

# An Analysis upon Socio - Cultural Awakening and Religious Reform Movements in 19th Century India

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**Abstract – Social movements primarily take the form of non-institutionalised collective political action which strive for political and /or social change. While India has witnessed many such movements over the centuries, it is only recently that scholars have begun to study them in depth. Due to caste based hierarchy in society and Brahmins' domination, many of the reform movements were taken place in India. The main philosophies behind these movements were gender and caste based equality and unique worship to single god. These movements emphasized social equality and humanity.**

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## INTRODUCTION

The impact of British rule on Indian society and culture was widely different from what India had known before. Most of the earlier intruders who came to India had settled within her frontiers, were absorbed by her superior culture and had become one of the land and its people. However, British conquest was different. Eighteenth century Europe had experienced novel intellectual currents and created the Age of Enlightenment. A new spirit of rationalism and enquiry had given a new dynamism to European society. The development of science and scientific outlook had affected every aspect of activity-political, military, economic and even religious. In contrast to Europe, which was in the vanguard of civilization in the 18th century, India presented the picture of a stagnant civilization and a static and decadent society. Thus, for the first time, India encountered an invader who considered himself racially superior and culturally more advanced. For some time it seemed that India was completely bowled over by new Western ideas and western values in life. It seemed that India had lagged behind in the case for civilisation. This produced diverse reactions. Some English –educated Bengali youth (known as Derozians) developed a revulsion against Hindu religion and culture, gave up old religious idea and traditions and deliberately adopted practices most offensive to Hindu sentiments, such as drinking wine and eating beef. More mature minds led by Rammohan Roys were certainly stimulated by Western ideas and western values but refused to break away from Hinduism: their approach was to reform Hindu religion and society and they saw the path of progress in an acceptance of the best of the

East and the west. Another current was to deny the superiority of Western culture and prevent India from becoming a colour less copy of Europe; they drew inspiration from India's past heritage and reinterpreted it in the light of modern rationalism. This new-Hinduism preached that European had much to learn from India's spiritualism.

The new scientific outlook, the doctrine of rationalism and humanism particularly impressed the English – educated class. The India leaders, stimulated by the new knowledge, sought to reform sought Hinduism from within and sought to purge it of superstitious pilgrimages came up for close scrutiny and consequent reform. The new concept of secularization was born. The term secularization implies that what was previously regarded as religious was no longer regarded as such. The magic wand was moved by rationalism i.e., the emergence of a tendency to regulate individual religious and social life in accordance with the principles of reason and to discard traditional beliefs and practices which cannot stand the test of modern knowledge. This approach brought a great change in the concept of „pollution and purity“ which formed an integral part of traditional Hindu religious. The educated persons could see no logic behind labeling certain forbidden vegetables such as garlic, ginger, onion, beet root as impure; rather food value of vegetables received more importance. Further, ferment of puberty by girls was no longer an occasion for elaborate rituals: it began to be looked upon as a natural stage in the process of growth. Urbanisation, modernization, new trends in eating at tables and restaurants promoted new outlook and erosion of orthodox way of living. The

Ferment of ideas an expansive touch of Indian Culture . A spirit of renaissance pervaded the whole country. Indian intellectuals closely scrutinized the country's past and found that many beliefs and practices were no longer of any use and needed to be discarded; they also discovered that many aspects of Indian's culture heritage were of intrinsic value to India's cultural awakening. The result was the birth of many socio-religious reforms movements touching almost every segments Indian society.

The reforms movements fall in two broad categories One, Reformist movements like that Brahmo Samaj, the prarthana Samaj and the Aligarh movements Two, Revivalists movements like the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and band movement Both the reformist and revivalist movement depended on a varying degree on a appeal to the lost purity of the religion they sought to reform. The only difference one reform movement and the other lay in the degree to which it relied on tradition or on reason and conscience. Another significant aspects of all the reform movements was their emphasis on both religious and social reforms. This link was primarily due to two main reasons. (a) Almost every social custom and institution in India derived sustenance from religious injunctions and sanctions. This meant that no social reform could be undertaken unless the existing religious notions which sustained the social customs were also reformed. (b) Indian reformers well understood the close interrelation reforms must precede demand for social reforms or political rights.

