

## CHAPTER IV

### CHALLENGING TRADITION AND REACHING OUT TO MODERNITY

“The fate of an epoch that has eaten of the tree of knowledge is that it must .... recognize that general views of life and the universe can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge, and that the highest ideals, which move us most forcefully, are always formed only in the struggle with other ideals which are just as sacred to others as ours are to us.” (Weber 1930)

In the words of Childe, man appeared on the earth

“Man is inadequately adapted for survival in any particular environment. His bodily equipment for coping with any special set of conditions is inferior to that of most animals....yet he has been able to adjust himself to a greater range of environments than almost any other creature....and to beat the polar bear, the hare, the hawk and the tiger at their special tricks. Through his control of fire and the skill to make clothes and houses, man can and does live and thrive from the Arctic Circle to the Equator. In the trains and cars he builds, man can outstrip the fleetest hare or ostrich. In airplanes he can mount higher than the eagle, and with telescopes see further

than the hawk. With firearms he can lay low animals that a tiger dare not tackle.” (Childe 1951:31)

This phenomenon that has turned mankind from a weak, helpless creature to a powerful being is called progress. Mankind has accomplished this by acquiring knowledge and applying it to survive and multiply and that has been made possible by organized social activity. Every generation has handed over to the succeeding one its accumulated experience. At times additions and modifications were done to the same as new rules for action and behaviour became necessary. Despite all our species has gained, it cannot be argued that neither our knowledge nor our society needs any more improvement. Progress is a process that goes on as new problems confront mankind and demand solution; new developments require rethinking and remoulding of our lives.

However people cling passionately to old ways and display intense reluctance to modify customary modes of behaviour. The dead weight of conservatism, largely a cowardly distaste for the strenuous and painful activity of rethinking has retarded human progress in the past and it does so even now to a great extent. There are a number of factors that oppose change and it will be worthwhile to examine them.

Religion is the most powerful factor hostile to progress. Its role as the sole monopolist of truth and enemy of new ideas in Europe is well known. Copernicus dared not publicize his work *On the Revolution of Heavenly Bodies*

during his life. Galileo had to suffer persecution for what he dared to say. Darwin delayed the publication of Origin of Species for long and when he did it, he had to add “by the Creator” in the second and subsequent editions of the book in the concluding sentence to escape the fury of the clerics. Every breakthrough in Geology, Physiology and natural sciences brought the wrath of the clergy on the pioneers. That is amply documented by historians like Gibbon, Leakey, Draper etc.

In India, it is argued that religion had a tolerant attitude and proved less aggressive and less destructive. Persecution for dissent and burning books of the infidels were not generally practiced in India. People believed in arriving at truth through discussion. That is how India made tremendous progress in mathematics, astronomy, medical science, metallurgy etc.

But here too we have to be careful and set a limit. Religion in India as in case of the Semites, Persians, Greeks and Romans placed the golden age in the past. Change through the changes according to this view is not progress, but decline. Duration of life, wisdom and strength of people declined by a quarter during the three ages that followed the first one. So people of former ages are deemed wiser than those of the later. It becomes futile then to think anew and imperative to approach the wisdom of the past and remain satisfied with it.

This attitude is deep rooted with the faith in the sanctity of the Vedas. As the Vedas were supposed to contain all the wisdom of the world, it was

considered worthwhile to memorize the hymns and re – interpret them to reconstitute experiences and observation. Gordon Childe seems, therefore, justified in pointing to the fact that while “the Greek philosophers appealed again and again to facts of common experience and the practice of the crafts, their contemporaries in India were hampered by inheriting from the Bronze Age the sacred hymns of the Veda and ritual manuals verbally remembered.” (Childe 225)

Caste system is an institution sanctioned by religion. It prescribes or forbids occupations on the sole consideration of birth and permits marriage between people belonging to the same caste. That is a deterrent to progress because ability to pursue certain occupations is not predetermined by heredity. Marriage in the same caste is no guarantee for compatibility and happiness. In the *Roots and Shadows* (1992) we find a Brahmin’s son reluctant to take the occupation of a hotel– owner, though he prospers when he takes it ultimately. In *Small Remedies* (2001), Savitribai faces a lot of difficulty as she chooses to pursue the course of music despite her birth as a Brahmin. Compulsion to marry in caste leads to brushing aside all considerations of the qualifications of the groom and enforces the practice of dowry. Mini’s marriage is an instance to the point. Guardian’s concern about marriage and dowry stands in the way of proper orientation and education of the girls. Thus one half of the society is

deprived of all the opportunities it could and should have to develop itself which is detrimental to the progress of the society.

