UNIT 3 SALIENT FEATURES OF MODERN INDIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Structure

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with the salient features of modern Indian political thought. This is not an easy exercise as there is no single body of thought that we can call 'Indian'. Nor is there a continuity of concerns across time – say between the early nineteenth century and the late nineteenth century. Taking a synoptic view therefore necessarily reduces the complexities and does not do full justice to minority or subordinate voices, relegating them further to the margins. You will do well to bear in mind that most of the modern Indian political and social thought is marked by the experience of the colonial encounter. It was within this universe that most of our thinkers, hailing from different communities and social groups, embarked on their intellectual-political journey.

As mentioned in the previous unit the great intellectual question that most nineteenth century thinkers had posed before themselves was: how did a huge country like India become subjugated? If that was the question before the thinkers for the most of the nineteenth century, the question before those writing in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the question of 'freedom': How can 'we' become free of colonial rule? This was a more complicated question that might appear to you today because, as we saw in the last unit, there was no pre-given entity whose freedom was being sought. So, for each set of thinkers,

the 'we' in the question above differed, We could also call this a 'search for the Self' – for that Self was never as evident to these thinkers as it is to 'us' today.

3.2 TWO PHASES OF MODERN INDIAN THOUGHT

We can broadly divide modern Indian thought into two phases. The first phase was that of what has often been referred to as the phase of 'Social Reform'. Thinkers of this phase, as we shall see, were more concerned with the internal regeneration of indigenous society and because its first effervescence occurred in Bengal, it was often referred to as the 'Bengal renaissance'. Nationalist historians of course, even started referring to it as the Indian renaissance, but this will be an inaccurate description for reasons that we will see shortly. The second phase, more complex and textured in many ways, is the phase that \we can designate as the nationalist phase. The concerns in this phase shift more decisively to questions of politics and power, and of freedom from colonial rule. It is important to remember that what we are calling the 'nationalist phase' is merely a shorthand expression, for there were precisely in this period, many more tendencies and currents that cannot simply be subsumed under the rubric of 'nationalism'. At the very least, there are important currents like the Muslim and Dalit, that mark the intellectual and political 'search for the Self' in this period.

Before we go into the specific features of the thinkers of the two broad periods that we have outlined, it is necessary to make a few clarifications. Though most scholars have tended to see these as two distinct phases or periods, this way of looking at the history of modern Indian political thought can be quite problematic. These periodisations can only be very broad and tentative ones, made for the purpose of convenience of study; on no account should they be rendered into fixed and hermetically sealed periods. In fact, we can more productively see them as two broad currents which do not necessarily follow one after the other. As we shall see, there are many social reform concerns that take on a different form and continue into the nalionalist phase. In fact, the nationalist phase itself reveals two very distinct tendencies in this respect. On the one hand, there is the dominant or hegemonic nationalism, represented in the main by the Indian National Congress, where the social reform agenda is abandoned in a significant way; on the other there are other contending narratives that insist on privileging the reform agenda much to the discomfort of the nationalists. We shall soon see why. We shall also have the occasion to note that, in this respect, Gandhi remains almost the lone figure within this hegemonic nationalism, who keeps trying to bring in the reform agenda into the nationalist movement.

3.3 SOCIAL REFORM AND THE 'HINDU RENAISSANCE'

There was a veritable explosion of intellectual activity throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in Bengal and Western India. In Bengal there was the Young Bengal movement, and publicists, thinkers and social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Keshub Chandra Sen, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, Surendranath Banerjee, Swami Vivekananda and such other personalities who embodied this effervescence. In Western India there were reformers like Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Jotirao Govindrao Phule, Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar and Swami Dayanand Saraswati (whose activity was mainly in North India), such other luminaries who directly addressed the question of

internal regeneration of Indian society. They launched the most vigorous critique of their own society, with the aim of bringing it out of its backwardness. As Rammohun Roy put it, it was the "thick clouds of superstition" that "hung all over the land" (i.e. Bengal), tliat worried him most. As a consequence, he believed, polygamy and infanticide were rampant and the position of the Bengali woman was "a tissue of ceaseless oppressions and miseries". Idolatory and priestcraft were often held responsible by thinkers like Dayanand Saraswati, for the destruction of the yearning for knowledge. He believed that it was institutions such as these that had made Hindus fatalist and inert. The issues that dominated the concerns of the social reformers were primarily related to the status of women in Indian society. Sati, widow re-marriage and the education of women were central issues raised by the reformers. To this end, they re-interpreted tradition, often offered ruthless critiques of traditional practices and even lobbied support with the colonial government for enacting suitable legislations for banning some of the more obnoxious practices like Sati.