We are a very lucky people today. We are free from foreign domination and also free from many other rigidities which our ancestors had to face. The Indian society in the first half of the 19th century was caste ridden, decadent and rigid. It followed certain practices which are not in keeping with humanitarian feelings or values but were still being followed in the name of religion. A change was therefore needed in society. When the British came to India they introduced the English language as well as certain modern ideas. These ideas were those of liberty, social and economic equality, fraternity, democracy and justice which had a tremendous impact on Indian society.

Fortunately for our country there were some enlightened Indians like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati and many others who were willing to fight and bring in reforms in society so that it could face the challenges of the West. There have been many studies on social movements in India during the last three decades, though compared to many other areas and the incidence of movements, their number is very small. A majority of the studies are recent, published after the mid-1960s.

Most of them are by historians, sociologists, political activists or journalists. Political scientists have, by and large, ignored this area till recently. Historians have for

long concentrated on political history, which is mainly the history of rulers and of the elite.

British historians, in whose footsteps Indian historians, for good or for bad, followed, focused their studies on the activities of the British as the actors on the stage of history with India as a shadowy background. Social history came onto the scene very late. And for a long time, it limited its scope to the 'history of people with the politics left out'. It has been largely confined to social policies of the government, educational and cultural history, social reform movements, the growth of the middle class, etc.. Recently, social historians have produced very stimulating studies on social movements in general and peasant movements in particular.

Sociology is a relatively-new discipline. Although the first generation of sociologists maintained a broader horizon, the second generation has confined its focus to the tradition-modernity paradigm. A majority of their studies are related to kinship, caste and village society. Their interest in social movements was largely focused on Sanskritisation and socio-religious reform movements, excluding the political dimension as beyond their scope, until political sociology or the sociology of politics began to take shape in the late 1960s. Political science is still lagging behind.

Earlier, under the influence of British tradition, political science in India was confined to political philosophy, formal government institutions and international relations. Empirical studies, including the functioning of the institutions, are of recent origin—from the late 1950s—influenced by the behavioural school developed in America. Positivism dominated analysis, and the question 'why' has been relegated to oblivion. Second, the concept of politics adopted by political scientists influenced s by American and British traditions is narrow, confined to the political system whose functions are: rule making, rule application and rule adjudication. For many political scientists, 'polities' means who gets what, when and how in society. For others, the definition of politics is 'authoritative allocation' of values.

Elaborating on the meaning of 'authoritative', David Easton points out, "... a policy is clearly authoritative when the feeling prevails that it must or ought to be obeyed . . . that policies whether formal or effective, are accepted as binding' (1953: 76). Thus, these definitions delimit the study of politics to the functions of the government and the state, or the politics of the ruling class or elite. Therefore, it is not surprising that, in America and Britain, some universities have departments of 'government' or 'public law', and in India of 'civics and administration' or 'public administration', instead of 'polities' or 'political science'<sup>1</sup>. These definitions delimit the study of politics to the functions of the government and the state.

A social movement is a deliberate collective endeavour to promote change in any direction and by any means, not excluding violence, illegality, revolution or withdrawal into 'utopian' community. Social movements are thus clearly different from historical movements, tendencies or trends. It is important to note, however, that such tendencies and trends, and the influence of the unconscious or irrational factors in human behaviour, may be of crucial importance in illuminating the problems of interpreting and explaining social movement.

A social movement must evince a minimal degree of organization, though this may range from a loose, informal or partial level of organization to the highly institutionalized and bureaucratized movement and the corporate group. Indeed, it will be shown that much of the literature of social movements has been concerned with natural histories, models or theories of movement development. Such models have attempted to simulate changes in movement structure and organization ranging from states of initial social unrest and excitement and the emergence of a charismatic leadership, to a revolutionary movement's seizure of power.

