

- Status of Women Two Hundred Years Ago
- Caste System and Social Divisions
- Reform Against Sati and Widow Remarriage
- Education and Empowerment of Women
- Prominent Women Reformers
- Child Marriage and Legal Reforms
- Caste Reform Movements
- Jyotirao Phule and the Satyashodhak Samaj
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Temple Entry Movements
- Non-Brahman Movement and Periyar
- Social Reform Organisations
- Solved Examples
- Practice Set
- Answer Key
- Quick Reference
- Glossary

## Status of Women Two Hundred Years Ago

About two hundred years ago, the lives of children and women were very different from today. Most girls from middle-class families did not attend school, and education for women was rare. Early marriage was common, and both Hindu and Muslim men could have multiple wives. Widows faced severe restrictions and social stigma. In some regions, the practice of **sati** was prevalent, where widows were expected or forced to immolate themselves on their husband's funeral pyre. Women had limited rights to property and almost no access to education. Many believed that educating women was harmful, fearing it would lead to widowhood.



**Fig. 1** – *Sati*, painted by Balthazar Solvyn, 1813

This was one of the many pictures of sati painted by the European artists who came to India. The practice of sati was seen as evidence of the barbarism of the East.

The image above shows a painting by Balthazar Solvyn from 1813 depicting the practice of sati, where a widow is about to immolate herself on her husband's funeral pyre. This practice was controversial and was eventually banned by the British colonial government in 1829 due to its inhumanity.

## Caste System and Social Divisions

---

Indian society was divided into castes, with Brahmans and Kshatriyas considered upper castes, followed by Vaishyas (traders and moneylenders), Shudras (peasants and artisans), and those considered "untouchables" at the bottom. Untouchables were excluded from temples, wells, and ponds used by upper castes and were treated as inferior. Over the 19th and 20th centuries, social norms and perceptions about caste began to change through reform movements and social activism.

## Social Debates and the Role of Print Media

From the early 19th century, new forms of communication such as books, newspapers, and pamphlets became widely available, enabling debates on social, political, economic, and religious issues. Reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy used these platforms to challenge unjust social customs and promote change.

