



Reshaping History and Society of Gujarat through Women's Transformation

Ms. Anshu Sharma

Research Scholar, Department of History, Gujarat University

Email address: sharma.anshu813@gmail.com

Abstract: *The research aimed to assess the advancements in women's status, acknowledging their societal roles shaped by gender expectations, particularly focusing on Gujarat from a historical perspective. Societies have traditionally been male-dominated in every part of the world, but social reforms, governmental interventions, and notably, rising literacy rates have instigated transformative shifts in women's positions during colonial rule and after independence in India. The research paper highlights specific laws and programs implemented by the British government in this context. In history, the perspective of women is often ignored and not recorded. Therefore, acquiring the ideas, emotions, and perspectives of women was challenging. I acquired the data from available primary and secondary sources. Biographies and autobiographies, though scarce, helped in preparing this research. This paper highlights the major areas of concern for women especially in Gujarat and the efforts to improve women's condition, which began during British rule, with Western- educated Indian reformers influencing legislative changes to abolish social and religious practices that subjugated women to male dominance. The entire historical perspective spans from 1818, the beginning of British rule in Gujarat, to 1856, when laws like widow remarriage were passed, and from 1857, when three major universities were established, to 1901, when the first Gujarati woman stepped out from university with a degree, and from 1901 to 1947, the pre-Gandhian and Gandhian era, and from 1947 to 1960, the establishment of Gujarat as a separate state. In post-independence, the Indian government initiated various policies to combat women's exploitation, this paper presents the gist of the same. Despite notable progress in economic, political, and social realms, challenges persist for women in society. This research paper delves into different aspects of women's empowerment, underscoring the ongoing need to address persistent challenges.*

Key words: *Empowerment, Feminism, Transition, Conventional, Transformation, Swadeshi.*

Overperiod of time, the world has witnessed a noteworthy transformation in the roles and status of women. Historically, women were often overlooked, their contributions marginalised, and their lives undervalued, especially in India. Their labour, though crucial, was often dismissed due to its lack of economic quantification.

It's important to recognise that, social transformation is a continuous process, devoid of a fixed destination but rather a perpetual journey. Looking ahead, the next fifty years and beyond offer

hope for more progress, showing steps toward achieving gender equality.

Traditionally, a woman's primary role revolved around procreation, and marriage stood as a cornerstone of societal expectations. It wasn't merely a personal choice but a societal imperative, deeply entrenched in cultural norms and traditions. Marriage, prevalent across diverse cultures globally, served not only as a legal and religious contract but also as a means of transmitting heritage, wealth, and resources to successive generations.

However, contemporary perspectives on marriage and women's roles have shifted. While the institution of marriage endures, its significance has evolved alongside broader societal changes. Women today are asserting their agency, pursuing diverse paths beyond traditional domesticity. The narrative is no longer confined to merely perpetuating kinship ties or labour accumulation but encompasses broader aspirations for personal fulfilment, professional success, and societal contribution.

In examining economic and political shifts, it becomes evident that change can be swift and relatively straightforward. Dynasties can rise and fall in moments, propelled by force, intrigue, or various catalysts but the landscape of social transformation presents a more intricate challenge. For example, the entrenched customs like the Sati system and child marriage which were deeply ingrained in societal norms are not such phenomena that vanish overnight; rather, they linger, causing anguish and perpetuating injustice over generations. Unlike the abrupt shifts of political regimes, altering such social practices demands a sustained effort, a gradual unravelling of deeply rooted traditions. The profound transformations witnessed by women in family life, religion, government, employment, and education did not occur by chance. Rather, women actively and intentionally drove these changes forward. They took proactive measures to shape a more equitable world. Through democratic means such as meetings, petition drives, lobbying, and public speaking, women united to bring about these changes. The evolving role of women in society can

be linked to diverse factors that have shaped social, economic, and cultural environments throughout history. The women's rights movement played a crucial role in questioning conventional gender roles and championing the rights of women. Their concerted efforts with the feminist movement have undeniably led to significant successes in creating a more inclusive and just society. (Fiss:1994:413)

The research paper delves into the transformations experienced by women in Gujarat between 1818 and 1960.

The Marathas controlled Gujarat during the 17th and early 18th centuries. Under their rule, Gujarat faced widespread disorder and instability due to a lack of a good administrative system. Political unrest and economic troubles were common thus limiting opportunities for its people. Socially, Gujarat struggled with deep-rooted problems and superstitions. Trade routes were blocked by high taxes on goods passing through, making merchants vulnerable to theft. Even in cities like Ahmedabad, corruption bred fear and mistrust among citizens.

