



Distance Learning Programme

UPSC Prelims

Modern India & Freedom Struggle





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MODERN INDIA & FREEDOM STRUGGLE

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CHAPTER

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS
REFORM MOVEMENTS

British rule in India brought many changes to Indian social, political and economic life. Western education and modern ideas of liberty, democracy, equality and fraternity played an important role in the development of the reform movements in the country. Reform movements were also inspired by the ideals of humanism and rationalism and sought to bring the traditions and culture in conformity with the science, reason and modernity.

Reformism & Revivalism

- **Reformism:** It is the belief that gradual changes through and within existing institutions can ultimately change a society's fundamental system and structures.
- **Reformist:** He is a person who advocates gradual reform rather than abolition or revolution.
- **Revivalism:** It is a tendency or desire to revive a former custom or practice.
- **Revivalist:** He is one who conducts religious revivals.

During the time of 19th century India saw major changes in the social, religious structure of the society. Both reformist and revivalist tried to change the structure of the society.

Causes of Social and Cultural Awakening

Many causes accounted for the social and cultural awakening in the 19th century.

- The first and foremost was the establishment of British rule and its deep influence on the political, economic, social and cultural life of the country, which created conditions favourable to intellectual growth.
- A second contributory factor was the painstaking efforts of the orientalist to bring India's past into limelight. The pioneering work in this field was done by Sir William Jones, James Prinsep, Charles Wilkin and Max Muller, among others. A number of distinguished Indian scholars like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Radhakanta Deva, Rajendra Lal Mitra, M.G. Ranade, R.G. Bhandarkar and others, also contributed towards discovering and reinterpreting India's past. The urge to orient towards the past was further accentuated by India's status as a subject nation. Along with healthy desire for national awakening and freedom from foreign rule, chauvinist dreams of spiritual conquest of the world through resurrected Hinduism were sometimes conceived (such as by Vivekananda).
- A third factor in the spread of the reform movement was the highly creative literature. It was marked by a marvellous fusion of the old and the new, a grand intermingling of the best literary traditions of ancient India with the good features of the culture of the modern world outside. Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Kashinath Trimbak Telang, and others were prominent scholars in this regard.
- The fourth factor was the detrimental effect of the Christian missionaries, who held that the propagation of Christianity in India would serve the British imperial interests,

security of the Empire, prosperity of the East India Company and attachment of the Indians to the Empire. The missionaries, while engaged in spreading the Christian faith, held aloft the imperial flag and propped up the British trade. They denounced the religious rituals, beliefs of the Hindus, the caste system and the discriminatory treatment of women. Indian intellectuals now felt the need to meet this onslaught on their religion and social customs by reforming it and removing evil social practices from Indian society.

Important Reform Movements

Some of the important socio-religious reform movements in the Modern India are:

Brahmo Samaj

The father of Indian Renaissance, Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828 founded the Brahmo Sabha which was later renamed as Brahmo Samaj. It was one of the earliest reform movements of the 19th century India.

- It aimed to purify Hinduism and preach monotheism or belief in one God.
- It was based on the twin pillars of reason and the Vedas and the Upanishads.
- It sought to remove ill practices, abuses and superstitions from Hinduism.
- It focused on reinterpretation of Hindu doctrines and found the basis for humanitarianism in the Upanishads.
- Brahmo Samaj opposed polytheistic ritualism and upheld monism and was guided by a vision of a universal religion based on the recognition of human values and faith in one single God (Brahma) which meant the realization of God in every human being.
- It advocated a rational approach to religion without interference of an intermediary or Brahmin and acceptance of only those religious doctrines which stand the test of one's own ethical reasoning.
- It launched campaigns against the practice of Sati, polygamy, child marriage, female infanticide etc.
- It advocated widow remarriage, women education and equality between men and women.
- It sought to assimilate the new values created by Western science and to blend them with the traditional values of India.
- It stressed the need for the new Western type of education based on the Western ideals of liberalism, rationalism, democracy, nationalism, etc.

Successive Branches of Brahmo Samaj

The father of Rabindranath Tagore, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) gave a new life to Brahmo Samaj. He joined the Samaj in 1842 and gave a definite shape to the theistic movement.

- Tagore on one front focused on reforming the Hinduism from within and on another front opposed the Christian missionaries for their aggressive evangelist activities and criticism of Hinduism.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy

Born in 1772 to Ramakant Roy at Radhanagar village in the district of Hooghly in Bengal, Ram Mohan Roy studied at Patna and Banaras and emerged as a polymath. Initially he worked at East India Company. He wrote 'Gift to Monotheists' (Persian) arguing for monotheism and against belief in many Gods. He translated into Bengali the Vedas and the five Upanishads to prove his conviction that ancient Hindu texts support monotheism.

