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Socio-religious reform movements and reformers in India

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Abstract

The dawn of the 19th century witnessed the birth of new vision- a modern vision among some enlightened sections of the Indian society. This enlightened vision was to shape the course of events for decades to come and even beyond. Here, we are giving a complete overview on the Socio-Religious Reform Movements and Reformers in India that will enhance the knowledge of readers to understand, how Indian Society transformed after reform movements. The process of reawakening, sometimes, but not always follow the intended as the Renaissance', did not always follow the intended line and gave rise to some undesirable by- products as well, which have become as much a part daily existence in the whole of the Indian subcontinent as have the fruits of these reform movements.

Keywords: M-modern, M-movement, R-reformers, T-transformers, S-society

Introduction

Although, the majority of reformation associated with religious beliefs and therefore most of the movement of the 19th century were socio-religious character. Here, we are giving a complete overview on the Socio-Religious Reform Movements and Reformers in India that will enhance the knowledge of readers to understand the Indian Society. Although religion reform was the integral part of these movements none of them were totally religious in character. They were humanist in aspiration and rejected salvation and otherworldliness as the agenda. They focused on worldly existence. The socio cultural regeneration in 19th century was influenced by colonial state but not created by it. The newly emerging middle class and the traditional or western educated intellectuals were responsible for it. The movements started with

Raja Ram Mohan Roy

The religious reform was a pre requisite for social reforms as social life of both Hindus and Muslims were influenced by religious tenets. Hinduism was dominated by superstitions and priests. Idolatry, anim echnical Services for Indexing Scopus/Web of al sacrifice, physical torture was common to appease god.

Social life too was depressing. Sati, female infanticide, child marriage and social boycott of widows were common. Caste system had created divisions in the society making it difficult to support a united mass movement. Untouchability was prevalent too.

Reformists sought to create a climate of modernization. They used faith to challenge such practices. They referred to the period of past where no such practices existed but they used it as only an aid and an instrument. Thus they wanted to prove that no practice like sati, child marriage etc. were sanctioned by religion.

Rationalism

The movements believed in rationalism and religious universalism [god is one and all countrymen are brethren]. They emphasized the role of religion in progress of the society. However reform wasn't always based on religious consideration. A rational and secular outlook was more important to prevalent social practices. E.g. medical opinion was cited as an aid to oppose child marriage.

Modernization

Blind adherence to western ideology wasn't practices but reform indigenous culture. Thus modernization not westernization was the aim.

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Abolition of Sati

- Influenced by the frontal attack launched by the enlightened Indian reformers led by Raja Rammohan Roy, the Government declared the practice of sad or the burning alive of widows is illegal and punishable by criminal courts as culpable homicide
- The regulation of 1829 was applicable in the first instance to Bengal Presidency alone, but was extended in slightly modified forms to Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1830.

Female Infanticide

- The practice of murdering female infants immediately after birth was common among upper class Bengalis and Rajputs who considered females to be an economic burden.
- But it was mainly due to the efforts of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), the principal of Sanskrit College, Calcutta that the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856, which legalized marriage of widows and declared issues from such marriages as legitimate, was passed by the Government.
- Vidyasagar cited Vedic texts to prove that the Hindu religion sanctioned widow remarriage.
- Jagannath Shankar Seth and Bhau Daji were among the active promoters of girls' schools in Maharashtra. Vishnu Shastri Pandit founded the Widow Remarriage Association in the 1850s. Another prominent worker in this field was Karsondas Mulji who started the Satya Prakash in Gujarati in 1852 to advocate widow remarriage.

Child Marriage

- The Native Marriage Act (or Civil Marriage Act) signified the coming of legislative action in prohibiting child marriage in 1872. It had a limited impact as the Act was not applicable to Hindus, Muslims and other recognised faiths.
- The relentless efforts of a Parsi reformer, B.M. Malabari, were rewarded, by the enactment of the Age of Consent Act (1891) which forbade the marriage of girls below the age of 12.
- The Sarda Act (1930) further pushed up the marriage age to 18 and 14 for boys and girls respectively. In free India, the Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 1978 raised the age of marriage for girls from 15 to 18 years and for boys from 18 to 21.

