

A Study of Historical and Philosophical Perspective of Indian Renaissance and Reform Movement

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Abstract – A country looks for renaissance generally when its present is too much depleted and the future is even more uninspiring and bleak. This realization of being almost at the verge of extinction or nothingness as a culture, as a religion or as a nation does not come easily and smoothly.

A country looks for renaissance generally when its present is too much depleted and the future is even more uninspiring and bleak. This realization of being almost at the verge of extinction or nothingness as a culture, as a religion or as a nation does not come easily and smoothly. It takes a lot of political, cultural, economic, and philosophical pressures in a country to be shaken off of its slumber, of its ignorance, of its sense of nothingness. That is why renaissance is almost always related with nationalism, patriotism, spiritual aspirations, establishment of cultural and philosophical supremacy, and the issues of economic growth.

India's renaissance was not in any way different from this line of thought. Indian renaissance was more intellectual, moral and spiritual than political. That is why during the reign of Mughal emperors there was not so much thinking given to this revivalism, though India's identity, mainly Hindu culture and religion, was more in danger during their rule. It seems that the British rulers in India contributed a lot in giving the renaissance thought process a sufficient cause by their attitude, their administration, their education and philosophy.

In the beginning Indian people failed to identify and adjust with the British rulers, their thoughts and culture. But with the establishment of colleges and universities, the occidental education, literature, thoughts, and philosophy spread like anything. The uneducated India had no voice or they were too orthodox to open their eyes to see anything different or important other than their too localized interests.

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INTRODUCTION

The 19th century saw India make a late entry into the modern age from medieval times. The activities of missionaries and the policies of British government resulted in the growth of social-religious reform movements to safeguard Hindu religion from the Christian onslaught and to put an end to social evils eating into the vitals of Indian culture and civilization. These movements were generally linked with religious beliefs and practices. The ideas and activities of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra VidyaSagar, Vivekananda, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Veeresalingam Panthulu and many other reformers were directed at the regeneration of Indian society.

Caste intolerance was a common malady raging all over the country. Illiteracy was prevalent everywhere. Amongst the educated also, the majority were

conservative in outlook. Women's status was at the lowest ebb; female infanticide and polygamy were common practices. To liberate the masses from ignorance, few liberal men undertook the mammoth task of reforming the Indian society. They were mainly western educated intellectuals belonging to upper and middle classes in the initial stages of reform movement. On the religious front, however, few leaders like Dayanand opposed tooth and nail the influence of western culture.

Almost all the leaders gave importance to education in their efforts to reform the society. Abolition of sati, widow remarriage, property rights for women and similar reforms were taken up with zeal. There were a few organizations like Arya Samaj and Theosophical Society which gave prime importance to revivalism than to reformation. This had a negative impact on the society and the reform movements as well.

Vivekananda's contribution lies mainly in the sphere of elevating Hinduism to unprecedented levels in the West. His voice did a great deal to swell feeling of national pride. Sayyid Ahmed Khan was the pioneer of reform movement in the Muslim community. He helped the Muslims to get modern education and turn British sympathies towards his community.

It is to be noted that the reformers with the sole exception of Tilak, depended on the colonial power to introduce social and religious reforms. Moreover, all the important reform movements of the 19th century were religious than secular in nature. Their political and economic ideas were never radical and fell within the natural economic principles of the day. There were several differences among the reformers regarding the approach and methods of the movement. Though the achievements of the reform movements in the 19th century are not so impressive in the immediate sense they did make a beginning and influenced the future developments. The spirit of nationalism which emerged from the cultural revolution highlighted the necessity to fight for reforms.