Needless to say, while the position of women was a matter of central concern, there was another equally itnportant question – that of caste divisions and untouchability that became the focus of critique of many of these reformers. However, you must bear in mind that their approach to caste was different from those of reformers like Jotiba Phule and later, Dr Arnbedkar. Uniike the latter, they did not seek the emancipation of the lower castes, but their assimilation into the mainstream of Hindu society. Most of the reformers held not only that Hindu society had become degenerate, insulated and deeply divided into hundreds of different communities and castes, but also it had become thereby incapable of forging any kind of 'common will'. Hindu society therefore, had to be reconstituted and reorganised into a single community. Swami Vivekananda or Dayanand Saraswati therefore, sought to reorganise somewhat along the lines of the Christian Church, as Ashis Nandy suggests. If Vivekananda was candid that no other society "puts its foot on the neck of the wretched so mercilessly as does that of India", Dayanand Saraswati sought to redefine caste 'in such a way that it ceased to be determined solely by birth. He sought to include the criterion of individual accomplishment 'in the determination of the caste-status of an individual.

3.3.1 Two Intellectual Moves of Reformers

There are two distinct moves made by the reformers that we must bear in mind. First, their critiques drew very explicitly from the exposure to Western liberal ideas. To many of them Birtish power was the living proof of the validity and 'invincibility' of those ideas. They were therefore, open admirers of British rule. For instance, as Bal Shastri Jambhekar saw it, a mere sixty or seventy years of British rule over Bengal had transformed it beyond recognition. He saw in the place of the "violence, oppression and misrule" of the past, a picture of "security and freedom" where people were able to acquire "a superior knowledge of the Arts and Sciences of Europe". Jambhekar's statement is in fact, fairly representative of the understanding of the early reformers with regard to British rule. It should be remembered that the first generation of reformist thinkers began their intellectual journey in the face of a dual challenge. On the one hand, there was the overwhelming presence of colonial rule that did not simply represent to them a foreign power but also a modern and 'advanced' society that had made breathtaking advances in the field of ideas – of science and philosophy. To them, it embodied the exhilarating developments of science and modern ways of thinking that a country like India – which to most reformers was essentially Hindu – had to also adopt,

if it was to emerge as a free and powerful country in the modern era. On the other hand, there was the continuous challenge thrown before the emerging indigenous intelligentsia by Christian missionaries who mounted a powerful critique of Hinduism and some of its most inhuman practices like Sati, female infanticide, and caste oppression – particularly the abominable practice of untouchability. Questions of widow re-marriage and the education of women, therefore were major issues of debate and contention. These formidable challenges required two simultaneous intellectual moves: (a) An acknowledgement of the rot that had set in, in Hindu society and a thorough going critique of it. For this purpose, they welcomed modern liberal ideas and philosophy with open arms. (b) As we saw, in the last unit, they were equally anxious to retain a sense of their own Self. Complete self-negation could not make a people great. So, most of the reformers, drawing on contemporary Orientalist scholarship, claimed a great and ancient past. Even a convinced Anglophile like Rammohun Roy, for instance had the occasion to reply to a missionary critic that "the world is indebted to our ancestors for the first dawn of knowledge which sprang up in the East" and that India had nothing to learn from the British "with respect to science, literature and religion." This awe of Western knowledge and achievements and a simultaneous valorisation of a hoary Indian past, were a common features of the reformers of all shades – even though the specific emphasis on different aspects varied from thinker to thinker. For instance, Dayananda was not really influenced, as many others were, by Western thinkers and philosophers. Nevertheless, he too acknowledged the immense progress made by the West. He attributed this progress to the high sense of public duty, energetic temperament and adherence to their own religious principles, rather than to their scientific and philosophical achievements. He therefore drew very different conclusions from his reading of the modernity and progress of the West, which focussed on the regeneration of Hindu society through religious reform.

There are reasons to believe that the early responses to British rule and the so-called Renaissance were a distinctly I-Iindu phenomenon. For various reasons that we cannot go into in this unit, it was within Hindu society that the first critical engagement with colonial modernity began. Other responses from communities like the Muslims, had their own distinct specificities and history and we shall discuss them separately. I-Iowever, we can identify two immediate reasons for this relatively early effervescence within Hindu society. One immediate reason for the Hindu response was of course, the fact that it was precisely certain practices within Hindu society that colonial rule sought to address. A second reason was that, for specific historical reasons, it was the Hindu elite that had an access to English education and exposure to the radical ideas of the Enlightenment. It will be wrong, however, to present what was essentially a response from within Hindu society as an "Indian renaissance".

