

SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

For centuries, the Indian society endured numerous social ills. The primary issues include the caste system, the poor status of women, lack of education, child marriage, idol worship, the sati practice, polygamy, and the dowry system. Different reform movements such as Arya Samaj, Ramkrishna Mission, Indian Social Conferences, Mohammedan Literacy Society, Aligarh Movement, and Ahmadiya Movement were initiated to address these problems. Certainly, it was due to their persistent efforts and diligent work that numerous social ills were eliminated. These movements exerted significant pressure on the British Government to enact different laws periodically aimed at eradicating social injustices. Undoubtedly, some social issues were so ingrained that it was challenging to eliminate them quickly. Certain issues such as the dowry system, lack of education, etc., persist and present significant challenges to contemporary reformers. Undoubtedly, new reform initiatives must be launched to eliminate the social ills that continue to exist in India.

Keywords: Arya samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, Reforms movement, tree-huggers, British, child marriage, illiteracy.

INTRODUCTION

Social reform movements in India were primarily results of the renaissance and a surge in intellectual awareness. Renaissance intellectuals received their education in the west, allowing them to juxtapose their own ideas and societal structures with those of the west. Consequently, they inherently experienced a pressing desire for social change. Socio-political elements such as western education, the rise of nationalism, the expansion of Hindi literature, the formation of western political institutions, the emergence of the Indian National Congress, the development of a new economic system, and social legislation fostered a new consciousness. This enlightenment led to multiple social and political reform initiatives. The overarching goals of these movements in social contexts were the reform of caste systems and the enhancement of women's rights and status, generally opposing social and legal disparities. The religious movements also targeted specific institutions and practices such as child marriage, the status and treatment of widows, seclusion, and the denial of women's rights to property and education, rooted in the traditions of various communities. Consequently, the push for social reform emerged within the boundaries of each religion instead of as a collective effort to transform society in its entirety. The key movements that emerged within Hinduism included the Arya Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, and the Brahmo Samaj.

The expansion of western education and India's interaction with western culture stimulated Indian awareness of the negative aspects of social and religious traditions. The emancipation of thought encouraged a spirit of investigation and a logical method to the socio-religious issues. Numerous Indians started to understand that social and religious reform was crucial for the overall progress of the nation. The inadequacies of Indian society profoundly

impacted rationalist thinkers and social and religious reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda, and Mrs. Annie Besant.

REFORM MOVEMENTS AMONG THE HINDUS

BRAHMO SAMAJ

Raja Ram Mohan Roy is sometimes considered as the father of modern India as he had practically laid the foundations of all the principal movements which subsequently became an instrument for modernization of the country. As a social reformer, he denounced the abuses of caste, sati and idolatry. The widespread idolatry and dogmatism among the Hindus came to be viewed as retrogressive, which needed to be changed.

Reacting these features of Hindu Society, Raja Ram Mohan Roy launched a reform movement in 1828 which came to be known as Brahmo Samaj. Its purpose was to purify Hinduism and to preach belief in one God. Brahmo Samaj movement was based on the twin pillars of reason, Vedas and Upanishads. It also incorporated teachings of other religions. Brahmo Samaj laid emphasis on human dignity, opposed idolatry and criticized social evils like sati and untouchability. Brahmo Samajists under the leadership of Raja Ram Mohan Roy organized agitations against sati and appealed to the reason and humanity and compassion of the people. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was also one of the earliest propagators of modern education and a pioneer of Indian journalism and used press as a medium for dissemination of modern ideas.

He could convince the Governor General William Bentinck to pass legislation banning sati. The Brahmo tradition of Raja Ram Mohan Roy was carried after 1843 by Devendranath Tagore who also repudiated the doctrine of those Vedic scriptures which were infallible, and after by Keshab Chandra Sen. Brahmo Samaj was successful in bringing about general uplift of women including widow remarriage and abolition of sati. They also actively opposed the rigid caste system and practices of child marriage and contributed to the spread of modern

He founded the Hindu College in 1816, the first academic institution of western learning. However, towards the end of the 19th century, Brahmo Samaj was weakened by internal dissensions. Moreover, its influence on the intellectual, social, cultural and Political life of Bengal and the rest of India in the 19th and 20th centuries remained strong. Raja Ram Mohan Roy had used various techniques of social work like social action, social advocacy for the abolition of social which is one of the important goals of professional social work. His work was particularly aimed at empowerment of the widows, destitute as well as removal of social evils, which is a still now important goal before the Indian social workers.