A brief analysis of the conditions of the period before Indian Renaissance reveals the fact that it was passing through a socio-cultural and philosophical crisis of grave consequence, especially with the western invasion. It is regarded as really a period of darkness in which the spirit of Indian heritage and culture was threatened with destruction by the transgression of western ideas and values. Under the western influence, the young generation questioned all traditional beliefs, conduct and character, and glorified everything western. They developed an attitude of contempt and disregard towards the great spiritual and cultural traditions of our country. Religion as revelation or dogmas or superstitions had not appealed to the believer in science. The foundation of Ancient Indian religious tradition was Varnasramadharma. The four-fold order of the Hindu society includes Brarunanas, ~atriyas, Vaisyas, and \$iidras. The Brfilunanas, the sole intermediary between God and individual, enjoyed the highest status in the hierarchical system of castes and the monopoly over the study and interpretation of Hindu scriptures and sacred texts. Religion came under the complete domination of the corrupt priestly class who tried to keep the downtrodden lower classes in ignorance and with false hopes of rewarding after-life. The lower classes were always subjected to humiliation and exploitation by the higher classes. Hinduism was in a moribund state. It was characterized either by extreme asceticism or by excessive ritualism.

The real spirit behind the religion was always overshadowed by the evil practices. The social evils like child marriage, untouchability, sati, general degradation of women and the division of people into endless castes and sub-castes weakened the whole human society. Bigotry, intolerance, mass ignorance and communal rivalry shattered the entire structure of the country, as a result, mutual hatred and discontent sustained in the

social life of the individual. In the beginning, the British Government was very cautious not to upset the social traditions of India. They adopted the policy of non-interference in social affairs, simultaneously the Christian missionaries propagated their religion against the Hindu religious spirit and social order of the society. They not only criticized and defamed Hinduism, but also tried to convert people in large number into their fold by various means. Referring to this situation, D. S. Sharma observes: " the zealous missionaries never failed to point their finger of scorn at our religious and social institutions." 1 Religious reformation became necessary at this time because the social and cultural development of the individual was mainly based on the religious principles.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIAN RENAISSANCE MOVEMENTS

Indian Renaissance movement originated in Bengal during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This period is generally considered as the dawn of a golden era in the history of India because of the presence of a galaxy of great men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen, Dayananda Saraswathi, Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda.

They were born in response to the compulsions of extra ordinary circumstances of the times and therefore a historical necessity. The main objective of Indian Renaissance movement was to face the challenge posed by the importation of western ideas and values on Indian culture and social outlook. It has contributed to the revival and restoration of lost individuality, the re-construction of faith in man in the light of secularized view of life. It tried to modernize Hinduism by discarding the irrational rituals, false doctrines, and monopolistic priest craft. The movement has universal rather than sectarian outlook. The aim was the emancipation of the whole humanity from worldly miseries and the radical divine transformation of life.

The pioneers of Indian Renaissance, being conscious of the social, political and religious degradation of Indian culture, are forced to interpret the inestimable value of the glorious Indian tradition and its practical significance in daily life. Respecting the religious sentiment of the people, they declared that they were not ready to reject the authority of the scriptures. They wanted to reinstate Vedanta in a correct way in the light of scientific knowledge and changed conditions in order to achieve harmony between present and past and to meet the new requirements of the modern era. Under the influence of western education they became conscious of individual freedom and a sense of human dignity. Inspired by the ideas and values, both religious and secular, they reacted against the social evils in life.

Collecting evidences from classical Sanskrit texts, they claimed that these practices of Hindu society were only later developments and that they had no sanction of the sastras. They spread a new light of renaissance in all spheres of life- in politics, religion, literature, education, industries and social reorganization, which paved the way for removing the darkness of the ages.

The advancement of English education and scientific knowledge exercised a fruitful influence in stimulating the process of social renaissance. Meanwhile the Christian missionaries undertook humanitarian works for the welfare of the entire humanity irrespective of caste, creed, age, sex and the economic and social status. They started educational institutions for educating girls as well as boys belonging to the lower and untouchable castes. The rise of new renaissance caused a wave of reforming activities first in Bengal and then throughout the country.