India has a long history of socio-religious reform movements. However, the present work focuses on the social reform movements of Nineteenth century only. The reforms by definition entail change or replacement of the institutions, which have become functionally irrelevant (totally or partly) to the contemporary social order and are responsible for low quality of life, deprivations, unrest and misery to the sizeable sections of the society. Etymologically, 'reform' means 'forming again', 'reconstruct', which can be done only when a system is first demolished; but social reform envisages 'amendment', 'improvement' etc.; thus entailing peaceful crusading, use of non-violent means for change and change in slow speed.<sup>1</sup> A reform movement is a kind of social movement that aims at making gradual change, or changes in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental changes. A reform movement is distinguished from more radical social movements such as revolutionary movements.

In India, social reform did not ordinarily mean a reorganization of the structuring of society at large, as it did in the West, for the benefit of underprivileged social and economic classes. Instead, it meant the infusion into the existing social structure of the new ways of life and thought; the society would be preserved, while its members would be transformed.<sup>2</sup> Nineteenth century is the period of turmoil in Indian society. The age-old traditions and practices were degraded and these were replaced by many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child-marriage, caste system, purdah; ban on female education, and widow re-marriage etc. The beginning of the social reform

movements in India in the nineteenth century were clearly the outcome of coming in contact of two different societies- totally different from each other.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, there is the traditional orthodox Society and on the other hand is the English educated young generation. It is regarded as the product of the English education which brought the young India into contact with the Age of illumination in Europe. It is the age which proclaimed the supremacy of reason over faith, of individual conscience over outside authority and brought in its train new conceptions of human rights and social justice. The introduction of English education helps a lot in bringing about a great transformation in Indian society. A group of young people of India who came in contact with the new system of education became familiar with the liberal and rational thinking of Europe and they revolted against the tyranny of dogma and traditional authorities, beliefs, customs and age-old practices. The impact of English education in India is both positive as well as negative. However, the first and foremost positive effect is that it instilled into the minds of Indians a spirit of rational enquiry into the basis of their religion and society. There was the replacement of blind faith in current traditions, beliefs, and conventions characteristics of Medieval Age- by a spirit of rationalism, which is the distinctive feature of the Modern Age. In short, there is a transition from the Medieval Age to the Modern Age.

In nineteenth century, a large number of individuals as well as a number of organisations took active role in social reform movement. However, the story of Indian social reform movement practically began with Raja Rammohan Roy (1774-1833). The advent of Raja Rammohan Roy marks the line of demarcation between the dark middle age and the modern age of 'enlightenment'.<sup>5</sup> He is a multifaceted personality- a rationalist, free thinker, a stern fighter against social evils, humanitarian, a social and religious reformer. As a religious reformer, Rammohan is opposed to idolatry and polytheism. He aims at establishing monotheism and the worship of one formless God. As a social reformer, he fights for the cause of women, especially to eradicate the evil practice of sati, and abolition of caste discrimination. He supports the spread of Western knowledge.

**BRAHMO SAMAJ :** In 1815 Rammohan Roy forms 'Atmiya Sabha' (Association of Friends), an association for holding religious discussions. In 1828, he forms 'Brahmo Sabha' which later on became famous as 'Brahmo Samaj'. This Brahmo Samaj movement is the most remarkable aspect of the nineteenth century Indian awakening and reform.<sup>6</sup> It attacks almost all evils prevalent in the then Indian society and tries to eradicate them. Rammohan Roy is the first person in modern India to fight against the social discrimination against women. Among the various reform activities of Rammohan, the most significant one is his crusade

against 'Satidaha' or immolation of the widows at the funeral pyre of their dead husband. In July, 1819, he starts 'Sambad Kaumudi', a Bengali journal in which he ceaselessly attacks the practice of sati rite. Some other newspapers like the 'Samachar Darpan' and 'Bangadut' supports Rammohan's stand; while the 'Samachar Chandrika' defends the practice of sati. He writes many articles both in Bengali and in English against this evil practice and tries to make people aware that such practice was not sanctioned by the Vedic religions. He starts an organized movement against this horrible practice. The orthodox section of the society led by Radhakanta Deb, Maharaja Kalik\_\_a Bahadur and others severely opposed at Rammohan's attempt. But these oppositions could not desist Rammohan from his objective. At first he is not in favour of state interference for the abolition of this practice.