Hinduism like other religions is based on patriarchy and perpetuates the subordination of women. Thus, according to the Laws of Manu,

“No act is to be done according to her own will by a young girl, though she be in her own house. In her childhood a girl should be under the will of her father; in her youth under that of her husband; her husband being dead, under the will of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will. Though a bad conduct or debauched, a husband must always be worshipped like a god by a good wife.” (Roberts 345)

In the same spirit, Manu goes on to say that a husband can take another wife after eight years if his first wife is barren, after ten years if her babies do not survive, after eleven years if she bears female children only and immediately if she speaks unpleasant things. (Manu 81)

Such laws in the scriptures have denied opportunity to woman to make the best use of their abilities and nurtured ignorance. It is unscientific to blame women for barrenness, birth of still born babies or birth of female children only. There are cases where the husband, not the wife, is in fact barren. Still born babies are born due to a number of reasons like accident, infection, incompatibility of the blood groups of the couple etc. As for the birth of female

children, it does not depend on the sweet will of the either; it is purely accidental. These facts were not known during the days of Manu. But his laws paved the way for the maltreatment of women and provided excuse for bigamy and polygamy. They also blocked research. Why bother about the secrets of birth and survival when it suffices to blame women for everything?

Early marriage of the girls has done no less harm to society. Though, we have much in our literature to believe that people in ancient India married after attaining adulthood yet the scriptures of Parashar and Samvarta prescribe marriage of girls before puberty recommending eight as the best and ten as the latest for it. Such marriages are the surest way to making women ignorant and vulnerable to diseases. Despite all the reforms during the last two centuries, the practice persists. Though the Sharada Act passed in 1929 and amended in 1978 makes the minimum age of marriage for girls 18, fifty per cent of the girls in the age group 14-18 were married earlier than 18 in West Bengal during 2000-2005 according to National Family Health Survey – 3, 2005-2006.

Manu prescribes contact with and living amidst people not subscribing to Vedic practices. Later scriptures forbid crossing the seas. We wonder then how migrations to Indonesian islands, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Myanmar, China and Japan took place. As relics of Indian culture, such migrations are a reality that cannot be denied. Some historians assume that the migrants were the Shudras or heretics who were not bound with the rule. But

the assumption is not well founded as some inscriptions of the South – East Asian islands show, some Brahmins were living there and their rulers claimed descent from Indian Kshatriyas. Whatever the cause and time of the restrictions, they narrowed the vision of the people and made them incapable of learning from the developments taking place in other countries.

Again, Manu counts invention of big machines as a sin, though not a major one, no explanation for the strange law is given. True, mechanization leads to unemployment under capitalism but that is not the fault of the machine but the drawback of the system. Big machines make difficult task easy to perform, save time and produce goods on a large scale. They also reduce the cost of the products. So a ban on the invention of big machines maintains status quo and prevents change. No wonder the west left India, the land of the pious and came to dominate the world by inventing big machines.

Religion is also the source of unnecessary controversies and troubles that sidetrack vital issues of the present, lead to wastage of time and energy, and cause immense loss of human lives and property in communal riots. *Small Remedies* refers to the Bombay Riots. Adit and Munni fell victims to those riots. Then, Hasina who wanted to sing on the death anniversary of her guruji was threatened and Madhu, mistaken for Hasina was assaulted. That shows how religious frenzy divides people along communal lines and weakens

progressive movements. Fortunately, we find a lot of people around us determined to resist the fanatics.

Besides religion, there are social customs, conventions and practices that stand in the way of progress. We learn from *A Matter of Time* (1996) that there was “a time when schooling for a girl was something that could come in the way of ..... marriage prospects.” (MT119)

So it required a lot of courage on the part of Manorama’s mother to send her to Yamuna bai’s school; more so, when the teacher and most of the students were non – Brahmins. Fortunately, such practices give way to healthier ones over time. That is why we find girls like Indu, Jaya and Sarita in Shashi Deshpande’s novels.