ISHWAR CHANDRA VIDYASAGAR

The great scholar and reformer, Vidyasagar's ideas were a happy blend of Indian and western thought. He believed in high Moral values, was a deep humanist, and was generous to the poor. In 1850, he became the principal of Sanskrit College. He was determined to break the priestly monopoly of scriptural knowledge, and for this he opened the Sanskrit College to break the self-imposed isolation of Sanskrit learning. Also, as an academician, he evolved a new methodology to teach Sanskrit.

Vidyasagar started a movement in support of widow remarriage which resulted in legislation of widow remarriage. He was also a crusade against child marriage and polygamy. He did much for the cause of Women's education. As government inspector of schools, he helped organize thirty-five girls' schools many of which he ran at his own expense. As secretary of Bethune School (established in 1849), he was one of the pioneers of higher education for the

women in India. The first lawful Hindu widow remarriage was celebrated in Calcutta in 1856 under the inspiration and supervision of Vidyasagar.

ARYA SAMAJ

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) is an important figure in Indian socio-religious reform movement. He says, "The world is fettered by the chain forged by superstition and ignorance. I have come to snap asunder that chain and to set slaves at liberty". He establishes the Arya Samaj in Mumbai on April 10, 1875. Later on several branches of this organization has been formed in different parts of the country. The main aims of this organisation were--abolition of image worship and sub-castes, to provide social service through education and charitable enterprises.

From the very beginning, it is anti-West in its tone. It has its foundation on the Vedas and through it Swami Dayananda gives a call 'Go back to the Vedas'. He pleads that the study of the Vedas be made open to all. He strongly criticises the hereditary basis of caste system and the belief in the superiority of Brahmins over the other caste groups. The Arya Samaj for the first time focuses attention on the deplorable condition of the untouchables. It starts a crusade against untouchability and tries to ameliorate the social status of untouchables. It pleads equal rights for both male and female. It severely criticises the practice of child-marriage and the minimum marriageable age for girls and boys being fixed respectively at 16 and 25. Arya Samaj opposes polygamy, purdah, practice of Sati etc. and encourages inter-caste marriage. But the most remarkable feature of Arya Samaj is the 'suddhi Movement'. It is an effort to take back the converted

Muslims and Christians into Hindu-fold after purifying them. Two distinctive features of Arya Samaj were social services like famine relief and spread of English education. Arya Samaj emphasises removal of illiteracy to dispel orthodoxy and darkness from the society. It establishes a large number of educational institutions in India for the education of both male and female. Gurukuls provide education mostly of Sanskrit, the Vedas, Ayurvedas etc. Dayananda Anglo Vedic (DAV) schools and colleges provide modern education in Humanities and Sciences. It also contributes towards arousing national consciousness. Many national leaders like B.G. Tilok, Lala Lajpat Rai and G.K. Gokhale were deeply influenced by the philosophy and principles of the Arya Samaj.

RAMA KRISHNA MISSION

The Rama Krishna Mission was founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1887 in memory of his teacher Swami Rama Krishna Paramhansa. Vivekananda propounded the teachings of his Guru and made him known all over the world. He demonstrated the greatness of the Hindu religion to the west, denounced the untouchability and advocated the upliftment of the masses. The mission has a net work of its centers all over the country and has developed into a worldwide organization. The head quarters of Rama Krishna Math and Mission are at Belur, near Kolkata. The Rama Krishna Mission is an important social reform institution and runs a number of school, hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages and welfare centers, helping the poor and the afflicted in times of distress and natural calamity. Millions of women and men suffering from problems have been helped by the Mission. It has not only been doing a yeoman social service but also helped to foster a spirit of national consciousness in the minds of educated people. The Ramakrishna mission is still one of the exemplary social service institutions in India. It had practiced social case work, social group work techniques for helping the clients suffering from distress and natural calamity. It has always worked for the rehabilitation of the weaker sections of the society particularly the orphans, widows,

destitutes and had organized various schools, hospitals and orphanages for providing various curative and preventive services.

THE YOUNG BENGAL MOVEMENT

Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), a young Anglo-Indian teacher of Hindu College initiates this movement. His followers were also known as Derozians. Rev. Krishnamohan Bondopadhyay, Tarachand Chakraborty, Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghosh, Ramtanu Lahiri, Pearychand Mitra were the important members of this group. Derozio inspires his students to think rationally and freely. His motto is: 'he who will not reason is a bigot; he who cannot is a fool, and he who does not is a slave'. Most of the supporters of this movement were Christians by faith. They use to follow Western culture, dress, food and manners. The Derozians were dead against the old, obsolete social customs of Hindu society of that time and protests against idolatry, polygamy, child- marriage, dowry, caste system, and the system of purdah. One remarkable contribution of the Derozians is the establishment of the Calcutta Public Library in 1935 which later on becomes National Library, the biggest library in the country. They advocates for mass education, particularly education for women, and supports Western education. They set up a few schools at their own cost and they were in favour of introduction of mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

But the followers of this movement were radicalists and their radicalism is bookish. They consider everything of Hinduism as bad, obsolete and valueless. They failed to grasp the realities of Indian society and as a result it could not last long. Nemai Sadhan Bose remarked that the Young Bengal Movement was like a mighty storm that tried to sweep away everything before it. It was a storm that lashed society with violence causing some good and perhaps naturally, some discomfort and distress. Though this movement is short lived, yet it contributed immensely to the reform movement of 19th Century.

