



SOCIAL AWAKENINGS AND PURDAH SYSTEM IN INDIA

Sachida Nand Mishra

B.Sc., M.A (History) ,Research Scholar , Faculty of Social Sciences,
L. N. Mithila University, Darbhanga.

ABSTRACT :-

Bihar has been unique from social and cultural points of view. Its society and institutions have been pluralistic in character. Though the Hindus dominated, Muslims and Christians also formed significant parts of Society. Among the Hindus also there has not been a uniform social pattern. The Hindus of Mithila and the other parts of the state differed from each other in social classification and custom. The Muslims were found in parts of the state. Christians formed part of tribal population of Chota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas. The Adivasis of Chotanagpur and the Santhal Parganas had a different social as well as cultural pattern. Among all social groups and classes, a process of synthesis began during the close of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The liberal forces of modernization, which had inaugurated a new era in Indian history, produced its impact in Bihar as well. This process continued even during the period between the two world wars. As the Hindus formed about seventy-seven per cent of the population, the impact of social and religious changes was among them more profound and wide spread. It was the high class and educated Hindus who were mostly affected. Among the Muslims the influence of the Wahabi Movement was profound. The liberalization of the Muslim Society, began by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, had its repercussions in Bihar as well. With the advent of Christianity proselytizing religion, education, social welfare and philanthropic activities began among the tribals and Adivasis. The foreign missionaries played an important part in changing the social and cultural life of the Adivasis. Consequently, the traditional character or social and cultural life of Bihar began to yield to a new phase under the impact of powerful renaissance movement. The First World War also accelerated the process of social and cultural changes, particularly in the urban areas of Bihar. This paper deals with social awakening in relation to Purdah System.

KEY WORDS: Cultural Changes, Philanthropic Activities, Purdah System, Social Awakening

INTRODUCTION

As the whole nation began to respond to the impact of Western science, technology, introduction of ideas or democracy and liberalism, the reforming zeal of Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical society and the immense wave of nationalism, Bihar could not be free from the operation of these modernising forces. The social and cultural movement launched by Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Aurobindo could not do otherwise than have a profound influence in Bihar. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of Indian renaissance who began the Brahma Samaj Movement, had begun his career as a Serishtedar in the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Ramgarh, in the Hazaribagh district of Bihar. Hence the ideas of Raja Ram Mohan Roy spread among the higher classes in Bengal and Bihar. Brahma Samaj Movement which was the earliest form of protestant Hinduism in modern India had also

produced its influence in the modernization of Bihar. It sought to correct certain vagaries and superstitions to simplify worship by resorting to strict monotheism without any image of God.

The numbers of converts were small, but their significance was great because they belonged to upper class and were mostly intellectuals. It was not confined among the Bengali families only. The Arya Samaj Movement of Swami Dayanand Saraswati had also produced its impact on the people of Bihar. The Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College and Schools in Bihar were established by it. According to the Census Report of 1921 there were 4,578 Arya Samajists, and 794 Brahma Samajists, in Bihar. The Arya Samajists worked for social changes. They were active in Patna. Brahma Samaj also exerted the some influence on the intellectual and social life of Bihar. Bhagalpur, Patna, Ranchi, Gaya and Hazaribagh were main centers of its activities. It worked for women's education and social reform. The Bihar Theosophical Federation also began a campaign for social reform and development of education. Annie Besant had a close contact with Bihar. She had come to Patna in 1910. The meeting of the Bihar Theosophical Federation at Patna and Purnea during 1918 had drawn a large number of people. Many branches of this organisation were set up in Bihar. The teachings of Rama Krishna and Swami Vivekananda also influenced many people. In 1922, three branches of the Rama Krishna Mission were established at Patna, Gaya and Deoghar. The Rama Krishna Mission tried to spread education, medical facilities and help to the poor and affected the life of the people of Bihar.³ They continued their work of social reform. In 1931, it was reported that the Arya Samaj was working for two decades for the improvement of the conditions of widows and orphans by opening Vidhwa Ashram and Anathalaya. During the same period Theosophical Society was also working for social and religious reforms. The Rama Krishna Mission also played a constructive role in bringing about social changes in the province during the period between the two world wars.