His main intention in this regard is to inject in the minds of the people such enlightenment as to desist them from practicing this evil practice. But when Lord William Bentinck abolished it by Regulation XVII passed on December 1829, he fully supports it.

**Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884)** joins Brahmo Samaj in 1857 and assumes its leadership in 1861. He remarks that all social reforms are involved in a great radical reformation-religious reformation. "I do not undervalue social reformation", he declares, "but make religion the basis on which reorganised, reformed and regenerated India will stand in future".<sup>13</sup> He establishes Sangat Sabha for discussing religious and moral questions. He is in favour of radical reforms which were not liked by the older section of the Samaj. The younger section also opposes the wearing of Brahmanical thread.

Debendranath Tagore is not against social reform but he and his followers wants to keep social life out of the purview of religious life.<sup>14</sup> All these led to an open conflict between the older and the younger sections and as a result of such conflict Keshab Chandra Sen breaks away from the original Brahmo Samaj in 1866. He forms a new organization known as 'the Brahmo Samaj of India' or 'Bharatiya Brahmo Samaj'. The original organisation, henceforth known as the \_di Brahmo Samaj, quietly followed the pure monotheistic form of Hinduism. Shortly after the division of the Samaj, Debendranath Tagore retires from active participation in the work of the \_di Brahmo Samaj, and Rajnaraya\_ Bose became its president. But in spite of the tremendous personal effort of its leader, it soon went into oblivion.

## PANDIT ISWAR CHANDRA VIDY\_S\_GAR & SOME OTHER REFORMERS

**Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891)** was born in an orthodox Hindu Brahmin family, but he was

very liberal in his outlook. He feels sorry and compassionate for the poor, weak and needy. For his charity and philanthropy he is known as 'Dayarsagar'-ocean of kindness. He prefers to work for social reform without being associated with any socio-religious organisation of his time. He dedicates his whole life for the betterment of the condition of the child widows of the Hindu society. He works particularly for the upliftment of Indian women. He raises his voice in favour of the marriage of the widows and a movement emerges in its favour under his leadership.

Because of his continuous efforts, the Government passed the Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act in 1856 which legalised the marriage of widows. The first lawful Hindu widow remarriage among the upper castes is celebrated in Calcutta on December 7, 1856, under the supervision of Vidyasagar. He is against child-marriage and launches a powerful agitation against kulinism and polygamy. Kulinism was a remarkable system that had evolved in Bengal during the reign of Ballal Sen in the 12th Century. Due to the shortage of kulin bridegrooms, a large number of girls were used to be married to the same groom, often simultaneously on the same nuptial night. So polygamy was the natural result of kulinism. Sometimes very young girls were married to very aged persons who were on the verge of death, and as a result there were speedy widowhood. A kulin brahmin groom used to take honoraria to visit his wife and naturally it becomes a means of livelihood for him; and so he used to marry as many women as he could. Rammohan Roy also protests against kulinism and polygamy, but it was Vidyasagar who starts a powerful crusade against the entire system. He continues to write against these practices and tries to make people aware of its evil effects. However, with the spread of education and change of public attitudes, kulinism died a natural death.

Vidyasagar's heartfelt for the oppressed section of the society and he tries his best to better their condition. He is against untouchability and even dined with them. He opened the doors of Sanskrit College for the lower caste students which were previously meant for Brahmin students only. He is in favour of education of the girls and set up nearly 35 girls' schools, many of which were run at his own cost. He rendered yeoman's service to the cause of women's education in Bengal.

## KENDUKURI VEERESALINGAM:

**Veeresalingam (1848-1919)** worked for the social reformation in Andhra Pradesh. Throughout his lifetime he works for the betterment of the condition of women. He dedicates his life in eradicating social evils concerning Indian women. He supports the cause of Western education, education of women and coeducation.