REFORM MOVEMENTS AMONG THE MUSLIMS

Movements for socio-religious reforms were also strong among the Muslim community. From the very beginning, Sayyid Ahmed devoted himself to the upliftment of the Muslim community. He diagnosed the miserable plight of the Muslim to their innate conservatism and their antipathy towards the western culture and education.

ALIGARH MOVEMENT

Aligarh movement was led by Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan. He was tremendously impressed by modern scientific thought and worked all his life to reconcile it with him. Throughout his life, he struggled against blind obedience and irrationalism. He also interpreted Quran in the light of contemporary rationalism and science. He viewed, any interpretation of the Quran that conflict with human reason, science, or nature was in reality a misinterpretation. He urged the people to develop a critical approach and freedom of thought. He also warned against fanaticism, narrow mindedness, and exclusiveness and urged students and others to be broad indeed and tolerant. He 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 was given great priority by him. He founded schools in many towns and had many books of western countries translated in to Urdu. In 1875, he founded at Aligarh the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College, which later grows into Aligarh Muslim University. This college was run on secular principles in which Hindus, Parsis, and Christians were freely admitted. He had also undertaken various reforms in the social sphere like the abandonment of medieval customs and ways of thought by Muslims. In particular, he wrote

in favour of raising the status of women in society and advocated removal of purdah and spread of education among.

TITU MIR'S MOVEMENT

Titu Mir was a disciple of Sayyid Ahmed Raebareli, the founder of Wahabi Movement. Titu Mir organised the Muslim peasants of Bengal against the Hindu landlords and the British indigo planters. The British records say it was a militant movement which wasn't completely true.

FARAIZI MOVEMENT

The movement also called the Faraize Movement because of its emphasis on the Islamic pillars of faith, was founded by Haji Shariatullah. Its scene of action was East Bengal, and it aimed at the eradication of social innovations current among the Muslims of the region. Under the leadership of Haji's son, Dudumian, the movement became revolutionary from 1840 onwards. He gave the movement an organizational system from the village to the provincial level with a khalifa or authorized deputy at every level. The movement survives merely as a religious movement without political overtones after the death of Dudumian in 1862.

AHMADIYA MOVEMENT

This movement was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed in 1889. It was based on liberal principles. It described itself as the standard bearer of Mohammad Renaissance, and based itself, like Brahmo Samaj, on the principle of Universal religion of all humanity, opposing jihad. The movement spread western liberal education among the Indian Muslims. However, the Ahmadiya Movement, like Brahmo samaj which flourished in the west Asian Countries, suffered from mysticism.

TABLIGH MOVEMENT

Tabligh Movement was started by Moulana Ilyas in the late 1920, among the Meos of Northern India. The Meos was Hindus who had converted to Islam. But in spite of the adoption of Islam they continued to practice several Hindu social customs and beliefs. Even some of the Hindu religious festivals were celebrated by Meos along with their Hindu neighbors. Moulana Ilyas emphasized on religious orthodoxy and wanted to restore the purity of Islamic practices among the Meos. According to Marhah who studied the Talibagh movement, a crucial role was played by the Jammatis (group of propagators) who moved from village to village, propagating the precepts of Moulana Ilyas. Moulana Ilyas had laid down six precepts which framed the basis of the ideology of the Talibagh Movement. The consequences of the Tabligh Movement were to increase emphasis on islamisation to transform the Hindu social customs and practices which the converted had retained. This was heightened their Islamic identity but has weakened the traditional ties between the Meos and their Hindu neighbors.

RELIGIOUS REFORM AMONG SIKHS

Religious reform among the Sikhs was started at the end of the 19th Century when the Khalsa College started at Amritsar. Through the efforts of the Singh Sabhas (1870) and with British support, the Khalsa College was founded at Amritsar in 1892. This college and schools set up as a result of similar efforts, promoted Gurumukhi, Sikh learning and Punjabi literature as a whole.

