

CHAPTER XIII

Growth of New India Religious and Social Reform After 1858

THE rising tide 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. 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. Keshub Chandra Sen, for example, said:

What we see around us today is a fallen nation—a nation whose primitive greatness lies buried in ruins. Its national literature and science, its theology and philosophy, its industry and commerce, its social prosperity and domestic simplicity and sweetness, are almost numbered with the things that were. As we survey the mournful and dismal scene of desolation—spiritual, social and intellectual—which spreads around us, we in vain try to recognise there the land of Kalidas—the land of poetry, of science, and of civilization

Similarly, Swami Vivekananda described the condition of Indian people in the following words:

Moving about here and there emaciated figures of young and old in tattered rags, whose faces bear deep-cut lines of the despair and poverty of hundreds of years; cows, bullocks, buffaloes common everywhere—aye, the same melancholy look in their eyes, the same feeble physique, on the wayside, refuse and dirt;—this is our present day India! Worn-out huts by the very side of palaces, piles of refuse in the near proximity of temples, the Sannyasin clad with only a little loin cloth, walking by the gorgeously dressed, the pitiful gaze of lustreless eyes of the hunger-stricken at the well-fed and the amply-provided;—this is our native land! Devastation by violent plague and cholera; malaria eating into the very vitals of the nation; starvation and semi-starvation as second nature; death-like famine often dancing its tragic dance; „A conglomeration of three hundred million souls, resembling men only in appearance;—crushed out of life by being down-trodden

by their own people and foreign nations...—without any hope, without any past, without any future...of a malicious nature befitting a slave, to whom the property of their fellowman is unbearable;—...licking the dust of the feet of the strong, withal dealing a death-blow to those who are weak;—full of ugly, diabolical superstitions which come naturally to those who are weak, and hopeless of the future;— without any standard of morality as their backbone;—three hundred millions of souls such as these are swarming on the body of India, like so many worms on a rotten, stinking carcass;—this is the picture concerning us, which naturally presents itself to the English official!

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.

RELIGIOUS REFORM

Filled with the desire to adapt their society to the requirements of the modern world of science, democracy, and nationalism, and determined to let no obstacles stand in the way, thoughtful Indians set out to reform their traditional religions. While trying to remain true to the foundations of their religions, they remodelled them to suit the new needs of the Indian people.

Brahmo Samaj

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, by basing it on the worship of one God and on the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads, and by incorporating the best aspects of modern western thought. Most of all it based itself on human reason which was to be the ultimate¹ 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. Thus the Brahmos were basically opposed to idolatry, and superstitious practices and rituals,—in fact the entire Brahmanical system; they could worship one God without the Mediation of the priests.

The Brahmos were also great social reformers. They actively opposed the caste system, child-marriage and supported the general uplift of women, including widow remarriage, and the spread of modern education to men and women.

The 'Brahmo' Samaj was weakened by internal dissensions in the second half of the 19th century. Moreover its influence was confined mostly to urban educated groups. Yet it had a decisive influence on the intellectual, social, cultural, and political life of Bengal and the rest of India in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Religious Reform in Maharashtra

Religious reform was begun in Bombay in 1840 by the Paramahansa 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', who wrote in Marathi, made powerful rationalist attacks on Hindu orthodoxy, and preached religious and social equality. For example, he wrote in the 1840's:

The priests are vefy unholy because they repeat things without understanding their meaning and profanely reduce knowledge to such repetition. The Pandits arc worse than priests; because they are more ignorant and also are haughty.... Who are the *brahmins* and in what respects to do they differ from us? Have they twenty hands and do we lack something in us?. When such questions are now asked the *brahmins* should give up their foolish concepts; they must accept that all men are equal and every body has a right to acquire knowledge.

Later the Prarthana Samaj was started with the aim of reforming Hindu religious thought and practice in the light of modern knowledge. It preached the worship of one God and tried to free religion of caste orthodoxy and priestly domination. Two of its great leaders were R.G. Bhandarkar, the famous Sanskrit scholar and historian, and Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901). It was powerfully influenced by the Brahmo Samaj. Its activities also spread to South India as a result of the efforts of the Telugu reformer, Viresalingam. One of the greatest rationalist thinkers of modern India, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, also lived and worked in Maharashtra at this time. Agarkar was an advocate of the power of human reason. He sharply criticised any blind dependence on tradition or false glorification of India's past.

