

PAPER 1 DSE-A-1 SEM -5: HISTORY OF BENGAL(c.1757-1905)

IV. CULTURAL CHANGES AND SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT PART 1

The early policy of East India Company was that of non intervention in the Indian social matters. Along with pragmatism that demanded continuation of existing system, there was also a respect for the traditional Indian culture that expressed itself in Warren Hastings policy of Orientalism. But since the end of Hastings's tenure there was a gradual move towards cautious intervention in Indian social institutions. The several ideological influences in Britain such as Evangelicalism, Utilitarianism etc was what contributes towards this shift. While the Utilitarianism began to talk of appropriate social engineering and authoritarian reformism, the Evangelists argued about the necessity of government intervention to liberate Indians from their religions that were full of superstition, idolatry and tyranny of the priests. But the Company's government was still tentative about interfering for fear of adverse Indian reaction. It could not do so unless a section of the Indian society was prepared to support reform. Such a group that would support wide ranging social reforms in India was soon to emerge through the Introduction of English education, which became therefore the first and the most important area intervention and innovation for the Company's state in India.

English education was introduced in India in the Eighteenth century through the charity school run in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay for the education of the European and the Anglo-Indian children. The Company supported these schools in various ways, but did not take any direct responsibility for education of the indigenous population until 1813. The real beginning of Western education in India can therefore be dated from the Charter Act of 1813, which not only allowed the missionaries to travel to India, but provided for the allocation of one hundred thousand rupees per year for promoting Indian Vernacular language and literature.

The next big step in the field of educational reforms taken by the Company was in 1835. Lord Macaulay, a member of the Executive council wrote a Minute arguing in favour of introducing Western Education and making English as the medium of instruction. The Government of William Bentinck in a resolution in

1835 accepted the view point of Lord Macaulay. Thus there was a curtailment of fund for Oriental learning while English education received more funds.

In 1854, Charles Wood's Educational Dispatch signalled a shift from the Macaulian system of education as it recommended the extension of vernacular elementary education, which was endorsed by Dalhousie's administration. Higher education also received a further boost in 1857 through the creation of three Universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

As a result of the exposure to western education and scientific knowledge of the west the Indian society witnessed immense intellectual and cultural stirrings which further paved way for certain social and cultural reform measures.

The problem of human sacrifice and female infanticide first attracted government action in 1802. After an investigation made by the Baptist missionary, William Carey, Lord Wellesley suppressed human sacrifice. Female infanticide was found to be more widespread and prevalent among the wealthier and upper caste section of certain areas. By a Bengal Regulation (XXI) of 1795 the practice was declared to constitute murder and the territory to which the regulation applied was extended in 1804.

The most irrational and inhumane custom widely followed in Hindu society was the custom of sati or the self immolation of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband. This custom was so deep rooted among the orthodox Hindus that it required a serious attempt from the British in the form of legislation to bring an end to it. In 1829 sati was declared illegal in the Bengal presidency (Regulation XVII) under the Governor-Generalship of William Bentinck. By this Regulation anyone assisting a voluntary sacrifice was to be held guilty of culpable homicide and anyone using violence to force a widow to burn herself was to be liable to the death sentence. Raja Rammohun Roy had immense contribution in the abolition of sati.

The campaign for the suppression of Thuggee was one act of the Government that aroused no public hostility. Thugs were men generally appeared in groups for robbing people after murdering them. Travellers, merchants, traders or zamindars were usually their target.

Emancipation of women and education of the womenfolk of India was a major field of activity for the missionaries from the mid 18th century onwards. To improve the condition and status of women in India a number of measures were

taken. Much emphasis was laid on education of women. Most schools for girls were product of missionary activities. Among the Indian social reformers Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar is remembered gratefully by his countrymen for his contribution to the uplift of India's downtrodden womanhood..He waged a long struggle in favour of widow remarriage.Eventually in 1856 The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed.

Apart from these there were wide spread protest against practises of polygamy and child marriage. The purdah system prevalent among the womenfolk was also questioned and was considered as a barrier that prevented the young Indian women to come out of their house and mix freely with the masses and go to schools and colleges and to be economically independent.

The period up to 1857 was one wherein certain essential reforms were achieved as a result of legislative action stimulated by positive desire for reform. The limits of security however made the Government distinctly reluctant to go further. Western ideas both religious and secular had their effects on Indian intellectuals, and Hindu reform movement emerged in response to both governmental reforms and the government's unwillingness to do more.

(to be continued)

REFERENCE

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