

An Analysis of Socio-Religious Reform Movements Before Independence: Causes and Impact

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ABSTRACT:

It is relevant, after the completion of sixty five years of our existence as an independent, socialist, democratic republic to look back on the journey we have gone through to take note of our accomplishments and shortcomings in the various spheres of our national life to consolidate the success and correct the errors and to march forwards to a better future. With the progression of revolutionary struggle, the passion for social change waned considerably and it consciously disassociated itself from the political movement. The spread of the natural course of growth and education, however increased the pace of demand for socio-religious changes and broadened the horizons of editing. The contribution that freedom fighters, social and religious reformists, organizations and associations have done in this regard is equally important. Therefore, I would like to analyze the causes and impact of the social reform movements in this paper and also social reformers, social reform movements as well as associations and organizations working towards the socio-religious upliftment of the society.

KEYWORDS: Sovereign, Democratic, Social Reform, Political Struggle, Education, Socio Religious Reforms, Evolution, Freedom Fighters, Religious Reformist, Freedom Movements Etc.

INTRODUCTION

The 19th century was a time of change and conflict in the socio-religious domain in the history of pre-independent India as three streams: reform, rebirth and rejection of ancient cultural values were woven around the socio-religious movement or movement for social reform initiated by eminent intellect of vision and foresight.

This movement was a catalyst for the rise of nationalism which gradually forced the British away from India and made India an independent republic. This movement started in Bengal and expanded to other parts of India. It was a movement aimed at regenerating India's sluggish spirit that, due to the influence of British rule, was in a dazed state. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), the father of modern India who is recognized as the connection between the fading past and dawning future, between deep-rooted conservatism and radical change and in short, between

superstitious isolationism and revolutionary synthesis, between reaction and development was the founder of this Indian regeneration movement.

The arch that spanned the gulf between ancient caste and modern ideology, between superstition and science, between immovable tradition and conservative advancement, between a bewildering polytheism and a pure but vague theism is also recognized as figure of Ram Mohan Roy.

In the words of M.G. Ranade, the thinkers of the 19th century had a vision of the future of India. The vision that motivated inspired them was a shift from restraint to liberty, from conviction to religion, from status to contract, from authority to reason, from unorganized to organized life, from bigotry to compassion, from blind fanaticism to a source of human dignity. It was the responsibility of the newly emerging middle class and the conservative or western educated elites.

RELIGION AS A TOOL TO REFORM

Religious reform was a necessary condition for social changes as both Hindus and Muslims were influenced by religious values in social life. Superstitions and priests have dominated Hinduism. To please god, idolatry, animal sacrifice and physical torture was prevalent. Social life has been depressing too. Sati, female infanticide, child marriage and social boycott of widows were prevalent. Caste system has created social disparities, making it hard to support a single mass movement. Untouchability was also widespread.

CAUSES BEHIND ARISING OF THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT

Some of the causes can be summarized as mentioned below:

1) Political Unity: Due to the expansion and consolidation of British rule India was politically unified. This contributed to the understanding of many common Indian problems. Many young Indians were prompted by the existence of British rule to figure out the causes of their suffering and degradation.

2) Reaction against propaganda of Christian missionaries: Christian missionaries have made every possible effort to spread Christianity, especially among the poor and the oppressed. For this reason, educational establishments, hospitals, charity services and formal support have also been used. Thus, both Hindus and Muslims tried to protect their faith.

3)Contribution offoreignscholars:The history of India has been rediscovered by manyforeign scholars such asMaxMullerand William Jones.Theyresearchedtheacademicworkof former Indians.Theybroughttolight a rich heritage culture thatwas also superiortowesternculture.Many literaryandsuperiorworks were translated by them. Suchworks have gainedglobal recognition.This led the educated Indians to establish trust in their culture. TheywantedthesupremacyofIndian cultureoverwesternculture to be developed.

.4)Indianpress:Theprintingpress was introducedinIndia by the Europeans.Itmade possiblefor manynewspapersandmagazines to appear.Therewerealso books writteninvariousIndian languages.Theirsubjectmatterwaspredominantly Indian.In terms of natural heritage and glory,it definitelyopen theeyesofeducatedIndians.Thus, they began toworkfor thegloryandculture of India.

5)WesternEducation:Theexpansionofwesterneducationhas contributed tothepropagationof the westernnotionofdemocracy,liberty,equalityandnationalism.Indirect interaction with the workings of these ideas came to theIndianswho wentabroad.theyweretoopainedtoseethelackofconsciousnessamongthe Indiansaboutsuchconcepts after they returned. Forthedissemination ofsuch theories, they did the spade job.

1.4. Major Socio-ReligiousReformMovementsInModernIndia

BRAHMO SAMAJ

Established by pioneer social reformer Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772 – 1833) in Calcutta in 1828, the movement fought against idol worship, polytheism, caste oppression, needless rituals and other social evils such as Sati, polygamy, purdah system, child marriage, etc. The group also fought for the rights of women such as widow remarriage and women's education. It also battled against mainstream superstitions among Hindus.

