

UPSC

Old NCERT Summary (Bipan Chandra)

Growth of New India - Religious & Social Reform After 1858- 2

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 and other-worldly 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 Rehnumai Mazdayasan Sabha or Religious Reform Association was started by Naoroji Furdonji, Dada bhai Naoroji, S.S. Bengalee, and others. It campaigned against the entrenched orthodoxy in the religious field and initiated the modernization 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 the most westernized 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 Akali Movement rose in the Punjab. The main aim of the Akalis was to purify the

management of the gurudwaras or Sikh shrines. These gurudwara had been heavily endowed with land and money by devout Sikhs But they had come to be managed autocratically by Corrupt and selfish mahants. The Sikh masses led by the Akalis started in 1921 a powerful satyagraha against the mahants and the Government which aided them.

- The Akalis soon forced the Government to pass a new Gurudwara Act in 1922 which was later amended in 1925. Sometimes with to aid of the 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 and the modern educated intellectuals 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 obscurantist elements in Indian religions. Many of them abandoned, though to varying degrees, the principle of authority in religion and evaluated truth in any religion and its holy books by its conformity to logic reasons, are science.
- 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 by Justice Ranade, who has himself often asked the people to revive the best tradition of the past, in the following: 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 hacatombs of animals sacrificed from year's end to year's end, in which even human beings were not spared as propitiatory offering to God? ... Shall we revive the sati, and infanticide customs?
- 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, 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.

- Similarly, Sayyid Ahmed Khan aroused the anger of the traditionalists. They abused him, issued fatwas (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 include 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.
- Though the reformers tried to reform their religions, their general outlook was universalistic. Rammohan Roy saw different religions as particular expression of a universal God and religious truth. Sayyid Ahmad Khan said that prophets had the same faith or din and every people had been sent prophets by God. Keshab Chandra Sen expressed the same idea as follows: “Our position is not that truths are to be found in all religions, but all established religions are true.
- 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.
- 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; those who copied the West blindly were increasingly looked down upon. In fact, while adopting a critical attitude towards backward elements of traditional religions and culture and welcoming positive elements of modern Culture, most of the religious reformers— opposed blind imitation of the West and waged an ideological struggle against the colonialisation of Indian culture and thought. The problem here was to maintain a balance between the two aspects. Some went too far in modernisation and tended to encourage colonialisation of culture; others defended traditional thought, culture and institutions to the extent of glorifying them and opposing any introduction of modern ideas and culture. The best of reformers argued that modern ideas and culture could be best imbibed by integrating them into Indian cultural streams.
- 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 over-emphasis 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 of 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. Men 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 was arrested; though in other spheres national unification of the Indian people was accelerated. The evil aspects of this phenomenon became apparent when it was found that, along with a 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 the religious reform movements also contributed to 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 outdated customs. They could no longer tolerate irrational and dehumanizing 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 the sexes, 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, Gopal Han Deshmukh, Justice Ranade, K. T. Telang, B. M. Malabari, O. K. Karve, Sasipada Banerjee, B. C.

Pal, Viresalingam, Sri Narayn Guru, E. V. Ramaswami Naiker 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 language to reach the masses. They also used novels, dramas, poetry, short stories, the Press and, in the thirties, the cinema 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 the irreligious 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 revolutionize the strata of society and began to revolutionize 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.