POSITION OF WOMEN:

In India, the natural instinct to rear and beget children had been encouraged by the teachings, of religion. To the Hindus, marriage was a sacrament and a religious duty incumbent on all and a man just marry and bring children into the world for the salvation of his own soul and his ancestors, Marriage customs among the Hindus continued to be what they were during the earlier periods, Marriage was one of the twelve purificatory rites which a Hindu must perform. In some cases, different rules affected the field of match-making. One such rule restricted the circle within which a man must marry Every person had to marry with his own sub-caste, In caste where there were 'Gotras' (traditional common ancestors), Gotra exogamy was generally the rule. But this was common only among the Brahmins, Rajputs and other high caste Hindus. In some cases, marriage was allowed within the same village, But the most prevalent rule of exogamy was sapinda (of the same blood) by which marriage was prohibited between parties who had common ancestors up to seven or five generations, seven being on the father's side and five or three generations on the mother's side, many instances were found of Hindus marrying girls belonging to inferior social groups within the same caste according to the principle of hyper-gamy.

To the Muhammadans, marriage was a civil contract of legal validity according to which it was only necessary that there should be a proposal and acceptance made at the same meeting with a view to establishing marital relations between the parties, The universal practice was, however, that the proposal and acceptance were to be made at a formal gathering of relatives and friends called the Nikah ceremony at which passages from the Kuran were also read and prayer was offered.

Similar among the Christians a religious ceremony, though legally not binding, was in practice more or less on this basis.

Of the Christians and generally the "Animists" also it might be said that a religious ceremony was an essential part of marriage.

Marriage, funeral and other ceremonies remained much the same as in the last few decades.

MOVEMENT AGAINST PURDAH:

During the period under discussion several factors facilitated the loosening of the bond of the age-old Purdah system. The development of higher education; the encouragement of coeducation, the spread of education among girls and their entry into various professions in general and teaching and medicine in particular; the growing western contact and the: penetration of western ideas, particularly those of democracy and equality, transport facilities for travelling and their use by both sexes, increase in the age of marriage of both sexes, the leadership and personality of Gandhiji, the progressive ideas of some 'political leaders and some social reformers both among: men and women, grant of female franchise, women's organisations and above all, the force of nationalism and the national movement—all these contributed to the decay and decline of the Purdah System in the country.

With the advance of time people became gradually conscious that the institution of Purdah was not necessary in the society. It was not a guarantee for the protection of chastity of women. Towards the end of the 19th century Shri G. Subramania, the late editor of the 'Hindu' had significantly observed: "To say that Purdah is necessary to protect the moral purity of women within the four walls of the home is as absurd in theory as it is a gross libel on Hindu women."

The enlightened reformers of the 19th Century also preached against the Purdah system and its harmful effects. But till the end of the 19th century the institution of Purdah was scarcely shaken. In the 20th century the citadel of Purdah began to be seriously breached. The Swadeshi movement, the Home Rule Movement, the Non-cooperation movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement gave a great stimulus to the Anti-Purdah Movement in India in general and in Bihar in particular.

The partition of Bengal (1904-5) and the Swadeshi Movement for the first time drew women out from the seclusion of their homes and inspired them to take an interest in public affairs.⁶ They took interest in the Home Rule Movement (1914-18) led by Mrs. Annie Besant and B. G. Tilak and they had expressed their resentment against the internment of the former in 1917 by the Government of Madras. The Non-co-operation movement (1920-22) and the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-32) under the enlightened leadership of Gandhiji did much in causing, imperceptibly, the disappearance of the veil from the areas where it prevailed. A large number of ladies—old and young, married and unmarried—and belonging to all communities discarded Purdah and actually participated in the struggle for freedom from alien rule.