ARYA SAMAJ

Established by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 in Bombay, this organization struggled against idolatry, polytheism, rituals, priesthood, sacrifice of animals, child marriage and the caste system. It also allows western scientific information to be disseminated.

THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY

Although the name of Annie Besant is most associated with this society, it was in reality founded in New York (later relocated to Madras) in 1875 by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott. It

facilitated the study of Hindu, Buddhist and Zoroastrian ancient philosophies. As described in the Upanishads and Vedas, it advocated the notion of universal brotherhood. It placed an emphasis on occultism.

RAMKRISHNA MISSION

Swami Vivekananda established this mission in 1892 in Belur, near Calcutta to spread the teachings of Guru Ramakrishna Paramahansa of Vivekananda. The caste system and untouchability was opposed by this organization. It concentrated and propagated Vedanta on the universality of all religions.

SATYASHODHAK SAMAJ

This society was founded on 24 September 1873 in present-day Maharashtra by Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. It fought against the culture of idolatry and caste. It encouraged independent thought and rejected the priesthood. For the oppressed castes, Jyotirao Phule is said to have used the word 'Dalit'.

YOUNG BENGAL MOVEMENT

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio began this movement in the 1820s in Calcutta. In Calcutta, Derozio was an Anglo-Indian college teacher and among his students he promoted progressive thought. He opposed orthodox Hinduism's prevalent religious traditions. He also inspired free-thinking and spread the spirit of democracy, equality and liberty.

ALIGARH MOVEMENT

Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan began this movement in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh in the 1860's. It concentrated on the dissemination among the Muslim masses of India about western scientific education.

WIDOW REMARRIAGE ASSOCIATION

It was founded in Bombay in 1861 by Vishnu Shastri Pandit and Mahadev Govind Ranade. It encouraged widow remarriage and lobbied against child marriages, marriage costs and customs-like shaving of the head of the widow, etc.

DEOBAND MOVEMENT

This was started in 1867 in Deoband in UP by theologians, Muhammad Qasim Nanawatawi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi. It was an anti-British movement that aimed at the uplifting the Muslims through educational efforts.

1.5. Impact of these Reform Movements

The British wanted the upper orthodox segment of society to be appeased. As a result, only two major laws have been enacted. To increase the status of women, some legislative initiatives have been adopted. For instance, Sati was declared illegal (1829). It was ruled illegal to commit Infanticide. By a law passed in 1856, widow remarriage was allowed. Marriageable age of girls was raised to ten by law passed in 1860. In 1872, a law was passed sanctioning inter-caste and inter-communal marriages. The other law passed in 1891, aimed at discouraging child marriage. For preventing child marriage, the Sharda Act was passed in 1929. According to it a girl below 14 and a boy below 18 could not be married. In the 20th century and especially after 1919 the Indian national movement became the main propagator of social reform. Increasingly, the reformers took recourse to propaganda in the Indian language to reach the masses. They also used novels, dramas, short stories, poetry, the newspapers and the cinema their opinions in the thirties (1930's). Many citizens, reform societies, and religious organizations have worked hard to spread education among women, to prevent young children from marrying, to bring women out of the purdah, to enforce monogamy, and to encourage women of the middle class to take up professions or public jobs. Because of all these efforts, Indian women have played an active and important part in the struggle for independence of the country. As a consequence, 15 separate superstitions disappeared and several more were on their way out.

1.6. Conclusion

Many thinkers and reformers in India have come forward to bring about changes in our society. According to them, culture and faith were intertwined. Both had to be reformed in order to achieve the country's sustainable growth and development. The initiative to awaken the Indian masses was then taken by our reformers. The bulk of social activities have been carried out in the name of faith. Therefore without religious reform, social reform would have no meaning. In Indian culture and philosophy, our reformers were deeply rooted and had a sound knowledge of the scriptures. They were able to blend positive Indian values with western ideas and the principles of democracy and equality. On the basis of this understanding, they challenged the rigidity and superstitious practices in religion. They cited the scriptures to show that the practices prevalent during nineteenth century find no sanction in them. The enlightened and the rationalistic among them questioned the popular religion which was full of superstitions and was exploited by the 17 corrupt priests. The reformers wanted a logical and empirical method to be embraced by society. They also believed in the idea of human rights and social equality for both, men and women. The

spread of modern education was targeted by all the socio-religious reformers whether Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Parsis. They claimed that the most powerful method for awakening and modernizing our society is education. During the 19th century, India's reform movements were able to build socio-religious understanding among Indians. Many of these movements stressed objective interpretation of social and religious ideas and advocated a scientific and humanitarian viewpoint. The advent of modern education directed the Indians towards an approach to life that was empirical and logical. All the movements worked to improve women's status and criticized the caste system especially the practice of untouchability. These movements sought social solidarity and pursued democracy, equality and fraternity. Those reform movements, however, had some restrictions. A very small percentage of the population, mainly the educated elite, was effected and the overwhelming masses of the peasants and urban poor who tended to live in the same conditions, could not be reached.

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