, social awareness and human dignity. Her writings encouraged women to acquire knowledge and challenge the inequalities imposed upon them.

The contribution of the Phule movement was particularly significant because it recognised that women's oppression could not be understood independently of caste and class inequalities. It expanded the scope of social reform by placing the experiences of lower-caste women at the centre of its activities.[6]

3.5 Women's Participation in the Widow Remarriage Movement

The prohibition of widow remarriage, particularly among upper-caste Hindu communities, constituted one of the major social problems of nineteenth-century India. Widows were frequently subjected to social isolation, economic dependence and severe restrictions on personal freedom. The condition of child widows was especially difficult because many girls became widows at a very young age.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emerged as one of the leading advocates of widow remarriage. Through his scholarship and public campaigns, he attempted to demonstrate that Hindu religious texts did not prohibit widow remarriage in the absolute manner claimed by orthodox sections of society.His efforts contributed to the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, which legally removed certain barriers to the remarriage of Hindu widows.[7]

Women also played an important role in bringing attention to the suffering of widows. Pandita Ramabai criticised the oppressive conditions experienced by upper-caste Hindu widows and highlighted the contradictions within a social system that denied women the freedom to remarry while permitting men greater marital freedom.

Her book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) provided a critical account of the position of women, particularly child brides and widows. She also established Sharada Sadan in Bombay in 1889, an institution intended to provide education, shelter and opportunities for self-reliance to widows and other women in difficult circumstances.The widow remarriage movement therefore represented more than a legislative achievement. It initiated wider discussions about women's personal autonomy, dignity and right to make decisions concerning marriage and family life.

3.6 Women's Participation in Muslim Social and Educational Reform

Muslim society also witnessed important debates concerning women's education, social position and religious responsibilities during the nineteenth century. The reformist ideas associated with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement encouraged modern education and intellectual development, although women's education did not initially receive the same institutional attention as male education.

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Muslim women's participation in educational and social reform developed gradually through family initiatives, literary activities, religious education and reformist networks. Women from educated Muslim families began to question restrictions on female literacy and the limited opportunities available to women.An important figure in this broader development was **Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani (1834–1903)** of Bengal. She was a zamindar, writer and philanthropist who supported women's education and established educational institutions, including the Faizunnessa Girls' School in Comilla in 1873. Her work demonstrated that Muslim women could exercise independent leadership in educational and social development.

Another important personality was **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932)**. Although her major reform activities belong primarily to the twentieth century, her birth and early intellectual development fall within the late nineteenth-century period. She subsequently became a leading advocate of Muslim women's education and emancipation. Her inclusion is relevant as a transitional figure, but her major organisational achievements should not be incorrectly attributed to the nineteenth century.

The contribution of Muslim women to social reform was particularly important because it challenged the assumption that women's education and public participation were incompatible with religious identity. Their activities helped establish the foundations for organised Muslim women's education and social advancement.[8]

3.7 Sikh Reform Movements and Women's Social Position

The nineteenth century also witnessed important religious and social reform activities within the Sikh community. The Singh Sabha Movement, which originated in Amritsar in 1873, sought to strengthen Sikh religious identity, promote education and address practices considered inconsistent with Sikh teachings.

The movement encouraged religious awareness, educational development and the preservation of Sikh traditions. Sikh religious teachings contained important principles concerning the spiritual dignity and equality of women. Nevertheless, certain social practices, including restrictions on women's participation in public and religious activities, remained subjects of concern.The wider Sikh reform environment encouraged educational development, although organised efforts specifically led by women became more prominent in subsequent decades. Women continued to participate in religious life, family-based educational initiatives and community activities.

It is important to distinguish between the general reformist principles of the Singh Sabha Movement and the later development of organised Sikh women's associations. The nineteenth-century movement contributed to an environment in which questions concerning women's education and social position could receive greater attention, but its women's organisational history requires separate examination.[9]

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4. Women as Writers and Intellectual Contributors to Social Reform

One of the most important developments of the nineteenth century was the emergence of women as writers and independent intellectual critics. Women began using autobiographies, poetry, essays and pamphlets to express their experiences and challenge the unequal social structures governing their lives.Their literary contributions were significant because they introduced women's voices into public debates that had previously been dominated by male reformers.

4.1 Rashsundari Devi (1809–1899)

Rashsundari Devi occupies an important place in the history of women's education and autobiographical literature in India. Her autobiography *Amar Jiban*, published in 1876, is widely recognised as one of the earliest autobiographies written by an Indian woman.She described the difficulties she encountered in acquiring literacy within a conservative domestic environment. At a time when women were frequently denied opportunities for formal education, her determination to learn to read demonstrated the importance of intellectual independence.