The educated ladies began to hate the age-long and injurious Purdah system and freed themselves from it. The women's organisations also made ceaseless efforts against it and did a lot in doing away with it.

In the Ashrams of Gandhiji no Purdah was observed. Men and women all participated in all sorts of work. They used to take their food also sitting side by side or even face to face.

In 1921 the Bombay Maratha Deshastha Samaj held a meeting to congratulate K. Shantabai Doundakar on her success in the B.A. examination. A special feature of the meeting was a very large attendance of the Maratha ladies who sat side by side with men without any Purdah. Prabudh Bharat, an organ of the Ramakrishna Vivekananda' Mission, took note of the increasing activities of women and remarked:

"We see before our eyes how women are slowly coming out of their seclusion even in India. We find them in, schools and colleges, pulpits and public platforms and in various departments of life working for the national weal side by side with men. No power can stop the spirit of the age."

By 1923-24 the women were displaying growing interest in political and social questions and there was steady increase in the number of women emancipated from Purdah.

1929 the demand for abolition of Purdah was still not so popular as the demand for abolition of the custom of early marriage. All of the constituent conferences of women without an exception had passed 'resolutions demanding abolition of the custom of child marriage. But only 8 constituent conferences of women passed resolutions urging abolition of the Purdah system. They could not do so without encountering a great deal of opposition' On 21 October, 1924 a big meeting of the Muslim Women was held at Bombay under the President-ship of Begum Nafis Dulhin Saheba. Social reforms were emphasised but the Purdah system was supported. But there was a great change in the situation with the beginning of the year 1930.

Bihar had been the citadel of Purdah in North India. It was the Purdah dominated province. Whenever Gandhi ji went to Bihar he observed the Purdah system more strictly followed than in other provinces. Once at Darbhanga he was called upon to address the ladies behind the Purdah. The sight of the screen behind which his audience, whose numbers he did not know, was seated, made him sad. He did not believe in the utility of Purdah and a woman within the Purdah, was not necessarily purer than a woman without it. Moreover, he did not like man's anxiety about a woman's purity. He did not understand why man was so anxious about women's purity.

In many cases Purdah was being retained in even educated household not because the educated men believed in it, but because they would not manfully resist the brutal custom and sweep it away at a stroke. To Gandhi ji Purdah system was 'vicious, brutal and barbarous' and so quite useless. He pleaded that woman should have the same liberty and opportunity for self development as man. Hence it was essential that the custom of Purdah should, end.

The enlightened people of Bihar felt aggrieved against the Purdah system. Some attempts were made against it on a small scale at the time of the Indian National Congress Session held at Gaya in 1922.²⁸ But the anti-Purdah movement started seriously in 1927.

Shri Ramanandan Mishra, a khadi worker of Darbhanga, gave a lead to this movement. He wanted to make his wife free from the tyranny of Purdah against the will of the other inmates of his house. He went to Sabarmati along with his wife to discuss the matter with Gandhi ji. Gandhi ji was already acquainted with the evil system of Purdah prevailing in Bihar. So he became pleased to hear the mission of Mishra. With his consent Radhabahen, daughter of Shri Maganlal Gandhi and Durgadevi, daughter of Dalbahadur Gin accompanied him to Bihar. Once Maganlal came to Bihar to meet his daughter and assess the work but unfortunately he fell ill and passed away at Patna on 23 April, 1923. The martyrdom of Maganlal gave further impetus to the movement. Its effect was wonderful.³⁰ The movement having a personal touch promised to be carried on with energy.

On 8 July, 1928 a conference was held under the president-ship of Shri Braj Kishore Prasad, in the Radhika Srnha Institute The Searchlight, an important daily newspaper of Bihar, described the scene of the meeting in the following words:

"A unique spectacle was witnessed at the mixed meeting of ladies and gentlemen of the 8th July, held at Patna, in the Radhika Sinha Institute on Sunday last. In spite of heavy rains that fortunately stopped just at the time of the meeting, the gathering was unexpectedly large. In fact; half of the spacious hall of the Radhika Sinha Institute was crowded with ladies, three-fourth of whom were 'such as had been observing Purdah a day before, an hour before.'"