Prepzy

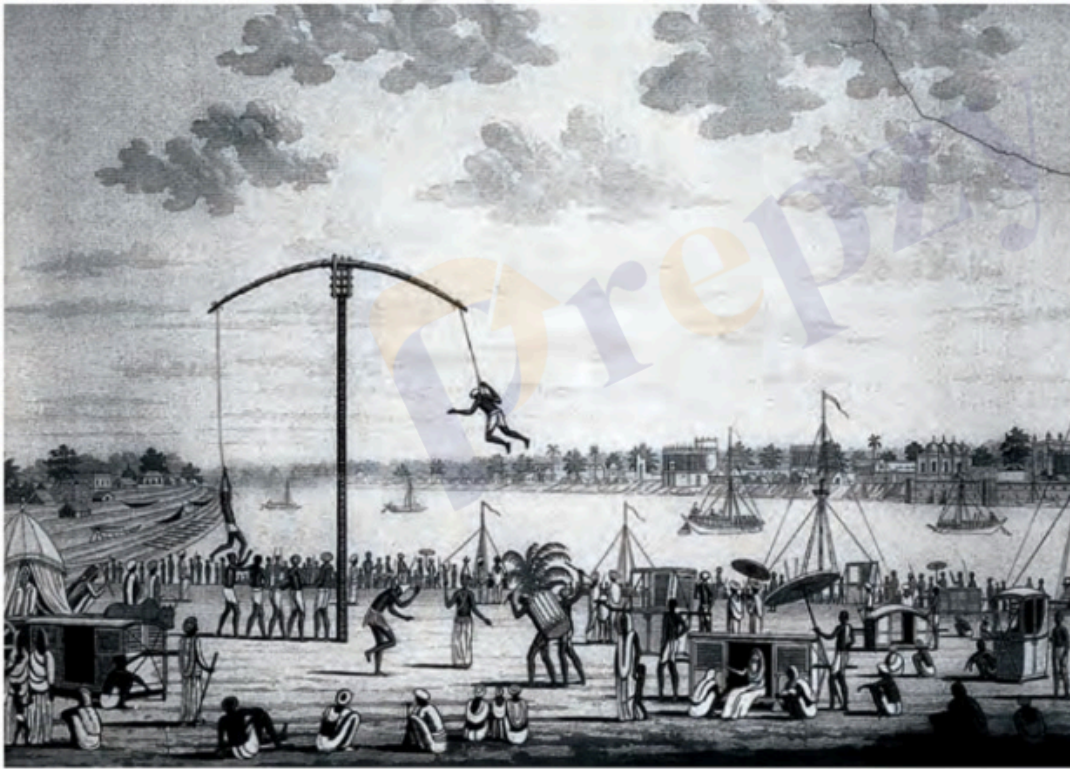


**Fig. 2** – Raja Rammohun Roy,  
*painted by Rembrandt Peale. 1833*

Raja Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) was a pioneering social reformer who founded the Brahma Sabha (later Brahma Samaj) in Calcutta. He advocated for the abolition of harmful practices like sati, promoted women's education, and sought greater social equality.

## Reform Against Sati and Widow Remarriage

Rammohun Roy campaigned against sati, arguing that it had no sanction in ancient texts. His efforts contributed to the British ban on sati in 1829. Later reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar advocated for widow remarriage, leading to the passage of a law in 1856 permitting it. Despite opposition, the movement for widow remarriage spread across India.



**Fig. 3** – Hook swinging festival

In this popular festival, devotees underwent a peculiar form of suffering as part of ritual worship. With hooks pierced through their skin they swung themselves on a wheel. In the early nineteenth century, when European officials began criticising Indian customs and rituals as barbaric, this was one of the rituals that came under attack.

The Hook Swinging Festival was a ritual involving devotees being suspended by hooks pierced through their skin and swung around a pole. This practice was criticized by European colonial authorities as cruel and was part of the broader social customs debated during the 19th century.

### Exam Question

**Q:** What was the significance of Raja Rammohun Roy's campaign against sati?

**A:** Raja Rammohun Roy's campaign was significant because it challenged the practice of sati by showing it had no basis in ancient texts, leading to its ban in 1829 and marking an important step in social reform in India.

## Education and Empowerment of Women

Many reformers believed that educating girls was essential for improving women's status. Schools for girls were established in various parts of India, including by the Arya Samaj and reformers like Jyotirao Phule. However, societal fears and conservative attitudes limited girls' access to education. Some women educated themselves secretly, like Rashsundari Debi.



**Fig. 6** – *Students of Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya, 1875*

When girls' schools were first set up in the nineteenth century, it was generally believed that the curriculum for girls ought to be less taxing than that for boys. The Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya was one of the first institutions to provide girls with the kind of learning that was usual for boys at the time.

The Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya, established in 1875, was one of the first schools for girls, offering education comparable to that of boys, challenging the prevailing norms of the time.

## Exam Question

**Q:** Why was the establishment of schools like Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya important?

**A:** These schools were important because they provided girls with education similar to boys, challenging social norms and promoting gender equality in education.

## Prominent Women Reformers

---

Women like Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Pandita Ramabai played key roles in promoting women's education and rights. Pandita Ramabai founded a widows' home to support widows economically and wrote about the oppression of upper-caste Hindu women.

Prepzy



# Fig. 7

## Pandita Ramabai

Pandita Ramabai was a scholar and social reformer who worked to improve women's education and fight against social injustices faced by women.

### Exam Question

**Q:** What contributions did Pandita Ramabai make to women's reform?

**A:** She promoted women's education, wrote about the oppression of women, and established a home to support widows, helping them become economically independent.