Then there are social prejudices that perpetuate inequality between men and women. Thus a wife is generally expected to remain a step or two behind her husband while moving in society, both literally and figuratively. The husband is expected to be more educated, better placed in life and to earn more than his wife if both of them are earning. If the wife surpasses her husband, the husband feels belittled and the domestic peace is shattered. That is what we find in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990). Manohar and Sarita had married inter caste out of love much against social norms but as Sarita surpassed Manohar, the lover turned a sadist.

According to an age old custom of our country, men and women do not dine together. Wife serves meals to her husband and children first and her turn comes last. Husband, under the circumstances, cannot and generally does not know what she eats and if she eats at all. So the best in the kitchen goes to the husband and the wife takes the remainder. Such neglect leads to ill – health, malnutrition and diseases which remain undetected and at last there remains little to be done. If one half of the society remains suffering, how can it progress well and attain its goal?

Indian society demands modesty and mental strength from women. It means they are expected to be shy and uncomplaining; they have to suffer everything in silence. Shyness goes to the extent that women do not reveal their ailments and seek timely care for them. Often they refuse to go to doctors. More so, if their problems are specific to their sex. This false sense of modesty deprives them of the attention and care they need and leads to fatal consequences. Mohan's mother and sister in *That Long Silence (1989)* show that Indian women are yet to rid themselves of such false notions.

It is also such false notions of modesty that keep women in dark and make them incapable of controlling their bodies. We find several women in Shashi Deshpande's novels who are frequently pregnant. Such pregnancies take a heavy toll on their health, bring lot of worries and burden to them, leave little time to them for hobbies or intellectual or socio - cultural activity. If their

husbands are not responsible and resourceful enough, they get little for themselves after feeding their children. It is absolutely necessary therefore for the women to have the knowledge and the means to avoid unwanted pregnancies and keep the size of the family small. In absence of that, women at times turn to quacks in despair and die a tragic death like Mohan's mother in *That Long Silence*.

Again, custom makes husband the master of the family and as such the sole authority to take decisions in all matters concerning the lot of the family. That was inevitable in the days when husbands were well developed adults and wives were minors. Nowadays even in case of love marriages the old custom persists. Wives are quite ignorant of what their husbands are doing in offices or in business and the latter do not deem it necessary to keep them informed. They come to know about them only when some crisis occurs and casts its shadow on the entire family. The case of Jaya in *That Long Silence* is a case to the point. To become real partners in life, both of them have to confide to each other what is likely to affect both of them, rather, the whole of the family.

Experiences during the last two decades of the twentieth century and after have demonstrated well that while the scriptures are proving more and more irrelevant, religion is invoked more and more to serve political interests of the exploiting classes. Destruction of shrines, schools, hospitals, firings and bombings in public places – everything takes place in the name of religion.

Religion is also invoked to deprive people of their civil liberties like freedom of expression and freedom of movement. Such things occur not only in the backward areas in rural hinterland but even in the metros like Hyderabad and Kolkata so proud of their culture. Social customs, conventions and practices are less volatile. They change and sometimes even disappear imperceptibly as they come in conflict with stronger forces favouring change. We are going to discuss them in the next chapter.

Mathew Arnold, the British critic and poet in his *Essays on Criticism* observed that

“modern times find themselves with an immense system of institutions, established facts, accredited dogmas, customs, rules which have come to them from times not modern. In this system their life has to be carried forward; but they have a sense that this system is not of their own creation, that it is by means corresponds to the wants of their actual life, that for them it is customary, not rational. The awakening of this sense is the awakening of the modern spirit.”

This modern spirit is not the exclusive possession of the British as the observation does not apply to Britain alone. It is also applicable to India. We in India are not entirely satisfied with all that we have inherited. Part of prevalent ideas, customs and practices is not in tune with the demands of the age. Part of

them have proved simply impracticable and have been already discarded. It demonstrates that conservatism is not everlasting, that tradition gives way to change partially if not totally with the passage of time. What we have to find out then is the factors which make that possible.