The following resolution was passed at this meeting:

"We, the men and women of Patna assembled, hereby declare that we have today abolished the pernicious practice of the Purdah which has done and is doing incalculable harm to the country, and particularly to women 'and we appeal to the- other women of the province, who are still wavering, to abolish this system as early as they can and thereby advance their education and health.'"

A provisional committee was also formed to propagate against Purdah and promote education among women. It was also decided to form Mahila Samitis (women's Institutes) in every town and

village of the province and to start Mahila Ashrams at important places in order to make, women worthy and useful.

Meetings and demonstrations against Purdah were held in many other places also in Bihar on that day and they were successful beyond the expectations of the organizers. Reports concerning them were published in all important papers of Bihar and other provinces.

In memory of late Shri Maganlal Gandhi, an Ashram called after his name, was established at Majhoulia in the district of Darbhanga with a view to encourage disappearance of Purdah from Bihar.

People were so much enthusiastic about breaking the Purdah that Rs. 5000 were promised on the spot in the Patna meeting of the 8th July. Women also volunteered to contribute between Rs. 25 and Rs. 250.

It seemed the people of Bihar observed, as if, the funeral ceremony of Purdah in Bihar. Gandhi ji was pleased and congratulated the leaders of Bihar for their earnest struggle against the Purdah system.

As a result of these deliberations and activities the Bihari women of respectable and aristocratic families began to discard Purdah and participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement still in larger numbers than before.

On 28 and 29 July, 1931 the first session of the Bihar National Women's Conference was held in the Radhika Sinha Institute Hall at Patna under the president-ship of Smt. Ramswarup Devi, Nine resolutions were passed and in one of them the women of Bihar were called upon to remove the Purdah system and in another resolution congratulation was given to those women who, having discarded Purdah, had participated in the freedom movement.

Meanwhile, the An India Bhargava Brahmin Conference held a meeting at Jaipur in early 1928. It was a conference primarily of men but women were also present in it without any Purdah. One of the resolutions passed at the meeting aimed at the abolition of the Purdah system.

The educated women of Agra started Anti Purdah Association and began agitation against the Purdah system, The women of Prayag also held a big meeting under the presidentship of Smt. Uma Nehru and passed a resolution against the custom of the Purdah.

When the Purdah system was predominant in society, many purdanasin ladies during the period of their illness preferred death to treatment by male doctors. But during the period under report change became visible. Among the educated wealthy class Purdah was loosing its significance. The Middle class people were also influenced by the spirit of the age. Even among the people of this class Purdah became less rigid than before and in many families women whose mothers would have been forbidden, were permitted to see male doctors.

The lady delegates even from the Purdah provinces used to attend the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress. As early as 1921, 8 ladies from Bihar attended the Ahmadabad session of the Congress. Bengal sent 12, the united provinces 20, the Punjab 18, Central Provinces and Berar 9, and Ajmer-Merwara 24. About 16 women from a few provinces of North India attended the 38th Session of the Congress at Cocanada and Smt. Mohini Devi of Bengal was a member of the Subjects Committee. At the Belgaum Congress in 1924 at least 1000 women in all were delegates.

Mr. J.M. Sengupta, the Chairman of the Reception Committee at the 43rd Session of the Indian National Congress held at Calcutta in 1928 denounced the forces of reaction and said that if Hindu Culture meant Purdah and Mohammedan culture meant harem, both must go.

The number of lady delegates was unusually large at this 43rd Session of the Congress. The Bande Mataram was sung by the whole choir of 200 boys and girls. Smt. Sarala Devi also sang a song.

A women's political conference was to be held at Meerut in 1929. The Purdah arrangements were made for the ladies. But women strongly resented them. When all the curtains were removed, only then the women could enter the purdah.

The Indian statutory commission appointed in 1927 had also noticed that the feeling against Purdah was fast gaining ground.