THE RENAISSANCE IN INDIA

There has been recently some talk of a Renaissance in India. A number of illuminating essays with that general title and subject have been given to us by a poet and subtle critic and thinker, Mr. James H. Cousins, and others have touched suggestively various sides of the growing movement towards a new life and a new thought that may well seem to justify the description. This Renaissance, this new birth in India, if it is a fact, must become a thing of immense importance both to herself and the world, to herself because of all that is meant for her in the recovery or the change of her time-old spirit and national ideals, to the world because of the possibilities involved in the rearing of a force that is in many respects unlike any other and its genius very different from the mentality and spirit that have hitherto governed the modern idea in mankind, although not so far away perhaps from that which is preparing to govern the future. It is rather the first point of view that I shall put forward at present: for the question what India means to make of her own life must precede the wider question what her new life may mean to the human race. And it is besides likely to become before long an issue of a pressing importance.

There is a first question, whether at all there is really a Renaissance in India. That depends a good deal on what we mean by the word; it depends also on the future, for the thing itself is only in its infancy and it is too early to say to what it may lead. The word carries the mind back to the turningpoint of European culture to which it was first applied; that was not so much a reawakening as an overturn and reversal, a seizure of Christianised, Teutonised, feudalised Europe by the old Graeco-Latin spirit and form with all the complex and momentous results which came from it. That is certainly not a type of renaissance that is at all possible in India. There is a closer resemblance to the recent Celtic movement in Ireland, the attempt of a reawakened

national spirit to find a new impulse of self-expression which shall give the spiritual force for a great reshaping and rebuilding: in Ireland this was discovered by a return to the Celtic spirit and culture after a long period of eclipsing English influences, and in India something of the same kind of movement is appearing and has especially taken a pronounced turn since the political outburst of 1905. But even here the analogy does not give the whole truth.

We have to see moreover that the whole is at present a great formless chaos of conflicting influences with a few luminous points of formation here and there where a new selfconsciousness has come to the surface. But it cannot be said that these forms have yet a sufficient hold on the general mind of the people. They represent an advance movement; they are the voices of the vanguard, the torchlights of the pioneers. On the whole what we see is a giant Shakti who awakening into a new world, a new and alien environment, finds herself shackled in all her limbs by a multitude of gross or minute bonds, bonds selfwoven by her past, bonds recently imposed from outside, and is struggling to be free from them, to arise and proclaim herself, to cast abroad her spirit and set her seal on the world. We hear on every side a sound of the slow fraying of bonds, here and there a sharp tearing and snapping; but freedom of movement has not yet been attained. The eyes are not yet clear, the bud of the soul has only partly opened. The Titaness has not yet arisen.

We have practically to take three facts into consideration, the great past of Indian culture and life with the moment of inadaptive torpor into which it had lapsed, the first period of the Western contact in which it seemed for a moment likely to perish by slow decomposition, and the ascending movement which first broke into some clarity of expression only a decade or two ago. Mr. Cousins has his eye fixed on Indian spirituality which has always maintained itself even in the decline of the national vitality; it was certainly that which saved India always at every critical moment of her destiny, and it has been the starting-point too of her renaissance. Any other nation under the same pressure would have long ago perished soul and body.

But certainly the outward members were becoming gangrened; the powers of renovation seemed for a moment to be beaten by the powers of stagnation, and stagnation is death. Now that the salvation, the reawakening has come, India will certainly keep her essential spirit, will keep her characteristic soul, but there is likely to be a great change of the body. The shaping for itself of a new body, of new philosophical, artistic, literary, cultural, political, social forms by the same soul rejuvenescent will, I should think, be the type of the Indian renaissance,—forms not contradictory of the truths of life which the old expressed, but rather

expressive of those truths restated, cured of defect, completed.

Despite its virtual monopoly of force from about 1820 onward, the Company's rule in India was never totally secure. There was hardly a year in which its armies were not at war. On its shifting frontiers campaigns were waged against the Burmese in the north-east and the Afghans in the north-west; Sind was annexed in 1843 and the Sikh state of Punjab in 1849. The British faced chronic unrest from their own recalcitrant subjects in the Indian countryside. In this context, the mutiny of part of the Indian army in May 1857 was the last, albeit perhaps the grandest, attempt at resistance to the new social and economic order that has been a century in the making. The rest of history of the sepoy Mutiny is well known. It was probably the first attempt, though violent in nature, to actively resist the colonial conspiracy to extinguish the instinct of Indian nationalism and thereby prevent the creation of 'Brown Englishmen' by the third-rate Western education system imposed by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), a member (1834-1838) of the Supreme Council, who wanted to "form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions and in morals and intellect". Though the mutiny failed militarily, its legacy and philosophy remained at the core of Indian psyche.