There was a time when most scholars would consider the Bengal Renaissance in particular, as an analogue of the European Renaissance. More specifically, the "role of Bengal in India's modern awakening" as historian Sushobhan Sarkar argued, was seen as analogous to the role played by Italy in the European Renaissance. Later historians like Sumit Sarkar and Ashok Sen however, reviewed the legacy of the Bengal Renaissance in the 1970s, and came to the conclusion that the portrayal of the intellectual awakening of this period was actually quite flawed. The tendency to see the division between the reformers and their opponents as one between 'progressives' and 'traditionalists' was an oversimplification of the story of the renaissance. They noted the "deeply contradictory" nature of the "break with the past" .

inaugurated, for instance by Rammohun Roy, which combined with it, strong elements of a Hindu elitist framework. Sumit Sarkar, in fact, presented a much more modest and complicated picture of the Renaissance than had been drawn by earlier historians and scholars. It makes more sense, therefore, to see these responses as Bhikhu Parekh does, as primarily Hindu responses to the colonial encounter. Parekh has suggested that for these Hindu thinkers, their own self-definition and their attempt to understand what colonial rule was all about, were part of the same exercise: they could not define and make sense of themselves without making sense of colonial rule and vice versa.

In this context, an intense soul-searching marked the activities of the early intelligentsia. The encounter with colonialism and through it, with ideas of equality and liberty, made them aware of some of the inhuman practices still prevalent in Indian society. It was the section that was able to avail of Western education and steeped therefore in Western values that became the harbinger of reforms. Since you will read about the positions of the different thinkers in greater detail in the later units, here we will not go into the positions of individual thinkers. From the point of view of political and social thought, however, we will identify below some of the broad strands.

3.3.2 Modes sf Reformist Thought

Bhikhu Parekh has suggested that the arguments of these Hindu reformers relied on one or more of the following four modes of arguments derived from tradition but deployed with a distinct newness to meet the demands of changing times. First, they appealed to scriptures that seemed to them to be more hospitable to their concerns. Vidyasagar for instance relied on the *Parasharasmriti*, while Rammohun Roy invoked the Upanishads. Second, they invoked what they called *sadharandharma*, which they interpreted to mean the universal principles of morality. Third, they appealed to the idea of a *yugadharma*, or the principles that accord with the needs of the prevailing *yuga* or epoch. Fourthly, they invoked the idea of *loksangraha*, and "argued that the practice in question had such grave consequences that unless eradicated, it would destroy the cohesion and viability of the Hindu social order." As instances, he mentions that Vidyasagar argued that unmarried widows were turning to prostitution or corrupting their families; K.C. sen contended that child marriages were endangering the survival of the Hindu jati; Dayananda Saraswati believed that image worship was leading to internal sectarian quarrels.

V.R. Mehta has suggested that there are at least two important theoretical issues involved in these intellectual initiatives of the reformers. First, they worked strenuously to change the attitude towards fate and other-worldliness and assert the importance of action in this world. While they continued to assert the importance of the soul and spirituality as a distinctive feature of Hindu/Indian thought, they shifted the emphasis to underline the significance of "enterprise in the service of the community." In that sense, they asserted the significance of secular, this-worldly concerns, in the face of the challenges of the modern world. Secondly, the main focus of their enquiry however, remained not the individual but society, community and humanity as a whole. They do not see society as an aggregate of individuals in pursuit of their self interests but as an organic whole. He suggests that this was so for two reasons. Firstly, there was already a strong tradition in India that emphasised the wholeness or oneness of being. Secondly, the individualist idea society was already under attack in much of the nineteenth century thinking in Europe itself, There is a third feature that he also

mentions in relation to later social reform thought – the concern with the welfare of the peopte and the attraction that ideas such as 'socialism' and 'equality' held for thinkers like Vivekananda and Bankimchandra.

Mehta also locates three broadly identifiable sources of the elements that went into the constitution of Renaissance thought. The first, the "culture and temper of European Renaissance and the Reformation", and more particularly the ideas of Bentham, Mill, Carlyle and Coleridge through which came a sense of democracy and rule of law and private enterprise. These ideas became available to the indigenous elite through the advent of English education. The second was the influence of the ideas of German philosophers like Schelling, Fichte, and Herder. This is a current however, that influenced the later-day nationalists more than the early reformers – with their sharp emphasis on the ideas of *volk*, community, duty and nation, that were more immediately the concern of nationalists like Bankimchandra, Vivekananda, Bipin Chandra Pal and Aurobindo Ghosh. The third source identified by Mehta is Indian traditional thought. Here the work of great Orientalist scholars like William Jones and Max Mueller, who had brought ancient Indian culture and learning to light, became the basis for a renewed appeal to the greatness of that past. However, as you will see in subsequent units, it was the first and third of these sources that made up the framework of the reformist thinkers. The concern with 'nation' and a rejection of everything British and colonial was strikingly absent among them.