The year 1930 saw marvellous awakening among the women in India. Gandhi ji started Civil Disobedience Movement against the British rule in India. Women were also called upon to participate in the movement along with men. Response to Gandhi ji's call was unique. Generally speaking, the proverbial shyness and modesty of Indian women did not prevent them from joining the non-violent army of the Congress. Women in hundreds and thousands came out of Purdah, joined and led processions, attended meetings and even delivered speeches, worked as Desh Sevikas (Servants of the Country), picketed liquor and foreign shops, faced police and authorities, bore beatings, insults and hardships and welcomed imprisonment.

There were such women who had never gone out of their houses. They used to picket in the day and return to their homes at night accompanied by some persons. Once when a woman returned home with the help of some one, she was not in a position to recognise her own house and with great difficulty her house could be located.

A youngman educated abroad, was very anxious to introduce modernism in his conservative family. But despite all his efforts he could not succeed in introducing any change. However, when the Civil Disobedience Movement began, his mother, wife and sisters joined it and were imprisoned. In these circumstances the young man was forced to cook his food himself and to take care of his children besides doing his work in the day.

On one occasion in Meerut alone 5000 women, leaving Purdah, came out to express their protest against the arrest of Gandhi ji and again they never accepted Purdah. There was a public procession of 6000 women in protest against Gandhi ji's arrest in Purdah ridden Lahore.

A big meeting of women was held at Prayag on 23 May, 1930 under the president-ship of Smt. Swaruprani Nehru. She said in her speech that the women should com' out of Purdah and that they should fit themselves to remain in jails as prisoners.

Smt. Durgadevi Verma belonging to the Flaihaya section of the Kshatriya was the rst lady to break the Purdah among her caste men. Mahabir Prasad Poddar of Kanpur and Smt. Kamal Kumari Devi were married but they did not observe any Purdah at the time of their wedding. Smt. Shyamadevi of a small Ratwara estate in the district of Muzaffarpur had vehemently opposed the Purdah system and freed herself from it. A lady named Durgarani Kunwar, wife of J.N. Karpur of Farukhabad, discarded Purdah when she was 43-years Old.

Gandhi ji's call appealed to women's sense of nationalism and to the spirit of selfless devotion which was characteristic of Indian womanhood. They came out of Purdah in thow sands and remained out of it. Having enjoyed the sweets of liberty and freedom of action they were unwilling now to lead secluded, sheltered, and sluggish life and they could not be forced to do so. There were such great public gatherings of emancipated women during the thirties as would have been unthinkable even in early 20th Century.

Women were members of the Indian National Congress, All India Congress Committee and its working committee. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu and Mrs. L. M. Sengupta had become President of the Indian National Congress at Kanpur (1925) and Calcutta (1933) respectively. This was the highest honour the country could offer to its women.

CONCLUSION

Through the efforts of Srnt. Kailash Srivastava, wife of Shri J.P. Srivastava of Kanpur two bills were passed in the United Provinces according to which each District Board and Municipal Board was required to have at least one woman member. Thus, the non-political result of the political movement of 1930-32 was extraordinary and astounding. A great shock was given to the custom of Purda and it did

not show any sign of weakening among people in general and educated classes in particular. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter to his daughter dated 7 January, 1931 very significantly observed that the Purdah was rapidly sinking away to take its rightful place in the shelves of museums where the relics of a by gone age were kept. To him the house with women in Purdah was like a Zoo or a prison and a nation could not go ahead if half of its population was kept hidden away in a kind of prison. But it was very fortunate for India that she was rapidly tearing the Purdah away. It was fast disappearing among the Hindus and slowly among the Muslims. While sending a message to the Paryag Mahila Vidyapith on the occasion of its annual convocation he had said that the Purdah was the evil relic of a barbarous age and it had imprisoned the body and mind of many sisters and wanted women to tear it to bits and further in fragments. But it was a matter of satisfaction that the use of Purdah was gradually lessened.

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