

Socio-Religious Reform Movements: General Features

Factors Giving Rise to Desire for Reform

The dawn of the nineteenth century witnessed the birth of a 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. This process of reawakening, sometimes, but not with full justification, defined 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 of daily existence in the whole of the Indian subcontinent as have the fruits of these reform movements.

■ Impact of British Rule

The presence of a colonial government on Indian soil played a complex, yet decisive role in this crucial phase of modern Indian history. The impact of British rule on Indian society and culture was widely different from what India had known before. Most of the earlier invaders, who had come to India settled within its frontiers, were either absorbed by its superior culture or interacted positively with it and had become part of the land and its people. However, the British conquest was different. It came at a time when India, in

contrast to an enlightened Europe of the eighteenth century affected in every aspect by science and scientific outlook, presented the picture of a stagnant civilisation and a static and decadent society.

■ Social Conditions Ripe for Reform

Religious and Social Ills

Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism. Hinduism had become steeped in magic and superstition. The priests exercised an overwhelming and, indeed, unhealthy influence on the minds of the people. Idolatry and polytheism helped to reinforce their position, and their monopoly of scriptural knowledge imparted a deceptive character to all religious systems. There was nothing that religious ideology could not persuade people to do.

Depressing Position of Women

Social conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. Attempts to kill female infants at birth were not unusual. Child marriage was another bane of society. The practice of polygamy prevailed and in Bengal, under Kulinism, even old men took very young girls as wives. Several women hardly had a married life worth the name, yet (at least among the higher castes) when their husbands died they were expected to commit sati which Raja Rammohan Roy described as a “murder according to every *shastra*”. If they escaped this social coercion, they were condemned to a life of misery and humiliation.

The Caste Problem

Another debilitating factor was caste. This entailed a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status. At the bottom of the ladder came the untouchables or scheduled castes, as they came to be called later. The untouchables suffered from numerous and severe disabilities

and restrictions. The system splintered people into numerous groups. In modern times it became a major obstacle in the growth of a united national feeling and the spread of democracy. It may also be noted that caste consciousness, particularly with regard to marriage, prevailed also among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs who also practised untouchability, though in a less virulent form. Under a rigid caste system, social mobility was checked, social divisions grew, and individual initiative was thwarted. Above all, the humiliation of untouchability—so much a part of the caste system—militated against human dignity.

■ **Opposition to Western Culture**

The establishment of colonial rule in India was followed by a systematic attempt to disseminate colonial culture and ideology as the dominant cultural current. Faced with the challenge of the intrusion of colonial culture and ideology, an attempt to reinvigorate traditional institutions and to realise the potential of traditional culture developed during the nineteenth century.

■ **New Awareness among Enlightened Indians**

The impact of modern Western culture and consciousness of defeat by a foreign power gave birth to a new awakening. There was an awareness that a vast country like India had been colonised by a handful of foreigners because of weaknesses within the Indian social structure and culture. For some time it seemed that India had lagged behind in the race of civilisation. This produced diverse reactions. Some English-educated Bengali youth developed a revulsion for Hindu religion and culture, gave up old religious ideas and traditions and deliberately adopted practices most offensive to Hindu sentiments, such as drinking wine and eating beef. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the rising tide of nationalism and democracy also found expression in movements to reform and democratise the social institutions and religious outlook of the Indian people. Factors such as 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 strengthened the resolve to reform.

The socio-cultural regeneration of the India of the nineteenth century was occasioned by the colonial presence, but not created by it.

Social and Ideological Bases of Reform

■ Middle Class Base

The social base of the regeneration seen in the nineteenth century was the newly emerging middle class and the educated (both traditionally educated and the Western educated) intellectuals, but there was a significant contrast between the broadly middle class ideals derived from a growing awareness of contemporary developments in the West, and a predominantly non-middle class social base.

The nineteenth century intelligentsia searched for its model in the European 'middle class', which, as it learnt through Western education, had brought about the great transformation in the West from medieval to modern times through movements like the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and democratic revolution or reform. However, the intelligentsia of nineteenth century India did not grow from trade or industry (which were firmly under the control of British agencies); their roots lay in government service or the professions of law, education, journalism or medicine—with which was often combined some connection with land in the form of the intermediate tenures.