Ramakrishna and Vivekananda

Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1834-1886) was a saintly person who sought religious salvation in the traditional ways of renunciation, meditation, and devotion. 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. Knowledge unaccompanied by action in the actual world in which we lived was useless, he said. He too, like his guru, proclaimed the essential oneness of all religions and condemned any narrowness in religious matters. Thus, he wrote in 1898, "For our own motherland a junction of the two great systems,

Hinduism and Islam... is the only hope." At the same time, he was convinced of the superior approach of the Indian philosophical tradition.

He himself subscribed to *Vedanta* which he declared to be a fully rational system.

Vivekananda criticised Indians for having lost touch with the rest of the world and become stagnant and mummified.

He wrote; "The fact of our isolation from all other nations of the world is the cause of our degeneration and its only remedy is getting back into the current of the rest of the world. Motion is the sign of life."



Vivekananda

Vivekananda condemned the caste system and the current Hindu emphasis on rituals, ceremonies, and superstitions, and urged the people to imbibe the spirit of liberty, equality, and free-thinking. -Thus he bluntly remarked:

There is a danger of our religion getting into the kitchen. We are neither Vedantists, most of us now, nor Paurams, nor Tantrics. We are just "don't touchists". Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is in the cooking-pot, and our religion is "Don't touch me, I am holy". If this goes on for another century, everyone * "Tus will be in a lunatic asylum.

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Regarding liberty of thought, he said:

Liberty in thought and action is the only condition of life, growth and well being: Where it does not exist, the man, the race, and the nation must go down.

Like his guru, Vivekananda was also a great humanist. Shocked by the poverty, misery and suffering of the common people of the country, he wrote:

The only God in whom I believe, the sum total of all souls, and above all, my God the wicked, my God the afflicted, my God the poor of all races.

To the educated Indians, he said:

So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold everyman a traitor, who having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them.

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 or social service.

Swami Dayanand and Arya Samaj

The Arya Samaj undertook the task of reforming Hindu religion in North India. It was founded in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati

(1824-1883). Swami Dayanand believed that selfish and ignorant priests had perverted Hindu religion with the aid of the Puranas which he said were full of false teachings. For his own inspiration, Swami Dayanand went to the Vedas which he regarded as infallible, i.e., being the inspired word of God, and the fount of all knowledge. „He rejected all later religious thought if it conflicted with the Vedas. This total dependence on the Vedas .•



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 interpreted, by himself and others,

Dayanand< , and their inf

who were human beings. Thus individual reason was the decisive factor. He believed that every person had 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 surprisingly 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 the problems of men as they lived in this real world and away from the traditional belief in the other world. He also favoured the study of western sciences. Interestingly enough, Swami Dayanand had met and had had discussions with Keshub Chandra Sen, Vidyasagar, Justice Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and other modern religious and social reformers. In fact, the idea of the Arya Samaj with its Sunday meeting resembled the practices of Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj in this respect.

Some of Swami Dayanand's followers later started a network of schools and colleges in the country to impart education on western lines. Lala Hansraj played a leading part in this effort. On the other hand, in 1902, Swami Shradhananda started the Gurukul near Hardwar to propagate the more traditional ideals of education.

The Arya Samajists were vigorous advocates of social reform and worked actively to improve the condition of women, and to spread education among them. They fought untouchability and the rigidities of the hereditary caste system. They were thus advocates of social equality and promoted social solidarity and consolidation. They also inculcated a spirit of self-respect and self-reliance among the people. At the same time, one of the Arya Samaj's objectives was to prevent the conversion of Hindus to other religions. This led it to start a crusade against other religions.

| This crusade became a contributory factor in the growth of communal*ism in India in the 20th century. While the Arya Samaj's reformist work tended to unite people> its religious work tended, though perhaps unconsciously, to divide the growing national unity among Hindus, Muslims, i Parsis, Sikhs, and .Christians. It was not seen clearly that in India national unity had to be secular and above religion so that it would embrace people of all religions.

j Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded in the United States by Madam | H. P. Blavatsky and Colonel H.S. Olcott, who later came to India and founded the headquarters of the Society at Adyar near Madras in 1886.)

, The Theosophist movement soon grew in India as a result of the leadership given to it by Mn. Annie Besant who had come to India in 1893. The Theosophists advocated the revival and strengthening of the ancient religions of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. They recognised the doctrine of the transmigration of the soyl. 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 religions and philosophical tradition. This helped Indians recover their self-confidence, even though it tended to give them a sense of false pride in their past greatness.