Factors which Undermined Caste Rigidities under British rule

- The pressure of British rule in India unleashed certain forces, sometimes through direct administrative measures and sometimes indirectly by creating favourable circumstances.
- For instance, the creation of private property in land and free sale of land upset caste equations.
- A close interlinks between caste and vocation could hardly continue in a state of destruction of village autarchy. Besides, modern commerce and industry gave birth to several economic avenues while growing urbanization and modern means of transport added to the mobility of populations.
- The British administration introduced the concept of equality before law in a., uniformly applied system of

law which dealt a severe blow to social and legal inequalities, while the judicial functions of caste panchayats were taken away.

- The administrative services were made open to all castes and the new education system was on totally secular lines.
- But the struggle against caste could not be successful during the British rule. The foreign government had its limitations it could not afford to invite hostile reaction from the orthodox sections by taking up any radical measures. Also, no social uplift was possible without economic and political upliftment.
- All this could be realized only under the government of a free India.

Raja Ram Raja Ram Mohan Roy: father of Indian Renaissance

- Title of Raja was given to him by Mughal Emperor Akbar – II.
- Established Brahma Samaj [initially the Atmiya Sabha] in 1828 to purify Hinduism and preach monotheism.
- He was called the first modern man of India. He was the pioneer of socio religious reforms.
- His Biggest Achievement - He helped Bentinck outlaw sati. He preached against female infanticide. He wanted equal rights for women and female education.
- His second most important contribution - He promoted western sciences and English education.

Roy was a gifted linguist He knew more than a dozen languages including Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. A knowledge of different languages helped him broad base his range of study.

As a pioneer in Indian journalism, Roy brought out journals in Bengali, Hindi, English, and Persian to educate and inform the public and represent their grievances before the Government.

He stood for cooperation of thought and activity and brotherhood among nations. His understanding of the international character of the principles of liberty, equality and justice indicated that he well understood the significance of the modern age.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

- The great scholar and reformer, Vidyasagar's ideas were a happy blend of Indian and western thought.
- He was determined to break the priestly monopoly of scriptural knowledge, and for this he opened the Sanskrit College to non-Brahmins. He introduced western thought in Sanskrit College to break the self-imposed isolation of Sanskrit learning.
- Vidyasagar started a movement in support of widow remarriage which resulted in legalization of widow remarriage. He was also a crusader against child marriage and polygamy.
- He was one of the pioneers of higher education for women in India.

Bal Shastri Jambekar

- He attacked brahminical orthodoxy and tried to reform popular Hinduism
- He started the weekly Darpan in 1832, Students' Literary and Scientific Societies also called the Gyan Prasarak Mandalis.

- They had two branches -Marathi and Gujarati-and were formed by some educated young men in 1848.
- These Mandalis organized lectures on popular sciences and social questions. One of their aims was to start schools for girls.

Paramhansa Mandalis

- The founders of these Mandalis believed in one God.
- They were primarily interested in breaking caste rules. At their meetings food cooked by lower caste people was taken by the members.
- These Mandalis also advocated widow remarriage and women's education.
- Henry Derozia and Young Bengal movement:
- Founder of young Bengal movement. His followers were derozians. They attacked idol worship, casteism and superstitions.
- Movement was more progressive than any other of that period. The derozians wrote poems about Nationalism and love of the country, such things were known before.

Swami Dayanand Saraswati

- He was founder of Arya Samaj. He believed Vedas were source of true knowledge. He advocated —Back to the Vedas.
- He attacked casteism, idol worship and child marriage. He attacked inter caste marriage and widow remarriage.
- He was first to put forth ideas like ‘Swadeshi’ and ‘India for Indians’ and hence was called ‘Martin Luther of Hinduism’.