■ The Intellectual Criteria

What gave these reform movements an ideological unity were rationalism, religious universalism and humanism. Rationalism was brought to judge social relevance. Raja Rammohan Roy firmly believed in the principle of causality linking the whole phenomenal universe and demonstrability as the sole criterion of truth. Akshay Kumar Dutt, while declaring that “rationalism is our only preceptor”, held that all natural and social phenomena could be analysed and understood by purely mechanical processes. They thus used a rational approach to study tradition; they evaluated the contemporary socio-religious practices from the standpoint of social utility and to replace faith with rationality. As a consequence, in the Brahmo Samaj the infallibility of the *Vedas* was repudiated, while the Aligarh movement emphasised reconciliation of Islamic teachings with the needs of the modern age. Syed Ahmed Khan went to the extent of emphasising that religious tenets were not immutable.

Many of the intellectuals set aside the authority of religion and evaluated truth in any religion by the criteria of logic, reason or science. According to Swami Vivekananda, the same method of investigation which applies to sciences should be the basis on which religion must justify itself. Although some reformers tended to appeal to faith and ancient authority to support their appeal, on the whole, a rational and secular outlook was very much evident in putting forward an alternative to prevalent social practices. Akshay Kumar Dutt, for instance, brought medical opinion to support his views against child marriage. Reference to the past was to be used only as an aid and an instrument. Neither a revival of the past nor a total break with tradition was envisaged.

Though the reformers tried to reform their religions, there was a universalistic aspect to their religious perspective. Raja Rammohan Roy considered different religions as national embodiments of universal theism. He defended the basic and universal principles of all religions—such as the monotheism

of the *Vedas* and unitarianism of Christianity—while attacking the polytheism of Hinduism and trinitarianism of Christianity. Syed Ahmed Khan said that all prophets had the same '*din*' (faith) and every country and nation had different prophets.

The social reformers used the universalist perspective to contend with the influence of religious identity on the social and political outlook of the people which was indeed strong.

A new humanitarian morality was embodied in the social reform movements which included the notion that humanity can progress and has progressed, and that moral values are ultimately those values which favour human progress. The humanist aspect of the religious reform movements was to be seen in the emphasis on the individual's right to interpret religious scriptures in the light of human reason and human welfare and in a general attack on priestly domination of religious practices.

Religious reformation was an important but not the exclusive concern of these movements. Attention was focussed on worldly existence and not on issues of salvation or other worldliness. Because of the strong religious element in social practices and the fact that religion was the dominant ideology of the times, it was not possible to undertake any social action without coming to grips with it.

These movements took into their ambit the entire cultural existence, the way of life. The evolution of an alternative cultural-ideological system and the regeneration of traditional institutions were two concerns of these movements. These concerns were manifest in the attempts to reconstruct traditional knowledge, the use and development of vernacular languages, creation of an alternative system of education, defence of religion, efforts to regenerate Indian art and literature, the emphasis on Indian dress and food, attempts to revitalise the Indian systems of medicine and to research the pre-colonial technology for its potential.

■ Two Streams

The reform movements could broadly be classified into two categories—the reformist movements like the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Aligarh Movement, and the revivalist movements like Arya Samaj and the Deoband movement. The reformist as well as the revivalist movement depended, to varying degrees, on an appeal to the lost purity of the religion they sought to reform. The only difference between one reform movement and the other lay in the degree to which it relied on tradition or on reason and conscience.

Direction of Social Reform

The humanistic ideals of social equality and the equal worth of all individuals which inspired the newly educated middle class influenced the field of social reform in a major way. The social reform movements were linked to the religious reforms primarily because nearly all social ills like untouchability and gender-based inequity derived legitimacy from religion in one way or the other. In later years, though, the social reform movement gradually dissociated itself from religion and adopted a secular approach. Moreover, earlier the reform movements had a rather narrow social base, being limited to the upper and middle classes and upper castes who tried to balance their modernised views and the existing social conditions. But later on, the social reform movements penetrated the lower strata of society to revolutionise and reconstruct the social sphere.

