

RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL AWAKENING IN COLONIAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT

India in the 19th century witnessed a series of reform movements undertaken in various parts of the country. These movements were oriented toward a restructuring of the Indian society along modern lines. The changes brought by the British like modern education resulted in many social and religious reform movements in India. The 1800s and 1900s saw more and more people appreciating the values of Indian culture, but they were also vocal enough to reject the bad elements in it. Many leaders emerged to reform Indian society. They mostly aspired to revive the Indian society with modern values.

Keshub Chandra Sen, for example, said: "What we see around us today is a fallen nation – a nation whose primitive greatness lies buried in ruins".

Keywords: Liberty, Social and Economic, Equality, Fraternity, Democracy and Justice.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian society in the first half of the 19th century was caste-ridden, decadent and rigid. The conquest of India by the British during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Indian social institutions. When the British came to India, they introduced the English language as well as certain modern ideas. These ideas were those of liberty, social and economic equality, fraternity, democracy and justice which had a tremendous impact on Indian society. As a consequence, several individuals and movements sought to bring about changes in social and religious practices with a view to reforming and revitalizing society. These efforts, collectively known as the Renaissance, were complex social phenomena. It is important to note that this phenomenon occurred when India was under the colonial domination of the British. There were some enlightened Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati and many others who were willing to fight and bring reforms to society so that it could face the challenges of the West.

Swami Vivekananda described the condition of the Indians then, in the following words: "Moving about here and there emaciated figures of young and old in tattered rags, whose faces bear deep-cut lines of the despair and poverty of hundreds of years; cows, bullocks, buffaloes common everywhere – aye, the same melancholy look in their eyes, the same feeble physique, on the wayside, refuse and dirt; – this is our present-day India."

FACTORS WHICH GAVE RISE TO REFORM MOVEMENTS

(a). Presence of colonial government on Indian soil: When the British came to India they introduced the English language as well as certain modern ideas.

- These ideas were those of liberty, social and economic equality, fraternity, democracy and justice which had a tremendous impact on Indian society.

(b). Religious and Social Ills: Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism.

(c). Depressing Position of Women: The most distressing was the position of women.

- ❖ The killing of female infants at birth was prevalent.
- ❖ Child marriage was practiced in society.
- ❖ The practice of polygamy prevailed in many parts of country.
- ❖ The widow remarriage was not allowed and the sati pratha was prevalent on a large scale.

(d). Spread of Education and Increased Awareness of the World: From the late 19th century a number of European and Indian scholars started the study of ancient India's history, philosophy, science, religions and literature.

- This growing knowledge of India's past glory provided to the Indian people a sense of pride in their civilization.
- It also helped the reformers in their work of religious and social reform for their struggle against all types of inhuman practices, superstitions etc.

(d). Awareness of the Outside World: During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the rising tide of nationalism and democracy also found expression in movements to reform and democratise the social institutions and religious outlook of the Indian people.

- Factors such as growth of nationalist sentiments, emergence of new economic forces, spread of education, impact of modern Western ideas and culture and increased awareness of the world strengthened the resolve to reform.

RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT BY VARIOUS PROMINENT LEADERS

(a). The Brahmo Samaj Movement

Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded Brahmo Sabha in 1828, which was later renamed as Brahmo Samaj. Its chief aim was the worship of the eternal God. It was against priesthood, rituals and sacrifices. It focused on prayers, meditation and reading of the scriptures. It believed in the unity of all religions. It was the first intellectual reform movement in modern India. It led to the emergence of rationalism and enlightenment in India which indirectly contributed to the nationalist movement.

It was the forerunner of all social, religious and political movements of modern India. It split into two in 1866, namely Brahmo Samaj of India led by Keshub Chandra Sen and Adi Brahmo Samaj led by Debendranath Tagore.

Prominent Leaders: Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, Pt. Sivnath Shastri, and Rabindranath Tagore.

Debendra Nath Tagor headed the Tattvabodhini Sabha (founded in 1839) which, along with its organ Tattvabodhini Patrika in Bengali, was devoted to the systematic study of India's past with a rational outlook and to the propagation of Rammohan's ideas.

Rammohan Roy progressive ideas met with strong opposition from orthodox elements like Raja Radhakant Deb who organised the Dharma Sabha to counter Brahmo Samaj propaganda.

(b). What was the Prarthana Samaj

The Prarthana Samaj was established in Bombay by Dr. Atma Ram Pandurang in 1876 with the objective of rational worship and social reform.

The two great members of this Samaj were R.C. Bhandarkar and Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade.

- They devoted themselves to the work of social reform such as inter-caste dining, inter-caste marriage, widow remarriage and improvement of the lot of women and depressed classes.

The four point social agenda of Prarthana Samaj were

- a) Disapproval of caste system
- b) Women education
- c) Widow remarriage
- d) Raising the age of marriage for both males and females

Mahadev Govind Ranade was the founder of the Widow Remarriage Association (1861) and the Deccan Education Society.