Prathana Samaj

- It was an off shoot of Brahma Samaj. It was founded by Atmaram Pandurang in Bombay.
- It promoted inter dining, inter caste marriage, widow remarriage, upliftment of women and depressed classes.
- Justice Ranade was an integral part of it. He was also called Nyaymurti. He wrote the book Rise of Maratha Power. Poona Sarwajanik Sabha was started by him to criticize legislative and administrative decisions.

Swami Vivekananda

- Original name was Narendranath Dutta. He was the follower of Ramakrishna Paramhansa.
- He too was against superstitions and caste system.
- He founded Ramakrishna mission as a charitable and social organization.

Theosophical society

- Founded by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Alcott.
- The main objectives were to form a universal brotherhood of men and fight distinctions on grounds of race, religion, color, caste and creed. They also promoted study of ancient religion and philosophies.
- Annie Besant took over the leadership from Alcott. She founded the central Hindu school which later became Banaras Hindu University.

Jyoti Rao Phule

- He founded Satyasodhak Samaj to fight the caste system i.e. free lower caste from oppression of Brahmins. He pioneered widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra.

- He and his wife Savitribai Phule founded the first girl's school in Pune. His work was inspired by Thomas Paine.
- Called the Father of Indian Social Revolution.

Deoband School

- The orthodox sections of the Ulemas organized the Deoband movement.
- Its objective was to teach Muslims the lessons from Koran and Hadis for keeping alive the spirit of jihad amongst Muslims against foreign rulers. The liberal interpretations of Islam created a political awakening amongst Muslims.

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar

- Started Fergusson College and Deccan Education Society.
- Founder of Sudharak newspaper.

Baba Amte

- Started Anandvan, Bharat Jodo. Quit India movement.
- Campaigned for Narmada Bachao. He also worked for lepers.

Gopal Hari Deshmukh

- Popularly called Lokhitwadi. Believed that if religion sanctions evil then religion should be changed as it's a product of man. He said "If religion does not sanction social reform, then change religion."
- Started Shatpatre. Awarded title of Raobahadur.

Vinayak damodar Sawarkar:Known as Swatantraveer Sawarkar. Founded Abhinav Bharat [extremist] and Mitramela [moderates]. The Mitramela converted to Abhinav Bharat soon.

- Deported to Andaman and Nicobar

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar

- Also known as Babasaheb Ambedkar. The Father of the Indian Constitution.
- He established Bahishkrut Hitkarni Sabha [1924] for education of depressed classes and to uplift them socially and politically.
- He started Mooknayak periodical with help of Shahu Maharaja.
- Kalaram temple entry movement, burning of Manusmriti and Mahad water tank Satyagraha were highlights of his activism.
- He tried to pass the Hindu code bill to give freedom and equal rights to women. But as the bill was rejected he resigned and later went to Rajya Sabha.
- He founded independent labor party. He got doctorate in law from Columbia University.
- His biography is named —Waiting for a Visal.
- He converted to Buddhism in October and died in December 1956. He was awarded Bharat Ratna in 1990.

Vinoba Bhawe

- National teacher of India.
- Started Bhoodan movement. Ideological follower of Gandhiji.

Subhash Chandra Bose

- Popularly called 'Desha Nayak'. He was born in Odisha and selected in ICS. Upon Gandhiji's advice worked under CR Das and joined Khilafat and Non-cooperation movements. He went to Cambridge University.
- He called cancellation of the movement a national calamity. He became CEO of Calcutta Corporation and contested election of Bengal Congress. He also went to jail during civil disobedience movement.
- He criticized Gandhiji's ways and wanted Congress to take advantage of the WW-II; he was put under house arrest but escaped to Kabul. He sought USSR help for the freedom movement but USSR joined the allies and his plan failed.
- He started Azad Hind Radio with Nazi support. He went to Berlin to setup a Free India center of Indian POW's.
- He organized national planning committee to plan for development of India. This was forerunner to the planning commission.