In the beginning, organisations such as the Social Conference, Servants of India Society and the Christian missionaries were instrumental in social reform along with many enlightened individuals like Jyotiba Phule, Gopalhari Deshmukh, K.T. Telang, B.M. Malabari, D.K. Karve, Sri Narayana Guru, E.V. Ramaswami Naicker and B.R. Ambedkar. In later years, especially with the onset of the twentieth century, the national movement provided the leadership and organisation for social reform.

To reach the masses, the reformers used the Indian languages to propagate their views. They used a variety of media—novels, dramas, poetry, short stories, the press and, in the 1930s and later on, the cinema—to spread their opinions.

Broadly, the social reform movements had a two-point agenda—fight for the betterment of status of women in society and fight to remove disabilities arising out of untouchability.

■ Fight for Betterment of Position of Women

The reformers had to work against great odds. Women were generally accorded a low status and were considered to be inferior adjuncts to men, with no identity of their own. They enjoyed no scope of giving expression to their talents as they were suppressed by practices such as *purdah*, early marriage, ban on widow-marriage, sati, etc. Both Hindu and Muslim women were economically and socially dependent on male relatives, while education was generally denied to them. The Hindu women did not enjoy the right to inherit property or to terminate an undesirable marriage. Muslim women could inherit property but only half as much as men could, while in matters of divorce there was no equality between men and women. Polygamy was prevalent among Hindus as well as Muslims.

Their glorification as wives and mothers was the only way in which society recognised the contribution of women as members of society. The improvement of the status of women in the society was considered to be vital, and social reformers worked towards this since a radical change in the domestic sphere—where initial socialisation of the individual takes place and where a crucial role is played by women—was the need of the hour. It was clearly understood that this change would translate into reformed homes and reformed men, and that no country whose females were sunk in

ignorance could ever make significant progress in civilisation.

The social reform movements, the freedom struggle, movements led by enlightened women themselves and, later, free India's Constitution have done much for the emancipation of women.

The reformers basically appealed to the doctrines of individualism and equality, and argued, to bolster their appeal, that true religion did not sanction an inferior status to women. They raised their voice against degrading customs such as polygamy, *purdah*, child marriage, restrictions on widow marriage, and worked relentlessly to establish educational facilities for women, to persuade the government to enact favourable legislations for women and in general to propagate the uselessness of medieval, feudal attitudes which required to be given up.

Steps taken to Ameliorate Women's Position

Because of the indefatigable efforts of the reformers, a number of administrative measures were adopted by the government to improve the condition of women.

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 *sati* illegal and punishable by criminal courts as culpable homicide. The regulation of 1829 (*Regulation XVII, A.D. 1829 of the Bengal Code*) was applicable in the first instance to Bengal Presidency alone, but was extended in slightly modified forms to Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1830.

Preventing Female Infanticide The practice of murdering female infants immediately after their birth was a common practice among upper class Bengalis and Rajputs who considered females to be an economic burden. The Bengal regulations of 1795 and 1804 declared infanticide illegal and equivalent to murder. An Act passed in 1870 made it compulsory for parents to register the birth of all babies and provided for verification of female children for some

years after birth, particularly in areas where the custom was resorted to in utmost secrecy.

Widow Remarriage The Brahmo Samaj had the issue of widow remarriage high on its agenda and did much to popularise it. 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, was passed; it legalised marriage of widows and declared issues from such marriages as legitimate. 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. Similar efforts were made by Professor D.K. Karve in western India and by Veerasalingam Pantulu in Madras. Karve himself married a widow in 1893. He dedicated his life to the upliftment of Hindu widows and became the secretary of the Widow Remarriage Association. He opened a widows' home in Poona to give the high caste widows an interest in life by providing them with facilities for vocational training. The right of widows to remarriage was also advocated by B.M. Malabari, Narmad (Narmadashankar Labhshankar Dave), Justice Govind Mahadeo Ranade and K. Natarajan among others.

Controlling Child Marriage The Native Marriage Act (or Civil Marriage Act), 1872 signified legislative action in prohibiting child marriage. 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.

