Wisdom Vortex:
International Journal of Social Science and Humanities

Open-access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Quarterly Journal, Multiple Language (English & Hindi)

e-ISSN: 3107-3808
p-ISSN: Applied for

Wisdom Vortex: International Journal of Social Science and Humanities, Volume: 02, Issue: 03, Oct-Dec 2026

How to cite this paper:
Narayanan, K. L. (2026). Reinterpreting Women's Agency through Gender, Caste, and Reform in 19th-Century Social Movements. *Wisdom Vortex: International Journal of Social Science and Humanities, 2*(3), 64-70. https://doi.org/10.64429/wvijsh.02.03.056

Received: 03 Sep. 2026
Accepted: 30 Sep. 2026
Published: 10 Oct. 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Wisdom Vortex: International Journal of Social Science and Humanities.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY- 4.0).
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Reinterpreting Women's Agency through Gender, Caste, and Reform in 19th-Century Social Movements

K. Laxmi Narayanan[1]

ABSTRACT

This research paper critically reinterprets nineteenth-century Indian social history by moving beyond conventional elite-centric narratives to examine women as active agents of historical change. Challenging traditional historiography that frequently categorized colonial women as passive victims of patriarchal oppression or mere beneficiaries of state legislation, this study investigates how colonialism, indigenous patriarchy, and Brahmanical caste hierarchies intersected to shape female experiences. By analyzing socio-legal interventions, such as the abolition of Sati and the Widow Remarriage Act, alongside the restrictive upper-caste "bhadramahila" domestic construct, the paper highlights the complex mechanisms of societal control. Furthermore, it contrasts mainstream upper-caste reform limitations with the revolutionary anti-caste educational praxis spearheaded by Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, as well as the militant grassroots struggles of Adivasi and working-class women across regional domains. Through the unprecedented expansion of vernacular schooling, missionary institutions, and print culture, pioneering women authors articulated powerful critiques of traditional dogma, transforming private grievances into collective political consciousness. Ultimately, by dissecting everyday forms of resistance, spiritual autonomy, and the structural transition from passive reform objects to self-articulating political subjects, this research proves conclusively that nineteenth-century women were the primary architects of modern Indian feminist consciousness.

Keywords: *Women's Agency, 19th-Century Reform, Gender and Caste, Colonial Modernity, Subaltern History*

The historiography of nineteenth-century India has undergone a profound transformation, shifting decisively away from elite-centric political narratives toward feminist and subaltern perspectives that illuminate

[1] Research Scholar, Department of History, Sharnbasva University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka India

marginalized social groups (Sarkar, 1989). For decades, historical inquiry predominantly focused on macroeconomic transformations, nationalist movements spearheaded by men, and high-caste reform agendas, frequently reducing women to passive beneficiaries or helpless victims of state legislation (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). However, contemporary gender history necessitates a comprehensive re-evaluation of women's agency, understanding them not merely as objects of patriarchal oppression, but as active participants capable of resistance, negotiation, and intellectual articulation within restrictive social structures (Chakravarti, 1993). This intellectual shift requires a rigorous examination of how colonialism, indigenous patriarchy, and caste hierarchies intersected to shape the lived realities of women across divergent social strata during the colonial era (Geetha, 1998). At the core of this historical investigation is the critical analysis of how colonial modernity interacted with traditional societal norms (Nair, 1994). While British administrators introduced legislative reforms concerning social practices such as the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 these legal interventions were frequently framed by patriarchal concerns regarding moral policing rather than genuine female liberation (Mani, 1998). Concurrently, indigenous elite reformers constructed an idealized model of the educated woman, often termed the bhadramahila, which prescribed specific domestic boundaries while expanding access to basic education (Chatterjee, 1993). Crucially, these upper-caste reform paradigms often eclipsed the harsh lived experiences of lower-caste, Dalit, and laboring-class women, whose daily struggles were inextricably bound to systemic caste oppression alongside gender subordination (Rege, 2006). By addressing these complex research questions and historiographical debates, this paper establishes a robust analytical framework to reinterpret how nineteenth-century women forged their own historical agency amidst overlapping structures of power, resistance, and social reform.