Even the society was archaic. The prevalence of superstition and divine retribution further stifled societal progress, manifesting in barbaric practices such as the cruel tradition of Sati, particularly prevalent in regions like Baroda, Rajpipla, and Kutch. Additionally, instances of female infanticide among certain communities underscored the grim reality of gender-based violence. (Raval:1987:4) Despite these challenges, Gujarat struggled to mount a cohesive intellectual and moral resistance against these entrenched social ills. The caste-ridden

Gujarati society further perpetuated these issues, with an education system that was fragile and primarily focused on arithmetic and vocational training, predominantly accessible to individuals from upper castes. Women's education was largely absent from the educational landscape. They were treated like objects or animals.

In essence, the cultural and religious fabric of Gujarat, though rich and vibrant, had become entangled in a web of regressive customs and beliefs, perpetuating societal injustices rather than alleviating them. Thus, the first phase of women's transformation in Gujarat was marked by a profound struggle against the shackles of tradition and superstition, laying the groundwork for future social reform efforts. While my study sheds light on the grim realities of a patriarchal society, it also offers a beacon of hope.

The Battle of Kirki ultimately established British political authority over Gujarat, bringing about a period of peace, security, and stability following the tumultuous rule of the Marathas. (Raval:1987:4)

As the British rule approached Gujarat, there was a positive atmosphere of peace and stability. In the changed atmosphere, people like Swami Sahjanand from the Swaminarayan group led the social change and spoke out against harmful practices like female infanticide. Furthermore, the prevailing social structure hardly had the possibility of significant change, although certain saint-poets like Akha and Bhoja Bhagat did highlight some of the prevalent social and religious injustices. (Dwyer:2004:180)

The transformation under colonial administration in Gujarat extended to the business sphere, where a

burgeoning class of industrialists and traders emerged as the pinnacle of societal hierarchy. Traditional positions of inherited authority, such as those held by the Patel and Desai communities, were transitioned into salaried roles under British rule. Additionally, groups like the Nagar Brahmins, Parsis and Patidars transitioned into entrepreneurship after acquiring English education. (Gillion:1969:63)

Immersed in liberalism, some English travellers and Christian missionaries who visited India in the latter half of the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries were appalled by the dismal conditions faced by people from all walks of life. With the advent of British rule, a new administration and judicial system was introduced, along with a uniform legal framework that aimed to uphold human dignity and freedom. The first significant legislation targeting the women in which the practice of Sati was abolished in 1829 in the Bengal Presidency, subsequently extending to the Bombay Presidency, which included Gujarat. (Sarkar, Sumit, Tanika: 2008)

Female infanticide was also recognized as a crime and the remarriage of Hindu widows was legalized in 1856. Although these laws laid the foundation for social change in Gujarat, societal transformation did not occur immediately, and reports of such practices persisted in various regions. The groundwork for these reforms was laid by a group of reformers belonging to the newly educated, urbanized middle class, who played a pivotal role in advocating for social and religious change. (Raval:1987:55)

During the initial phase of social reform, figures like Dadoba Pandurang Dalpatram, Durgaram, Dinmanishankar and Damodardas worked towards establishing the Manav Dharm Sabha. This organization aimed to eradicate social and religious superstitions, caste restrictions, child marriage, endogamous marriage and the sati system, while advocating for widow remarriage. (Mehta:2009)

The second phase of social reform was initiated after 1856. Durgaram set the tone for a new awakening, which was embraced by the younger generation including Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave (1833-1886), Karsandas Mulji (1832-1871), and Mahipatram Rupram (1830-1891). In June 1850, Narmadshankar Lalshankar Dave, along with his friends Mayaram Shambhunath, Kalyanji Shivlal, Narandas Kalyandas and others, initiated an association aimed at discussing Hindu reforms. This association, known as Juvan Purushoni Anyoanya Buddhivardhak Sabha, established numerous girls' schools in different parts of Gujarat. (Raval:1987:119)

In Gujarat, women's history often gets ignored, their voices silenced, and their actions ignored. But hidden in this overlooked history are the stories of women who bravely stepped out to discover the world and stand up for themselves. These women, from all walks of life, were trailblazers, leading the path for those to come. Even though they weren't acknowledged, books and stories helped women speak up and share their lives. It's important to remember these forgotten heroes, who broke free from society's rules and made a lasting impact on Gujarat's

past. As Western education gained momentum, more schools for women opened, and uniform laws were implemented, Gujarat's atmosphere began to transform, ready for the second phase of transformation covering the time period from 1891 to 1920.