3.4 THE ARRIVAL OF NATIONALISM

'Nationalism' could be said to have made its appearance in the last part of the nineteenth century. In this phase, the concerns and approach of the thinkers change in a very significant way. Here there is a strong concern with the 'freedom of the nation' and an almost irreconcilable hostility towards colonial rule. Unlike the social reformers before them, they placed no trust on the institutions of the colonial state for effecting any reform. On the contrary, they displayed a positive opposition to what they now considered the 'interference' by the colonial state in the 'internal matters' of the nation. Alongside this, there is a parallel move towards privileging of the political struggle over social reforms.

3.4.1 The 'Inner' and 'Outer' Domains

Partha Chatterjee observes that there is a disappearance of the 'women's question', so central to the concerns of the reformers, from the agenda of the nationalists towards the end of the nineteenth century. We may also mention here the fact that practically the first major nationalist mobilisation took place around the Age of Consent Bill of 1891, where the nationalists argued that this was gross interference in the affairs of the nation and that Hindu society would be robbed of its distinctiveness if this were allowed to pass. As you would know, this Bill was meant to prohibit marital intercourse with girls below the age of twelve. You would also know that in the past, most reformers had in fact solicited colonial legal intervention in the prohibition of certain practices, even when these supposedly intervened within the so-called 'private' sphere. It should also be remembered that this was a controversy that spread far beyond the borders of Bengal and lay behind the final parting of ways between Gopal Agarkar and Bal Gangadhar Tilak – the former supporting the cause of social reform and the latter staunchly opposing it. Chatterjee suggests that this disappearance of women's

issues from the agenda of the nationalists had to do with a new framework that had been set in place by then. This framework was characteristic of what Chatterjee calls nationalism's 'moment of departure' and was a fairly elaborate one, where the overriding concern was that of *the nation's sovereignty.* Here, Chatterjee argues that nationalism began by making a distinction between two spheres: the 'material' and the 'spiritual', or what is another name for it, the 'outer' and 'inner' sphere. As you saw above, this was a distinction already made by the reformers and even they would, on occasions, claim that they were spiritually superior to the Birtish, even if the latter had made significant material progress. What the nationalists did then, was to carry over this distinction into the formulation of an entirely novel kind. It conceded that as a colonised nation it was subordinate to the colonisers in the material sphere. But there was one domain that the coloniser had no access to: this was the inner domain of culture and spirituality. Here the nation declared itself sovereign. What did this mean? This meant that henceforth, in this inner domain, it would not allow any intervention by the colonial state.' From now on, the questions of social reform would become an 'internal matter' that would be dealt with after the nation attained freedom in the material domain. This did not mean however, that all nationalists were against reforms per se. What it did mean was that these questions would now be dealt with after the power of the state passed into the hands of the nationalists.

There is another aspect of this distinction that Chatterjee does not deal with, but which we can easily see in relation to the question of caste reforms. Soon after the Age of Consent agitation, the nationalists led by Tilak threatened to bum down the pandal of the Indian Social Conference that used to be held simultaneously with the sessions of the Indian National Congress and used to be a forum for discussing questions of social reform. This was the period when the so-called 'moderates' were in the leadership of the Congress. The methods of the moderates like Gokhale and Ranade were in the framework of constitutional reform and very much in line with the position of the early reformers. With the arrival of nationalism, all this changed and soon power within the Indian National Congress passed into the hands of the so-called 'extremists', in particular the Lal-Bal-Pal combine (i.e. Lala Lajpat Rai, BalGangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal). Unlike the women's question there was no resolution here with regard to caste reforms; they were simply deferred "in the larger interests of anticolonial unity". All issues of social reform were henceforth to be considered "divisive" of national unity. As it happens, there is one more thing that happened here: with the demarcation of the 'inner' sphere as a sphere of sovereignty, many socially conservative ideas could also now easily inhabit the nationalist movement, It is here that we must locate the strident critique of nationalism that was made not only by leaders and thinkers like Jotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar but also many Muslim leaders who began to see tlie emergent nationalism as a purely Hindu affair. As nationalism became. a mass movement and since most nationalists saw the incipient nation as primarily Hindu, there was an increasing resort in this phase to a revival of Hindu symbols for mobilisation.

However with the entry of Gandhi into the political scene, we can see a shift from this framework to some extent. Although Gandhi himself resorted to the use of Hindu symbols, he was acutely aware of the unfinished agenda of social reform. Here it is interesting however, that while he located himself squarely within the framework of nationalism as defined by his predecessors, and held on to the idea of sovereignty in the inner sphere, he nevertheless made an important departure in terms of his insistence on the question of the

social reform. Unlike other nationalists, he was not prepared to abandon it altogether and would repeatedly insist upon the need of Hindu society to redeem itself by exorcising untouchability from within itself through 'self-purification'. It is also interesting that while he himself used the idea of 'Ram Rajya' as a utopia of nationhood, he made untiring efforts to draw the Muslims into the mainstream of the nationalist struggle.

