Indian Renaissance: Socio-Religious awakening in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

The socio-religious movements in the 19th century India, tried to create an equivalent society for all. The reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dyanand Saraswati, Vivekananda and others tried to foster among Indians, pride, self respect and self confident. Problems of women and downtrodden were raised by almost all reformers. Though the result was not spectacular, the road was laid in proper form.

1. Introduction

In the history of modern India, the 19th century occupies a very important place in terms of social and religious regeneration. Numbers of persons contributed to the surge of socio-religious and cultural awakening amongst common mass which led to the growth of a nationalist consciousness. This intellectual awakenings in India was a result of Indian renaissance based on Western concept of reason, equality and liberty.

2. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is said to be the torch bearers of Indian Renaissance. He was pioneer for the liberation of women and supported the right of inheritance of property by daughters and opposed sati system and child marriage. Due to his constant efforts then Governor General, Lord William Bentick passed the famous regulation no. XVII in December 1829, that declared the practice of ‘Sati’ illegal.

In 1821, he started the first Indian newspaper- Sabad Kaumudi, meaning the ‘moon of intelligence’. Earlier in 1815, he founded Aatmiya Sabha to fight against evil customs.

3. Brahmo Samaj

Raja Ram was a great proponent of monotheism and he invoked mystic ideas of Sufism and ethical teaching of Christianity. In 1828, founded the Brahmo Samaj at Calcutta to propagate the monotheistic doctrine. The Brahmo Samaj did not propagate any definite rites and rituals. This organisation, as the first platform of New India, proved to be the precursor of the subsequent social reform movements started by M.G. Ranade and Others.

After the death of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the responsibility to propagate his ideas came on Debendra Nath Tagore.

4. Adi Brahmo Samaj

In 1843, Debendra Nath Tagore founded the Adi Brahmo Samaj, also known as Tattvabodhini Samaj, to promote religious enquiry and disseminate the knowledge of the Upanishads.

5. Paramhansa Mandal

In 1849, Dadoba Panderung organised the Paramhansa Mandal, a radical socio-religious society at Bombay, to propagate the principles which denied polytheism of popular Hinduism and the caste system. The society acted secretly to bring changes in the Hindu orthodox society.

6. Prarthana Samaj

Prarthana Samaj was founded by Dr. Atmaram Pandurang in 1867 in Bombay. It advocated for inter caste marriage, remarriage of windows and uplift of women and depressed classes.

7. Arya Samaj

Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded Arya Samaj at Bombay in 1875. Arya Samaj Movement was an outcome of reaction to western influences. Arya Samaj rejected Western ideas and sought to revive the ancient Vedic past. Swami Dayanand Saraswati was opposed to idolatry, ritual and priesthood. Arya Samaj, under his guidance, opposed child marriage, polygamy, caste-ism and the ‘Sati Pratha’. Some followers of Swami Dayanand later started a network of schools and colleges to impart education on western pattern.

Arya Samaj criticized religious superstitions, supremacy of Brahmins, polytheism and propagated the programme of mass education.

Arya Samaj also contributed to the Swaraj and Swadeshi movements. Dyanand Saraswati was the first person who demanded Swaraj for Indians. Leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Lala Lajpat Rai, Gopal Krishna Gokhale were deeply influenced by the principles and philosophy of Arya Samaj.

8. Ram Krishna Mission

This mission was founded by Swami Vivekanand in 1897, eleven years after the death of his Guru Ram Krishna Paramhans.

Vivekananda proclaimed the essential oneness of all religions. He condemned the caste- system, religious rituals,
cerebrations and superstitions. He had a deep understanding of Hindu philosophy and travelled across the world to propagate it.

His brilliant speech on Hindu philosophy at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago (1893), was well received. American newspapers described him as an ‘Orator by Divine Right’. He delivered a series of lectures on Hinduism in the U.S.A., England and in several other countries of Europe. Through his speeches, he explained Hindu philosophy and clarified the wrong thinking that prevailed in Western countries about the Hindu religion and Indian culture.

He said that it was the social responsibility of the better placed people to take care of the downtrodden. With his clarity of thought, deep understanding of the social problems of India, Vivekananda left a deep mark on the Indians.

9. Henry Vivian Derozio and the young Bengal movement:

The establishment of the Hindu College in Bengal was an important event in the history of India. A radical movement for the reform of Hindu Society started here which is known as the Young Bengal Movement.

Its leader was Henry Vivian Derozio, a teacher of the Hindu College. He was of mixed parentage his father was Portuguese and his mother was Indian. In 1826, at the age of 17, he joined the Hindu College as a teacher and taught there till his premature death in 1831.

He was deeply influenced by the revolutionary ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity. He was a brilliant teacher and in a very short period of time, he made a huge followers.

He inspired his students to think rationally and freely, to question authority, to love liberty, equality and freedom and to worship truth. The movement started by Derozio was called the Young Bengal Movement and his followers were known as the Derozians. They condemned religious rites and the rituals, and pleaded for eradication of social evils, female education and improvement in the condition of women.

10. Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was a great educator, humanist and social reformer. He was born in 1820 in a village in Midnapur, Bengal. He rose to be the Head Pandit of the Bengali Department of Fort William College.

He firmly believed that reform in Indian society could only come about through education. Vidyasagar founded many schools for girls. He helped J.D. Bethune to establish the Bethune School.

He founded the Metropolitan Institution in Calcutta. He protested against child marriage and favoured widow remarriage which was legalized by the Widow Remarriage Act (1856). It was due to his great support for the spread of education that he was given the title of Vidyasagar.

11. Jyotiba Phule

Jyotiba Phule belonged to a low caste family in Maharashtra. He waged a life-long struggle against upper caste domination and Brahmanical supremacy. In 1873 he founded the Satyashodak Samaj to fight against the caste system.

He pioneered the widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra and worked for the education for women. Jyotiba Phule and his wife established the first girls’ school at Poona in 1851.

12. Muslim Reform Movements

The Muslim reform movements started a little later because they had avoided western education in the beginning. The first effort was in 1863 when the Muhammad Literary Society was set up in Calcutta. Its aim was to popularise the study of English and western sciences. It established a number of schools in Bengal.

13. Aligarh Movement

The Aligarh Movement was started by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98) for the social and educational advancement of the Muslims in India. He fought against the medieval backwardness and advocated a rational approach towards religion.

In 1866, he started the Mohammadan Educational Conference as a general forum for spreading liberal ideas among the Muslims. In 1875, he founded a modern school at Aligarh to promote English education among the Muslims. This had later grown into the Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College and then into the Aligarh Muslim University.

14. The Deoband School

The orthodox section among the Muslim ulema organised the Deoband Movement. It was a revivalsist movement whose twin objectives were

i. to propagate among the Muslims the pure teachings of the Koran and the Hadis and

ii. to keep alive the spirit of jihad against the foreign rulers.

The new Deoband leader Mahmud-ul-Hasan (1851-1920) sought to impart a political and intellectual content to the religious ideas of the school. The liberal interpretation of Islam created a political awakening among its followers.

15. Sikh Reform Movement

Punjab also came under the spell of reforms. Baba Dayal Das founded the Nirankari Movement. He insisted the worship of God as nirankar (formless). The Namdhari Movement was founded by Baba Ram Singh. His followers wore white clothes and gave up meat eating.

The Singh Sabhas started in Lahore and Amritsar in 1870 were aimed at reforming the Sikh society. They helped to set up the Khalsa College at Amritsar in 1892. They also encouraged Gurmukhi and Punjabi literature. In 1920, the Akalis started a
movement to remove the corrupt Mahants (priests) from the Sikh gurdwaras.

The British government was forced to make laws on this matter. Later, the Akalis organised themselves into a political party.

16. Parsi Reform Movement

The Parsi Religious Reform Association was founded at Bombay by Furdunji Naoroji and S.S. Bengaljee in 1851. They advocated the spread of women's education. They also wanted to reform their marriage customs. Naoroji published a monthly journal, Jagat Mithra.

The momentum gathered through these reform movements and went a long way in uplifting the entire community. By the middle of the twentieth century most of them were highly placed in various capacities and have made a significant contribution to India's development.

17. Self-Respect Movement and Periyar E.V.R.

E.V. Ramaswamy known as Periyar was a great social reformer and worked for downtrodden. In 1924, he took an active part in the Vaikom Satyagraha to secure for untouchables the right to use a road near a temple at Vaikom in Kerala.

During 1920-1925 as a member of the Congress Party he stressed that Congress should accept communal representation.

Subsequently in 1925, he started the "Self-Respect Movement" to uplift the Dravidians and to expose the Brahminical tyranny and deceptive methods by which they controlled all spheres of Hindu life. He criticised caste system, child marriage and enforced widowhood.

He encouraged inter-caste marriages. He himself conducted many "Self-Respect Marriage" without any rituals. He gave secular names to new born babies. He attacked the laws of Manu, which he called the basis of the entire Hindu social fabric of caste.

18. Effects of Socio-Religious awakening

Characteristics of the Reform Movements:

An analysis of the reform movements of the 19th century brings out several common features:

1. All the reformers propagated the idea of one God and the basic unity of all religions. Thus, they tried to bridge the gulf between different religious beliefs.
2. All the reformers attacked priesthood, rituals, idolatry and polytheism. The humanitarian aspect of these reform movements was expressed in their attack on the caste system and the custom of child marriage.
3. The reformers attempted to improve the status of girls and women in society. They all emphasised the need for female education.
4. By attacking the caste system and untouchability, the reformers helped to unify the people of India into one nation.

19. Conclusion

Many reformers like Dayanand Saraswati, Vivekananda, Ishwar chandra Vidyasagar and many more upheld Indian philosophy and culture. This instilled in Indians with a sense of pride and faith in their own culture. Female education was promoted and Schools for girls were set up. Even higher educational colleges were established for women. This led to the development of girls' education. The cultural and ideological struggle taken up by the socio-religious movements helped to build up national consciousness. They, thus, paved the way for the growth of nationalism.

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