Her autobiography provided an account of women's domestic experiences and highlighted the restrictions imposed upon them by prevailing social conventions. Through her personal narrative, she made women's experiences an important subject of literary and social discussion.[10]

4.2 Tarabai Shinde (1850–1910)

Tarabai Shinde was one of the most outspoken critics of patriarchal social structures in nineteenth-century India. Her work *Stri-Purush Tulana* (A Comparison Between Women and Men), published in 1882, is regarded as a pioneering text in Indian feminist thought.

The book emerged in response to the controversy surrounding Vijayalakshmi, a young widow accused of killing her newborn child. Tarabai questioned the social hypocrisy that placed the entire burden of morality upon women while allowing men to escape similar scrutiny.

She criticised the unequal moral standards applied to men and women and challenged the religious and social arguments used to justify women's subordination. Her work exposed the contradictions of a society that expected women to remain virtuous while denying them freedom, education and social dignity.

Tarabai Shinde's contribution was particularly important because she did not merely request reforms within the existing social system; she questioned the very foundations of patriarchal authority.[11]

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4.3 Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922)

Pandita Ramabai was among the most influential women reformers of nineteenth-century India. Born into a family that valued Sanskrit learning, she acquired considerable knowledge of Sanskrit religious literature and became widely recognised for her intellectual abilities.

She challenged the traditional restrictions imposed upon women and criticised the condition of child brides and widows. Her book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, published in 1887, examined the social, religious and educational difficulties faced by upper-caste Hindu women.In 1882, she helped establish the Arya Mahila Samaj in Pune, which provided a platform for women to discuss social problems and advocate educational reform. In 1889, she established Sharada Sadan, which provided educational opportunities and shelter to widows and other disadvantaged women.

Ramabai's work was significant because it combined intellectual criticism with practical social service. She demonstrated that women's emancipation required not only changes in public attitudes but also institutions that could provide education, economic opportunities and social protection.Her reform activities also reflected the growing independence of women in articulating their own interpretations of religion, society and individual freedom.[12]

5. Major Areas of Women's Participation in Socio-Religious Reform

Women's participation in nineteenth-century reform movements was not restricted to any single activity. It developed through various forms of social, educational, literary and organisational engagement.

5.1 Promotion of Women's Education

Education was one of the most important objectives of nineteenth-century reformers. Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and other reform-minded women worked to establish educational institutions and encourage female literacy. Their efforts challenged the belief that formal education was unnecessary or inappropriate for women.

5.2 Campaign Against Sati

The campaign against sati was one of the earliest major social reform initiatives of the nineteenth century. Although Raja Rammohun Roy was the leading Indian advocate of its abolition, the issue also raised wider questions about women's right to life, dignity and personal autonomy.

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5.3 Advocacy of Widow Remarriage

Women reformers highlighted the social and economic difficulties faced by widows. They challenged the restrictions imposed upon widows and advocated their right to education, remarriage and independent living.

5.4 Opposition to Child Marriage

Reformers increasingly questioned the practice of child marriage because of its harmful effects on women's health, education and personal development. Pandita Ramabai and other women intellectuals brought attention to the suffering of child brides and the lack of autonomy within early marriages.

5.5 Development of Women's Organisations

The establishment of organisations such as the Arya Mahila Samaj and Sakhi Samiti created spaces for women to discuss their problems and participate in collective social action. These institutions gradually strengthened women's organisational abilities and public confidence.

5.6 Literary and Intellectual Contributions

Women used literature as a medium of protest and social criticism. The writings of Rashsundari Devi, Tarabai Shinde, Pandita Ramabai and Savitribai Phule provided valuable insights into women's experiences and exposed the inequalities embedded in contemporary society.

6. Challenges Faced by Women Reformers

Despite their significant contributions, women reformers encountered numerous social, cultural and institutional obstacles. Their participation in public activities frequently challenged deeply established patriarchal beliefs.

6.1 Patriarchal Resistance

Women who attempted to acquire education or participate in public activities often faced opposition from conservative families and religious communities. Savitribai Phule, for instance, experienced harassment and hostility while teaching girls. Women who questioned traditional customs were frequently criticised for challenging established social and religious authority.

6.2 Restrictions on Women's Education

The denial of educational opportunities remained a major obstacle. Many families considered female education unnecessary or feared that education would undermine traditional domestic

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responsibilities. Consequently, women reformers had to struggle not only to establish schools but also to convince families to send their daughters to educational institutions.

6.3 Social and Economic Dependence

Women's economic dependence on male family members restricted their ability to make independent decisions. Widows, in particular, experienced considerable social and financial insecurity. Institutions such as Sharada Sadan attempted to address these difficulties by providing education, shelter and opportunities for self-reliance.