3.4.2 Concerns of the Nationalists

At this stage, it is necessary to point out that it will be wrong to see the divisions between different strands as those between 'progressives' and 'conservatives' or 'modernists' and 'traditionalists'. For, as many scholars have pointed out, even the nationalists who rejected the standpoint of the reformers, were worlcing for a thoroughly modernist agenda. Their valorisation of Hindu tradition was not a valorisation of existing practices of Hindu religion. In fact, they all wanted, much like the reformers, a modern and reorganised Hindu society that would become the centre-piece of the emerging nation. Being 'Hindu' to them was the sign of national identity rather than a religious one. It is for this reason that, as Bhikhu Parekh notes, these thinkers (whom he calls 'critical traditionalists') were largely preoccupied with themes of statecraft, autonomy of political morality, political realism, will power, and courage – issues that were absent from the discourse of the reformers. And these were all entirely modern concerns. This concern with 'Hinduness' as a marker of national, rather than religious identity was very much there not only in the case of Congress nationalists but also of Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, the author of the ideology of Hindutva. It is not surprising that Savarlcar, who stayed away from the Gandhi-dominated Congress movement, was a thorough modernist and atheist who was opposed to all kinds of superstitions and was greatly influenced by the scientific and philosophic achievements of the West. In fact, Savarkar greatly valued the work done by Ambedkar and unlike Gandhi who was suspicious of his motives, he associated him with his Hindu Mahasabha functions. What is even more interesting is that Savarkar's critique of Gandhi was precisely because of Gandhi's wholesale rejection of modern civilisation, science and technology. In a sense, like Nehru the secular-nationalist, Savarkar's complaint with Gandhi related to his 'irrationality' and 'backward-looking' ideas.

This is precisely the conundrum of the nationalist phase that has eluded many scholars and historians. For, it is the proclaimed anti-modernist and *sanatani* Hindu Gandhi who stood steadfastly for Hindu-Muslim unity as the precondition of India's freedom, while the modernist and secular leaders like Madan Mohan Malaviya, Purushottamdas Tandon and Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi often seemed to be speaking a language of Hindu nationalism. It was Gandhi who made the Khilafat-Non Cooperation movement collaboration of Hindus and Muslims possible. It is true that Gandhi's insistence on a Hindu *sanatani* identity could not eventually convince either the Muslims or the Dalit/lower caste leaders about his sincerity in safeguarding their interests. In the case of the Dalits, in fact, the problem was far more complex at one level, for what they wanted was an independent political voice within the new nation and that could not be achieved merely by Gandhian self-purification methods.

3.5 THE TRAJECTORY OF MUSLIM THOUGHT

We have traced the broad contours of nineteenth and twentieth century thought as it emerged from within Hindu society. The history of Muslim society in India is still steeped in a sea of

ignorance and misconceptions and a lot more work needs to be done to unearth the different kinds of trends of thought that emerged from within it. We will sketch a broad outline of this below but let it be stated at the outset that the situation is no less complex and variegated and the common myth of a monolithic Muslim society is as ill-founded as that of any other community. There are a range of responses to the changing world that we encounter here too. A case in point for instance, is the role of the Ulama (i.e. religious scholars) of Farangi Mahal, brought out by the pioneering research of Francis Robinson in the mid 1970s. Robinson noted that this tendency, so active in the second decade of the twentieth century, had been consigned to silence, buried under the narratives of both the Indian and the Pakistani nationalisms. I-le pointed out the crucial role played by Maulana Abd-al Bari of Farangi Mahal in the pan-Islamic protest, particularly the Khilafat movement and in the foundation of the Jamiat-ul-Ulema-I- Hind, which worlced, for the most part, in close cooperation with the Indian National Congress and remained opposed to the Muslim League demand for a separate homeland.

With regard to Muslim society in India, we might need to steer clear of two diametrically opposed viewpoints. One, represented by Hindu nationalists, which sees Muslims as an alien body continuously at odds with and insulated from local society arid culture, and the other represented by the secular-nationalists who see merely a syncretic culture that expressed the combined elements of Islamic and Hindu culture. We need to see the process by which what was once and elite Perso-Islamic culture of the ashrafs (the gentry or the nobility), gradually enters into a dialogue with the local traditions of learning, of the arts and music etc. This is a process that spans centuries and there are contradictory pulls and trends that are at work throughout. To take just one instance, as Robinson observes, most eighteenth century Sufis believed in the doctrine of *wahdat-al-wujud* (the Unity of Being), which saw all creation as the manifestation of a single Being and thus made it possible for them to search for a common ground with the Hindus. But this teaching of the 13th century Spanish mystic Ibn-al-Arabi, was also challenged by the Naqshbandi order which insisted an the more sectarian doctrine of *wahdat-al-shuhud* (or the Unity of Experience) which insisted on the formal teachings of scriptures'as they encapsulated God's revelation. This tendency however, remained far less popular for a very long time. However, we cannot dwell on this prehistory of modern Muslim thought in this unit at any length but it should nevertheless be kept in mind as a background.