Gopal K Gokhale and Lokmanya Tilak

Gokhale was a moderate leader and known as the "Socrates of Maharashtra". He was inspired by Ranade and Gandhiji called him his political guru. He founded the "Servants of India" society. The aim of the society was to train national missionaries for the service of India; to promote, by all constitutional means, the true interests of the Indian people; and to prepare a cadre of selfless workers who were to devote their lives to the cause of the country in a religious spirit. Tilak was known as the "father of Indian Unrest". He started the Home Rule League in Mumbai and also the Ganpati and Shivaji festivals in 1893.

Pandita Ramabai

She was a Brahmin woman but converted to Christianity to escape persecution from orthodox men. She was conferred the title "Pandita" by Kolkata University. She published book "Hindu High Caste Women". She opened Mukti Mission, Sharda Sadan and Arya Mahila Samaj where she helped widows and helpless women.

Vitthal Vamji Shinde

He was a social reformer who worked for equality to depressed classes. His ideas were influenced by Mahatma Phule. He established "Depressed class mission." His book "India's untouchability question". "Athvani va anubhav". "Bahishkrut Bharat".

Other leaders

VB Phadke: Father of Indian armed struggle.

- Phadke, a Chitpavan Brahman and a Commissariat Department clerk who had some English education, seems to have been influenced by Ranade's lectures on drain of wealth, the experience of the Deccan famine of 1876-77, and the growing Hindu revivalist mood among Poona Brahman intellectuals.
- In an autobiographical fragment written while hiding from the police in a temple, Phadke later recalled how he had thought of reestablishing a Hindu Raj by collecting together a secret band, raising money through dacoities, and instigating an armed revolt through disrupting communications.

- The outcome was a type of social banditry, with the dacoits given shelter by the peasants. After Phadke's capture and life sentence, a Ramoshi dacoit band under Daulata Ramoshi remained active till 1883, while we also hear of a tribal Koli group committing 28 dacoities in seven months.

Jagannath Shankar Shet

"Architect of Mumbai", "Justice of Peace", "Uncrowned emperor of Mumbai".

Seva Sadan

- A Parsi social reformer, M. Malabari, founded the Seva Sadan in 1885.
- The organisation specialized in taking care of use women who were exploited and then discarded by society.
- It catered to all castes and women with education, medical and welfare services.

Deva Samaj Founded in 1887

- Founded in 1887 at Lahore by Shiv Narain Agnihotri, this sect emphasised of the soul, the supremacy of the guru, and the need for good action.
- It called for an ideal social behaviour such as not accepting bribes, avoiding intoxicants and non-vegetarian and keeping away from violent actions.

Dharma Sabha

- Radhakant Deb founded this Sabha in 1830. An orthodox society, it stood for the preservation of the status quo in socio-religious matters, opposing even the abolition of sati.
- However, it favoured western education, even for girls.

Bharat Dharma

- Mahamandala An all-India organisation of the orthodox educated Hindus, it stood for a defence of orthodox Hinduism against the teachings of the Arya Samaj, the Theosophists, and the Ramakrishna Mission.
- Other organisations created to defend orthodox Hinduism were the Sanatana Dharma Sabha (1895), the Dharma Maha Parishad in South India, and Dharma Mahamandali in Bengal.
- These organisations combined in 1902 to form the single organisation of Bharat Dharma Mahamandala, with headquarters at Varanasi. This organisation sought to introduce proper management of Hindu religious institutions, open Hindu educational institutions, etc. Pandit Madan -Mohan Malaviya was a prominent figure in this movement.

Radha Swami Movement

- Tulsi Ram, a banker from Agra, also known as Shiv Dayal Saheb, founded this movement in 1861. The R. d. i, one supreme being supremacy of the Spiritual attainment, they believe does not call for renunciation of the worldly life.
- They consider all religions to be true. While the sect has no belief in temples, shrines and sacred places, it considers as necessary duties, works of faith and charity, service and prayer.

Indian National Social Conference Founded by M.G. Ranade and Raghunath Rao

- The conference met annually from its first session in Madras in 1887 at the same time and venue as the Indian National Congress.
- It focused attention on the social issues of importance; it could be called the social reform cell of the Indian National Congress, in fact.
- The conference advocated inter-caste marriages, opposed polygamy and kulinism. It launched the "Pledge Movement" to inspire people to take a pledge against child marriage.

