

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

IV. CULTURAL CHANGES AND SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENT

(C). HINDU AND MUSLIM RELIGIOUS REVIVALIST MOVEMENT

The early policy the East India Company was that of the non-intervention in Indian social matters. Along with pragmatism that demanded continuation of existing systems, there was also a respect for traditional Indian culture that expressed itself in Warren Hastings's policy of Orientalism. But since the End of Hastings's tenure there was a gradual move towards cautious intervention in Indian Social Institutions. However 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 area of intervention and innovation for the Company's state in India

In the early 19th century a series of social reformed were initiated which remained reformed mainly from above through government fiat and as expected these reforms remained on paper in most cases, as there was never any attempt to develop a modern social consciousness from below. But from the mid-19th century onwards the earlier reforming tendencies was broadened.

The socio-religious movement of a given area must be examined in relation to British influence and political dominance, in terms of local and regional cultures and according to pattern of interaction between different religious communities. The historic role of socio-religious reform movements can only be understood within the context in which they originated and functioned.

Raja Rammohun Roy, born in 1772, at Radhanagar in the Burdwan District of West Bengal is unanimously considered as the 'first modern man'. He was a pioneer of socio-religious and political reform movement in India. He studied different languages like Persian, Sanskrit, Arabic, French English etc to study various religious scripts in their original. He believed in mono-theism and

opposed idol worship. He published in Persian a treatise called Tuhfat-ul-Muwahidin (A Gift to Monotheists), in 1803, wherein he explains the concept of monotheism.

Rammohun Roy established the **Atmiya Sabha** in 1815 in Calcutta to propagate monotheism and also to fight against the evil customs and practises that were incorporated in the Hindu society. Later he established the **Brahmo Samaj** in 1828 in Calcutta in order to bring reforms within the Hindu religion and to preach monotheism. The Brahmo Samaj believed in judging everything on the basis of reason and it followed the ancient Hindu scriptures. The best teaching of other religions were also welcomed by the Brahmo Samaj. He led a life long battle against the custom of Sati and finally in 1829 with the help of Lord William Bentinck he was successful in abolishing sati.

Apart from these, Raja Rammohun Roy also tried to bring in changes in the aspects of women's right to education, women's right to property and inheritance, spread of modern education and he supported English being the medium of education. He attacked the custom of polygamy and also went against the derogatory condition of the widows. Raja Rammohun Roy died in 1833.

Debendranath Tagore established the **Tattvabodhini Sabha** in 1839 in Calcutta to carry forward Rammohun Roy's ideas. He joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1843 and reorganised it. He promoted Tattvabodhini Patrika, a Bengali monthly which helped in systematic study of India's past. Till 1866 he remained the leader of the Brahmo Samaj and carried on the socio-religious reform works initiated by Rammohun Roy.

Later during the leadership of Debendranath Tagore there developed some differences among the members of the Brahmo Samaj and there was division. The original organisation came to be known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj and the new organisation was known by the name of Brahmo Samaj of India, under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen.

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.

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 Dayananda had met and had discussions with Keshab Chandra Sen, Vidhyasagar, Justice Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and other social and religious reformers.

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.

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, . 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.

Reformers like Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar contributed to the uplift of Indian women by struggling in favour of widow remarriage, which after a lot hard work became a success when the Government passed the Widow Remarriage Act in 1856, by opposing child marriage and polygamy and by favouring and supporting education of women.

Gopal Hari Deshmukh, popularly known as Lokhitawadi, was a social reformer from Maharashtra who was against religious orthodoxy and preached social and religious equality.

Another social reformer of the time was Jyotiba Phule, also from Maharashtra, belonged to a low caste and thus was well aware of the degraded position of the non-Brahmins and the untouchables. He led a prolonged struggle against upper caste dominations and Brahminical supremacy through his **Satyashodak Samaj**.

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.

Other Muslim Reform Movement include-Ahmadia Movement founded by Mirza Gulam Ahmad in Punjab in 19th century with the objective of reforming Islam and defending it against the onslaught of Christian missionaries.