3.5.1 The Specificity of Muslim History and Thought

The advent of British rule meant a more immediate loss of political power for the ruling Muslim elite, especially in North India and Bengal. And this contest with British power continued through the century from the Battle of Plassey (1757) to the Great Revolt – the so-called 'Mutiny' – of 1857, which saw a massive participation of Muslims as a whole and, not merely of the elite. As a consequence, in the immediate period following the institution of the power of the British, the relationship between the erstwhile ruling elite and the colonial rulers came to be marked by deep hostility and antagonism, One of the consequences of this hostility was a certain inwardness that came to define Muslim attitude towards the modern. By and large, they seemed to stay away from English education and ideas and institutions associated with British power. This, as you can see, is in sharp contrast with the attitude of the early Hindu intelligentsia which embraced the new ideas and institutions with considerably

less difficulty. One instance of this complexity can be seen in the instance of Delhi College, established in 1825, which began to impart both Oriental and Western education together in the same institution. In 1827, it began the teaching of English. However, after the revolt of 1857, Western education was discontinued and could only be restarted in 1864. Nonetheless,. the fact that such an institution was established indicates a certain openness towards Western knowledge, despite the overall experience of hostility vis-à-vis the British. Mujeeb Ashraf, in fact, claims that Delhi college became one of the models for institutions like Jamia Millia Islamia in the later period. Delhi College produced important nineteenth century reformers and writers like Zakaullah, Muhammad Husain Azad and Nazir Ahmad Nazir.

3.5.2 The Reform Initiative

The crucial turning point in this respect, however, is the emergence of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-99) who is known to be the harbinger of liberalism and modernity in Muslim society. He opposed the Great Revolt as he believed that not only had British rule come to stay but also that there was much to be gained by imbibing modern ideas from its contact. It is well known that in order to propagate modern scientific knowledge, he established his Mahommedan Anglo-Oriental College, which in due course, became the Aligarh Muslim University. In 1870, after his return from a trip to England, he began publishing his Urdu journal, *Tahzib-ul-Ikhlaq*, which exhorted Muslims to reform their religious ideas. Sir Syed's basic intellectual move was to argue that Islam was not incompatible with modern ideas and values. For this reason, though he was not a religious scholar by training, his insistence on reform took recourse to a well established method of *ijtihad* that calls for the use of independent reasoning in order to keep up with changing times. Theologically, therefore he took it upon himself to distinguish the essence of Islam from the inessential parts, which he described as 'social customs and practices' that had attached to it and which he argued, had lost relevance in the modern world. Among these, for instance was the Islamic prohibition on charging interest. In doing so, he began to insist on the Quran as the sole legitimate source of Islam. Alongside the Quran, he proclaimed the importance of Reason and Nature, in his attempt to combat the 'overgrowth' of superstition and 'unreasonableness' that was attached to the religion over the centuries. It was a move, you can see, that was clearly parallel to the kind of move made by the Hindu reformers discussed above in relation to their own society. There was undoubtedly a large body of support for his project among the educated Muslims as he managed to raise enough money by contributions for setting up the Aligarh college.

Among the other important figures associated with Syed Ahmad Khan's reform moves were those of Sayyid Mahdi Ali, better known as Muhsin-ul-Mulk and Maulana Shibli Numani. Muhsin-ul-Mulk differed from Syed Ahmad Khan insofar as he sought to win over the Muslim clergy to their side and therefore found it necessary to dialogue with them in terms of Islamic principles. Shibli Numani is considered, along with poets Altaf Husayn Hali and Mohammed Iqbal as one of the key literary figures of modern Muslim society in India. A founder of modern literary criticism in the vernacular language, he also had a reputation as a great poet and historian of Islam. While Shibli supported the efforts of the Aligarh school, he was almost entirely rooted in the vernacular world and the world of Islam. His ambition was to reform Islam from within. According to Ayesha Jalal, he is a more complex figure as he eludes classification either as a 'liberal moderniser' or as an 'anti-modern traditionalist'. Despite his allegiance to the reformist programme he continued to work within the world of

Islamic learning. In later years he took on a different project – that of trying to bridge the gulf between the Aligarh modernisers and the 'traditionalists' represented by the Ulama of Deoband and Farangi Mahal. In his later years he also became a critic of Syed Ahmad Khan, whom he held responsible for stunting the growth of political consciousness among the Muslims. Shibli was among those important voices who remained a strong critic of the Muslim League, which he saw as a forum of upper class, landlord elements of North India, and believed that the interests of the Muslims would be better served by overcoming its 'minority complex' and malting common cause with the Congress.