Socio – economic factors are the most important ones leading to change. Indian society has been predominantly rural with agriculture supporting the majority of the population through the ages. East India Company had created a class of landlords loyal to them even before the British took over the rule of the country directly. The landlords paid a fixed amount of revenue to the government and lived comfortably by exploiting the tenants. So education was not valued much in those days. Therefore, the landlord and the money – lenders in the villages were satisfied with the little education that enabled them to keep accounts and protect their possessions. In a male dominated system, it was not the concern of the woman to bother about these matters. So they could remain ignorant and illiterate. Education, for woman was deemed neither necessary nor desirable in those days.

This state of affairs began to change gradually. First, a section of the landlords found it better to live in urban centres where the courts and government offices were located. Urbanization in its turn brought some changes in their living and thinking. Then, industrialization began slowly during the nineteenth century with the landless from the villages supplying the labour to

the mills and factories. Though the British rule was reluctant to develop industries which could compete with the British capital, it too had to seek the help of Indian entrepreneurs for war supplies during the two World Wars. Then there was the nationalist movement which promoted Indian industries with its stress on boycott of foreign goods and use of indigenous ones. Development of industries further accelerated the process of urbanization. While the landless poor of the villages went to handle the machines, others went to the urban centres to facilitate transport and sale of finished goods. Besides shops, courts, government offices, educational institutions and hospitals offered jobs to a section of the villagers who did not have enough means in the form of land to support their families.

Thus it was the landless and small farmers who moved to the towns first. The poorest of them could not afford education and found employment as unskilled labour in mills and factories. But those who wanted to try to improve their conditions by seeking some job in the urban centres were the first to care for education. But even the landlords and the moneylenders felt the need for change after the year 1947. Growing awareness about struggle of the peasants and land reforms (even if half – hearted and inadequate) in different states of India made it obvious to them that they could no longer depend on land and had to seek alternatives. Government service, professions like law and medicine or business were the only outlets open to them. All of them demanded some

education and brought them to urban areas. Even to become acceptable in the social milieu there, education was required not only for men but for women as well. That brought not an insignificant change in the social attitude.

Shashi Deshpande's novels reflect such changes that took place during the period 1947 – 2000. We learn from *A Matter of Time* that going to a school was a disqualification when Manorama was in her teens. But by the time Jaya in *That Long Silence* grew up, the knowledge of English had become desirable for a bride. As a matter of fact, Mohan chose her for her ability to speak English fluently. In *Roots and Shadows* Indu is permitted to go to college by her conservative aunt Akka as she knows the social attitude has changed and bridegrooms seek educated girls. That she disapproves of her talking with a boy in a corner of the library is a different matter.

Indu's father is a journalist. One of her uncles is a doctor while the other is a government servant. Her uncle Anant who depended mostly on land regrets all of them have gone:

“All of them. Who would have imagined it? Our own lands...for generations they were ours... and we had to hand them over just like that.” (RS 54)

He cannot even afford to pay taxes of his house. No wonder one of his sons has got employed as a clerk and the other (much against the wishes of his

own and his elders) turned to hotel business. This alienation from land, from rural background explains and illustrates the phenomenon that education, formerly an anathema for women has become desirable in course of time.

Besides the above, in India the introduction of railways, telegraph, radio and press had taken place by the nineteenth century. They got extended during the twentieth century. As people started moving far from their remote villages and towns, their vision broadened with new experiences. Even the illiterate folk of the villages who rushed to industrial centres for employment, could see that the traditional way of living was not the only one or the ideal one as people in other areas had different customs and rituals. People who listened to the radio or read the newspapers learnt a lot about their own country and about the world. It awakened them to the problems and acquainted them with what different people were thinking around them. Since the introduction of the television the process has gained a new magnitude. People were no longer passive receptors of news and views now, many of them have become interactive.

The British rule in India brought the country into contact with the west. There were pleasing as well as shocking aspects of the contact. Goethe read the translation of Kalidasa's and praised it highly. Humboldt found in the Bhagavad Gita perhaps the deepest and loftiest thing the world has to show. Arthur Schopenhauer discovered "the highest human wisdom" and "almost

super human conceptions” in the Upanishads. (Winternitz 1972: 20, 266) Louis Jacolliet wrote a book *La Bible dans L’Inde* which appeared in English in 1870. He called India the cradle of humanity and argued that all the main currents of thought in the world were derived from India. Such appreciation from the west turned Indian intellectuals nostalgic. Several stories and novels displaying interest in India’s past were written. Those who studied the past deeply realized that not all of the social practices (bigamy, polygamy, child marriages, sati, untouchability etc.) were either eternal or even sanctioned by the scriptures.

