

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

## **IV. CULTURAL CHANGES AND SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT PART 2**

The growth of nationalism and democracy, which led to the struggle for freedom, also found expression in movements to reform and democratise the social institutions and religious outlook of the Indian people. Many Indians realised that social and religious reformation was an essential condition for the all-round development of the country on modern lines and for the growth of national unity and solidarity. The 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 not only heightened the consciousness of the backwardness and degeneration of Indian society but further strengthened the resolve to reform. Thus, after 1858, the earlier reforming tendency was broadened. The work of earlier reformers, like Raja Rammohun Roy and Pandit Vidyasagar, was carried further by major movements of religious and social reform.

### **Brahmo Samaj**

Rammohun Roy established the Atmiya Sabha in Calcutta in 1815 in order to propagate monotheism and to fight against the evil customs and practices in Hinduism. Later in 1828 he established the Brahmo Samaj with the same aim. After a long struggle against the practice of Sati he was finally successful in 1829 in abolishing Sati with the help of William Bentinck.

The Brahmo tradition of Raja Rammohun Roy was carried forward after 1843 by Devendranath Tagore, who also repudiated the doctrine that the Vedic scriptures were infallible, and after 1866 by Keshub Chandra Sen. The Brahmo Samaj made an effort to reform Hindu religion by removing abuses and by basing it on the worship of one God and on the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads even though it repudiated the doctrine of the infallibility of the Vedas. It also tried to incorporate the best aspects of modern western thought. Most of all it based itself on human reason which was to be the ultimate criterion for deciding what was worthwhile and what was useless in the past or present religious principles and practices. For that reason, the Brahmo Samaj

denied the need for a priestly class for interpreting religious writings. Every individual had the right and the capacity to decide with the help of his own intellect what was right and what was wrong in a religious book or principle. The Brahmos were basically opposed to idolatry and superstitious practices and rituals. The Brahmos were also great social reformers. They actively opposed the caste system and child-marriage and supported the general uplift of women, including widow remarriage and the spread of modern education to men and women.

Religious reform was begun in Bombay in 1840 by the Parmahans Mandali which aimed at fighting idolatry and the caste system. Perhaps the earliest religious reformer in western India was Gopal Hari Deshmukh, known popularly as Lokahitwadi. He said that if religion did not sanction social reforms then religion should be changed, for after all religion was made by human beings and scriptures, written long ago, might not remain relevant to later times. An off-shoot of Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj was founded by Dr. Atmarang Pandurang in 1867 in Bombay. In 1870 M.G. Ranade and R.G Bhandarkar joined it and infused new strength in it. It was reform movement within Hinduism and concentrated on social reforms like inter-dining, inter-caste marriage, remarriage of widows and uplift of women and depressed classes.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834-86) was a saintly person who sought religious salvation in the traditional ways of renunciation, meditation and devotion (bhakti). In his search for religious truth or the realisation of God, he lived with mystics of other faiths, Muslims and Christians. He again and again emphasised that there were many roads to God and salvation and that service of man was service of God, for man was the embodiment of God. It was his great disciple, Swami Vivekananda (1863- 1902), who popularised his religious message and who tried to put it in a form that would suit the needs of contemporary Indian society. Above all, Vivekananda stressed social action. Vivekananda condemned the caste system and the current Hindu emphasis on rituals and superstitions, and urged the people to imbibe the spirit of liberty, equality and free thinking. In 1896, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to carry on humanitarian relief and social work. The Mission had many branches in different parts of the country and carried on social service by opening schools, hospitals and dispensaries, orphanages, libraries etc. It thus laid emphasis not on personal salvation but on social good and social service.

## **Swami Dayanand and the Arya Samaj**

The Arya Samaj undertook the task of reforming Hindu religion in north India. It was founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati that selfish and ignorant priests ruined Hindu religion with the aid of the Puranas which, according to him were full of false teaching. For his own inspiration he went to the Vedas which he regarded as infallible, being the inspired word of God, and as the fount of all knowledge. He rejected such later religious thought as conflicted with the Vedas. This total dependence on the Vedas and their Infallibility gave his teachings an orthodox colouring, for infallibility meant that human reason was not to be the final deciding factor. However, his approach had a rationalist aspect, because the Vedas, though revealed, were to be rationally interpreted by himself and others, who were human beings. Thus individual reason was the decisive factor.

He believed that every person has the right of direct access to God. Moreover, instead of supporting Hindu orthodoxy, he attacked it and led a revolt against it. The teachings he derived from his own interpretation of the Vedas were consequently similar to the religious and social reforms that other Indian reformers were advocating. He was opposed to idolatry, ritual and priesthood, and particularly to the prevalent caste practices and popular Hinduism as preached by brahmins. He also directed attention towards problems of men as they lived in this real world and the traditional belief in the other world. He also favoured the study of western sciences. Interestingly enough Swami Dayanand had met and had discussions with Keshab Chandra Sen, Vidhyasagar, Justice Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and other social and religious reformers.

## **The Theosophical Society**

Theosophical Society was founded in the United States by Madam H.I Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott, who later came to India and founded the headquarters of school at Adyar near Madras in 1886. The Theosophist soon grew in India as a result of the leadership by Mrs. Annie Besant who had come to India in 1893. The Theosophist advocated the revival and strengthening of the ancient religions of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. They recognised the doctrine of the trans- migration of the soul. They also preached the universal brotherhood of man. As religious revivalists, the Theosophists were not very successful. But they made a peculiar contribution to developments in modern India. It was a movement led by westerners who

glorified Indian religious and philosophical traditions. This helped Indians recover their self-confidence, etc. One of Mrs. Besant's many achievements in India was establishment of the Central Hindu School at Benaras which was later developed by Madan Mohan Malaviya into the Benaras Hindu University.

### **Saiyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh School**

Movements for religious reform were late in emerging among the Muslims. The Muslim upper classes had tended to avoid contact with western education and culture, and it was mainly after the Revolt of 1857 that modern ideas of religious reform began to appear. A beginning in this direction was made when the Mohammedan Literary Society was founded at Calcutta in 1863. This Society promoted discussion of religious, social and political questions in the light of modern ideas and encouraged upper and middle class Muslims to take to western education. The most important reformer among the Muslims was Saiyid Ahmad Khan. He was tremendously impressed by modern scientific thought and worked all his life to reconcile it with Islam.

Saiyid Ahmad Khan believed that the religious and social life of the Muslims could be improved only by imbibing modern western scientific knowledge and culture. Therefore promotion of modern education remained his first task throughout his life. As an official he founded schools in many towns and had many western books translated into Urdu. In 1857, he founded at Aligarh the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College as a centre for spreading western sciences and culture. Later, this college grew into Aligarh Muslim University.

Saiyid Ahmad Khan was a great believer in religious toleration. He believed that all religions had a certain underlying unity which could be called practice morality.

Saiyid Ahmad's reformist zeal also embraced the social sphere. He urged Muslims to give up medieval customs and ways of thought and behaviour. He advocated in favour of removal of purdah and spread of education among women. He also condemned the customs of polygamy and easy divorce.

The Caste system was another major target of attack for the social reform movement. The caste system was an evil in another respect. Not only was it humiliating and inhuman and based on the antidemocratic principle of inequality by birth, it was cause of social disintegration

The reforms movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century influenced the future development in the field of society, religion and culture. The spirit of nationalism which emerged from the cultural revolution highlighted the necessity to fight for reforms. Exposure to western education gave rise to a sense of awareness among the people with the help of which they came out of the superstitious believes that were prevalent in the society.

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