- ❖ He established the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha as well.
- ❖ To Ranade, religious reform was inseparable from social reform.
- ❖ He also believed that if religious ideas were rigid there would be no success in social, economic and political spheres.
- ❖ Although Prarthana Samaj was powerfully influenced by the ideas of Brahmo Samaj, it did not insist upon a rigid exclusion of idol worship and a definite break from the caste system.

(c). Satyashodhak Samaj

Jyotiba Phule organized a powerful movement against upper caste domination and brahminical supremacy. He founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers' Society) in 1873.

The main aims of the movement were:

- Social service
- Spread of education among women and lower caste people

Phule's works, Sarvajanik Satyadharma and Ghulamgin, became a source of inspiration for the common masses. Phule used the symbol of Rajah Bali as opposed to the brahmins' symbol of Rama. Phule aimed at the complete abolition of the caste system and socio-economic inequalities. This movement gave a sense of identity to the depressed communities as a class against the Brahmins, who were seen as the exploiters.

(d). Arya Samaj Movement

The Arya Samaj Movement was revivalist in form though not in content, as the result of a reaction to Western influences. The first Arya Samaj unit was formally set up by Dayananda Saraswati at Bombay in 1875 and later the headquarters of the Samaj were established at Lahore.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE ARYA SAMAJ ARE:

God is the primary source of all true knowledge;

- a) God, as all-truth, all-knowledge, almighty, immortal, creator of Universe, is alone worthy of worship;
- b) The Vedas are the books of true knowledge;
- c) An Arya should always be ready to accept truth and abandon untruth;
- d) Dharma, that is, due consideration of right and wrong, should be the guiding principle of all actions;
- e) The principal aim of the Samaj is to promote world's well-being in the material, spiritual and social sense;
- f) Everybody should be treated with love and justice;
- g) Ignorance is to be dispelled and knowledge increased;
- h) One's own progress should depend on the uplift of all others;
- i) Social well-being of mankind is to be placed above an individual's well-being.

The nucleus for this movement was provided by the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (D.A.V.) schools, established first at Lahore in 1886, which sought to emphasise the importance of Western education. The Arya Samaj was able to give self-respect and self confidence to the Hindus which helped to undermine the myth of superiority of whites and the Western culture. The Arya Samaj started the shuddhi (purification) movement to reconvert to the Hindu fold the converts to Christianity and Islam.

This led to increasing communalisation of social life during the 1920s and later snowballed into communal political consciousness. The work of the Swami after his death was carried forward by Lala Hansraj, Pandit Gurudutt, Lala Lajpat Rai and Swami Shraddhanand, among others. Dayananda's views were published in his famous work, Satyarth Prakash (The True Exposition).

(e). Young Bengal Movement

The young Bengal movement was a movement led by thinkers of the Hindu College of Calcutta. These thinkers were also known by the name Derozians. This name was given to them after one teacher of the same college, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio. Derozio promoted radical ideas through his teaching and by organizing an association for debate and discussions on literature, philosophy, history and science. They cherished the ideals of the French Revolution (1789 A.D.) and the liberal thinking of Britain. The Derozians also supported women's rights and education.

- The main reason for their limited success was the prevailing social condition at that time, which was not ripe for the adoption of radical ideas. Further, support from any other social group or class was absent.
- The Derozians lacked any real link with the masses, for instance, they failed to take up the peasants' cause.
- In fact their radicalism was bookish in character. But, despite their limitations, the Derozians carried forward Roy's tradition of public education on social, economic, and political questions.

(f). Ramakrishna Movement

Ramakrishna Paramhansa was a mystic who sought religious salvation in the traditional ways of renunciation, meditation and devotion. He was a saintly person who recognized the fundamental oneness of all religions and emphasized that there were many roads to God and salvation and the service of man is the service of God. The teaching of Ramakrishna Paramhansa formed the basis of the Ramakrishna Movement.

The two objectives of the movements were:

- a. To bring into existence a band of monks dedicated to a life of renunciation and practical spirituality, from among whom teachers and workers would be sent out to spread the Universal message of Vedanta as illustrated in the life of Ramakrishna.
- b. In conjunction with lay disciples to carry on preaching, philanthropic and charitable works, looking upon all men, women and children, irrespective of caste, creed or color, as veritable manifestations of the Divine.

(g). Swami Vivekananda

established Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, named after his Guru Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa. The institution did extensive educational and philanthropic work in India. He also represented India in the first Parliament of Religion held in Chicago (U.S.) in 1893. He used the Ramakrishna Mission for humanitarian relief and social work. The mission stands for religious and social reform. Vivekananda advocated the doctrine of service- the service of all beings. The service of jiva(living objects) is the worship of Shiva. Life itself is religion. By service, the Divine exists within man. Vivekananda was for using technology and modern science in the service of mankind.