Then a section of white elite and Christian missionaries tried arrogantly to misrepresent India’s past besides attacking religion and customs of the Hindus and the Muslims. Initially the attitude of the Indians was defensive. They tried to defend everything desperately and soon they realized that there were weaknesses in their society and it was no use gainsaying them. So they began to re – interpret the scriptures and sought to reform the society thereby. They argued that the prevalent evils issued not from the scriptures but from a departure from the same. Thus, Rammohun Roy based himself on the scriptures while propagating against the immolation of the widows and Vidyasagar argued for remarriage of the widows in the same fashion. They sought reforms but proceeded with regard to their own patriotic feelings and nostalgia as well of the country men. Also, they must have felt that this is the best tactic to follow in order to influence their orthodox countrymen. Later on

gradually a part of the elite felt bold enough to think and express freely. The Young Bengal led by Henry Derozio was the forerunner of them.

The British education too played a role in this respect. Disregarding oriental learning Macaulay favoured English education and the British government accepted his recommendations on March 7, 1835. What the British needed and Macaulay intended was but the creation of clerks to run the offices of the government in India. But that education eventually exposed educated Indians to the ideas of Mill, Spencer, Bentham and other thinkers of the west and acquainted them with social institutions of the west. That exposure caused them to think anew, to re-consider and re-evaluate their customary life – something the society in India needed to break the stagnation of centuries.

Progress, as V. G. Childe remarked, consists

“essentially in the improvement and adjustment of the social traditions transmitted by precept and example.” (Childe 1951: 31)

That is why it became possible for the government to make laws which challenged social customs regarded as sacrosanct. Immolation of widows (called Sati) was banned legally in 1829 and remarriage of widows was legalized in 1856. An act passed in 1929 prohibited child marriages. Its amendment in 1978 rose the minimum age for marriage of girls to 18. Since 1947, laws giving more rights to women in respect of marriage, divorce and

inheritance and banning dowry, bigamy or polygamy for the Hindus have come into being. More important of all, untouchability is legally abolished now. It ought to be admitted, however, that the impact of western ideas as well as of legislation has not been even in different regions, classes and communities. In case of the religious minorities, the progress has been much slow due to the resistance from the bigots.

Protagonists of Shashi Deshpande are all educated; they speak English and refer to western literature too. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* refers to James Forsyte at one place and shows her acquaintance with the *Cancer Ward* in the other. She writes *A Song of Myself* imitating Whitman. In *The Dark Holds No Terror*, Sarita's friends read Virginia Woolf and discuss Shakespeare's dramas. Jaya in *That Long Silence* quotes from Marx and comments on the remark. It is only the women like Akka, Atya, Vanita mami etc. who stick to traditional practices and what is common to all of them is that they are uneducated and free from western influence.

As remarked earlier, the British policy of education was designed to create a section of clerks in the government offices. It was also expected that education will make at least a section of the ruled respectful and loyal to the foreign rulers. But the developments did not take place exactly as desired by the colonial rule.

“Pre – British India was both a geographical and cultural continuum but absence of a unified national economy and efficient, well – ramified and exhaustive means of communication could not lead to political integration. The British introduced railways and telegraph and effected political and administrative unification of India. That in turn gave birth to the concept of nation in India and in course of time, culminated in the rise of a national movement in India.”

(Desai 1959: 153)

The first All India Organization for Political Purposes was founded by a retired civil servant A. O. Hume in 1885 and was called Indian National Congress. It aimed at providing educated Indians a platform to air their views, their demands and expectations so that the government too could consider them and thereby keep them far from a rebellious course. Initially it was an organization of the well – to – do elite who communicated in English and submitted petitions from time to time. Gradually, however, changes took place. A section of the organization began to think about ‘swaraj’ or ‘Home Rule’ which however did not mean more than Dominion Status within the British Commonwealth. It was not before 1929 that complete independence from the British became the goal of Congress.

