Religious and Social Reform of India – The Indian Renaissance

The urgent need for social and religious reform that began to manifest itself from the early decades of the 19th century arose in response to the contact with Western culture and education. The weakness and decay of Indian society was evident to educated Indians who started to work systematically for their removal.

They were no longer willing to accept the traditions, beliefs and practices of Hindu society simply because they had been observed for centuries.

The impact of Western ideas gave birth to new awakening. The change that took place in the Indian social scenario is popularly known as the Renaissance.

1. Raja Rammohan Roy:

The central figure of this cultural awakening was Raja Rammohan Roy. Known as the “father of the Indian Renaissance”, Rammohan Roy was a great patriot, scholar and humanist. He was moved by deep love for the country and worked throughout his life for the social, religious, intellectual and political regeneration of the Indians.

Rammohan Roy was born in 1772 in Radhanagar, a small village in Bengal. As a young man he had studied Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy in Varanasi and Persian, Arabic and Koran in Patna. He was a great scholar Roy who mastered several languages including English, Latin, Greek and Hebrew.

Social Reforms:

In 1814, Rammohan Roy settled in Calcutta and dedicated his life to the cause of social and religious reform. As a social reformer, Rammohan Roy fought relentlessly against social evils like sati, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide and caste discrimination. He organised a movement against the inhuman custom of sati and helped William Bentinck to pass a law banning
the practice (1829). It was the first successful social movement against an age-old social evil.

Rammohan Roy was one of the earliest propagators of modern Western education. He looked upon it as a major instrument for the spread of modern ideas in the country. He was associated with the foundation the Hindu College in Calcutta (which later came to be known as the Presidency College). He also maintained at his own cost an English school in Calcutta. In addition, he established a Vedanta College where both Indian learning and Western social and physical science courses were offered.

He sent petitions to the government to adopt a wider system of public education in English. He also recognised the importance of vernaculars for spreading new ideas. He compiled a Bengali grammar and developed an easy and modern style of Bengali prose.

**Journalism:**

Rammohan Roy was a pioneer of Indian journalism. He himself published journals in Bengali, Persian, Hindi and English to educate the public on various current issues. *Samvad Kaumudi* was the most important journal brought out by him.

**Rammohan Roy and Internationalism:**

Rammohan Roy was a firm believer in internationalism. He held that the suffering and happiness of one nation should affect the rest of the world. He took a keen interest in international events and always supported the cause of liberty and nationalism. He celebrated the success of the revolution in Spain in 1823 by hosting a public dinner.

**Religious Reforms:**

Rammohan Roy struggled persistently against social evils. He argued that ancient Hindu texts the Vedas and the Upanishads upheld the doctrine of monotheism. To prove his point, he translated the Vedas and five Upanishads into Bengali.
In 1849 he wrote *Gift to Monotheism* in Persian. Rammohan Roy was a staunch believer in the philosophy of Vedanta (Upanishads) and vigorously defended the Hindu religion and Hindu philosophy from the attack of the missionaries. He only wanted to mould Hinduism into a new cast to suit the requirements of the age.

In 1829 Rammohan Roy founded a new religious society known as the *Atmiya Sabha* which later on came to be known as the *Brahmo Samaj*. This religious society was based on the twin pillars of rationalism and the philosophy of the Vedas. The Brahmo Samaj emphasised human dignity, criticised idolatry and denounced social evils like sati.

Rammohan Roy represented the first glimmerings of the rise of national consciousness in India. He opposed the rigidity of the caste system because it destroyed the unity of the country. The poet Rabindranath Tagore has rightly remarked: “Rammohan was the only person in his time, in the whole world of men, to realise completely the significance of the Modern Age.”

2. **Henry Vivian Derozio and the young Bengal movement:**

The establishment of the Hindu College in 1817 was a major event in the history of Bengal. It played an important role in carrying forward the reformist movement that had already emerged in the province. A radical movement for the reform of Hindu Society, known as the *Young Bengal Movement*, started in the college.

Its leader was Henry Vivian Derozio, a teacher of the Hindu College. Derozio was born in 1809. 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 1831.
Derozio was deeply influenced by the **revolutionary ideas of liberty, equality and fraternity**. He was a brilliant teacher and within a short period of time, he drew around him a group of intelligent boys in the college.

He inspired his students to think rationally and freely, to question authority, to love liberty, equality and freedom and to worship truth. By organising an association for debates and discussions on literature, philosophy, history and science, he spread radical ideas.