One of Mrs. Besant's many achievements in India was the establishment of the Central Hindu School at Benaras which was later developed by Pt. Mahananda Malaviya into the Benaras Hindu University.

Sayyid 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 Muhammedan 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 Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). He was tremendously impressed by modern scientific thought and worked all his life to reconcile it with Islam. This he did, first of all, by declaring that the Quran alone was the authoritative work for Islam and all other Islamic writings were secondary. Even the Quran he interpreted in the light of contemporary rationalism and science. In his view any interpretation of the Quran that conflicted with human reason, science or nature was in reality a misinterpretation. All his life he struggled against blind obedience to tradition, dependence on custom, ignorance and irrationalism. He urged the people to develop a critical approach and freedom of thought. "So long as freedom of thought is not developed, there can be no civilized life," he declared. He also warned against fanaticism, narrow-mindedness, and exclusiveness, and urged students and others to be broadminded and tolerant. A closed mind, he said, was the hallmark of social and intellectual backwardness. Praising the study of world classics, he remarked:

The student will learn to appreciate the temper with which great minds approach the consideration of great questions, he will discover that truth is many-sided, that it is not identical or merely coextensive with individual opinion and that world is a good deal wider than his own sect, society, or class.

Sayyid 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 1875 he founded at Aligarh the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College as a centre for spreading western sciences and culture. Later, this College grew into the Aligarh Muslim University.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a great believer in religious toleration. He believed

that all religions had a certain underlying unity which could be called practical morality. Believing that a person's religion was his or her private affair, he roundly condemned any sign of religious bigotry in personal relations. He was also opposed to communal friction. Appealing to Hindus and Muslims to unite, he said in 1883:

Now both of us live on the air of India, drink the hot waters of the Ganga and Jumna. We both feed upon (the products of the Indian soil. We are together in life and death, living in India both of us have changed our blood, the colour of our bodies has become the same, our features have become similar; the Muslims have adopted numerous Hindu customs, the Hindus have accepted many Muslim traits of conduct, we became so fused that we developed the new language of Urdu, which was neither our language nor that of the Hindus. Therefore, if we except that part of our lives which belongs to God, then undoubtedly in consideration of the fact that we both belong to the same country, we are a nation, and the progress and welfare of the country, and both of us, depend on our unity, mutual sympathy, and love, while our mutual disagreement, obstinacy and opposition and ill-feeling are sure to destroy us.

Moreover, Hindus, Parsis and Christians had freely contributed to the funds of his college whose doors were also open to all Indians. For example, in 1898, there were 64 Hindu and 285 Muslim students in the college. Out of the seven Indian teachers/two were Hindu, one of them being Professor of Sanskrit. However, towards the end of his life, he began to talk of Hindu domination to prevent his followers from joining the rising national movement. This was unfortunate, though basically, he was not a communalist. He only wanted the backwardness of the Muslim middle and upper classes to go. His politics were the result of his firm belief that immediate political progress was not possible because the British Government could not be easily dislodged. On the other hand, any hostility by the officials might prove dangerous to the educational effort which he saw as the need of the hour. He believed that only when Indians had become as modern in their thinking and actions as the English were could they hope to successfully 'challenge foreign rule. He therefore advised all Indians and particularly the educationally backward Muslims to remain aloof from politics for some time to come. The time for politics he said had not yet come. In fact, he had become so committed to his college and the cause of education that he was willing to sacrifice all other interests to them. Consequently, to prevent the orthodox Muslims from opposing his college, he virtually gave up his agitation in favour of religious reform. For the same reason, he would not do anything to offend the government and, on the other hand, encouraged communalism and separatism. This was, of course, a serious political error, which was to have harmful consequences in later years. Moreover, some of his followers deviated from his broadmindedness and tended later to glorify Islam and its past while criticising other religions.

Sayyid Ahmad's reformist zeal also embraced the social sphere. He urged Muslims to give up medieval customs and ways of thought and behaviour. In particular he wrote in favour of raising the women's status in society and advocated removal of *purdah* and spread of education among women. He also

condemned the customs of polygamy and easy divorce.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was helped by a band of loyal followers who are collectively described as the Aligarh School. Chiragh Ali, the Urdu poet Altaf Husain Hali, Nazir Ahmad, and Maulana Shibli Nomani were some of the other distinguished leaders of the Aligarh School.