There were people, however, who wanted to overthrow the British rule from the very beginning and achieve freedom for India. Vasudev Balwant

Phadke led an armed struggle against the British in Maharashtra in 1879. The revolt was suppressed and Phadke was deported to Aden where he breathed his last in 1879. But the intellectuals observed the developments in Italy, Germany, Russia and Japan and felt dissatisfied with the policies of the Congress. As early as 1893 Aurobindo Ghosh (then in the service of Baroda State) wrote an anonymous letter which was published in the *Induprakash*. He observed:

“The National Congress is not national, and has not in any way attempted to become national.” He noticed that the real strength lay “in the masses, the proletariat, which is the real key of the situation.” (Tilak 216)

Indian press showed a keen interest when the Czar Nicholas of Russia had to concede some of the popular demands on October 17, 1905. Earlier, it rejoiced on the defeat of Russia at the hands of Japan (June, 1905). Mazzini, Garibaldi and O’ Leary had become the heroes of the patriotic youth in India. The American War of Independence, the struggle for unification in Germany and Italy, the national movement in Ireland and the rise of Japan inspired them. “Free and United India” was declared to be the goal on August 12, 1907. The song ‘Bande Mataram’ proceeded to declare the motives of Indians as lofty and noble as those of Mazzini and Garibaldi. Free and United India was also the goal of the ‘Anushilan Samiti’ founded in 1906. Ideas of republicanism and socialism were soon to become rooted in the political movement. ‘Hindustan

Republican Association' came into being in 1925 which became 'Hindustan Socialist Republican Association' shortly.

Indian National Congress, however, remained the main dominant force on the political scene. It assumed a mass character under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Whatever the limits and limitations of his policies, there can be no gainsaying that Gandhiji succeeded in involving people from remote corners of the country in the movement and politicizing them. But most important impact of all was the radical changes brought in the society by the movements he led. People speaking different languages, belonging to different castes and religions were placed together in jails and confronted with a reality that shattered caste rigidities. Women too participated in picketing, demonstrations and went to jail. That stirred Indian homes and brought in fresh air to them. Gandhiji disregarded the notions of untouchability and thereby banished the practice of untouchability from political life of the country. The Socialists and the Communists had differences with Mahatma Gandhi on political matters but agreed with him on social issues like equality of sexes, abolition of untouchability and removal of caste – prejudices.

Women's role in the political movements deserves special mention. As early as 1880s, Madam Cama (a Parsi woman from Mumbai) figured in the world socialist movement. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Aruna Asafali, Sucheta Kripalini and several others rose to leading positions in the

national movement. Women fought against the British, with gun in hands, first as the members of the secret organizations like 'Anushilan Samiti' and 'Jugantar' and then in the ranks of INA. It is quite natural; therefore that nobody questioned their franchise in India. They got not only voting rights before their sisters in Switzerland, they got positions like ministers, governors and ambassadors well before several western countries could grant the same to women. India had a woman prime minister for over two decades and also a woman president. Similarly, political movements prepared the background for the legal rights which the Dalits of the country enjoy even today.

Shashi Deshpande's novels present glimpses of the social transformations taking place due to the political movements. Badri Narayan's father in *Moving On* (2004) was sent to the college to get a degree which "would enhance the family's prestige and status" and also "increase the amount of dowry" his parents could expect. (MO 4) He returned not simply with a degree but with a political record. He had become a Gandhian and gone to jail. As a result, he married an orphan Harijan "who had been brought up as a daughter by his guru, the man who had initiated him into Gandhism." (MO 5) When she died after the marriage, he married a Brahmin girl, but "living up to his ideals", he chose one who was "fatherless and had the inauspicious Mangal in her horoscope". (MO 7) As the inauspicious Mangal is believed to cause the death of the husband, few grooms can be found to marry such a girl and that on

the payment of a big amount of dowry. As a Gandhian, he could not and did not take dowry. His politicization had freed him from superstitions and greed.