### Child Marriage and Legal Reforms

---

Child marriage was a widespread social problem. Reformers and legislators worked to pass laws to prevent child marriage. The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 prohibited marriage of boys below 18 and girls below 16, later raised to 21 and 18 respectively.



**Fig. 8** - *Bride at the age of eight*

This is a picture of a child bride at the beginning of the twentieth century. Did you know that even today over 20 per cent of girls in India are married below the age of 18?

The photograph shows a child bride at the age of eight, highlighting the social issue of child marriage that reformers sought to address.

**Exam Question**

**Q:** What was the purpose of the Child Marriage Restraint Act?

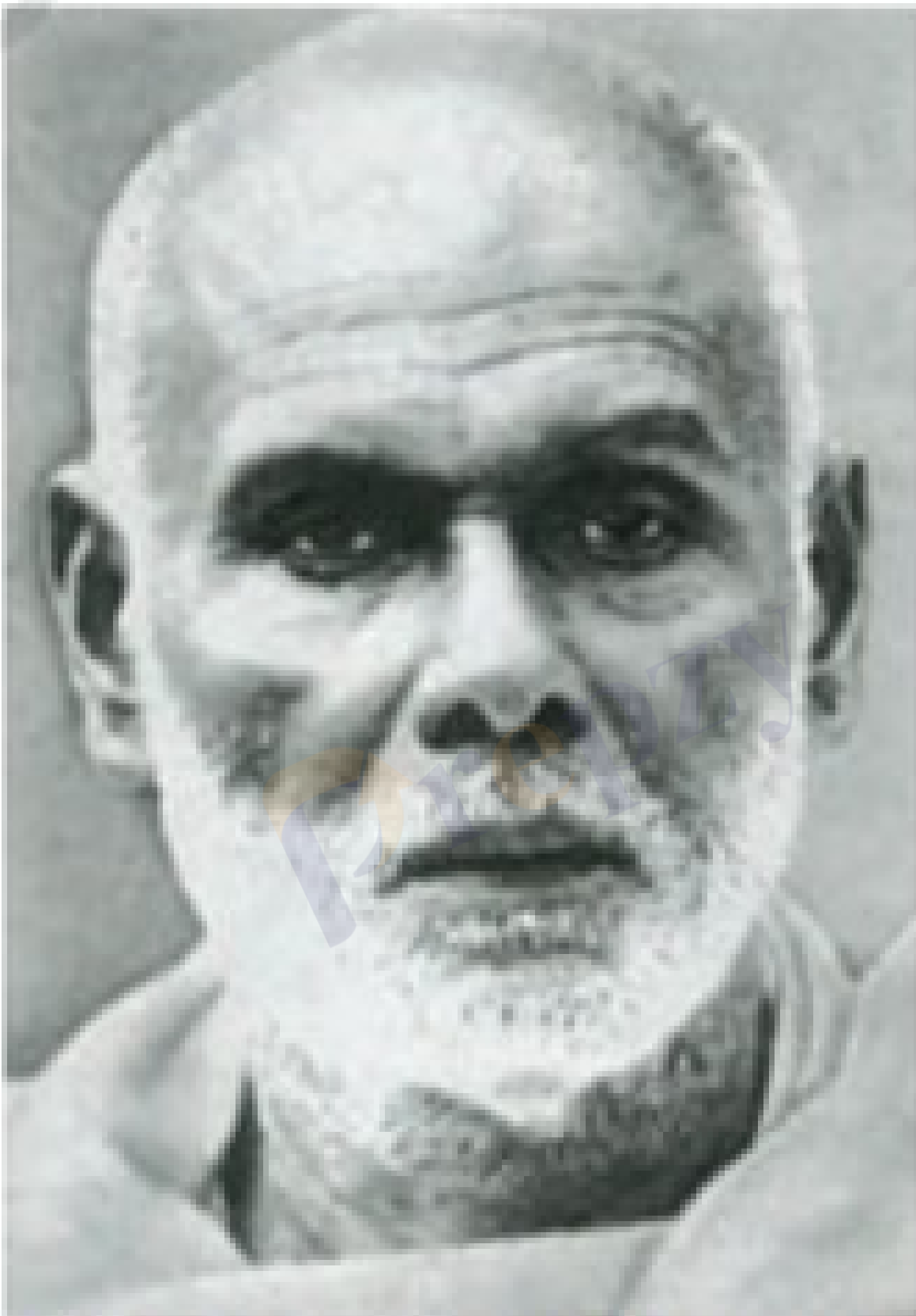
**A:** The Act aimed to prevent child marriage by setting minimum legal ages for marriage, protecting children from early and harmful marriages.