Wahabi/Walliullah Movement

- Shah Waliullah (1702-62) inspired this essentially revivalist response to western influences and the degeneration which had set in among Indian Muslims.
- He was the first Indian Muslim leader of the 18th century to organize Muslims around the two-fold ideals of this movement:
- Desirability of harmony among the four schools of Muslim jurisprudence which had divided the Indian Muslims (he sought to integrate the best elements of the four schools)
- Recognition of the role of individual conscience in religion where conflicting interpretations were derived from the Quran and the Hadis.
- The movement fizzled out in the face of British military might in the 1870s.

Titu Mir's Movement

- Mir Nithar Ali, popularly known as Titu Mir, was a disciple of Sayyid Ahmed Raebareli, the founder of the Wahabi Movement.
- Titu Mir organized the Muslim peasants of Bengal against the Hindu landlords and the British indigo planters.
- The movement was not as militant as the British records made it out to be; only in the last year of Titu's life was there a confrontation between him and the British police. He was killed in action in 1831.

Faraizi Movement

- The movement, also called the Fara'idi Movement because of its emphasis on the Islamic pillars of faith, was founded by Haji Shariat-Allah. Its scene of action was East Bengal, and it aimed at the eradication of social evils among the Muslims of the region.
- The Fara'idis organized a paramilitary forces armed with clubs to fight the Hindu landlords and even the police. Dudu Mian was arrested several times, and his arrest in 1847 finally weakened the movement.

Ahmadiya Movement

- It was based on liberal principles. It described itself as the standard-bearer of Mohammedan Renaissance, and based itself, like the Brahma Samaj, on the principles of universal religion of all humanity, opposing jihad (sacred war against non-Muslims).
- The movement spread western liberal education among the Indian Muslims. However, the Ahmadiya Movement, like Baha'ism which flourished in the West Asian countries, suffered from mysticism.

Negative Aspects of Reform Movements

- One of the major limitations of these religious reform movements was that they had a narrow social base, namely the educated and urban middle classes, while the needs of vast masses of peasantry and the urban poor were ignored.
- The tendency of reformers to appeal to the greatness of the past and, to rely on scriptural authority encouraged mysticism and fostered pseudo-scientific thinking while exercising a check on full acceptance of the need for a modern scientific outlook.
- But, above all, these tendencies contributed, at least to some extent, in compartmentalizing Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Parsis, as also alienating high caste Hindus from low caste Hindus.
- An overemphasis on religious and philosophical, as aspects of heritage, got somewhat magnified by insufficient emphasis on other aspects of culture art, architecture, literature, music, science and technology.
- To make matters worse, the Hindu reformers showered their praise of the Indian past to its ancient period and looked upon the medieval period of Indian history (Rise of Islam) essentially as an era of decadence.
- This succeeded to create a notion of two separate peoples, on the one hand; on the other, an uncritical praise of the past was not acceptable to the low caste sections of society which had suffered under religiously sanctioned exploitation precisely during the ancient period.
- Moreover, the past itself tended to be placed into compartments on a partisan basis. Many in the Muslim middle classes went to the extent of turning to, the history of West Asia for their traditions and moments of pride.
- Religious movements failed to enter the phase of secular movements and continued in their old form appealing only to a particular religion.

English Education and its impact

- By the 1880s, the total number of English-educated Indians was approaching the 50,000 mark, if the number of matriculates may be taken as a rough indicator (only 5000 as yet had B.A. degrees).
- The number of those studying English went up fairly rapidly from 298,000 in 1887 to 505,000 in 1907, while the circulation of English-language newspapers climbed from 90,000 in 1885 to 276,000 in 1905.
- A 'microscopic minority', as the British never tired of pointing out (the literacy figures even in 1911 were only 1 per cent for English and 6 per cent for the vernaculars), this emerging social group enjoyed an importance far in excess of its size
- English education gave its beneficiaries a unique capacity to establish contacts on a country-wide scale. English educated government employees, lawyers, teachers, journalists or doctors worked fairly often outside their home regions.
- Western education did bring with it an awareness of world currents and ideologies, without which it would have been difficult to formulate conscious theories of nationalism.
- At the same time, the alienating and divisive effects of education through a foreign medium were evident

enough from the beginning, and have persisted right up to the present day.