Muhammad Iqbal

One of the greatest poets of modern India, Muhammad Iqbal (1876- 1938) also profoundly influenced through his poetry the philosophical and religious outlook of the younger generation of Muslims as well as of Hindus. Like Swami Vivekananda, he emphasised the need for constant change and ceaseless activity and condemned resignation, contemplation, and quiet contentment. He urged the adoption of a dynamic outlook that would help change the world. He was basically a humanist. In fact he raised human action to the status of a prime virtue. Man should not submit to nature or powers that be, he said, but should control this world through constant activity. Nothing was more sinful in his eyes than the passive acceptance of things as they were. Condemning ritualism, asceticism, and otherworldly attitude, he urged men to work for and achieve happiness in this world of the living. In his earlier poetry, he extolled patriotism, though later he encouraged Muslim separatism.

Religious Reform among the Parsis

Religious reform, was begun among the Parsis in Bombay in the middle of the 19th century. In 1851, the Rehnum&i Mazdayasan Sabha or Religious Reform Association was started by jNaoroji Furdonji, Dadabhai¹ Naoroji, S.S. Bengalee, and others. It campaigned against the entrenched orthodoxy in the religious field*.and initiated the modernisation, of Parsi social customs regarding the education of women, marriage and the social position of women in general. In course of time, the Parsis became socially themost westernised section of Indian society.

Religious Reform among the Sikhs

Religious reform among the Sikhs was begun at the end of the 19th century when the Khalsa College was started at Amritsar. But the reform effort gained momentum after 1920 when the Akah Movement rose in the Punjab. The main aim of the Akalis was to purify the management of the *gurudwctras* or Sikh shrines, These *gurudwaras* had been heavily endowed with land and money by devout Sikhs, But they had come to be managed autocratically by corrupt and selfish *mahanis*. The Sikh masses led by the Akalis started in 1921 a powerful Satyagraha against the *mahanis* and the Government which came to their aid. The Akalis soon forced the Government to pass a new Sikh Gurudwaras Act in 1922 which was later amended in 1925. Sometimes with the aid of this Act, but often through direct action, the Sikhs gradually turned out of the *gurudwaras* the corrupt *mahants*, even though hundreds of lives had to be sacrificed in the process.

Apart from the reform movements and individual reformers discussed above, there were numerous other similar movements and individuals during the 19th and 20th centuries.

The religious reform movements of modern times had an underlying unity—most of them were based on the twin doctrines of Reason (Rationalism) and Humanism, though they also sometimes tended to appeal to faith and ancient authority to bolster their appeal. Moreover, it was to the rising middle classes, whose aspirations they expressed, that they appealed most. They tried to free from anti-intellectual religious dogmas and blind faith the human intellect's capacity to think and reason. They opposed the ritualistic, superstitious, irrational, and obscuranist elements in Indian religions. Many of them abandoned, though with varying degrees, the principle of authority in religion and evaluated truth in any religion or its holy books by its conformity to logic, reason, or science. Swami Vivekananda said.

Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason through which every science justifies itself? Are (the same methods of investigation which apply to the sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of religion? In my opinion, this must be so, and I am also of opinion that the sooner this is done the better.

Some of these religious reformers appealed to tradition and claimed that they were merely reviving the pure doctrines, beliefs, and practices of the past. But, in fact, the past could not be revived. Often there was

no agreed picture of the past. The problems that an appeal to the past often created were posed as follows by Justice Ranade, who had himself often asked people to revive the best traditions of the past:

What shall we revive? Shall we revive the old habits of our people when the most sacred of our castes indulged in all the abominations, as we now understand them, of animal food and intoxicating drink? Shall we revive the twelve forms of sons, or eight forms of marriage, which included capture, and recognised mixed and illegitimate intercourse?... Shall we revive the hecatomb's of animals sacrificed from year's end to year's end, in which even human-beings were not spared as propitiatory offerings to God?... Shall we revive the *sail*, and infanticide custom*?

And he came to the conclusion that the society as a living organism is constantly changing and can never go back to the past. "The dead and the buried or burnt are dead, buried, and burnt once for all, and the dead past cannot, therefore, be revived," he wrote. Every reformer, who appealed to the past, so interpreted it as to make it appear to agree with the reforms he was suggesting. Often the reforms and the outlook were new, only their justification was based on an appeal to the past. Many of the ideas which conflicted with the modern scientific knowledge were usually declared to be a later accretion or misinterpretation. And since the orthodox could not accept this view, the religious reformers came into conflict with the orthodox sections and became, at least in the beginning, religious and social rebels. For example, this is what Lala Lajpat Rai writes regarding the orthodox opposition to Swami Dayanand:

The amount of obloquy and persecution to which Swami Dayanand was exposed in his lifetime may be gathered from the fact that numerous attempts were made on his life by the orthodox Hindus; assassins* were hired to kill him, missiles were thrown at him during his lectures and disputation; he was called a hired emissary of the Christians, an apostate, an atheist, and so on.