After 1920 the Sikh momentum gained momentum when the Akali Movement rose in Punjab. The chief object of the Akalis was to improve the management of the Gurudwaras or Sikh Shrines that were under the control of priests or Mahants who treated them as their private

property. In 1925, a law was passed which gave the right of managing Gurudwaras to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee.

PEASANT MOVEMENTS

Peasants' movements occupy an important place in the history of social unrest in India though the aims and objectives of these movements differ in nature and degree from region to region. The Peasants' movements were a consequence of British exploitation, increased pauperization, insecure land tenures, and forceful eviction and exploitation of money lenders in the country side led to such peasant movements. These movements were also aimed at the unification of the peasants of a region, development of leadership, and for development of peasant elite. The consequences of peasant movement were that it developed resistance to the suppressive nature of the landlords and brought unification among the peasants.

The peasant movements belong to a distinct category of social movements with the ideology of class conflict as their basis. In the Indian context two opposite ideologies are associated with peasant movements—the bhoodan and sarvodaya approach of Vinobha Bhave and Jai Prakash Narayan, and the Communists. However, significant peasant movements such as Telengana, Naxalite and land grab have emerged on the basis of Communist ideology.

NANDIGRAM MOVEMENT

Nandigram is situated West Bengal's Purbo Medinipur District. Nandigram has always been a red bastion. It is one of the major areas that had witnessed the holistic Tebhaga movement launched by the united communist party in the undivided Bengal in the forties (its leader was such a legendary figure Bhupal panda) The Nandigram fiasco had its origin in a piece of information that sparked a local agitation. On January 3, an importunate notice sent by the Haldia Development

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS

Before the advent of British rule in India, there was only a customary regulation of people's rights over forest lands and produce. However, in 1965 an Act was passed to manage and preserve the government forests. Subsequently many Acts were passed by which, in the name of development, large scale deforestation took place. Due to increased exploitation of the forest, the forest communities have experienced a progressive loss of control over their habitat. In the seventies, people responded to this threat (to their survival) by launching ecological movements in various parts of the country and made demands for the conservation of vital natural resources to ensure their use on a sustainable basis.

CHIPKO MOVEMENT

The meaning of Chipko, translated in Hindi, literally means "tree-huggers". The Chipko movement is the contemporary expression of a continuing heritage of peaceful resistance by the people of Uttarakhand. The Chipko movement, are rooted in conflicts over forest resources and are similar cultural responses to forest destruction. Chipko's demand is conservation of not merely local forest resources but the entire life-support system, and with it the option for human survival. The Chipko Movement began in 1971 as a movement by local people under the leadership of Dashauli Gram Swarajya Sangh (DGSS) to assert their rights over the forest produce. The Chipko movement itself was never an organized protest. It was largely a series of discrete protests by separate Himalayan villages like Reni, Gopeshwar and Dungari-Paitoli. But this amorphousness of the movement was given a unified vision and leadership by the Gandhian social worker, Chandi Prasad Bhatt. The simplicity and sincerity of the leaders like Shri Sunderlal Bahuguna also helped to the success of the movement to a

large extent. The Chipko movement has been successful in forcing a fifteen year ban on commercial green felling in the hills of Uttar Pradesh, in stopping clear felling in the Western Ghats and the Vindhyas, and in generating pressure for a national forest policy which is more sensitive to people's needs and to the ecological development of the country.

SILENT VALLEY PROJECT

One of the early and complete successes of environmental movements was the abandonment of the Silent Valley hydro electric project in Kerala. This movement was organized by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishat (KSSP) in collaboration with wild life conservationists. In this project, however, there was no local people's involvement as there was no displacement of people. The movement was fought primarily on environmental grounds and mostly at the intellectual level. The major concerns of this movement were the adverse environmental impact on Silent Valley, one of the last surviving natural tropical forests in India and protecting a rare breed of monkey, lion-tailed macaque.

With the active support from the International organizations like World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and 103 Natural Resources the movement assumed International importance though it gained popularity and coverage, the ultimate success of the movement was attributed to the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi's desire to enhance her image among the International Conservation Community.

NARMADA BACHHO ANDOLAN

One of the most popular movement in the environmental history of India in recent years. Narmada Bachao Andolan associated with the Narmada River Valley Project. Though the movement started as early as in the 1970s, along with the clearance of the project, it received momentum only during late 1980s. This movement was centered around the issue of human rights. In fact, some of the main leaders of the movement at present like Medha Patkar were working toward proper rehabilitation programmes for the dam displaced.