From the Indian perspective, the tenor of the Renaissance was eloquently expressed in the immortal words of Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948): "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet". All great men think alike. Rabindranath, Saratchandra and Nazrul felt the same. No true poet should ever cut himself adrift from his own national tradition. Saratchandra and Nazrul never wrote in English. Saratchandra claimed to have read English literature well, but always maintained that he was not influenced by them. At a luncheon party given in honour of Rabindranath at the Trocadero Restaurant in London in July, 1912, by the literary elites of Irish-British society, like Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1958) "I have a speaking acquaintance with your glorious language; yet I can but feel in my own. My Bengali has been a jealous mistress, claiming all my homage and resenting rivals.

Still I have put up with her exactions with cheerful submission; I could do no other". This frank statement echoes what Madhusudan said on superiority of one's mother-tongue in creative writing.

Secondly, most English-educated responsible Indians did maintain their own Indianness at the end of the day, in spite of slight aberration initially. British poet-author, Rudyard Kipling, (1865-1936), Nobel Laureate in Literature (1907), was objectively right when he wrote in his famous poem- 'The Ballad of East and West': "Oh,

East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Slavish and blind imitation of the West was not the order of the day in the turbulent corridors of Indian Renaissance. Age-old tradition, history, literature and culture always dominated the scenario of change, which was under constant strain under Western impact. Kipling also worked as a journalist in India during 1882-1889 and seemed to understand Indian reasonably well; in his poem, he gave the British perspective of Indian reaction to alien Western intrusion.

RABINDRANATH AND THE RENAISSANCE

A conversation which took place between H.G. Wells (1866-1946) and Rabindranath, the Nobel Laureate in Literature (1913), is an eloquent expression of the latter's views on the intellectual interaction between the East and the West:

Tagore: Physical science of the nineteenth century probably has created this spirit of race superiority in the West. When the East assimilates this physical science, the tide may turn and take a normal course.

Wells: Modern science is not exactly European. A Series of accidents and peculiar circumstances prevented some of the eastern countries from applying the discoveries made by humanists in other parts of the world. They themselves had once originated and developed a great many of the sciences that were later on taken up by the west and given greater perfection. Today, Japanese, Chinese and Indian names in the world of science are gaining due recognition.

Tagore: India has been in a bad situation.

Wells: When Macaulay imposed a third-rate literature and a poor system of education on India, Indians naturally resented it. No human being can live on Scott's poetry. I believe that things are now changing. But remain assured, we English were not better off. We were no less badly educated than the average Indian, probably even worse.

India, a land of excellence in antiquity, always maintained her unique identity in the ocean of humanity as a living example to the dictum that "The test of every religious, political, or educational system is the man that it forms" (Henri Frederic Amiel: 1821-1881).

RAJA RAM MOHAN ROY AS AN EDUCATIONAL REFORMER

India is a beautiful country in South Asia. It is the 7th largest country by area, the 2nd most populous country with over 1.2 billion people and the most populous democracy in the world. Bounded by the Indian Ocean on the South, the Arabian Sea on the