Similarly, Sayyid Ahmed Khan aroused the anger of the traditionalists. They abused him, issued *futwas* (religious decrees) against him and even threatened his life.

The humanist aspect of the religious reform movements was expressed in the general attack on priesthood and rituals and the emphasis on- the individual's right to interpret religious scriptures in the light of human reason and human welfare. A significant feature of humanism was expressed in a new humanitarian morality which included the notion that humanity can progress and has progressed and that moral values are, ultimately, those which favour human progress. The social reform movements were an embodiment of this new humanitarian morality.

Apart from purely religious considerations, these religious reform movements fostered among Indians greater self-respect, self-confidence, and pride in their country. By interpreting their religious past in modern rational terms and by weeding out many of the corrupting and irrational elements from the 19th century religious beliefs and practices, the reformers enabled their followers to meet the official taunt that their religions and society were decadent and inferior. As Jawaharlal Nehru has put it:

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, something that gave them assurance of their own worth, something that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced.

The religious reform movements helped many Indians to come to terms with the modern world. In fact they arose to recast the old religions into a new modern mould to suit the needs of new social groups of society. Thus pride in the past did not prevent Indians from accepting the essential superiority of the modern world in general and modern science in particular. Of course, some people insisted that they were merely going back to the original, most ancient scriptures which, were suitably interpreted. As a result of the reformed outlook, many Indians began to acquire a modern, this worldly, secular and national outlook in place of a narrow outlook dominated by considerations of caste and religion, though the latter tendency by no means came to an end. Moreover, more and more people began to think in terms of promoting their physical and cultural welfare in this world in place of passively accepting their lot and waiting for improvement in life after death. These movements also to some extent ended India's cultural and intellectual isolation from the rest of the world and enabled Indians to share in the stream of world ideas. At the same time, they were no longer bewitched by everything in the West. In fact, those who copied the West blindly were increasingly looked down upon.

Two negative aspects of the religious reform movements may also be noted. Firstly, all of them catered to the needs of a small percentage of the population—the urban middle and upper classes. None of them could reach the vast masses of the peasantry and the urban poor, who continued by and large to lead their lives in the traditional, custom-ridden ways. This was because they basically gave voice to the urges of the educated and urban strata of Indian society.

The second limitation, which later became a major negative factor, was the tendency to look backward, appeal to past greatness, and to rely on scriptural authority. These tended to go against the positive Teachings of the reform movements themselves. They undermined to some extent the supremacy of human reason and scientific outlook. They encouraged mysticism in new garbs, and fostered pseudo-scientific thinking. Appeals to past greatness created false pride and smugness, while the habit of finding a 'Golden Age' in the past acted as a check on the full acceptance of modern science and hampered the effort to improve the present. But, most of, all these tendencies tended to divide Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis as also high caste Hindus from low caste Hindus. Any overemphasis on religion in a country containing many religions was bound to have a divisive effect. Moreover, the reformers put a one-sided emphasis on the religious and philosophical aspects of the cultural heritage. These aspects were, moreover, not a common heritage of all people. On the other hand, art and architecture, literature, music, science and technology etc., in which all sections of people had played an equal role were not sufficiently emphasised. In addition, the Hindu reformers invariably confined their praise of the Indian past to its ancient period. Even a broad-minded man like Swami Vivekananda talked of the Indian spirit or India's past achievements in this sense alone. These reformers looked upon the medieval period of Indian history as essentially an era of decadence. This was not only unhistorical but also socially and politically harmful. It

tended to create the notion of two separate peoples. Similarly an uncritical praise of the ancient period and religions could not be fully acceptable to the persons coming from lower castes who had for centuries suffered under the most destructive caste oppression which had developed precisely during the ancient period. The result of all these factors was that instead of all Indians taking an equal pride in their past material and cultural achievements and deriving inspiration from them, the past became a heritage of the few. Moreover the past itself tended to be torn 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. Increasingly, Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Parsis, and later on lower-caste Hindus who had been influenced by the reform movements tended to be different from one another. On the other hand, the Hindu and Muslim masses who followed traditional ways untouched by the reform movements still lived in harmony, practising their different religious rituals. To some extent the process of the evolution of a composite culture that had been going on for centuries received a check, though in other sphere national unification of the Indian people was accelerated. The evil aspects of this phenomenon became apparent when it was found that, along with rapid rise of national consciousness, another consciousness—communal consciousness—had begun to rise among the middle classes. Many other factors were certainly responsible for the birth of communalism in modern times; but, undoubtedly the nature of religious reform movements also contributed towards it.