Like Badri Narayan's father, Leela in *Small Remedies* (2001) is the other example of how politics brought about radical changes in the social outlook and behaviour of the participants. She too was born in a Brahmin family. She was not able to get higher education but she was active among the factory workers, lived among them and worked as a trade unionist for communist organization. That made her uninhibited. After the death of her husband, Vasant, she did not wash her hands of her in-laws. She did all she could for them and maintained best relations with them throughout. But after that, she did not hesitate to remarry and the man she married was a Christian. (SR 45)

Women in India had suffered much degradation during the medieval age. Child marriage, polygamy and immolation of widows were the usual practices of those times. As girls were married before puberty, they remained deprived of education – almost illiterate. The only instruction they were expected to receive consisted of how to become a good, caring and submissive wife and ideal mother. Frequent pregnancies, ill-health and early death was the lot of the woman. They had no freedom and lived at the mercy of the men all their lives. Widows who were spared immolation lived in palpable conditions. Religious preachers of different sects were unanimous at least in

one thing while they quarreled among themselves about a lot of other things. And what they agreed about was that the women were greedy, deceitful, dull lustful and misled men from the path of virtue.

Beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century women began to protest against their age old deprivation and degradation. In Maharashtra, a 52 page tract by Tarabai Shinde appeared in Marathi published by Shivaji Press, Pune. The tract called *Stree Purush Tulana* compared and contrasted the social role of men and women and demonstrated the injustice and falsehood of the men who blamed women for all their faults, weakness, failure and misfortunes.

More remarkable was the work of Ramabai (1858 – 1922). Born in Maharashtra, she travelled far and wide in India; spoke fluently in Sanskrit, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu and English. She founded 'Mahila Arya Samaj' in Pune (1882) with branches in Bombay, Sholapur and Pandharpur. She appeared before the Hunter Commission to represent the interests of women. She left for England in 1883 to acquaint herself with the western language and culture and remained there for six years. The callous attitude of the leaders of Hindu society toward women had hurt her deeply and she returned to India in 1889 converted to Christianity. She founded Sharada Sadan (March 11, 1889) in Bombay to work for the interests of the women which was shifted to

Kedgaon later. She did a lot to educate women and to bring relief to women victims of the social injustice.

Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussein (1880 – 1932) sought to enlighten women in Bengal. Widowed at nineteen, she founded Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School (1911) in memory of her husband. Besides her attempts to educate women, particularly the Muslim women, she became famous for her writings and speeches. She had the courage to declare that religion was a creation of men and biased in favour of them. She advocated freedom for women and did not believe that marriage was the ultimate goal of a woman's life.

Women in the nineteenth century were discriminated against not only by the Hindu orthodoxy as generally believed nowadays but also by and even more by the enlightened west in some respects. That is best illustrated by the biography of Cornelia Sorabjee, the pioneer lawyer of India. Cornelia Sorabjee (1866 – 1954) was the fifth child of a Parsi Christian father and a Toda Christian mother. Though she passed B. C. L. from Oxford University in 1889 – 1890, she got her deploma formally only in 1925. Then she passed LL.B. in 1891 from Bombay University but could not practise due to sex bar. Again, she got a law degree from Allahabad but could not practice due to the same reason. Allahabad and Calcutta allowed women to practice in 1920 and 1924 respectively. As a result her earning was meagre. She relied mostly on her

articles published in the journal '19<sup>th</sup> Century'. Though she was pro – British in politics, she stood for social reform and women's rights.

Thus though some women were fighting for women's rights on their own, there was no organized women's movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first one that came into being was born in the lap of the British Raj and was called National Council of Women in India. It was loyal to the British and aimed at securing women's rights through social reform. Generally, the collector's wife in every district functioned as the head of the Mahila Samiti, starting a school here, a sewing class there supported financially by the loyal persons in the district. It languished after the British rule.

Margaret Cousins founded Women's Indian Association in 1917 under the inspiration of Annie Besant who expressed people's urge for freedom through the Home Rule Movement. Soon it grew into All India Women's Conference. It led in 1919 a deputation to Montague, Secretary of State for India, for the right in the political life of the country. There was always a schism in the organization between the conservative and radical elements. It set up centres where the poor and the illiterate women could learn and earn. But it could not lead them to fight against the vested interests and the feudal due to the resistance of the conservatives who considered it outside the scope of the work of the organization.