## Caste Reform Movements

---

Reformers like Rammohun Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and later Dr. B.R. Ambedkar challenged caste inequalities. Movements such as the Satnami, Matua, and efforts by leaders like Shri Narayana Guru promoted social equality and fought caste discrimination.

Prepzy



**Fig. 12 – Shri Narayana Guru**

Shri Narayana Guru was a social reformer who preached unity and equality, opposing caste-based discrimination.

**Exam Question**

**Q:** How did Shri Narayana Guru contribute to caste reform?

**A:** He promoted the idea of unity among all people regardless of caste, arguing against caste discrimination and social inequality.

## Jyotirao Phule and the Satyashodhak Samaj

---

Jyotirao Phule was a social reformer who criticized caste oppression and promoted education for girls and lower castes. He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj to propagate caste equality and challenge Brahmanical dominance.

Prepzy



# *Fig. 13 – Jyotirao Phule*

Phule argued that the Aryans were foreign invaders who subjugated the indigenous people, and he called for unity among Shudras and Ati-Shudras to fight caste discrimination.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What was the main goal of the Satyashodhak Samaj?

**A:** To promote caste equality and challenge the social dominance of Brahmins.

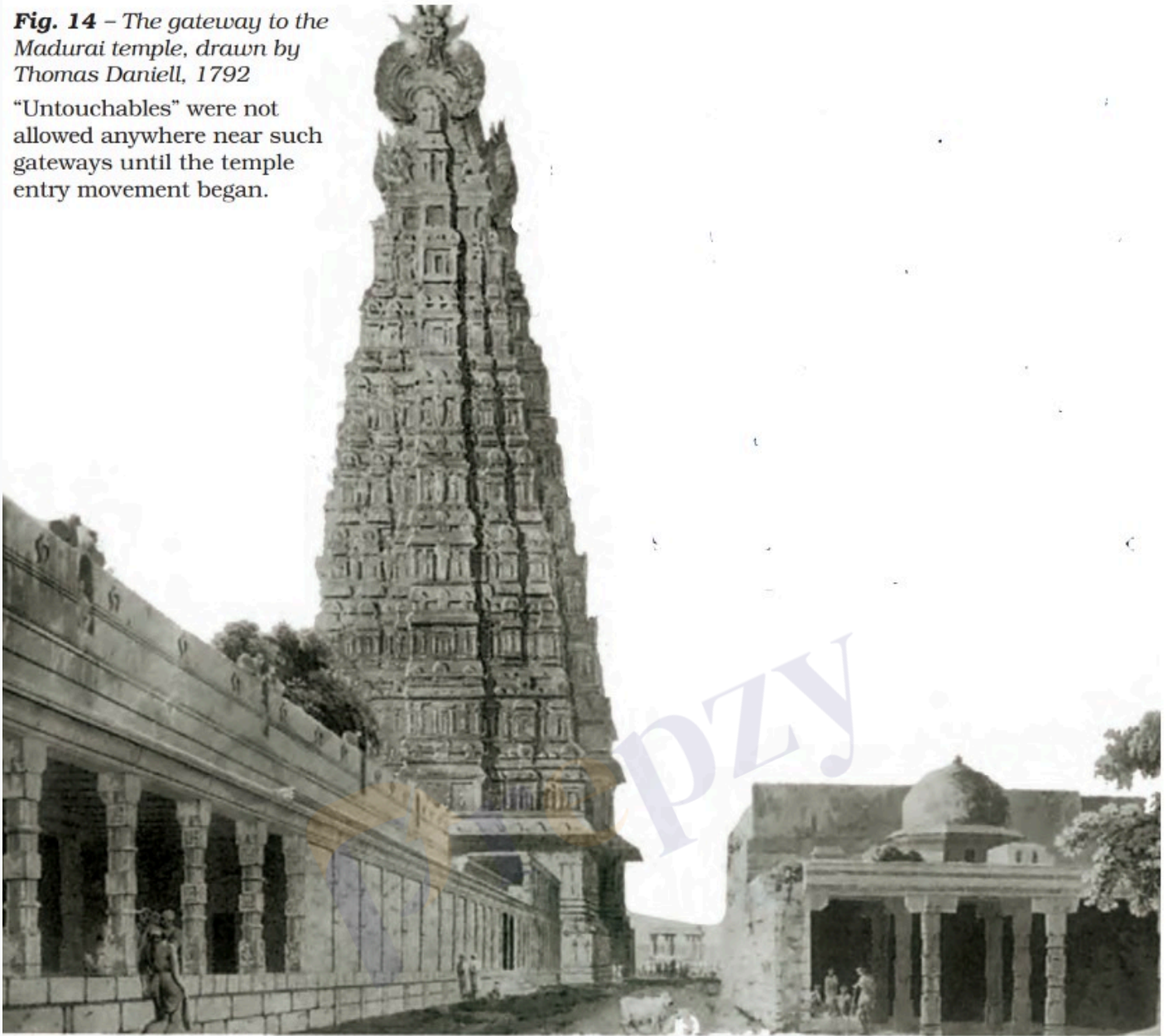
## Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Temple Entry Movements