He raises his voice against the prevalent social evils like child-marriage, dowry and marriage of young girls with aged persons. He preaches against corruption and the system of Devdasis<sup>21</sup> and prostitutes. He starts 'Widows' Remarriage Society' in 1881 and supports and arranges the remarriage of widows. He starts several educational institutions of different categories: day schools for adult women, night schools for workers, and schools for Harijans. He gives stress on vocational education. Because of his immense service for the betterment of women, Mahadev Gobinda Ranade calls him Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar of the Deccan.

**JYOTIBA PHULE :** Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) is a leading social reformer of the nineteenth century India from Maharashtra. Along with Justice Mahadev Gobinda Ranade he founded Satya Shodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers' Society). The main objective of the Samaj is to make the lower class people aware of their civil rights and free themselves from religious and emotional slavery imposed by Brahminical scriptures. He asserts that all men are children of one God and protests against priesthood. Phule launches a powerful movement against the supremacy of Brahmins and fights for the cause of lower class people. He is against untouchability and tries his best to eradicate this evil practice from society. He advocates equal rights of freedom to all human beings without discriminating sex, caste, religion and colour. Through his writings and deeds he makes continuous efforts to improve the condition of women and masses. He is the mouthpiece of native Indians and the suppressed women who fought for their equal rights. He led a movement against the prevailing caste restrictions in India and revolts against the domination of the Brahmins. Through his Satya Shodhak Samaj, he fights for the rights of the peasants and other lower caste people. He tries to instil courage, enthusiasm and self-reliance among them and to make them aware of their rights. Phule is in favour of female education and establishes schools for them. He supports widow re-marriage and takes active steps to propagate the remarriage of widows. He is believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children.

### EARLY PHASE OF NINETEENTH, CENTURY

The first soundings of intellectual revolt in Maharashtra were heard in the early decades of the 19th century. Among the early intellectuals who initiated and led the movement, the most prominent were Bal Shastri Jambhekar (1812-1846), Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1814-1882) and Bhasker Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1816-1847) Gopal Hari Deshmukh better known as 'Lokahitwadi' (1823-1882) and Vishnu Bhikaji Gokhale (1825-1873), popularly known as Vishnubawa Brahmachari, for he remained a life-long bachelor. Jambhekar was the pioneer of the

intellectual movement in Maharashtra. He laid its foundations through his numerous writings, in the early 1830s. Dadoba gave it an organisational shape; he founded the Paramhansa Sabha in 1840, the first reform organisation of nineteenth century Maharashtra. Bhaskar Pandurang distinguished himself as the militant nationalist critic of the colonial rule in India. It was he who first articulated the exploitative character of the British rule in India. He wrote in 1841 a series of eight long letters in the Bombay Gazette, one of the oldest newspapers in the Presidency, and exposed nearly every aspect of colonial domination. The main contribution of Lokahitwadi was in broadening the scope of the movement. In the Prabhakar, a Marathi Weekly, he wrote his hundred letters, the famous 'Shatapathren', between 1848 and 1850. This constituted the magnum opus of the early intellectual endeavours in Maharashtra. These letters taken together are all-encompassing in dimension; there is hardly any aspect of the society which is left untouched. Brahmachari was against caste distinctions and believed in the oneness of humanity. Although himself a Brahmin, he employed a Muslim cook and ate food served by anyone. He thus openly challenged the rigidity of the caste system and worked for an equitable social order.

In Bengal the movement had begun with a religious and philosophical note, in Maharashtra strictly social issues came to occupy a prominent place in the scheme of reform. The early intellectuals of Maharashtra were not essentially religious thinkers, concerned with the philosophical subtleties. Their approach was much practical in nature. For example, the Paramhansa Sabha's principal objective was the demolition of all caste distinctions. Each new recruit to the Sabha had to undergo initiation ceremony, and take the pledge that he would not observe any caste distinctions. He had to eat a slice of bread baked by a Christian and drink water at the hands of a Muslim. The Sabha was, however, a secret society; its meetings were conducted in the strictest secrecy for fear of facing the wrath of the orthodox. The challenge to the caste system and other social evils thus remained limited to the participation of its few members only.