A significant moment in British legislative history was the passing of the Age of Consent Bill in 1891 (Kosambi:1991:1). This bill raised the age of consent from 10 to 12 years, making sexual intercourse with those under 12 considered rape and punishable by law. Enlightened women began to speak out against societal injustices, finding support in literature, periodicals, and newspapers. For instance, Gangaben, the first female entrepreneur, expressed her discontent with social practices in her novels "Vahen Khandar Pothi" (1891) and "Devi Triya Nishedh Nibandh. (1892)". (Pandya and Joshi:1909:880) (Pranshankar:1892) Educated women became more involved in social organizations and activities during this period. However, their views on women's roles within the family largely remained unchanged due to the deep-seated traditional ideals of Indian society.

Dressed in traditional Indian attire yet fluent in English and often seen wearing boots while travelling in horse carriages, these women, known as "deshi mem" by the locals, were considered progressive and modern. They were actively involved in ladies' clubs dedicated to addressing women's issues, and they played a significant role in establishing numerous schools and colleges. The growing demand for female educators led to the establishment of female training

colleges, which opened new opportunities for middle-class and rural Gujarati women to integrate into mainstream society.

Over time, the role of women in society underwent a gradual but significant evolution, leading to the emergence of a class of professional women in various sectors of the economy. Motiben made history as the first female graduate in the Bombay Presidency in 1886. Choosing Ahmedabad as her base, she effectively balanced her professional career with her social commitments.

Vanita Vishram Guha, Sarswati Madal, Gujarati Hindu Trust Mandal improved the condition of urban women.

The reform movement garnered backing from literary sources, yet the changes instigated by reformists and social reformers only scratched the surface of a deeply ingrained societal structure. It wasn't until the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in 1915 that significant shifts began to unfold, paving the way for broader societal transformations.

Gandhi redefined political participation by bringing nationalist activities into the household. Women's involvement in the nationalist movement, symbolized by spinning at home, showcased a new interpretation of their role, emphasizing their significance both domestically and politically. Gandhi recognized that Swadeshi's success relied on women's participation, as they managed household affairs and influenced choices like clothing. (Kishwar:1986:43-61)

He said women were better than men at nonviolent resistance because they could sacrifice more, endure longer,

seek less for themselves and have more moral courage. (Basu:1995:101)

Gandhi actively engaged at the grassroots level to uplift marginalized communities, including women, encouraging their integration into mainstream society. With his guidance, they participated in large numbers in the civil disobedience movement. Gandhi empowered women and gave them confidence, bringing them to the forefront of the freedom struggle for the first time in India. They embraced nonviolence and truth and showcased their leadership in various events under Gandhi's guidance. Women stepped out of their homes and actively participated in the movement. Mithuben Petit, Kasturba Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu played very important roles in the freedom movement. (Basu:2003).

Mithuben Petit, affectionately known as "Maiji," was a prominent freedom fighter who founded and served as a source of inspiration for the Kasturba Sevashram Ashram, dedicated to supporting Adivasis and the impoverished group of people. (Mehta:2018)

Hansaben played a crucial role as a member of the Constituent Assembly, advocating vigorously for the inclusion of women's rights in the constitution of independent India. In 1948, she represented India at the United Nations and was appointed to the drafting committee of the United Nations Manifesto of Human Rights. She made history as the first woman Vice-Chancellor of her alma mater, M.S. University in Vadodara. Additionally, she served as the Vice-Chancellor of India's first Women's University, SNDT Women's University, which had a nationwide reach. Women like these,

who fearlessly championed change, owe their transformation directly or indirectly to Gandhi.

After India gained independence in 1947, the Indian government enacted numerous laws aimed at promoting women's empowerment.