---

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, born into a Mahar family, experienced caste discrimination firsthand. He led temple entry movements to allow Dalits access to Hindu temples and fought for social equality and the abolition of casteism.

**Fig. 14** – The gateway to the Madurai temple, drawn by Thomas Daniell, 1792

“Untouchables” were not allowed anywhere near such gateways until the temple entry movement began.



The gateway to the Madurai temple symbolizes the social restrictions of the time, where untouchables were barred from entering sacred spaces.

### Exam Question

**Q:** What was the significance of Ambedkar's temple entry movements?

**A:** They challenged caste-based exclusion by demanding Dalits' right to enter temples, highlighting caste discrimination in society.

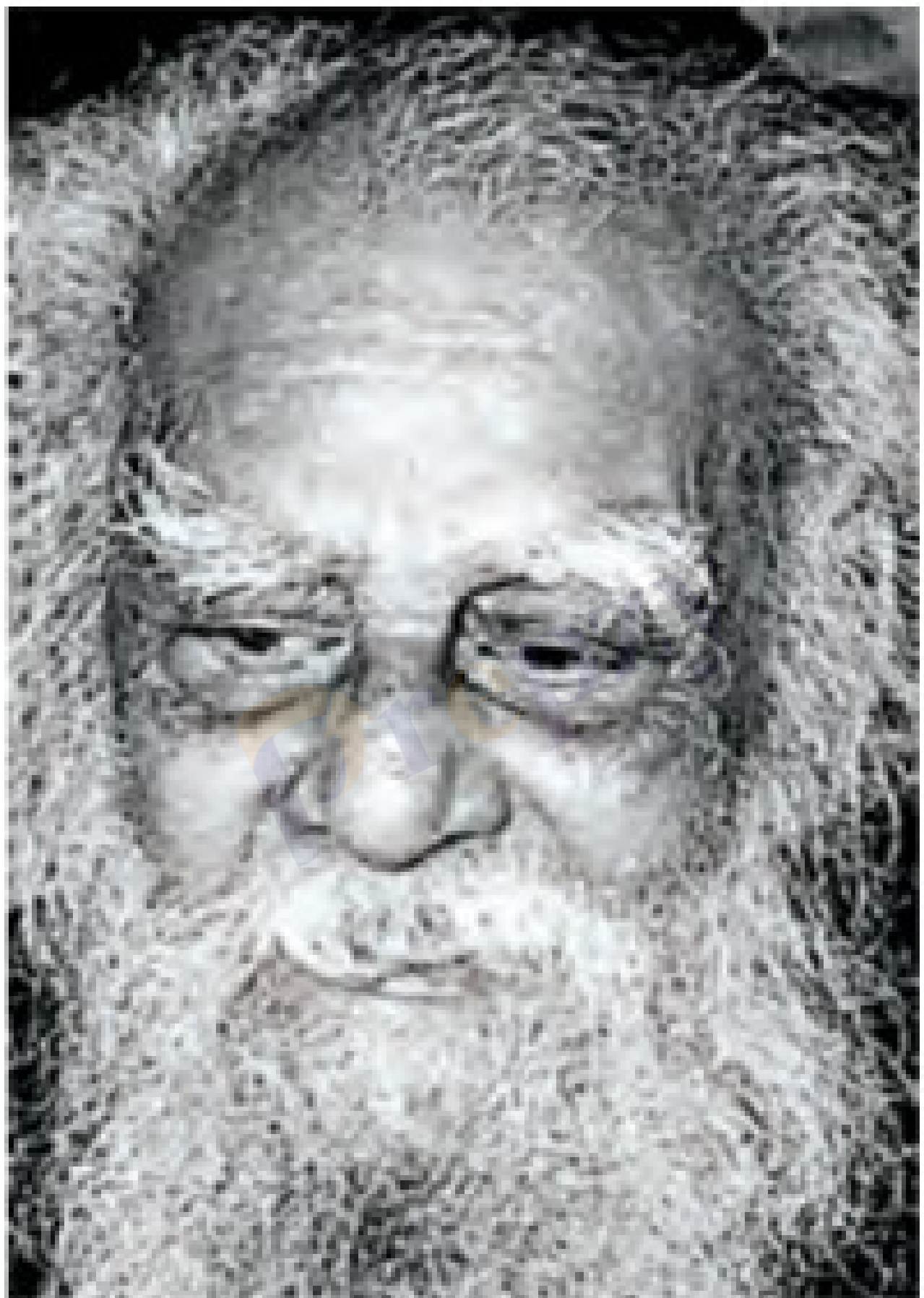
### Non-Brahman Movement and Periyar

---

The Non-Brahman movement arose in the early 20th century among educated non-Brahman castes. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, known as Periyar, founded the Self Respect Movement advocating for social justice,

rationalism, and the rejection of caste and religious inequalities.

Prepzy



**Fig. 15** – *E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker (Periyar)*

Periyar was a vocal critic of Hindu scriptures that justified caste and gender inequalities and promoted women's rights and social reform.