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.

Derozio was a poet, teacher, reformer and a fiery journalist. He was perhaps the first nationalist poet of modern India. He was removed from the Hindu College because of his radicalism and died soon after at the age of 22.

### 3. Debendranath Tagore:

Debendranath Tagore, the father of Rabindranath Tagore, was responsible for revitalising the Brahmo Samaj. Under him the first step was taken to convert the Brahmo Samaj into a separate religious and social community. He represented the best in traditional Indian learning and the new thought of the West.

In 1839, he founded the **Tatvabodhini Sabha** to propagate Rammohan Roy’s ideas. He promoted a magazine to do a systematic study of India’s past in Bengali language. The Samaj actively Debendranath Tagore supported the movements for widow remarriage, the abolition of polygamy, women’s education and the improvement in the condition of the peasantry.

### 4. Keshab Chandra Sen:
Keshab Chandra Sen carried on an intensive programme of social reform. He set up schools, organised famine relief and propagated widow remarriage. In 1872 the Government passed the Native (Civil) Marriages Act legalising marriages performed according to Brahmo Samaj rites.

5. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar:

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, a towering personality of the mid-nineteenth century, was born in a poor Brahmin family of Bengal in 1820. He was a renowned Sanskrit scholar and became the Principal of the Sanskrit College in 1851. The Sanskrit College conferred on him the title of ‘Vidyasagar’ because of his profound knowledge of Sanskrit.

Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar was both a scholar and a reformer. He was a great humanist and had deep sympathy for the poor and the oppressed. He dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform which he thought was necessary for modernising India. By admitting non-Brahmin students to the Sanskrit College, he dealt a severe blow to the prevalent caste system.

Vidyasagar was a staunch supporter of women’s education and helped Drinkwater Bethune to establish the Bethune School, the first Indian school for girls, in 1849. As Inspector of Schools, Vidyasagar opened a number of schools for girls in the districts under his charge.

Vidyasagar’s greatest contribution lies in the improvement of the condition of widows. Despite opposition, Vidyasagar openly advocated widow remarriage. Soon a powerful movement in favour of widow remarriage was started. At last, after prolonged struggle the Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. Through his efforts, twenty-five widow remarriages took place. He also spoke vehemently against child marriage and polygamy.

Vidyasagar contributed enormously to the growth of the Bengali language and contributed to the evolution of the modern prose style in Bengali. He wrote a Bengali primer, ‘Varna Parichay’, which is used even today. Through his writings, Vidyasagar made the people aware of the social problems and thus helped the growth of nationalism in India.
6. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhamsa:

Sri Ramakrishna Paramhamsa was one of the greatest saints of modern India. Ramakrishna was born in a poor Brahmin family of Bengal. He showed a religious bent of mind from his childhood. He had no formal education but his discourses were full of wisdom. He was the chief priest of the Kali temple at Dakshineswar near Calcutta. People from all walks of life visited Dakshineswar to listen to his discourses.

Ramakrishna Paramhamsa was a man with a liberal outlook. He firmly believed that there was an underlying unity among all religions and that only the methods of worship were different. God could be approached by any form of worship as long as it was done with single-minded devotion.

He believed that service to man was service to God, for man was the embodiment of God on earth. As man was the creation of God, man-made divisions made no sense to him. Ramakrishna Paramhamsa was a great teacher who could express complicated philosophical ideas in a simple language for everyone to understand. He believed that religious salvation could be attained through renunciation, meditation and devotion.

7. Swami Vivekananda:

Narendra Nath Dutta, better known as Swami Vivekananda, was the most illustrious disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. He was born in Calcutta in January, 1863. He graduated from the Scottish Church College and was well-versed in Western philosophy. Vivekananda was a man of great intellect and possessed a critical and analytical mind. At the age of eighteen, Vivekananda met Sri Ramakrishna. This meeting transformed his life completely. After the death of Sri Ramakrishna, he became a ‘sanyasi’ and devoted his life to preaching and spreading Ramakrishna’s message to the people. His religious message was put in a form that would suit the needs of contemporary Indian society.

Vivekananda proclaimed the essential oneness of all religions. He condemned the caste-system, religious rituals, ceremonies and
superstitions. He had a deep understanding of Hindu philosophy and travelled far and wide to spread its message. At the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago (1893), Vivekananda spoke about Hindu religion at length.