Birth of Women's International Democratic Federation in Paris in 1946 came as a catalyst under the circumstances. It invited representatives from India to attend its congress in Copenhagen in 1953. There a declaration of the Rights of Women was formulated. The Organizing Committee formed on that basis held a Conference in Calcutta and gave birth to a new organization, National Federation of Indian Women. It aimed at fighting against imperialism and feudalism and for democracy, peace and friendship among peoples – for a decent life for their children and equality and dignity for women.

Later, a number of women's organizations came into being. Almost all the major political parties, right or left, have a women's organization associated with them and canvassing support for their political program. For political purposes, they are no better than appendages of electoral politics.

They contribute liberally to the party fund, ensure much attendance to the public meetings addressed by the party leaders, supply a good reserve for party demonstrations. However, such organizations tied as they are to electoral politics, dare not challenge superstitions and social prejudices beyond a limit. Besides, there are some regional, organizations like SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association, Ahmedabad) and Vimochan Women's Forum (Bangalore) who seek to better the lot of women in their own way. Then, there are women's journals like Manushi (Hindi and English), Stree (Marathi) and

Srijana (Telegu) trying to raise the level of the consciousness of women and challenging some of the age-old prejudices.

Feminism as such arrived late in India with the rise of a new wave of feminism in the West, which coincided with some developments in the East. Sirimao Bandaranaike became the first woman of the state in the world in 1960 in Sri Lanka, followed by Indira Gandhi, the first woman prime minister in India and Golda Meir the first woman prime minister in Israel. Publication of works like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* and Sulamith Firestone's *The Dialectics of Sex* (1970) stirred women intellectuals in India too. International Feminist Congress in 1973 and U. N. Decade of Women's Right in 1975 followed which made the educated women aware of what the feminists in the West were thinking and doing. However feminism in India did not turn aggressive as in the west. Its program in India did not pass beyond the concern for the eradication of social evils (like dowry deaths, female foeticide and infanticide, rape, wife-beating and desertion) and education, equal wages and independence of the women. Issues like single motherhood and lesbianism which form an integral part of the western feminism did not attract the feminists much in India. Marriage and family remain the sacrosanct institutions which they do not challenge in India. Mostly they believe that along with private

property and state, they are eternal and human beings are destined to live with them ever.

Influence of the feminist movement is discernible in Shashi Deshpande's novels. In *Roots and Shadows* (1992), Indu reacts sharply to the superstitious notion that a wife shortens her husband's life by uttering his name: "That's just to frighten the women. To keep them in their places. And poor fools, we do just that." (RS 32) In the same novel, old uncle remarks:

"We like our women not to think". (RS 33)

*The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990) repeatedly refers to marriage as an unequal partnership with the male dominant one. The epigraph in *That Long Silence* (1989) consists of an extract from Elizabeth Robin's speech –

"If I were a man and care to know the world I lived in, I almost think it would make me a shade uneasy – the weight of that long silence of one half of the world". Jaya, the protagonist of that novel has "read an American poet's confession of her guilt because she just couldn't get along without her husband." (TLS 97)

To a traditional woman, that would not seem guilt. One of the main ideas of feminism is the assertion of women's sexuality.

In *A Matter of Time* (1996) we find a new interpretation of the story of Surpanakha: "neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality,

not frightened of displaying it.” (MT191) That is why we come across several instances of extra – marital relations in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. Indu’s relationship with her tenant in *Moving On* is an instance to the point. The protagonists in such cases are not condemned as sinners but as normal human beings with certain weaknesses.

The most important contribution of the feminist movement to literature in India is highlighting a reality condoned by omission through the ages – namely, the marital rape. The very idea of marital rape was inconceivable to the people who recognized husband’s total control over the person of his wife. So he could threaten an unwilling wife with disrepute or apply force against her by using hand or stick to win her submission. Feminism proceeds with different premises. It treats woman as not a property of her husband but as an individual and therefore her will matters. That is why feminism raises the issue of marital rape. This aspect of feminism finds expression in Shashi Deshpande’s novels. Akka in *Roots and Shadows* and Mira in *The Binding Vine* are the victims of marital rape who receive the sympathy of the protagonists. To conclude, “...not to change is unnatural, against nature...It is static that is aberration.” (TLS 47) But to lead the changes in a positive direction, some factors favouring the same are needed.