

Social Reform Movements in 19TH Century India

DR SURESH DODDAMANI
Government First Grade College

Abstract- The first and foremost reason was the British rule and its deep influence on political, economic, social and culture life of India. It created conditions favourable to intellectual growth. Second was the effort of the European Orientalists, whose efforts put India's glorious past into limelight. This includes work done by Sir William Jones, James Princep, Charles Wilkins, Max Muller etc. Further, many Indian scholars such as Raja Rammohan Roy, Radhakanta Deb, Rajendralal Mitra, MG Ranade etc. also contributed in reinterpreting India's past. Third was the highly creative literature, marked by fusion of old and new. Fourth was the detrimental effect of the Christian missionaries who held that propaganda of Christianity in India would serve Britain's imperial interests; and would secure the empire. The Indians took it as an onslaught on their religion and social customs. They wanted to reform it so that evil social practices could be removed from society.

I. INTRODUCTION

The conquest of India by the British during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Indian social institutions. As a consequence several individuals and movements sought to bring about changes in the social and religious practices with a view to reforming and revitalizing the 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.

India in the 19th century witnessed a series of reform movements under-taken in various parts of the country. These movements were oriented toward a re-structuring of the Indian society along modern lines.

Associate Professor of History Govt First Grade College Alnavar Dharwad Karnataka

- Know why and how these reforms were initiated in India

- Understand who were the leading reformers and their ideas about the nature of the Indian society
- Grasp the scope and methods of these reforms and highlight their shortcomings

The earliest expression of reform was in Bengal, initiated by Rammohun Roy. He founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1814, which was the forerunner of Brahma Samaj organized by him in 1829. The spirit of reform soon manifested itself in other parts of the country.

The following features are evident from the above account:

- i. Each of these reform movements was confined, by and large to one region or the other. Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj did have branches in different parts of the country yet they were more popular in Bengal and Punjab respectively, than anywhere else.
- ii. These movements were confined to a particular religion or caste.
- iii. An additional feature of these movements was that they all emerged at different points of time in different parts of the country. For example in Bengal reform efforts were afoot at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but in Kerala they came up only towards the end of the nineteenth century. Despite this, there was considerable similarity in their aims and perspectives. All of them were concerned with the regeneration of society through social and educational reforms even if there were differences in their methods.

II. SCOPE OF REFORMS

The reform movements of the nineteenth century were not purely religious movements. They were socio-religious movements. The reformers like Rammohun Roy in Bengal, Gopal Hari Deshmukh (Lokhitavadi) in Maharashtra and Viresalingam in

Andhra advocated religious reform for the sake of “Political advantage and social comfort.

Major social problems which came within the purview of the reform movements were:

- Emancipation of women in which sati, infanticide, child and widow marriage were taken up Casteism and untouchability
- Education for bringing about enlightenment in society In the religious sphere the main issues were:
- Idolatry
- Polytheism
- Religious superstitions

Exploitation by priests The approach of the modern social reform movement was not one exclusively of religious dedication. Conceived under the influence of Western methods of organisation, propagating and recruiting support mainly from the English educated, and maintaining as its basic premises western concepts of individualism, natural rights and social efficiency, the principal motivating force was sober, rationalism and positive social ethics.

Broadly considered, the uniqueness of the Social Reform Movement in India lay in the inspiration, the ideas and the motivations of the reformers themselves. While earlier reformers were prompted by a love for the underdog, these modern reformers saw the incompatibility of particular practices with the total progress of society. The modern social reform movement properly begins with Raja Rammohan Roy. More than any other Indian of his generation, Roy saw the need for a rational social basis for Hinduism. Combining deep erudition with uncommon wisdom.

With Roy began the rationalising of the Hindu tradition and the clearing of the underbrush of social evils. The thread was taken up by other enlightened individuals in Bengal. Bombay and Madras. In Bengal, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar shattered the very core of orthodoxy by his monumental crusade for widow remarriage. In Bombay Vishnu Shastri Pandit sought governmental sanction for the same, while in Madras the cause was taken up by Viresa Lingam Pantulu with the formation of the Rajamundhry

Social Reform Association. To mention some of the leading lights of the social reform movement in Western India, there was Balgangadhar Shastri Jambhekar, the founder of the Bombay Darpan and a prominent champion of social reform, the Gujaratis Mehtaji Mancharam and Narmada Shankar and that ebullient literary social critic Gopal Hari Deshmukh Tokahitwadi'. On the practical level, there was syotiba Phule, an ardent reformer and social worker, and Karsondas Mulji of the Maharaja Libel case fame. Even the Prarthana Samaj, formed in 1867. devoted itself to the reconstruction of Hinduism along more rational lines.