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

In India, however, Vivekananda’s main role was that of a social reformer rather than a religious leader. He propagated Ramakrishna’s message of peace and brotherhood and emphasized the need for religious tolerance which would lead to the establishment of peace and harmony in the country.

He believed that it was the social responsibility of the better placed people to take care of the downtrodden, or the ‘daridra narayan’.

**The Ramakrishna Mission:**

In 1896, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna Mission to propagate social welfare. It laid emphasis not on personal salvation but on social good and social service. The Ramakrishna Mission stood for religious and social reform based on the ancient culture of India. Emphasis was put on the essential spirit of Hinduism and not on rituals.

Rendering social service was the primary aim of the Ramakrishna Mission. It believed that serving a human being was the same as worshipping God. The Mission opened a chain of schools, hospitals, orphanages and libraries throughout the country. It provided relief during famines, earthquakes and epidemics. A math or monastery was established in Belur near Calcutta. The Belur Math took care of the religious developments of the people.
8. Dayanand Saraswati and the Arya Samaj:

Another organisation in northern India which aimed to strengthen Hinduism through reform was the Arya Samaj. Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj in Rajkot, was born into a Brahmin family in Kathiawar, Gujarat, in 1824. At the early age of 14, he rebelled against the practice of idol worship. He ran away from home at the age of twenty. For the next fifteen years, he wandered all over India meditating and studying the ancient Hindu scriptures.

In 1863 Swami Dayanand started preaching his doctrine of one God. He questioned the meaningless rituals, decried polytheism and image worship and denounced the caste system. He wanted to purify Hinduism and attacked the evils that had crept into Hindu society.

Dayanand Saraswati believed that the Vedas contained the knowledge imparted to men by God, and hence its study alone could solve all social problems. So he propagated the motto “Back to the Vedas.” Asserting that the Vedas made no mention of untouchability, child marriage and the subjugation of women, Swami Dayanand attacked these practices vehemently.

Dayanand began the *suddhi movement* which enabled the Hindus who had accepted Islam or Christianity to return to Hinduism, their original faith. Dayanand published his religious commentaries in Hindi so as to make the common people understand his preachings. The *Satyarth Prakash* was his most important work.

The Swami worked actively for the regeneration of India. In 1875, Swami Dayanand founded the Arya Samaj in Bombay. The Arya Samaj made significant contributions to the fields of education and social and religious reforms. After his death, his followers had established the *Dayanand Anglo Vedic Schools* first in Lahore and then in other parts of India. *Gurukuls* were also established to propagate traditional ideals of education. A network of schools and colleges both for boys and girls were also established by the Arya Samaj.
The Arya Samaj influenced mostly the people of northern India, specially Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Punjab. Although it was not a political organisation, the Arya Samaj played a positive role in creating a nationalist pride in Indian tradition and culture.

**Reform movements in Western India:**

**Jyotirao Govindrao Phule:**

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule prominent role in bringing about, reforms in Maharashtra. He fought for improving the condition of women, the poor and the untouchables. He started a school for the education of girls of the lower castes and founded an association called the *Satyasodhak Samaj*.

People from all castes and religions were allowed to join the association. He was opposed to the domination of the Brahmins and started the practice of conducting marriages without Brahmin priests.

**The Prarthana Samaj:**

In 1867, the Prarthana Samaj was started in Maharashtra with the aim of reforming Hinduism and preaching the worship of one God. Mahadev Govind Ranade and R.G. Bhandarkar were the two great leaders of the Samaj. The Prarthana Samaj did in Maharashtra what the Brahmo Samaj did in Bengal.

It attacked the caste system and the predominance of the Brahmins, campaigned against child marriage and the purdah system, preached widow remarriage and emphasised female education. In order to reform Hinduism, **Ranade** started the *Widow Remarriage Association* and the *Deccan Education Society*. In 1887, Ranade founded the National Social Conference with the aim of introducing social reforms throughout the country. Ranade was also one of the founders of the Indian National Congress.
Reform Movements in South India: The Theosophical Society and Annie Besant:

Many Europeans were attracted towards Hindu philosophy. In 1875, a Russian spiritualist named Madame Blavatsky and an American called Colonel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in America. The society was greatly influenced by the Indian doctrine of karma. In 1886 they founded the Theosophical Society at Adyar near Madras.