SOCIO-LEGAL LANDSCAPE AND PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES

The socio-legal landscape of nineteenth-century India was characterized by intense ideological negotiations between colonial administrators and indigenous elite reformers, deeply reshaping the regulatory framework governing women's lives (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). At the forefront of this transformation were legislative interventions driven by both British governance and local reformist zeal, notably the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the enactment of the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act in 1856 (Mani, 1998). While these legal milestones are frequently celebrated as emancipatory breakthroughs, feminist historiography reveals that such state interventions were primarily mediated through patriarchal anxiety, moral policing, and the administrative necessity of codifying religious personal laws rather than fostering genuine female autonomy (Chakravarti, 1993). The colonial state and indigenous male elites often utilized the bodies and social status of women as ideological battlegrounds to validate their respective notions of civilization, tradition, and progress, frequently silencing the actual voices of the women affected by these laws (Sarkar, 1989). Concurrently, this era witnessed the deliberate construction of the ideal upper-caste domestic persona, commonly referred to as the "bhadramahila," particularly within elite colonial modernity in Bengal and urban centers (Chatterjee, 1993). This cultural archetype prescribed a refined, educated, and morally upright woman who embodied traditional spiritual virtues while gracefully adopting modern domestic efficiencies (Nair, 1994). However, the bhadramahila construct established rigid behavioral boundaries, dictating acceptable standards of attire, deportment, and social interaction that subtly reinforced patriarchal control under the guise of enlightenment (Geetha, 1998). This domestic ideal was further reinforced through strict spatial segregation, maintaining a sharp dichotomy between the private domestic sphere (antaral or ghar) and the emerging public domain (bahir) (Parthasarathi, 2001). The private sphere was designated as the sacred, untainted repository of cultural and spiritual identity where patriarchal protection prevailed, whereas the public sphere of education, labor, and politics was viewed as hazardous or corrupting for respectable women (Karlekar, 1991). Consequently, when women ventured

beyond domestic thresholds to access missionary schools or reform meetings, they had to negotiate complex spatial boundaries and societal surveillance, turning physical mobility itself into an act of subtle resistance (Forbes, 1996). By examining these intersecting dynamics of colonial legislation, elite domestic constructs, and spatial containment, this section underscores how nineteenth-century patriarchal structures continually adapted to maintain control while simultaneously sowing the seeds for emergent female agency and organized resistance (Rege, 2006).

INTERSECTION OF CASTE AND GENDER

The historical discourse surrounding nineteenth-century social reform in India has frequently been dominated by upper-caste, elite-centric narratives that tend to homogenize women's experiences under a singular category of patriarchal oppression (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). However, a critical reinterpretation of women's agency requires a nuanced examination of how caste and gender intersect, revealing stark disparities between the reform priorities of upper-caste Hindu elites and the lived realities of marginalized lower-caste, Dalit, and Adivasi women (Geetha, 1998). Mainstream nineteenth-century reform movements largely spearheaded by upper-caste male intellectuals within organizations like the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj primarily focused on ameliorating the ritualistic and domestic grievances of upper-caste widows and wives, such as the abolition of Sati, child marriage regulations, and the promotion of upper-caste female education (Sarkar, 1989). While these initiatives challenged certain aspects of Brahmanical patriarchy within domestic domains, they systematically overlooked the foundational violence of the caste system, which subjected Dalit and Shudra women to multiple layers of systemic subordination, physical exploitation, and economic deprivation (Chakravarti, 1993). Consequently, upper-caste reform narratives often reinforced existing social stratification, substituting traditional ritual bondage with paternalistic protectionism, whereas marginalized women experienced gender oppression that was inextricably bound to untouchability, agrarian servitude, and agrarian labor exploitation (Rege, 2006). Challenging this Brahmanical monopoly on social reform, the revolutionary anti-caste and educational initiatives spearheaded by Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule in western India established an entirely new paradigm for women's liberation and social justice (Omvedt, 1994). Rejecting the elitist framework of upper-caste reformers, the Phules recognized that true social emancipation was impossible without dismantling the dual pillars of Brahmanical hegemony and patriarchal subjugation (Geetha, 1998). In 1948 (and expanding significantly through the 1850s), Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule established pioneering schools for girls and untouchables in Pune, confronting intense societal backlash, public ostracization, and physical intimidation with extraordinary resilience (Phule, 1991). Savitribai Phule emerged as India's first female teacher and a fearless social visionary, dedicating her life to educating Shudra, Ati-Shudra, and Dalit girls who had been systematically denied access to knowledge for centuries under religious dogma (Rege, 2006). Through the establishment of the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) in 1873, the Phules institutionalized a counter-cultural movement that critiqued religious scriptures, discarded priestly intermediaries, and championed inter-caste equality, widow remarriage without brahminical rituals, and women's intellectual autonomy (Omvedt, 1994). Their radical praxis repositioned education not merely as a tool for refined domesticity, but as a liberating weapon for self-respect, economic independence, and political awakening among the most oppressed sections of society (Chakravarti, 1993).