SOCIAL REFORM

The major effect of national awakening in the 19th century was seen in the field of social reform. The newly educated persons increasingly revolted against rigid social conventions and out-dated customs. They could no longer tolerate irrational and dehumanising social practices. In their revolt they were inspired by the humanistic ideals of social equality and the equal worth of all individuals.

Nearly all the religious reformers contributed to the social reform movement. This was because the backward features of Indian society, such as the caste system or inequality of sexes, had had religious sanctions in the past. In addition, certain other organisations like the Social Conference, Servants of India Society, and the Christian missionaries worked actively for social reform. Many prominent persons—Jotiba Govind Phule, Oopal Hari Deshmukh, Justice Ranade, K. T. Telang, B.M. Malabari, D.K. Karve, Sasipada Banerjee, B.C. Pal, Viresalingam, and B. R. Ambedkar, and many others—also played an important role. In the 20th century, and especially after 1919, the national movement became the main propagator of social reform. Increasingly, the reformers took recourse to propaganda in the Indian languages to reach the masses. They also used novels, dramas, poetry, short stories, the press, and, in the thirties, the films to spread their views.

While social reform was linked with religious reform in some cases during the 19th century, in later years it was increasingly secular in approach. Moreover, many people who were orthodox in their religious approach participated in it.

Similarly, in the beginning social reform had largely been the effort of newly educated Indians belonging to higher castes to adjust their social behaviour to the requirements of modern western culture and values. But gradually it penetrated down to the lower strata of society and began to revolutionise and reconstruct the social sphere. In time the ideas and ideals of the reformers won almost universal acceptance and are today enshrined in the Indian Constitution.

The social reform movements tried in the main to achieve two objectives: (a) emancipation of women and extension of equal rights to them; and (b) removal of caste rigidities and in particular the abolition of untouchability.

Emancipation of Women

For countless centuries women in India had been subordinated to men and socially oppressed. The various religions practised in India as well as the personal laws based on them consigned women to a status inferior to that of men. The condition of upper class women was in this respect worse than that of peasant women. Since the latter worked actively in the fields alongside men, they enjoyed relatively greater freedom of movement and in some respects a better status in the family than the upper class women. For example, they seldom observed *purdah* and many of them had the right to remarry. The traditional view often praised the role of women as wives and mothers but as individuals they were assigned a very lowly social position. They were supposed to have no personality of their own apart from their ties to their husbands. They could not find any other expression to their inborn talents or desires except as housewives. In fact, they were seen as just adjuncts to men. For example, a woman could only marry once among Hindus, a man was permitted to have more than one wife. Among Muslims too this custom of polygamy prevailed. In large parts of the country women had to live behind the *purdah*. The custom of early marriage prevailed, and even children of eight or nine were married. The widows could not remarry and had to lead an ascetic and restricted life. In many parts of the country, the horrifying custom of *sati* or self-immolation of widows prevailed. Hindu women had no right to inherit property, nor did they enjoy the right to terminate an undesirable marriage. Muslim women could inherit property but only half as much as a man could; and in the matter of divorce even theoretically there was no equality between husband and wife. In fact, Muslim women dreaded divorce. The social position of Hindu and Muslim women as well as their values were similar. Moreover, in both cases they were economically and socially totally dependent on men. Lastly, the benefit of education was denied to most of them. In addition, women were taught to accept their subjection and even to welcome it as a badge of honour. It is true that occasionally women of the character and personality of Razia Sultana, Chand Bibi, or Ahilyabai Holkar arose in India. But they were exceptions to the general pattern, and do not in any way change the picture.

Moved by the humanitarian and egalitarian impulses of the 19th century, the social reformers started a powerful movement to improve the position of women. While some reformers appealed to doctrines of individualism and equality, others

declared that true Hinduism or Islam or Zoroastrianism did not sanction the inferior status of women and that true religion assigned them a high social position.