## Exam Question

**Q:** What were the main ideas promoted by Periyar and the Self Respect Movement?

**A:** They promoted equality, rationalism, rejection of caste and religious discrimination, and women's rights.

## Social Reform Organisations

---

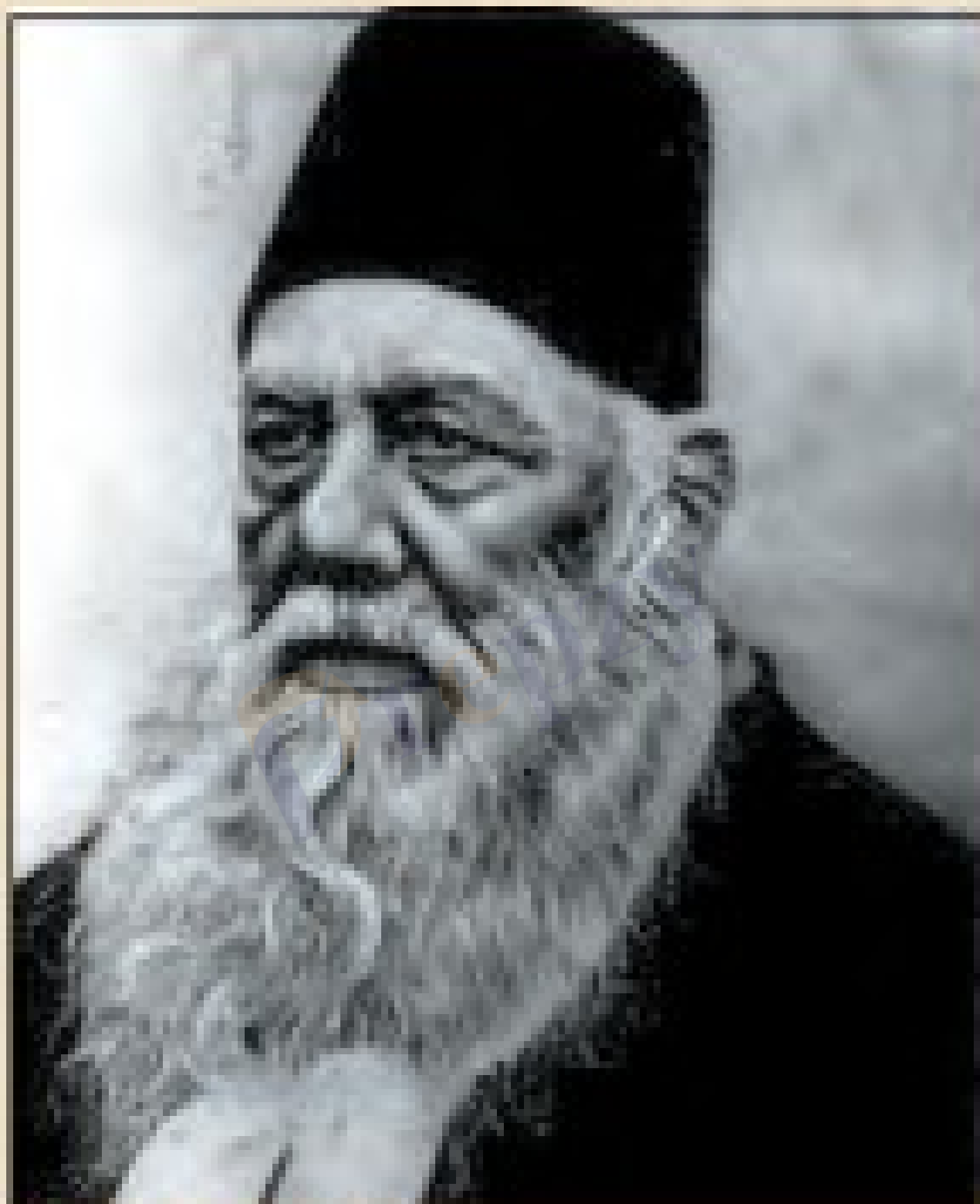
Several organisations worked for social reform in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

- **Brahmo Samaj:** Founded by Raja Rammohun Roy in 1830, it opposed idolatry and caste discrimination and promoted equality.
- **Young Bengal Movement:** Led by Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, it encouraged questioning authority and promoted education and freedom of thought.
- **Ramakrishna Mission:** Founded by Swami Vivekananda, it combined spirituality with social service and nationalism.
- **Prarthana Samaj:** Founded in Bombay in 1867, it worked to remove caste restrictions and promote women's education.
- **Veda Samaj:** Founded in Madras in 1864, inspired by Brahmo Samaj, it promoted caste abolition and widow remarriage.
- **Aligarh Movement:** Founded by Sayyid Ahmed Khan in 1875, it promoted modern education among Muslims.
- **Singh Sabha Movement:** Founded in the 1870s, it aimed to reform Sikhism and promote education.