Their demands included complete stopping of the dam, resettlement and rehabilitation benefits to the oustees. The movement, however, gained wider public attention with mobilization and organization of oustees (mostly tribal's) and the joining of the eminent social workers like Baba Amte, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Medha Patkar.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT

- In spite of the opposition from the orthodox sections of the society, these movements contributed towards liberating people from the exploitation of priests. The religious texts were translated into vernacular languages; there was more emphasis on interpretation of scriptures and simplification of rituals, thus making worship a more personal experience.
- The movement gave the upcoming middle class cultural roots and reduced the sense of humiliation that the British powers had created.
- Modern, rational, secular, and scientific outlook was promoted realizing the need of the modern era. The reformers aimed at modernization rather than outright westernization. A favorable social climate was created to end India's cultural and intellectual isolation from the world.
- It was greatly due to the constant endeavors of the reformers that abolition of Sati and legalization of widow-marriage were achieved during the nineteenth century. There was much intellectual fervor, prolonged agitation and acute discussion during the

controversy over the age of Consent Bill, Such debates, even if they failed to bring about any concrete change immediately, raised the level of consciousness.

- The ideas and activities of the intellectuals were directly or indirectly related to the task of nation-building and national reconstruction. The social reform movement, as a matter of fact, was not an isolated phenomenon; it was loaded with wider national political and economic considerations. In a way, the social reform movement was a prelude to nationalism.

IMPACT OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT

The British wanted to appease the orthodox upper section of society. As a result only two important laws were passed. Some legal measures were introduced to raise the status of women. For example Sati was declared illegal (1829). Infanticide was declared illegal. Widow Remarriage was permitted by a law passed in 1856. Marriageable age of girls was raised to ten by a law passed in 1860.

A law passed in 1872, sanctioned inter-caste and inter-communal marriages. The other law passed in 1891, aimed at discouraging child marriage. For preventing child marriage, the Sharda Act was passed in 1929. According to it a girl below 14 and a boy below 18 could not be married. In the 20th century and especially after 1919 the Indian 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, short stories, poetry, the Press and in the thirties (1930's), the cinema too spread their views.

Numerous individuals, reform societies, and religious organizations worked hard to spread education among women, to prevent marriage of young children, to bring women out of the purdah, to enforce monogamy, and to enable middle class women to take up professions or public employment. Due to all these efforts Indian women played an active and important role in the struggle for independence of the country. As a result many superstitions disappeared and many others were on their way out. Now, it was no longer a sin to travel to foreign countries.

LIMITATIONS OF THE SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT

Narrow Social Base

Reform in practice in any case affected a very small minority. Only the educated and urban middle class was involved in the social reform movement, while the needs of vast majority of peasants and the urban poor were ignored.

Movement did not reach rural India

Given the situation of widespread illiteracy in the rural areas and because of the absence of modern and diversified communications network, they were doomed to have a very limited audience, mainly urban-based. Thus even in terms of its practical appeal the movement remained urban, besides its other limitations.

Casteism remained strong

Caste distinctions remained strong and the religious and social practices did not die away. Caste and customs proved to be hard to eradicate from Indian consciousness. The tendency of the reformers to appeal to the greatness of the past and to rely on scriptural authority led to compartmentalizing religions as also alienating high caste Hindus from lower caste Hindus.

Communal Consciousness

Overemphasis on religious, philosophical aspects of culture while underemphasizing secular aspects led to the Hindus praising ancient Indian History and Muslims confining to the medieval history. This created a notion of two separate segments of people and increased communal consciousness.

EFFECTS OF THE REFORM MOVEMENTS

1. The reform movements brought about remarkable changes in the society and religion. Initially the great changes affected a small group of people, but gradually these ideas spread among many sections of the people,
2. The reform movements strengthened the Hindu and Muslim religions and made efforts to remove social evils among them,
3. The educated Indians started to think reasonably,
4. The reform movements helped in the revival of the past glory. They also helped in making up of a modern India,
5. It led to the progress of literature in different regional languages,
6. The caste system began to lose its hold on the society,

CONCLUSION

In this Unit various kinds of social movements like socio religious reform movements, backward class movement, peasants' movements, and environmental movements have been discussed. These movements are of great significance as it had ushered in social reforms by way of social mobility of the disadvantaged sections of the society. These movements have been responsible for the formulation and enforcement of various legal provisions for the protection of women, children, untouchables as well as poor peasants. So these movements are of immense significance to the students of social work to understand the roots of these social movements and how they had played a significant role in Indian society. It also describes the use of various methods of social work practice by different reformers in mobilizing and organizing the community. The section also describes briefly the Nandigram movement, which is a very recent movement in present context. The Nandigram movement is one of the most successful peasant movements in India which signifies that organized efforts, collective mobilization, social action can bring positive change and can resist change in our social structure.

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