3.5.3 The Anti-imperialist Currents

The Aligarh school came under fierce attack from the more theologically inclined Muslims – the learned Ulama. The conflict between the Aligarh school and the Ulama has often been seen as the conflict between the 'modernisers' and the 'traditionalists' but this is in some sense an oversimplification. The Ularna's main problem with Syed Ahmad seems to have been with what they considered his eulogisation of the British – his Angreziyat or Englishness. There was here something parallel to what we witnessed in the case of the nationalists departure from the social reformers, insofar as the Ulama saw his Angreziyat as being too collaborationist. It is interesting therefore that his most strident critics were also those who were more clearly anti-imperialist and sought to ally with the nationalist movement for liberation from the British rule. Among the most scathing of his critics was the Persian scholar Jamaluddin-al-Afghani who was also an advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity against the British. Afghani's strident anticolonialism combined with a deeply religious Islamic universalism, says Ayesha Jalal, found a receptive audience among many Muslims put off by Syed Ahmad Khan's loyalism vis-a-vis the British.

Into the twentieth century, other important figures like the poet-philosopher Mohammed Iqbal, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Maulana Abul Ala Maudoodi came ta the fore. By the time nationalism emerged as a strong mass force and it was becoming clear that it was increasingly being dominated by Hindu ethos, Muslim politics and thought went through interesting transformations. Mohammed Iqbal was, at one level, one of the great modernisers of Islam, who infused a sense of action and celebration of individual freedom in this world, into the religion, He was supremely concerned with combating the fatalism, contemplation and resignation that is normally associated with pre-modern religions and strove hard to articulate a notion of the Self (*khudi*) that would take its destiny into its own hands. As W.C. Smith put it, to that end he even transformed the notion of a transcendent God into an immanent one – into a God that lives here, in this world, arguing that the will of God is not something that comes from without but surges within the Self, to be absorbed and acted upon, In doing this, he was actually making a sharp critique of Islam as it was practiced by the *mullahs*. While Iqbal imbibed much from European philosophy – especially Nietzche and Bergson – he was equally contemptuous of those who thought they could become modern by simply aping the West. Here again, much like the Hindu thought we discussed earlier, we can see a clear critique in his thought, of the "materialistic" and "irreligious" nature of Western thought. It is interesting too, that like much of modern Hindu thought, he too sought to extricate science from his overall attack on the West, arguing that while repudiating the latter, the East should adopt the former. It is also interesting that like

all reformers from Syed Ahmad Khan to Ameer Ali, he also took recourse to *ijtihad*. However, he also qualified the recourse to *ijtihad*, by arguing that in times of crisis of Islam, such as was his time, this should be resorted to with circumspection.

It is also important to remember that while being a votary of Islamic universalism and a trenchant critic of the western idea of territorial nationalism, Iqbal was till pretty late in his life a celebrator of a deeper unity of Hindus and Muslims as evidenced in some of his finest poetry. Here we will not go into the complex political process by which Iqbal, inveterate enemy of territorial nationalism finally through his lot with the movement for Pakistan.

The figure of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad represents the more supposedly 'traditionalist' Muslims, who like other believers in Islamic universalism, are often seen as a paradox by most scholars. For, like the other traditionalists like the Ulama of Deoband, he was a strong believer in Islamic universalism, that is, the idea of a worldwide Islamic *ummah*, even while remaining as one of the most steadfast supporters of a composite Indian nationalism. This is a paradox that awaits greater research, which alone will explain why the so-called traditionalist and theologically inclined Muslims found it easier to make common cause with the Hindu-dominated Congress. This stands in sharp contrast to the position of someone like Jinnah who was a liberal and secular politician but eventually became the driving force for the struggle for Pakistan. We shall not deal any further here with the thought of individual thinkers whom you will read about in greater detail in the later units.

3.6 THE REVOLT OF THE LOWER ORDERS

The important point that needs to be registered here in relation to the work and thought of lower caste leaders like Jotirao Phule, EVR Ramaswarny Naicker – also known as Periyar – and B.R. Ambedkar is that it differed from the trends identified in the case of both Hindu and Muslim thought in two crucial ways. Firstly, at no point did these thinkers give up the social reform agenda and in fact their consistent critique of nationalism remained linked to this question. Secondly, they did not suffer from the deep ambivalence with regard to the West that marked the thought of reformers and nationalists alike in the case of the Hindu thinkers or of Shibli Numani, Muhsin-ul-Mulk and Iqbal in the case of the Muslims. You will read about the respective thoughts of these figures later but for now we will briefly outline some of the reasons for this stark difference.