### LATER PHASE OF NINETEENTH CENTURY

The reform movement gained strength during the second half of the century. A host of towering personalities emerged on the intellectual scene. The most notable among them were Vishnu Parashuram Shastri Pandit (1827-1876), Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925), Narayan Mahadev Permanand (1838-1893), Mahadev Gobind Ranade (1842-1901), Vishnushastri Chiplunkar (1850-1882), K.T. Telang (1850-1893), Ganesh Vasudev Joshi (1851-1911), Narayan

Ganesh Chandavarkar (1855-1923) and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856-1895). Pandit began his public career with the advocacy of widow-marriage. He was a leading figure in the sphere of the agitation for female emancipation. He started the Vidhava Vivaha Uttejaka Mandal (Society for Encouragement of Widow Marriage) in 1865 and worked as its Secretary. He set an example by marrying a widow in 1875. Phule, born in the Mali caste, emerged as a champion of the depressed sections of the society. He was the first Indian to start a school for the untouchables in 1854. He also championed the cause of the liberation of Indian women. In 1851 he and his wife started a girls' school at Poona. By his profound scholarship Bhandarkar earned the title of 'Maharshi' for himself. In the teeth of conservative opposition he allowed and arranged the marriage of his widow-daughter in 1891. He was one of the very few to strongly advocate Hindu Muslim unity. Paramanand, writing under the pen name of the 'Political recluse', was one of the constructive critics of the British administration, besides being a great social reformer.

Ranade was a man of many-sided activity. A product of the Elphinstone College, Bombay, he was Judge of the Bombay High Court during 1891-1901. He held that the caste distinction was the main blot on Indian social system. He realised that social reform movement could not move the people unless it assimilated religious reform. Under his guidance the Paramhansa Sabha was reorganised in 1867 under the name Prarthana Samaj. He guided the movement in Maharashtra with intellectual strength and pragmatism till the end of his life. The Prarthana Samaj preached monotheism and denounced priestly domination and caste distinctions. Its activities also spread to South India through the efforts of the Telugu reformer, Veeresalingam. Chiplunkar started his famous Nibandhmala in 1874, a monthly Marathi magazine, devoted to the cause of social reform. He died very young at the age of 32. Telang was instrumental in introducing compulsory primary education in Bombay. He was the first Indian Vice-Chancellor. Joshi greatly identified himself in the sphere of politics. He provided a brilliant critique of the economic policy of the British government. He was, however, one with other intellectuals in emphasising education to be the most effective agent of social change. Chandavarkar, basically a philosopher, was a great, leader of the Prarthana Samaj. Agarkar was an iconoclast and uncompromising rationalist. He was very pungent in his denunciation of any blind dependence on tradition or false deification of India's past. Other reformers in Bombay were Naoroji Furdonji, Dadabhai Naoroji and S.S. Bengalee. In 1851 they started a religious association called the Rehnumai Mazadayasan Sabha. It stood for the modernisation of Parsi religion and social customs. It launched a struggle for the introduction and spread of education among women, grant of a legal status to them and for uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for the Parsi community.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENTS

From the late 19th century a number of European and Indian scholars started the study of ancient India's history, philosophy, science, religions and literature. This growing knowledge of India's past glory provided to the Indian people a sense of pride in their civilization. It also helped the reformers in their work of religious and social reform for their struggle against all type of inhuman practices, superstitions etc.

Since they had become associated with religious beliefs, therefore most of the movements of social reform were of a religious character.

These social and religious reform movements arose among all communities of the Indian people. They attacked bigotry, superstition and the hold of the priestly class.

They worked for abolition of castes and untouchability, purdah system, sati, child marriage, social inequalities and illiteracy.

Some of these reformers were supported directly or indirectly by the British officials and some of the reformers also supported reformative steps and regulations framed by the British Government.

## CONCLUSION

There are quite a few theoretical studies on social movements. A few Indian political sociologists have attempted to evolve a theoretical and conceptual framework to study social movements. Conventional categories of the participants have been rightly questioned. Paradigms of looking at society and the perspectives on social change have been changing. New conceptual frameworks are emerging. This is a beginning, and we have a long way to go in that direction. First of all, rigorous debates need to be held regarding the role of social movements in civil society and democracy in general and the parliamentary democratic system in particular.

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