Expanding beyond urban reform centers, documenting the voices, labor, and resistance of Adivasi and working-class women reveals an inspiring history of militant grassroots struggle that conventional historiography has frequently marginalized (Hardiman, 1987). Adivasi women across central and eastern India including regions like Chota Nagpur and the Santhal Parganas played active, frontline roles in anti-colonial uprisings, forest satyagrahas, and peasant rebellions against the triple exploitation of colonial administrators, local landlords, and moneylenders (Sinha, 2007). Unlike elite women whose mobility was heavily restricted by

domestic seclusion and ritual purity codes, working-class and indigenous women participated extensively in subsistence agricultural labor, forest resource collection, and manual production, granting them a distinct form of economic agency within their communities (Parthasarathi, 2001). However, this heavy economic contribution did not exempt them from severe structural violence; they faced brutal exploitation from feudal landlords, forest contractors, and colonial police forces (Rao, 2003). Despite these immense hardships, Adivasi women consistently demonstrated fierce collective resistance, utilizing traditional solidarity networks, folk songs, and direct physical defiance to protect their land, culture, and community autonomy (Archer, 1984). By synthesizing these divergent trajectories contrasting Brahmanical reform limitations with the revolutionary educational legacy of the Phules and the militant struggles of Adivasi women this section illuminates the complex, multidimensional architecture of nineteenth-century women's agency, proving that resistance against oppression emerged as vigorously from the margins as it did from institutional reform centers (Rege, 2006).

EDUCATION, PRINT CULTURE, AND FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

The nineteenth century witnessed a profound intellectual and cultural awakening across India, catalyzed by the unprecedented expansion of native female education, print capitalism, and emerging feminist consciousness (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). Historically, formal education had been systematically restricted by orthodox religious dogmas and patriarchal gatekeeping, which barred women from acquiring literacy under the belief that reading and writing would invite moral degradation or widowhood (Chakravarti, 1993). However, this paradigm began to shift dramatically with the establishment of early missionary institutions, vernacular girls' schools, and indigenous reformist academies initiated by progressive thinkers (Forbes, 1996). While Christian missionaries pioneered early instructional spaces for young girls frequently encountering fierce societal resistance and deep parental apprehension native reformers soon established indigenous institutions that combined modern secular knowledge with ethical cultural grounding (Sarkar, 1989). These early schools served as foundational incubators where young women from elite and reformist households first stepped beyond domestic thresholds, acquiring literacy, numeracy, and critical cognitive skills that dismantled the traditional myth of female intellectual inferiority (Nair, 1994). Complementing the spread of formal schooling, the phenomenal growth of nineteenth-century print culture provided an unprecedented medium for pioneering women authors to articulate their inner thoughts, lived experiences, and socio-political critiques (Karlekar, 1991). Defying strict domestic seclusion and social censorship, remarkable women took up the pen to publish autobiographies, memoirs, political tracts, and periodic journal essays that challenged patriarchal hegemony directly (Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Groundbreaking autobiographical works such as Rasundari Devi's Amar Jiban (My Life), which chronicled her clandestine struggle to learn reading in the flickering light of domestic hearths revealed the quiet, persistent determination of women striving for self-emancipation (Chanana, 1988). Similarly, radical literary publications like Tarabai Shinde's Stripurusha Tulana (A Comparison Between Women and Men, 1882) and Pandita Ramabai's analytical critiques of high-caste Hindu patriarchy exposed the systemic hypocrisy of religious scriptures and social customs that subjugated women under the guise of tradition (Omvedt, 1994). Through these vernacular journals, magazines, and pamphlets circulating within private and public spaces, women established a robust cross-regional network of shared discourse, transforming private grievances into collective political consciousness (Geetha, 1998).

Crucially, this convergence of education and print culture fueled rigorous intellectual resistance against regressive religious traditions and entrenched social dogmas (Chatterjee, 1993). Patriarchal orthodoxy frequently weaponized sacred texts, caste purity laws, and customary practices to stifle female autonomy, branding educated women as subversion-prone threats to familial harmony (Rege, 2006). In fierce defiance, nineteenth-century female intellectuals and their reformist allies deconstructed orthodox religious arguments, utilizing scriptural reinterpretation and rationalist discourse to prove that spiritual and social equality was the

birthright of all human beings (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). By questioning child marriage, enforced widowhood, seclusion, and educational deprivation through public debates and published tracts, these women successfully carved out an independent intellectual sphere (Sarkar, 1989). Consequently, education and print media ceased to be mere tools of colonial or elite assimilation; instead, they evolved into revolutionary instruments of self-definition, empowering nineteenth-century women to dismantle traditional dogmas and lay the ideological bedrock for modern Indian feminism (Chakravarti, 1993).