Annie Besant, an Irish woman who came to India in 1893, helped the Theosophist movement to gain strength. She propagated Vedic philosophy and urged Indians to take pride in their culture. The Theosophists stood for the revival of the ancient Indian religion and universal brotherhood.

The uniqueness of the movement lay in the fact that it was spearheaded by foreigners who glorified Indian religious and philosophical traditions. Annie Besant was the founder of the Central Hindu College in Banaras, which later developed into the Banaras Hindu University. Annie Besant herself made India her permanent home and played a prominent role in Indian politics. In 1917, she was elected President of the Indian National Congress.

Reform movements among the Muslims:

Movements for socio-religious reforms among the Muslims emerged late. Most Muslims feared that Western education would endanger their religion as it was un-Islamic in character. During the first half of the 19th century only a handful of Muslims had accepted English education.

The Muhammedan Literary Society, established by Nawab Abdul Latif in 1863, was one of the earliest institutions that attempted to spread modern education. Abdul Latif also tried to remove social abuses and promote Hindu-Muslim unity.

Syed Ahmad Khan:
The most important socio-religious movement among the Muslims came to be known as the Aligarh Movement. It was organised by Syed Ahmad Khan
(1817-1899), a man described as the most outstanding figure among the Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan was born in 1817 into a Muslim noble family and had joined the service of the Company as a judicial officer. He realised that the Muslims had to adapt themselves to British rule. So Syed Ahmad advised Muslims to embrace Western education and take up government service.

In 1862, he founded the Scientific Society to translate English books on science and other subjects into Urdu. He also started an English-Urdu journal through which he spread the ideas of social reform. Through his initiative was established the **Mohammedan Oriental College** which later developed into the Aligarh Muslim University. It helped to develop a modern outlook among its students. This intellectual movement is called the Aligarh Movement.

As a social reformer, Syed Ahmad Khan campaigned against the purdah system, polygamy and the Muslim system of divorce. He emphasised the need for removing irrational social customs while retaining the essence of Islam and encouraging a rational interpretation of the Koran.

Syed Ahmad Khan believed that the interest of the Muslims would be best served through cooperation with the British Government. It was only through the guidance of the British that India could mature into a full-fledged nation. So he opposed the participation of the Muslims in the activities of the Indian National Congress.

**Reform movements among the Parsis and the Sikhs:**
The Parsi Religious Reform Association was started in 1851. It campaigned against orthodoxy in religion. Religious and social movements among the Sikhs were undertaken by various gurus who tried to bring about positive changes in the Sikh religion. **Baba Dayal Das** propagated the nirankar (formless) idea of God. By the end of the 19th century a new reform movement called the **Akali Movement** was launched to reform the corrupt management of Gurdwaras.
Women Reformers:

Pandita Ramabai:
The British Government did not take substantial steps to educate women. Still, by the end of the 19th century, there were several women who had become aware of the need for social reform.

Pandita Ramabai had been educated in United States and in England. She wrote about the unequal treatment meted out to the women of India. She founded the Arya Mahila Sabha in Pune and opened the Sarda Sadan for helping destitute widows.

Sarojini Naidu:
Sarojini Naidu was a renowned poet and social worker. She inspired the masses with the spirit of nationalism through her patriotic poems. She stood for voting rights for women, and took an active interest in the political situation in the country. She also helped to set up the All India Women’s Conference.

Literature and the Press:
Literature was used as a powerful weapon for spreading social awareness among the people. It was also used for promoting social reforms. The social reformers made valuable contributions to literature. Bharatendu Harish Chandra, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore spread the ideas of social reform and condemned social injustice in Hindi and Bengali.

Poets like Iqbal and Subramania Bharati inspired the masses. Premchand wrote about the sufferings of the poor and thus made the people aware of social injustice. Rabindranath Tagore composed the National Anthem. Bankim Chandra and Iqbal composed two other national songs Bande Mataram and Saare Jahan Se Achchha.

Growth of the Press:
Most reformers started journals of their own. Through these journals and newspapers they put forward their demands for social, economic and political changes. Thus, the press acted as a vehicle for disseminating ideas of social transformation.
**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.


**Contribution of the reform movements:**
Many reformers like Dayanand Saraswati and Vivekananda upheld Indian philosophy and culture. This instilled in Indians a sense of pride and faith in their own culture. Female education was promoted. Schools for girls were set up. Even medical colleges were established for women. 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.