Social and religious reforms movements and the expression of National Democratic Awakening

- The various socio reform and religious reform movements which took place in India during british rule were the expression of the rising national consciousness and spread of the liberal ideas of the west among the Indian people. These movements increasingly tended to have the national scope and programmer for reconstruction in the social and religious spheres.
- In the social spheres there were movements of caste reform and caste abolition, equal rights for women, a campaign against child marriage, and a ban on widow remarriage, a crusade against social and legal inequalities.
- In the religious spheres, there sprang up movement which combated religious superstitions and attacked idolatry, polytheism and hereditary priesthood.
- These movements, in varying degrees, emphasized and fought for the principles of individual liberty and social equality and stood for nationalism. So, in a sense, these movements provide a backbone for the mass awakening as far as freedom struggle were concerned.
- The reformers argued that such reforms are necessary to built up a sound national unity to achieve political freedom and social, economical and cultural advance of the Indian people. The national democratic awakening found expression in all fields of national life. In politics, it gave birth to the movement of administrative reform, self-government, Home rule, Dominion Status and finally Independence. In a social and religious sphere, Indian Nationalism proclaimed the principles of individual liberty, equality and self-determination. It attacked the undemocratic principle of birth and exclusive privileges based on birth, on which such institutions as castes were reared. Indian Nationalism was thus democratic in essence and, as such, struggled against both medievalism and foreign rule. The socio-reform and religious-reform movements were the expression of the national awakening in India and aimed at a revision of the medieval social structure and religious outlook on a more or less democratic basis, i.e. on the principle of individual liberty and human equality.
- The reform movements brought about remarkable changes in the society and religion. Initially, the great changes affected a small group of people but afterwards spread among large masses. The reform movements strengthened the Hindu and Muslim religions and made effort to remove social evils among them. The educated Indians started to think reasonably. The caste system began to lose its hold in the society and there was a significant achievement in the field of emancipation of women, some legal measures were also adopted to improve their status. The reform movements led to the mass awakening and strengthened the emotional, social and economic bond among Indians which provide as a great pillar to our fight for Independence. The individual realized the significance of the self as well as new responsibility towards society. The circumference of his society which had been limited to the family, the caste and the tribe now owe its allegiance to the Nation,

and in this way socio-religious reforms helped in mass awakening.

Conclusion

In India, many thinkers and reformers came forward to bring reforms in our society. According to them society and religion were interlinked. Both needed to be reformed to achieve positive growth and development of the country. Hence our reformers took the initiative to awaken the Indian masses. Most of the social practices were done in the name of religion. Hence, social reform had no meaning without religious reform. Our reformers were deeply rooted in Indian tradition and philosophy 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 amongst them questioned the popular religion which was full of superstitions and was exploited by the corrupt priests. The reformers wanted society to accept the rational and scientific approach. They also believed in the principle of human dignity and social equality of all men and women. All socio-religious reformers whether Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Parsis aimed at the spread of modern education. They believed that education was the most effective tool to awaken and modernize our society.

- The reform movements of India were able to create socio-religious consciousness among the Indians during the 19th century. All these movements laid stress on rational understanding of social and religious ideas and encouraged a scientific and humanitarian outlook. The reformers felt that modern ideas and culture could be best imbibed by integrating them into Indian cultural streams. The introduction of modern education guided the Indians towards a scientific and rational approach to life. All the movements worked to improve women's status and criticized the caste system especially the practice of untouchability. These movements looked for social unity and strived towards liberty, equality and fraternity. However, these reform movements had certain limitations. It affected a very small percentage of the population, mostly the educated class and could not reach the vast masses of the peasantry and urban poor who continued to live in the same conditions.

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