South-West, and the Bay of Bengal on the South-East, it shares land borders with Pakistan to the West; China Nepal and Bhutan to the North-East; and Burma and Bangladesh to the East. In the Indian Ocean, India is in the vicinity of Sri Lanka and the Maldives. The main motto of India is *Satyameva Jayate*. Many heroes, educators and great men were born in India, like Vivekananda, Gandhiji, Netaji, Vidyasagar, Ram Mohan Roy and so on. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was one of them. We can't think modern India without Ram Mohan Roy. He was not only a great social, religious reformer but he was also a great educational thinker or reformer. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great scholar and independent thinker and a multilingual person. He believed that education was prime necessity for up-liftmen of Indian society. He advocated the induction of Western learning into Indian education system. So he promoted study of English, Science, Western Medicine and Technology in India. He used his own money in welfare of education system in India. In Bengal Renaissance, Raja Ram Mohan Roy is regarded as one of the most important figure. His efforts to protect Hinduism and Indian rights by participating in British Government earned in the title 'The Father of the Bengal Renaissance'. Resurgence or Renaissance of modern Asia is one of the most significant phenomena of world history during the last two hundred years. Since the middle of the 19th century the mind and soul of Asia have definitely awakened. The intellectual Renaissance of India has been a great casual factor in the rise of modern Indian nationalism. One of the greatest forces in the making of the renaissance in India is the Brahma Samaj founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The Brahma Samaj has done considerable cultural, humanitarian and social work in north India during the mid-19th century (Sadanandan, G., 2013).

CAUSES OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT

Indian Society in the 19th century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and dogmas. All religions in general and Hinduism in particular had become a compound of magic, animism, and superstitions. The abominable rites like animal sacrifice and physical torture had replaced the worship of God. The priests exercised an overwhelming and unhealthy influence on the mind of people. The faithful lived in submission, not only to God, the powerful and unseen, but even to the whims, fancies, and wishes of the priests.

Social Conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage a burden and her widowhood inauspicious. Another debilitating factor was Caste. It sought to maintain a system of segregation, hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status, hampering social mobility and fostered social divisions. There were innumerable other practices marked by constraint, status, authority, bigotry and blind fatalism.

Rejecting them as features of a decadent society, the reform movements sought to create a social climate for modernization.

The conquest of India by the British during the 18th and 19th century exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Indian social institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. It also brought in completely new sets of ideas and social world. The exposure to post-Enlightenment rationalism that came to signify modernity brought a change in the outlook of a select group of Indians.

The introduction of western education and ideas had the far reaching impact on the Indian Society. Through the glasses of utility, reason, justice, and progress, a select group of individuals began to explore the nature of their own society. There was a gradual emergence of public opinion. The debates between the Orientalists, scholars of Eastern societies like India on one side, and the Utilitarians, Liberals and Missionaries on the other also enabled the penetration of ideas, at least amongst the upper section of society. The resultant cultural change led to introspection about Indian traditions, institution, and culture.

The socio intellectual revolution that took place in the nineteenth century in the fields of philosophy, literature, science, politics and social reforms is often known as Indian Renaissance. An important part of this Renaissance was reforming Hinduism from within on the basis of Post-Enlightenment rationalism. The Renaissance was especially focused in Bengal and is popularly known as the Bengal Renaissance. However, the use of 'renaissance' is slightly problematic as in European history it is used to refer to the "rebirth" or revival of Greco-Roman learning in the fifteen and sixteenth centuries after the long winter of the dark medieval period. But in Indian context, it implied rediscovering rationalism from within India's past.

CONCLUSION

The British conquest and the consequent dissemination of colonial culture and ideology had led to an inevitable introspection about the strength and the weakness of indigenous culture and institutions. The response, indeed, was varied but the need to reform social and religious life was a commonly shared conviction. The social base of these quest which has generally, but not altogether appropriately been called the renaissance, was the newly emerging middle class and the traditional as well as western educated intellectuals. The socio-cultural regeneration in the nineteenth century India was occasioned by the colonial presence, but not created by it.

The spirit of reform embraced almost the whole of India beginning with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy in

Bengal leading to the formation of the Brahma Samaj in 1828. Apart from the Brahma Samaj, the Paramahansa Mandali and the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and the Arya Samaj in Punjab and North India were some of the prominent movements among Hindus. There were several regional and caste movements like Kayastha Sabha in Uttar Pradesh, the Sarin Sabha in Punjab, Sree Narayana Paripalana Sabha in Kerala and the Satya Sodhak Samaj in Maharashtra.² Despite being regional in scope and content and confined to a particular religion, their general perspectives were remarkably similar. They were regional and religious manifestations of a common consciousness.

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