Numerous individuals, reform societies, and religious organisations worked hard to spread education among women, to encourage widow remarriage, to improve the living conditions of widows, to prevent marriage of young children, to bring women out of the *pardah*, enforce monogamy, and to enable middle class women to take up professions or public employment. After the 1880's, when Dufferin hospitals, named after Lady Dufferin, the wife of the Viceroy, were started, efforts were made to make modern medicine and child delivery techniques available to Indian women.

The movement for the liberation of women received a great stimulus from the rise of the militant national movement in the 20th century. Women played an active and important role in the struggle for freedom. They participated in large numbers in the agitation against the partition of Bengal and in the Home Rule movement. After 1918 they marched in political processions, picketed shops selling foreign cloth and liquor, spun and propagated *khadi*, went to jail in the non-cooperation movements, faced lathis, tear gas, and bullets during public demonstrations, participated actively in the revolutionary terrorist movement, and voted in elections to legislatures and even stood as candidates. Safojim Naidu, the famous poetess, became the President of the National Congress. Several women became ministers or parliamentary secretaries in the popular ministries of 1937. Hundreds of them became members of municipalities and other organs of local government. When the trade union and kisan movements arose in the 1920's, women were often found in their forefront. More than any other factor, participation in the national movement contributed to the awakening of Indian women and their emancipation. For how could those who had braved British jails and bullets be declared inferior? And how could they any longer be confined to the home and be satisfied with the life of 'a doll or a slave girl'? They were bound to assert their rights as human beings.

Another important development was the birth of a women's movement in the country. Up to the 1920's enlightened men had worked for the uplift of women. Now self-conscious and self-confident women undertook the task. They started many organisations and institutions for the purpose, the most outstanding of which was the All India Women's Conference founded in 1927.

Women's struggle for equality took a big step forward with the coming of independence. Articles 14 and 15 of the Indian Constitution (1950) guaranteed the complete equality of men and women. The Hindu Succession Act of 1955 made the daughter an equal co-heir with the son. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 permitted dissolution of marriage on specific grounds. Monogamy has also been made mandatory on men as well as women. But the evil custom of dowry still continues even though the demanding of dowry has been banned. The Constitution gives women equal right to work and to get employment in State agencies. The Directive Principles of the Constitution lay down the principle of

equal pay for equal work for both men and women. Of course many visible and invisible obstacles still remain in putting the principle of the equality of sexes into practice. A proper social climate has still to be created. But the social reform movement, the freedom struggle, women's own movement, and the Constitution of free India have made a big contribution in this direction.

Struggle Against Caste

The caste system was another major target of attack for the social reform movement. The Hindus were at this time divided into numerous castes (*jatis*). The caste into which a man was born determined large areas of his life. It determined whom he would marry and with whom he would dine. It largely determined his profession as also his social loyalties. Moreover, the castes were carefully graded into a hierarchy of status. At the bottom of the ladder came the untouchables or scheduled castes as they came to be called later, who formed about 20 per cent of the Hindu population. The untouchables suffered from numerous and severe disabilities and restrictions, which of course varied from place to place. Their touch was considered impure and was a source of pollution. In some parts of the country, particularly in the South, their very shadow was to be avoided, so that they had to move away if a *brahmin* was seen or heard coming. An untouchable's dress, food, place of residence all were carefully regulated. He could not draw water from wells and tanks used by the higher castes; he could do so only from wells and tanks specially reserved for untouchables. Where no such well or tank existed, he had to drink dirty water from ponds and irrigation canals. He could not enter the Hindu temples or study the *shastras*. Often his children could not attend a school in which children of caste Hindus studied. Public services such as the police and the army were closed to him. The untouchables were forced to take up menial and other such jobs which were considered 'unclean', for example, scavenging, shoe-making, removing dead bodies, skinning dead animals, tanning hides and skins. Usually denied ownership of land, many of them worked even as tenants-at-will and field labourers.

The caste system was an evil in another respect. Not only was it humiliating and inhuman and based on the anti-democratic principle of inequality by birth, it was a cause of social disintegration. It 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 practised untouchability though in a less virulent form.

British rule released many forces which gradually undermined the caste system. The introduction of modern industries and railways and buses and growing urbanisation made it difficult to prevent mass contact among persons of different castes, especially in the cities. Modern commerce and industry opened new fields of economic activity to all.