**Fig. 18** Swami  
Vivekananda





**Fig. 19**

*Sayyid Ahmed Khan*



*Fig. 20 – Khalsa College, Amritsar, established in 1892 by the leaders of the Singh Sabha movement*

Prepzy



*Fig. 17*

*Henry Derozio*



**Fig. 16** – *Keshub Chunder Sen – one of the main leaders of the Brahmo Samaj*

## Exam Question

**Q:** Name two social reform organisations and their main objectives.

**A:** Brahmo Samaj aimed to abolish caste discrimination and idolatry; Aligarh Movement promoted modern education among Muslims.

## Solved Examples

---

### Example 1

**Q:** Explain the role of Raja Rammohun Roy in social reform.

**A:** Raja Rammohun Roy was a pioneer of social reform in India. He campaigned against sati, promoted women's education, and founded the Brahmo Samaj to encourage rational thinking and social equality.

### Example 2

**Q:** What was the significance of the Child Marriage Restraint Act?

**A:** The Act set legal minimum ages for marriage to prevent child marriage, protecting children's rights and promoting social reform.

## Practice Set

---

### Easy

- What was the practice of sati?
- Who founded the Brahmo Samaj?
- What is caste?

### Moderate

- Explain the contributions of Jyotirao Phule to social reform.
- Why was education for girls opposed by many in the 19th century?
- Describe the role of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in caste reform.

## Challenging

- Discuss the impact of social reform movements on the status of women in 19th century India.
- Analyze the role of religious reform organisations in challenging caste and gender inequalities.
- Evaluate the significance of the Non-Brahman movement in the context of caste reform.

## Answer Key

---

- **Practice Easy 1:** Sati was a practice where a widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.
- **Practice Easy 2:** Raja Rammohun Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj.
- **Practice Easy 3:** Caste is a social division based on birth, determining social status and occupation.
- **Practice Moderate 1:** Jyotirao Phule promoted education for girls and lower castes and founded the Satyashodhak Samaj to fight caste discrimination.
- **Practice Moderate 2:** Education for girls was opposed due to fears it would corrupt them and prevent them from fulfilling domestic roles.
- **Practice Moderate 3:** Dr. B.R. Ambedkar fought caste discrimination, led temple entry movements, and advocated for social equality.
- **Practice Challenging 1:** Social reform movements challenged harmful customs like sati and child marriage, promoted women's education, and fought caste discrimination, improving women's status.
- **Practice Challenging 2:** Religious reform organisations like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj challenged caste and gender inequalities by promoting equality and education.
- **Practice Challenging 3:** The Non-Brahman movement challenged Brahmanical dominance and caste discrimination, promoting social justice and equality.

## Quick Reference

---

- **Sati:** Widow immolation practice banned in 1829.
- **Brahmo Samaj:** Reform movement founded by Raja Rammohun Roy.
- **Child Marriage Restraint Act:** Law passed in 1929 to prevent child marriage.
- **Jyotirao Phule:** Social reformer who fought caste discrimination.
- **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar:** Leader of Dalit movement and caste reform.
- **Periyar:** Leader of the Self Respect Movement against caste and gender inequality.

## Glossary

---

Sati

A historical practice where a widow immolated herself on her husband's funeral pyre.

Caste

A hereditary social group in India that determines social status and occupation.

Brahmo Samaj

A social reform movement founded in 1830 to promote equality and abolish social evils.

#### Widow Remarriage

The practice of allowing widows to marry again, promoted by reformers and legalized in 1856.

#### Child Marriage

The practice of marrying children below legal age, restricted by law in 1929.

#### Untouchables

Groups considered lowest in the caste hierarchy and subjected to social exclusion.

#### Self Respect Movement

A movement founded by Periyar to promote equality and reject caste and religious discrimination.

Prepzy