Education of Women The Christian missionaries were the first to set up the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society in 1819. The Bethune School, founded by J.E.D. Bethune, president of the Council of Education in Calcutta in 1849 was the first fruit of the powerful movement for women's education that arose in the 1840s and 1850s. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was associated with no less than 35 girls' schools in Bengal and is considered one of the pioneers of women's education.

Charles Wood's Despatch on Education (1854) laid great stress on the need for female education. In 1914, the Women's Medical Service did a lot of work in training nurses and mid-wives. The Indian Women's University set up by Professor D.K. Karve in 1916 was one of the outstanding institutions imparting education to women. In the same year Lady Hardinge Medical College was opened in Delhi.

Health facilities began to be provided to women with the opening of Dufferin Hospitals in the 1880s.

Participation in the swadeshi and anti-partition and the Home Rule movements during the opening decades of the twentieth century was a major liberating experience for the otherwise home-centred Indian women. After 1918, they faced *lathis* and bullets and were jailed during political processions, picketing, etc. They actively participated in trade union and kisan movements, or revolutionary movements. They voted in, stood for and got elected to various legislatures and local bodies. Sarojini Naidu went on to become the president of the Indian National Congress (1925) and later the governor of the United Provinces (1947-49).

After 1920, aware and self-confident women led a women's movement. Many organisations and institutions such as the All India Women's Conference (established in 1927) came up.

Women's Organisations In 1910, Sarla Devi Chaudhurani convened the first meeting of the *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* in Allahabad. Considered as the first major Indian women's organisation set up by a woman, its objectives included promotion of education for women, abolition of the *purdah* system and improvement in the socio-economic and political status of woman all over India. Sarla Devi believed that the man working for women's upliftment lived 'under the shade of Manu'.

Ramabai Ranade founded the Ladies Social Conference (Bharat Mahila Parishad), under the parent organisation National Social Conference, in 1904 in Bombay.

Pandita Ramabai Saraswati founded the Arya Mahila Samaj to serve the cause of women. She pleaded for improvement in the educational syllabus of Indian women before the English Education Commission which was referred to Queen Victoria. This resulted in medical education for women which started in Lady Dufferin College. Later Ramabai Ranade established a branch of Arya Mahila Samaj in Bombay.

In 1925, the National Council of Women in India, a national branch of the International Council of Women, was formed. Mehribai Tata played a vital role in its formation and advancement. She opined that the *purdah* system, caste differences and lack of education prevented women from working to solve societal problems. Other women who held important positions on the executive committee of the council included Cornelia Sarabji, India's first lady barrister; Tarabai Premchand, wife of a wealthy banker; Shaffi Tyabji, a member of one of Mumbai's leading Muslim families; and Maharani Sucharu Devi, daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen. However, according to critics, the philanthropic style that was being followed by these women was that of upper-class English women.

The All India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded by Margaret Cousins in 1927, was perhaps the first women's

organisation with an egalitarian approach. Its first conference was held at Ferguson College, Pune. Important founding members included Maharani Chimnabai Gaekwad, Rani Sahiba of Sangli, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya and Lady Dorab Tata. Its objectives were to work for a society based on principles of social justice, integrity, equal rights and opportunities; and to secure for every human being, the essentials of life, not determined by accident of birth or sex but by planned social distribution. For this purpose, the AIWC worked towards various legislative reforms before and after India's independence, some examples being Sarda Act (1929), Hindu Women's Right to Property Act (1937), Factory Act (1947), Hindu Marriage and Divorce Act (1954), Special Marriage Act (1954), Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act (1956), the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women Act (1958), Maternity Benefits Act (1961), Dowry Prohibition Act (1961) and Equal Remuneration Act (1958, 1976).

■ Struggle Against Caste-Based Exploitation

The later-Vedic conception of four-fold division of Hindu society got further subdivided into numerous sub-castes due to racial admixture, geographical expansion and diversification of crafts which gave rise to new vocations.

The concept of Hindu *chaturvarnashrama* dictated that the caste of a person determined the status and relative purity of different sections of population. It was caste that determined who could get education or ownership of landed property, the kind of profession one should pursue, whom one could dine with or marry, etc. In general, caste decided a person's social loyalties even before birth. The dress, food, place of residence, sources of water for drinking and irrigation, entry into temples—all these were regulated by the caste factor.