It is important to note in this context, that to most leaders of the lower castes, particularly the Dalits, the notion of a putative Hindu community simply did not carry any positive significance. To them, the memories of past and continuing humiliation and degradation through practices like untouchability and violent exclusion from society as such, constituted their over-riding experience that framed all their responses. In their perception, therefore, there was something insincere in the efforts of even the reformers who merely wanted the assimilation of lower castes into mainstream Hindu society without disturbing the power structure in anyway.

Phule's main concern therefore, is with an all-out attack on Hinduism and caste – where he sees caste as central to the existence of the former. In fact to most of the radical lower caste'thinkers, Hinduism is merely another name for Brahmanism and they prefer to refer

to it by that name. Therefore Phule, like Periyar after him, seeks to unite all the non-Brahmans or *shudra-atishudras* against the power of the Brahmans. It is also necessary to note that in this struggle almost all the radical lower caste leaders give special importance to the question of women's education and emancipation. Phule therefore established the first school for shudra-atishudra girls in 1848, at great risk, for he knew that it would invite the wrath of the upper castes. Later he also established a school for girls of all castes.

In a way, education was the key to Dalit or in the case of Periyar, Non-Brahman liberation, for it was their exclusion from the arena of knowledge that was seen as the main mechanism of their oppression. In the new, niodern world, the possibilities had opened out for the lower castes to take their destiny into their own hands. For the first time, their exclusion was significantly broken down, with tlie arrival of colonialism, which not only opened the doors of education to them, but also opened up secular public spaces where they could move about without fear of upper caste retribution. This being 'the case, the Dalit and Shudra leaders were less concerned with marking their difference from the 'irreligious' and 'materialistic' West and more directly concerned with breaking down tlie chains of bondage that had shackled them for centuries. To them colonial rule, if anything, appeared as their biggest benefactor. It is precisely for this reason that they saw the continuation of the social reform agenda as being of critical significance for the emancipation of the Dalits/Shudras. It is not as if they had great faith in the social reform of the upper caste, *bhadralok* reformers of the nineteenth century but the abandoning of even that limited agenda by nationalism was something that Ambedkar had occasion to recall bitterly in his writings and speeches. He especially recalled the role of Tilak and his .followers in stopping the sessions of the Social Conference in the late 1890s.

It is significant that even when the focus of Dalit and lower caste thinkers shifted to the explicitly political terrain -- witnessed for instance in the work of Periyar and Ambedkar, their central preoccupations remained with the *structure of power* within the emergent nation: who would wield power within an independent India? What would be tlie position of the Dalits in the new dispensation? And central to this structure of power was tlie question of 'social reform' - not in the vague sense of 'uplift' of the untouchables that Gandhi was seeking to do, without of course disturbing the power of the upper caste elite – but in the more radical sense given to it by Phule. These thinkers and leaders also realised that if the British were to leave without tlie question of power being settled, they would be yoked into slavery once again. It is from this fear that the main plank of Ambedkar's and Periyar's political life emerged: the vexed question of 'safeguards' or 'communal proportional representation' as it was also called. The radical lower caste leaders realised that independence would come, sooner or later; thus it was necessary to stake a claim for power by bargaining hard on the question of safeguards, while the British were still here. It is this battle that Ambedkar was forced to partially lose thanks to Gandhi's emotional blackmail – his notorious fast-unto-death and the eventual Poona Pact.

3.7 SUMMARY

We have seen that there are extremely complex layers to what we refer as '"modern Indian political thought"; that in fact there is no single body of thought nor a single set of themes that define them. All of them have different histories and arise from different sets of

experiences. Nevertheless, we can identify, at least among the Hindu and Muslim thinkers, a deep engagement with colonial modernity, leading to two distinct trends: (a) a sharp critique of the existing state of Iiindu or Muslim society and an effort to rejuvenate it by offering a different reading of tradition and canonical religious texts in most cases. (b) an effort to emulate the West in its scientific and philosophical advances, while at the same time offering a critique of what is seen to be crass materialism and ir-religiosity of its civilisation. We see a deep ambivalence that marks the efforts of reformers and nationalists alike, in this respect. We can also see, how with the coming of nationalism on the political stage, the reform agenda gives way to the political struggle for sovereignty among the Hindus. We have also seen that responses among the Muslims in this phase are much more layered and complex. Finally, we saw the entirely different attitude of the radical leaders of the lower castes – both with regard to colonialism and the West on the one hand and community, nation and religion on the other.

3.8 EXERCISES

1. Discuss the phases of modern Indian Thought.
2. Explain the relevance of Social Reform Movement in India
3. Explain the different concerns of Nationalism in India.
4. Discuss various aspects of Muslim Thought in India.
5. Explain the role of the Political Leadership to reform Indian Society led by lower order.