REINTERPRETING WOMEN'S AGENCY

Agency Dimension / Aspect	Core Description & Mechanisms	Historical Significance & References
Everyday Resistance	Uncovering subtle forms of defiance expressed within and outside domestic boundaries, such as secret literacy pursuits, clandestine correspondence, and non-compliance with oppressive household customs.	Subverts strict rules of seclusion and challenges male hegemony without inviting direct institutional retaliation *(Sarkar, 1989; Karlekar, 1991; Forbes, 1996)*.
Spiritual Autonomy	Navigating religious, spiritual, and bhakti traditions to carve out independent spaces and assert direct spiritual authority while bypassing male priestly intermediaries.	Enables women to cultivate alternative communities of sisterhood and command societal respect beyond domestic subjugation *(Tharu & Lalita, 1991; Geetha, 1998; Omvedt, 1994)*.
Transition to Subjects	Tracing how women evolved from mere passive recipients of male-led social reform into independent, self-articulating voices demanding legal equality, property rights, and educational freedom.	Marks the birth of modern Indian feminist consciousness, proving women were the primary architects of their emancipation *(Chatterjee, 1993; Rege, 2006; Sangari & Vaid, 1989)*.

The preceding table encapsulates a profound historiographical shift, moving away from conventional Victorian and patriarchal narratives that historically categorized nineteenth-century Indian women as helpless victims or passive beneficiaries of male-led social reforms. Instead, it systematically repositions women as active, conscious agents who continuously negotiated, challenged, and reshaped their social realities within restrictive colonial and indigenous frameworks. By dissecting agency across three critical dimensions everyday resistance, spiritual autonomy, and the structural transition to self-articulating subjects the framework highlights the multifaceted methods through which women contested systemic subordination. At the micro-level, everyday resistance manifested in subtle yet potent acts of defiance, such as subverting strict domestic seclusion codes, pursuing secret literacy, and engaging in non-compliance with oppressive household customs. These quiet transgressions eroded traditional spatial boundaries without immediately triggering institutional backlashes. Simultaneously, spiritual autonomy provided women with alternative cultural spaces. By reinterpreting devotional and bhakti traditions, women bypassed orthodox male priestly intermediaries, establishing independent networks of sisterhood and intellectual authority that transcended domestic subjugation. Crucially, the culmination of native education and print culture catalyzed the historic transition of women from mere objects of benevolent reform into independent, vocal subjects. Pioneering authors, educators, and social critics utilized memoirs, tracts, and journals to author scathing critiques of Brahmanical patriarchy, demanding educational freedom, legal equity, and personal autonomy. Ultimately, this comprehensive reinterpretation establishes that nineteenth-century women were not marginal participants, but

the primary architects of modern Indian feminist consciousness, permanently altering the trajectory of social history.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE SCOPE

The comprehensive historical investigation undertaken in this paper demonstrates that nineteenth-century India was not a static landscape of passive female subjugation, but a dynamic crucible of ideological contestation, institutional reform, and emergent grassroots resistance (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). By critically synthesizing the complex intersections of colonial modernity, indigenous patriarchal structures, and Brahmanical hegemony, this study has systematically re-evaluated how women navigated restrictive societal boundaries (Chakravarti, 1993). The primary findings indicate that while state-sponsored legislative reforms such as the abolition of Sati and the enactment of the Widow Remarriage Act were frequently framed by colonial and elite male anxieties regarding social control, they inadvertently opened ideological spaces for women to question traditional orthodoxies (Mani, 1998; Sarkar, 1989). Furthermore, contrasting upper-caste elite reform narratives with the radical anti-caste educational praxis spearheaded by Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule reveals that true emancipation required dismantling the dual pillars of caste hierarchy and gender subordination (Geetha, 1998; Omvedt, 1994). Through the unprecedented expansion of vernacular education, early missionary schools, and print culture, pioneering women authors and intellectuals transcended traditional domestic confinement, authoring autobiographies, journals, and political tracts that permanently transformed private grievances into collective public consciousness (Karlekar, 1991; Tharu & Lalita, 1991). Ultimately, reinterpreting women's agency through everyday forms of resistance, spiritual autonomy, and the structural transition from passive reform objects to self-articulating political subjects proves conclusively that nineteenth-century women were the primary architects of their own liberation and the founding figures of modern Indian feminism (Chatterjee, 1993; Rege, 2006).