6.4 Religious and Social Opposition

Reformers who challenged established religious interpretations often encountered opposition from orthodox groups. Women who questioned patriarchal practices were particularly vulnerable to criticism because their activities challenged both religious authority and traditional gender roles.

6.5 Limited Representation in Leadership

Although women increasingly participated in reform movements, leadership positions remained predominantly occupied by men. Women's experiences were frequently interpreted and represented by male reformers. Nevertheless, the emergence of women writers and independent organisations gradually challenged this imbalance.

7. Impact of Women's Participation on Indian Society

Women's participation in socio-religious reform movements produced significant changes in Indian society. Although these transformations were gradual and uneven, they established important foundations for the subsequent development of women's rights movements.First, the spread of female education created opportunities for women to acquire knowledge, develop intellectual abilities and participate in public discussions. The establishment of girls' schools during the nineteenth century represented a major departure from earlier educational restrictions.

Second, reform movements contributed to changes in social attitudes towards widowhood, marriage and women's dignity. The abolition of sati in 1829 and the legal recognition of Hindu widow remarriage in 1856 represented important legislative developments. Although these laws did not immediately eliminate social discrimination, they established legal foundations for further reform.

Third, the emergence of women writers and intellectuals transformed the nature of social debates. Through their autobiographies, essays, poetry and reformist writings, women began expressing their own experiences rather than depending entirely upon male interpretations.Fourth, the development of women's associations encouraged collective

participation and organisational independence. These associations provided opportunities for women to discuss educational, social and economic issues and gradually strengthened their presence in public life.

Finally, women's participation in nineteenth-century reform movements contributed to the development of modern feminist consciousness in India. Their struggles established intellectual and institutional foundations for the women's organisations and political movements that emerged during the twentieth century.

8. Critical Assessment

The contribution of women to nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movements must be evaluated within the wider social and political circumstances of colonial India. These movements were neither uniform in their objectives nor equally successful in addressing the problems of all women.Many early reform initiatives concentrated primarily on the condition of upper-caste and middle-class women. Consequently, the experiences of lower-caste women, agricultural workers and economically disadvantaged communities were not always adequately represented.The work of Savitribai Phule and Tarabai Shinde was particularly significant because it challenged both gender inequality and caste-based oppression. Their writings and activities demonstrated that women's emancipation could not be achieved without addressing wider structures of social inequality.

Similarly, Pandita Ramabai's work highlighted the need for institutions that could provide women with practical opportunities for education and economic independence. Rashsundari Devi's autobiography demonstrated that even within restrictive domestic environments, women could develop intellectual agency and express their experiences through writing.

Another important consideration is the relationship between colonial intervention and indigenous social reform. Although colonial legislation contributed to certain legal changes, it would be historically inaccurate to attribute the entire process of women's emancipation to British rule. Indian reformers and women themselves played an essential role in questioning social customs, generating public opinion and demanding institutional change.Furthermore, legal reforms did not automatically transform social attitudes. The abolition of sati did not eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, while the legalisation of widow remarriage did not ensure that widows could freely exercise this right without social opposition.

Therefore, women's participation should be understood as a complex process involving education, religious reinterpretation, literary expression, institutional reform and resistance to patriarchal authority.

Conclusion

Women's participation in socio-religious reform movements during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represents an important chapter in the history of modern India. These

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movements created opportunities for questioning traditional social practices and initiated discussions concerning women's education, marriage, widowhood, religious rights and social dignity.

Although early reform movements were largely initiated and led by men, women gradually emerged as independent participants and intellectual contributors. Savitribai Phule transformed female education through her pioneering teaching activities, Pandita Ramabai challenged patriarchal restrictions and established institutions for disadvantaged women, Tarabai Shinde exposed the unequal moral standards imposed upon men and women, and Rashsundari Devi introduced women's personal experiences into Indian autobiographical literature. Ramabai Ranade and Swarnakumari Devi further demonstrated the importance of women's organisational and social contributions.

The significance of these women extended beyond their immediate reform activities. They challenged the assumption that women were merely passive members of society and demonstrated their capacity to influence religious, educational, literary and social institutions. Their work also established connections between women's emancipation and broader questions of caste equality, social justice and human dignity.

It is equally important to recognise that the achievements of nineteenth-century reform movements remained limited by prevailing social inequalities and patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, these movements laid the foundation for the emergence of organised women's activism in the twentieth century.

In conclusion, women's participation in socio-religious reform movements was not simply a consequence of social transformation; it was itself a driving force behind that transformation. The intellectual contributions, educational initiatives and organisational activities of nineteenth-century women reformers helped reshape Indian society and established the foundations of the modern women's rights movement in India.

Notes and References

The numbered references below correspond to the footnote markers placed within the main text. They are provided together at the end, as requested.

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