For example, a *brahmin* or upper caste merchant could hardly find opportunity of trading in skins or shoes nor would he agree to himself the opportunity of

becoming a doctor or a soldier. Free s: land upset the caste balance in many villages. The close conn< between caste and vocation could hardly continue in a modern indi society in which the profit motive was increasingly becoming dom

In administration, the British introduced equality before law, took the judicial functions of caste *panchayats*, and gradually opened the of administrative services to all castes. Moreover, the new educa system was wholly secular and therefore basically opposed to caste di tions and caste outlook.

As modern democratic and rationalist ideas spread among Ini they began to raise their voice against the caste system. The Br Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mi the Theosophists, the Social Conference, and nearly all the great refo of the 19th century, attacked it. Even though many of them deft the system of four *varnas*, they were critical of the caste (*jati*) s> In particular they condemned the inhuman practice of untouchal They also realised that national unity and national progress in pol social, and economic fields could not be achieved so long as millions deprived of their rigtit to live with dignity and honour.

The growth of the national movement played a significant role in w ning the caste system. The national movement was opposed to all institutions which tended to divide Indian people. Common part tion in public demonstrations, giant public meetings, and satya struggles weakened caste consciousness. In any case those who lighting for freedom from foreign rule in the name of liberty and eq could hardly support the caste system which was totally oppos< these principles. Thus, from the beginning, the Indian National Coi and in fact the entire national movement opposed caste privilege! fought for equal civic rights and equal freedom for the developme the individual without distinctions of caste, sex or religion.

All his life Gandhiji kept the abolition of untouchability in the front of his public activities. In 1932, he founded the All India H. Sangh for the purpose.

Since the middle of the 19th century, numerous individuals, organisations worked to spread education among the untouct (or depressed classes and scheduled castes as they came to be < lafer) v to open the doors of schools and temples to them, to enable to use public wells and tanks, and to remove other social disab and distinctions from which they suffered.

As education and awakening spread, the lower castes themselves 1 to stir. They became conscious of their basic human rights and 1 to rise in defence of these rights. They gradually built up a powerful movement against the traditional oppression by the higher castes. Dr, B. R. Ambedkar, who belonged to one of the scheduled castes, devoted his entire life to fighting against caste tyranny. He organised the AH India Depressed Classes Federation for the purpose. Several other scheduled caste leaders founded the All India Depressed Classes Association. In South India, the *non-brahmins* organised during the 1920's the Self-Respect Movement to fight the disabilities which *brahmins* had imposed upon them. Numerous satyagraha movements were organised all over India by the depressed castes against the ban on their entry into temples and other such restrictions.

The struggle against untouchability could not, however, be fully successful

under alien rule. The foreign government was afraid of arousing the hostility of the orthodox sections of society. Only the government of a free India could undertake a radical reform of society. Moreover, the problem of social uplift was closely related to the problem of political and economic uplift. For example, economic progress was essential for raising the social status of the depressed castes; so also was spread of education and political rights. This was fully recognised by Indian leaders. Dr. Ambedkar, for example, said:

Nobody can remove your grievance *as* well as you can and you cannot remove these unless you get political power into your hands... We must have a government in which men in power will not be afraid to amend the social and economic code of life which the dictates of justice and expediency *to* urgently call for. This role the British Government will never be able to play. It is only a government which is of the people, for the people and by the people, in other words, it is only the *Swaraj* Government that will make it possible.

The Constitution of 1950 has provided the legal framework for the final abolition of untouchability. It has declared that “‘untouchability’ is abolished and its practice in any form is forbidden. The endorsement of any disability arising out of ‘untouchability’ shall be an offence punishable in accordance with law”. The Constitution further forbids any restrictions on the use of wells, tanks, and bathing ghats, or on the access to shops, restaurants, hotels and cinemas. Furthermore, one of the Directive principles it has laid down for the guidance of future governments says; “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.” Struggle against the evils of the caste system, however, still remains an urgent task before the Indian people, especially in the rural areas.

EXERCISES

1. Examine the rationalist and humanistic content of the religious reform movements of the 19th century. Evaluate their role in the making of modern India.
2. What were some of the disabilities from which women suffered in traditional Indian society? Discuss the steps taken by the modern reform movements for their emancipation.
3. Why did the modern social reforms find it necessary to attack the caste system? How did changes in economy, society, and politics and reform movements undermine it?
4. Write short notes on:
 - (a) Brahmo Samaj, (b) Religious Reform in Maharashtra, (c) Ramakrishna, (d) Swami Vivekananda, (e) Swami Dayanand and Arya Samaj, (f) Sayyid Ahmad Khan, (g) the Akali Movement.