The worst-hit by the discriminatory institution of caste were the 'untouchables' or the scheduled castes/dalits, as they came to be called later. The disabilities imposed on them

were humiliating, inhuman and based on the principle of inequality by birth.

Factors that Helped to Mitigate Caste-based Discrimination

- **British rule, perhaps without intention, created certain conditions that undermined caste consciousness to an extent.** British rule in India unleashed certain forces, sometimes through direct administrative measures and sometimes indirectly by creating suitable conditions. Though these measures had negative effects in one way, they had a positive effect too. For instance, the creation of private property in land and free sale of land upset caste equations. A close interlink between caste and vocation could not survive as village autarchy crumbled. Besides, modern commerce and industry gave rise to several economic avenues while growing urbanisation 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.

- **The social reform movements also strove to undermine caste-based exploitation.** From the mid-19th century onwards, numerous organisations and groups such as the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophists, the Social Conference and individuals worked to spread education among the untouchables and remove restrictions imposed on them from entering temples or using ponds, tanks, etc. Although many of them defended the *chaturvarna* system, they criticised untouchability. The social reformers attacked the rigid hereditary basis of caste distinctions and the law of *karma* which formed the basis of the religio-philosophic defence

of the undemocratic authoritarian caste institution. They called on people to work for betterment in the real world in which they lived, rather than strive for salvation after death. For instance, the Arya Samaj while crusading against the disintegration of Hindu society into myriad sub-castes, aimed at reconstructing it on the original four-fold division and upholding the right of even the lowest castes to study the scriptures.

● **The national movement took inspiration from the principles of liberty and equality against the forces which tended to divide the society.** The national leaders and organisations opposed caste privileges, fought for equal civic rights and free development of the individual. The caste divisions were diluted, although in a limited manner, because of mass participation in demonstrations, meetings and satyagraha struggles. The Congress governments in various provinces after 1937 did some useful work for the upliftment of the depressed classes; for instance, free education for Harijans ('untouchables') was introduced in some provinces. The rulers of states like Travancore, Indore and Devas took the initiative in opening all state temples by proclamation.

Gandhi always had in mind the objective of eradicating untouchability by root and branch. His ideas were based on the grounds of humanism and reason. He argued that the *Shastras* did not sanction untouchability and, even if they did, they should be ignored since truth cannot be confined within the covers of a book. In 1932, he founded the All India Harijan Sangh.

● **With increasing opportunities of education and general awakening, there were stirrings among the lower castes themselves.** This awakening gradually developed into a powerful movement in defence of their rights and against upper caste oppression. In Maharashtra, Jyotiba Phule, born in a low caste *Mali* family, led a movement against the brahminical domination of Hindu society. He accorded the

highest priority to education of lower castes, especially girls for whom he opened several schools.

Babasaheb Ambedkar, who had experienced the worst form of casteist discrimination during his childhood, fought against upper caste tyranny throughout his life. He organised the All India Scheduled Castes Federation, while several other leaders of the depressed classes founded the All India Depressed Classes Association. Ambedkar condemned the hierarchical and insular caste system as a whole, and advocated the annihilation of the institution of caste for the real progress of the nation. The struggle of the depressed classes led to the provision of special representation for these classes in the Government of India Act, 1935.

Others in the 1900s, such as the Maharaja of Kolhapur, encouraged the non-brahmin movement which spread to the southern states in the first decade of the twentieth century and was joined by the Kammas, Reddis, Vellalas (the powerful intermediate castes) and the Muslims.

During the 1920s in South India, the non-brahmins organised the Self-Respect Movement led by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker. There were numerous other movements demanding that the ban on the entry of lower castes into temples be lifted. Sri Narayana Guru in Kerala led a lifelong struggle against upper caste domination. He coined the slogan “one religion, one caste, one God for mankind”, which his disciple Sahadaran Ayyapan changed into “no religion, no caste, no God for mankind”.

Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar led the Mahad Satyagraha in March 1927 to challenge the regressive customs of the caste Hindus. He stressed the necessity of removing ideas of ‘high’ and ‘low’ and inculcating self-elevation through self-help, self-respect and self-knowledge. He led a procession of some 2,500 ‘untouchables’ through the town of Mahad to the Chawdar tank, a public source of water tank from which the untouchables were not allowed to draw water. Dr Ambedkar took water from the tank and drank it. There were huge

protests by caste Hindus. Later in December 1927, Ambedkar and his colleagues burnt the 'Manusmriti' at the same place as a gesture of getting rid of inequalities.

Dr Ambedkar established the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in 1924 to highlight the difficulties and grievances of the dalits before the government. Its motto was: 'Educate, Agitate and Organise'.

● **The Constitution of free India has made equality and non-discrimination on basis of caste imperative.** The struggle against caste discrimination 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 realised only under the government of a free India. The Constitution of free India abolishes untouchability and declares the endorsement of any disability arising out of untouchability as unlawful. It also forbids any restriction on access to wells, tanks, bathing *ghats*, hotels, cinemas, clubs, etc. In one of the Directive Principles, the Constitution has laid down that "the State shall strive to promote the welfare of the people by securing and protecting as effectively as it may a social order in which justice—social, economic and political—shall inform all the institutions of the national life".

Views

Nationalist power to stir up discontent would be immensely increased if every cultivator could read.

—Bombay Governor

[in a private letter to the Viceroy (1911)]

The rising middle classes were politically inclined and were not so much in search of a religion; but they wanted some cultural roots to cling on to...that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced.

—Jawaharlal Nehru

The dead and the buried are dead, buried and burnt once for all and the dead past cannot, therefore, be revived except by a reformation of the old materials into new organised forms.

—Mahadeo Govind Ranade

Unfortunately, no brahmin scholar has so far come forward to play the part of a Voltaire who had the intellectual honesty to rise against the doctrines of the Catholic church in which he was brought up...A Voltaire among the brahmins would be a positive danger to the maintenance of a civilisation which is contrived to maintain brahminic supremacy.

—B.R. Ambedkar

Untouchability question is one of life and death for Hinduism. If untouchability lives, Hinduism perishes, and even India perishes; but if untouchability is eradicated from the Hindu heart, root and branch, then Hinduism has a definite message for the world.

—M.K. Gandhi

I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave.

—M.K. Gandhi

Summary

- **Factors which gave Rise to Reform Movements**

Presence of colonial government on Indian soil.

Various ills plaguing Indian society—obscurantism, superstition, polytheism, idolatry, degraded position of women, exploitative caste hierarchy.

Spread of education and increased awareness of the world.

Impact of modern Western culture and consciousness of defeat by a foreign power.

Rising tide of nationalism and democracy during the late 19th century.

- **Social Base**

Emerging middle class and Western-educated intellectuals.

- **Ideological Base**

Rationalism, religious universalism, humanism, secularism.

- **Social Reform Components**

Betterment of Position of Women Degraded position due to
Purdah system
Early marriage
Lack of education
Unequal rights in marriage, divorce, inheritance
Polygamy
Female infanticide
Restrictions on widow remarriage
Sati

- **Major Contributors to Reforms**

Social reform movements, freedom struggle, movements led by enlightened women, free India's Constitution.

- **Legislative Measures for Women**

Bengal Regulation (1829) banning sati
Bengal Regulations (1795, 1804)—declaring infanticide illegal.
Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, 1856.
Age of Consent Act, 1891
Sarda Act, 1930
Special Marriage Act, 1954
Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
Hindu Succession Act, 1956
Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act
Maternity Benefits Act, 1961
Equal Remuneration Act, 1976
Child Marriage Restraint (Amendment) Act, 1978
Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act in Women and Girls, 1956 (amended in 1986)
Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961 (amended in 1986)

- **Struggle Against Caste-based Exploitation**

- **Factors Undermining Caste Rigidities**

Forces unleashed by colonial administration
Social reform movements
National movement
Gandhi's campaign against untouchability
Stirrings among lower castes due to better education and employment
Free India's Constitution