The urgent need for social and religious reform that began to manifest itself from the early decades of the 19th century arose in response to the contact with Western culture and education. The weakness and decay of Indian society was evident to educated Indians who started to work systematically for their removal. They were no longer willing to accept the traditions, beliefs and practices of Hindu society simply because they had been observed for centuries. The impact of Western ideas gave birth to new awakening. The change that took place in the Indian social scenario is popularly known as the Renaissance.

Debendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath Tagore, was responsible for revitalising the Brahmo Samaj. Under him the first step was taken to convert the Brahmo Samaj into a separate religious and social community. He represented the best in traditional Indian learning and the new thought of the West. Keshab Chandra Sen carried on an intensive programme of social reform. He set up schools, organised famine relief and propagated widow remarriage. Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was both a scholar and a reformer. He was a great humanist and had deep sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. He dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform which he thought was necessary for modernising India. By admitting non-Brahmin students to the Sanskrit College, he dealt a severe blow to the prevalent caste system.

Characteristics of the Reform Movements: An analysis of the reform movements of the 19th century brings out several common features:

- 1) All the reformers propagated the idea of one God and the basic unity of all religions. Thus, they tried to bridge the gulf between different religious beliefs.
- 2) All the reformers attacked priesthood, rituals, idolatry and polytheism. The humanitarian aspect of these reform movements was expressed in their attack on the caste system and the custom of child marriage.
- 3) The reformers attempted to improve the status of girls and women in society. They all emphasised the need for female education.
- 4) By attacking the caste system and untouchability, the reformers helped to unify the people of India into one nation.
- 5) The reform movements fostered feelings of self-respect, self-reliance and patriotism among the Indians.

III. WEAKNESSES AND LIMITATIONS

Though the nineteenth century reform movements aimed at ameliorating the social, educational and moral conditions and habits of the people of India in different parts of the country, they suffered from several weaknesses and limitations. Another limitation lay in the reformers' perception of the nature of the British rule and its role toward India. They believed quite erroneously, that the British rule was God sent providential and would lead India to the path of modernity.

To the student of Indian social U history, the intellectual movements of the nineteenth century present a fascinating subject for study. Never before in India's chequered past had there occurred a social and political transformation of the magnitude such as was initiated as a result of the impact of Western ideas. Uptil now, Hinduism had responded to efforts at cultural penetration by wrapping itself more closely in its own Ivory Tower. Muslim domination, like earlier influences, left the general basis of Hindu beliefs undisturbed. The presence of the British in

India, however, brought about a radical change in the entire social perspective.

Social Reform in India did not ordinarily mean, as it did in the West, a reorganisation of the entire structure of society with a view to the alleviation of the conditions of the underprivileged; rather, it meant the infusion into the existing social structure of newer ways of life and modes of behaviour. What was unique about the social reform movement initiated in the nineteenth century? Heimsath notes that even prior to the nineteenth century, there were movements aimed at reform especially in the field of religion. The entire Bhakti cult was in a way a revolt against orthodox Hinduism. Its appeal was more emotional than rational and individual salvation rather than social salvation was stressed.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE

In the evolution of modern India the reform movements of the nineteenth century have made very significant contribution. They stood for the democratization of society, removal of superstition and abhorrent customs, spread of enlightenment and the development of a rational and modern outlook.

The reform movements within the Hindu community attacked a number of social and religious evils. Polytheism and idolatry which negated the development of individuality or supernaturalism and the authority of religious leaders which induced the habit of conformity were subjected to strong criticism by these movements. The opposition to caste was not only on moral and ethical principles but also because it fostered social division. An attempt to change the then prevalent values of the society is evident in all these movements. In one way or the other, the attempt was to transform the hegemonic values of a feudal society and to introduce values characteristic of a bourgeois order.

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