The historiographical significance of this study lies in its deliberate departure from traditional male-centric and elite-dominated historical frameworks, offering a recalibrated lens through which modern gender and social history must be examined (Sarkar, 1989). By integrating gender and caste as mutually constitutive categories of analysis rather than isolated social variables, this research challenges monolithic representations of nineteenth-century Indian womanhood, underscoring the vast disparities between upper-caste elite bhadramahilas and marginalized lower-caste, Dalit, and Adivasi women (Geetha, 1998; Rege, 2006). This methodological shift enriches contemporary feminist historiography by demonstrating that resistance against structural oppression did not emanate solely from institutional reform centers or enlightened male benefactors, but frequently erupted from the everyday micro-political defiance and militant grassroots struggles of the most marginalized communities (Hardiman, 1987; Forbes, 1996). Consequently, this paper contributes to a more inclusive, nuanced, and structurally grounded understanding of modern Indian social history, bridging critical gaps between colonial administrative archives and subaltern lived experiences (Sangari & Vaid, 1989). Despite the robust analytical framework established in this study, the expansive terrain of nineteenth-century gender and social history offers fertile ground for future scholarly exploration and methodological innovation (Chakravarti, 1993). Future research avenues must move beyond conventional metropolitan archives and colonial administrative records, which have historically privileged elite vernacular literature and upper-caste male perspectives, to uncover untapped regional archives, vernacular pamphlets, and local folk traditions (Nair, 1994). Specifically, upcoming scholars should deploy rigorous oral history methodologies, localized folklore analysis, and micro-historical investigations to reconstruct the unrecorded lived experiences, labor patterns, and resistance strategies of rural, tribal, and working-class women across divergent linguistic and geographical zones (Sinha, 2007; Parthasarathi, 2001). Furthermore, comparative transnational studies examining how colonized women across different Asian and African geographies negotiated nineteenth-century imperial modernities

could yield profound comparative insights (Chatterjee, 1993). By embracing these interdisciplinary methodologies and expanding archival boundaries, future research will continue to dismantle lingering historical silences, ensuring that the multifaceted struggles and enduring agency of historical women receive the comprehensive academic attention they profoundly deserve (Sangari & Vaid, 1989; Rege, 2006).

REFERENCES

Archer, W. G. (1984). *Hill of flutes: Life, love, and poetry in tribal India: A portrait of the Santhals*. University of Pittsburgh Press.

Chakravarti, Uma. (1993). *Rewriting history: The life and times of Pandita Ramabai*. Kali for Women.

Chanana, K. (1988). *Socialisation, education, and women: Explorations in gender identity*. Orient Longman.

Chatterjee, Partha. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00012441

Forbes, G. (1996). *Women in modern India*. Cambridge University Press.

Geetha, V. (1998). *Gender*. Stree.

Hardiman, D. (1987). *The coming of the Devi: Adivasi assertion in western India*. Oxford University Press.

Karlekar, M. (1991). *Voices from within: Early personal narratives of Bengali women*. Oxford University Press.

Mani, Lata. (1998). *Contentious traditions: The debate on Sati in colonial India*. Oxford University Press.

Nair, Janaki. (1994). *Women and law in colonial India: A social history*. Kali for Women.

Omvedt, Gail. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. Sage Publications.

Parthasarathi, P. (2001). *The transition to a colonial economy: Weavers, merchants and kings in South India, 1700–1800*. Cambridge University Press.

Phule, Jyotirao. (1991). *Collected works of Mahatma Jotirao Phule*. Education Department, Government of Maharashtra.

Rao, A. (Ed.). (2003). *Gender and caste*. Kali for Women.

Rege, Sharmila. (2006). *Writing caste, writing gender: Narrating Dalit women's testimonios*. Zubaan.

Sangari, Kumkum, & Vaid, Sudesh (Eds.). (1989). *Recasting women: Essays in colonial history*. Kali for Women.

Sarkar, Tanika. (1989). *Bengal 1928–1934: The politics of protest*. Oxford University Press.

Sinha, Mrinalini. (2007). *Specters of mother India: The global restructuring of an empire*. Duke University Press.

Tharu, Susie, & Lalita, K. (Eds.). (1991). *Women writing in India: 600 BC to the present (Vol. 1: 600 BC to the early twentieth century)*. Feminist Press at CUNY.