CAUSES OF SOCIO-CULTURAL AWAKENING

- a) The most important factor which contributed to the socio-cultural awakening of the 19th century was impact of British rule on Indian economy and society. British imperialism brought political and administrative unification of the country.
- b) They introduced uniform system of law and introduced methods of communication. British rule marked the collapse of traditional economic structure. The economic life and lot of the Indian people got interlinked. The exploitative character of the colonial economy contributed a lot to rise of national spirit .The highly centralized character of the British rule in India promoted the growth of nationalism.
- c) The socio-cultural impact of British rule was tremendous and indeed it made a revolution in India.
- d) The emergence of a new middle class, by product of western contact, played the role of creative minority and aimed at destroying all traditions which helped the emergence of awakened India. Infused by the spirit of nationalism and rationalism the powerful middle class made serious introspection and tried their best to purge the Indian society of its vices.
- e) Another factor which helped the awakening was the coming of the Christian missionaries in India from the beginning of nineteenth century. These Christian missionaries spread education in different part of the country and undertook many welfare activities. Some section of Indian people became attracted to their creed.
- f) The activities of missionaries and their satire and condemnation of Hindu religion resulted in strong conservative and rationalist reaction. While the orthodox and conservatives opposed

Christianity doggedly, the liberals made introspection and tried to purge the inner weakness of their own religion.

- g) The spread of Western education provided stimuli to socio-culture awakening. According to K.M. Panikar the introduction of English language helped the cause of unity in the country without which India would have been spilt into as many different units as there are languages in India. According to Naoroji, "The introduction of English education with its great, noble, elevating and civilizing literature and advanced science will for ever remain a monument of good work done in India." A.R. Desai points out that "the study of the English language unfolded the treasures of the democratic and nationalistic thought crystallized in precious scientific works."
- h) The English educated young men criticized all Hindu traditions and customs and even drank intoxicant drinks to show that they were modern. But they tried to examine every aspect of life rationally and thus helped the process of modernization. The reformatory zeal of the British Government reflected in removing caste disabilities and injustice done to the women in Indian society.
- i) It made progressive forces inside the country to make a serious introspection. Press, newspapers and literature also contributed to the development of national awakening. The vitality of Indian culture also helped the advent and growth of Renaissance. Response of India to the crisis of the time had always been positive.
- j) When India got the western impact modern Indian gladly accepted the positive features of the west and adapted them to the changing condition. Thus due to the combination of forces 19th century saw a new mental awakening that led to Renaissance in Indian thought. The rational spirit of Renaissance developed a desire for reform.

THE IMPACT OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS ON INDIANS

There were positive and negative impacts of the socio-religious movements in India.

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

The religious reform movements of modern times had an underlying unity. Most of them were based on the twin doctrines of Reason (Rationalism) and Humanism, though they also sometimes tended to appeal to faith and ancient authority to bolster their appeal.

1. They opposed the ritualistic, superstitious, irrational and obscurantist elements in Indian religion.
2. Swami Vivekananda once said: "Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason through which every science justifies itself"
3. Justice Ranade came to the conclusion that society as a living organism is constantly changing and can never go back to the past.
4. The best of reformers argued that modern ideas and culture could be best imbibed by integrating them into Indian cultural streams.
5. The religious reform movements helped many Indians to come to terms with the modern world. These movements led to the emergence of Indian nationalism and eventually the freedom struggle.

THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Two negative aspects of the religious reform movements may also be noted.

- 1) Firstly, all of them catered to the needs of a small percentage of the population-the urban middle and upper classes.
- 2) The second limitation, which later became a major negative factor, was the tendency to look backwards, appeal to past greatness, and rely on scriptural authority. Appeals to past greatness created false pride and smugness, while the habit of finding a 'Golden Age' in the past acted as a check on the full acceptance of modern science and hampered the effort to improve the present.

The evil aspects of this phenomenon became apparent when it was found that, along with a rapid rise of national consciousness, another consciousness – communal consciousness – had begun to rise among the middle classes.

Many other factors were certainly responsible for the birth of communalism in modern times; but undoubtedly, the nature of the religious reform movements also contributed to it.

CONCLUSION

From the early decades of the 19th century, there was a growing awareness in all parts of country of the backwardness in the Indian society and of the need to better it. Some of the social evils and superstitions had become associated with religious beliefs

The British conquest and the consequent dissemination of colonial culture and ideology had led to an inevitable introspection about the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous culture and institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. The introduction of English education helps a lot in bringing about a great transformation in Indian society. A group of young people of India who came in contact with the new system of education became familiar with the liberal and rational thinking of Europe and they revolted against the tyranny of dogma and traditional authorities, beliefs, customs and age-old practices. Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism. The priests exercised an overwhelming and, indeed, unhealthy influence on the minds of the people. Idolatry and polytheism helped to reinforce their position.

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