WOMEN'S ACTS IN INDIAN CONSTITUTION

The Indian Constitution has enacted several laws that provide various rights and protections for women. Some of these include:

1. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955
2. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act of 1956
3. The Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956
4. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956
5. The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act of 1973

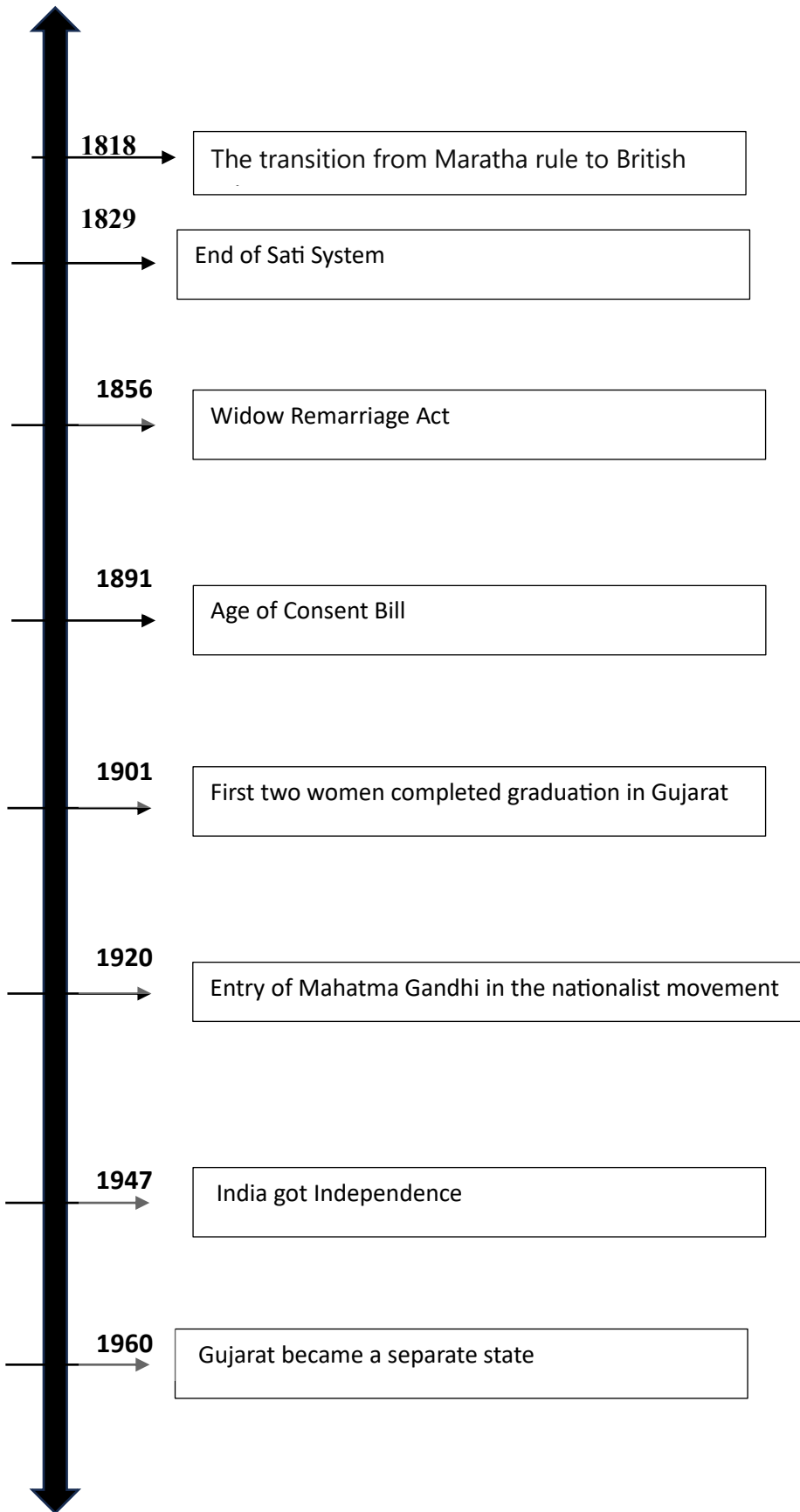
These laws have significantly changed women's lives for the better. However, it's crucial to acknowledge that laws alone cannot reach everyone in society. It requires collective efforts from all of

us to ensure that the benefits of these laws extend to every woman.

On May 1st, 1960, Gujarat emerged as an independent state of India following its partition from Maharashtra. Women played a significant role in the Maha Gujarat movement, contributing in large numbers. Today, Gujarati women are making notable strides in fields such as dairy, banking, entrepreneurship, and the arts. However, this progress has not occurred overnight; it has taken many centuries to reach this level. Despite these advancements, the condition of women's empowerment remains unsatisfactory, indicating the need for further action and improvement.

As Swami Vivekananda rightly said, "The betterment of the world hinges on the improvement of women's circumstances. Just as a bird cannot soar with only one wing, so too must the status of women be uplifted for true progress."

Timeline: Important Events in the Transformation of Women in Gujarat



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