- In 1814, he set up Atmiya Sabha in Calcutta to campaign against idolatry, caste rigidities, meaningless rituals and other social ills. He tried to separate the moral and philosophical message of the New Testament in his work, Precepts of Jesus (1820).
- He was criticized by the missionaries for his advocacy to incorporate the message of Christ in Hinduism.
- He stood for a creative and intellectual process of selecting the best from eastern and western cultures. He founded the Brahmo Sabha in order to institutionalize his ideas and mission.
- He started his anti-sati struggle in 1818 and cited sacred texts to prove his contention that no religion sanctioned the evil practice. He filed petitions to the Government against sati.
- His efforts were rewarded by the Government Regulation (Act XVII) by Lord Bentinck in 1829 which declared the practice of sati a crime.
- As a **campaigner for women's rights**, Roy condemned the general subjugation of women. Roy attacked polygamy and the degraded state of widows and demanded the right of inheritance and property for women.
- Roy did much to disseminate the benefits of modern education to his countrymen. He supported David Hare's efforts to found the Hindu College in 1817. In 1825, he established a Vedanta college where courses in both Indian learning and Western social and physical sciences were offered. He was conferred the title of 'Raja' and sent to England as an emissary by Mughal emperor Akbar II to the court of William IV to plead for the increment in the annual pension.

As a pioneer in Indian journalism, Roy brought out journals in Bengali, Hindi, English, and Persian. They include Mirat-ul-Akhbar in 1822 which was preceded by '**Samwad Kaumudi**' in 1821.

Roy was an internationalist in his vision and supported the revolutions of Naples and Spanish America. He condemned the oppression of Ireland by absentee English landlords. He died at Bristol, England on 27 September, 1833 and is remembered as the Father of Indian Renaissance.

- The Brahmo Samaj was infused with vitality and strength due to its informal association with the Tattvabodhini Sabha (earlier headed by Tagore) which, along with its organ Tattvabodhini Patrika, was devoted to the rational and systematic study of India's past and to the propagation of Roy's ideas.
- Gradually, the Brahmo Samaj included prominent followers of Roy, the Derozians and the likes of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Ashwini Kumar Datta.

Keshub Chandra Sen joined the Samaj in 1858 and soon he was made Acharya by Debendranath Tagore. Keshub helped in popularizing the movement, and branches of the Samaj were opened in the United Provinces, Punjab, Bombay, Madras and other places outside Bengal.

- But, Debendranath did not like some of the radical ideas of Sen such as that of strong opposition to the caste system, open support to inter-caste marriages, inclusion of all religious teachings, etc. In 1865, Sen was dismissed from the office of Acharya.
- In 1866, Keshub and his followers founded the Brahmo Samaj of India.
- The Samaj led by Debendranath Tagore came to be known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj.
- Keshub's Samaj was instrumental in the passage of the Brahmo Marriage Act, 1872. Thereafter he established Indian Reform Association. He also edited 'Indian Mirror' established by Debendranath Tagore in 1861 which subsequently became the mouthpiece of Brahmo Samaj.
- In 1878, Keshub got his thirteen-year-old daughter married with the minor Hindu Maharaja of Cooch-Bihar with all the orthodox Hindu rituals. This caused split in Keshub's Brahmo Samaj of India. He was also accused of authoritarianism.
- The disgusted followers of Keshub set up a new organization, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Its leaders included Bipin Chandra Pal, Shivnath Shastri, Anandmohan Bose and Surendranath Banerjee.

Young Bengal Movement

Henry Vivian Derozio was the principal inspiration for this movement in the late 1820s and the 1830s. He was a teacher at Hindu College, Calcutta from 1826 to 1831 and was inspired by the ideals of French Revolution.

- He fiercely advocated the rational thinking, liberty, equality and freedom and inspired his students to do the same. He was expelled from his college for his provocative ideas and died in 1831 of Cholera.
- His students carried forward his ideas and came to be known as Derozians. They criticized irrational orthodox practices and supported the rights of women, freedom of press, supported ryots against Zamindars, and argued in favour of the Indian appointments to higher Government offices.
- In spite of its rational and vocal outlook, this movement could not garner much support. Yet, it was a significant movement as it inspired and created an entire generation of reformers and activists.

Arya Samaj

Arya Samaj was established by Swami Dayanand in 1875 at Bombay. He wanted to revive Hinduism from within. His message attracted the Indian masses and took deep roots in the regions of Punjab, Haryana, U.P., Bihar and Rajasthan. Arya Samaj aimed to recover the lost values of Aryanism, re-establish the original Aryan vigor, and reassert itself against internal and external dangers.

- It represented a reaction against invasion of Western ideas and Christianity in Indian society. Inwardly, therefore, it resembled a Hindu revival.
- It launched a frontal attack on the various evil practices like idolatry, polytheism, belief in magic, charms, animal sacrifices, feeding the dead through shraadh, etc.
- It favoured the doctrine of 'Karma' and rejected the idea of destiny.
- It condemned the caste system, the dominant position of the Brahmins in society and rejected the claim of the priests to act as intermediaries between man and God.

- Arya Samaj supported women rights and equality. It argued for the rights of women and shudras to study the Vedas and condemned child marriage. It held that the minimum age for marriage for girls and boys should be 16 years and 25 years respectively. It was against Polygamy and supported widow remarriage.
- The Samaj initiated the Shuddhi Movement by which the non-Hindus could be converted to Hinduism.

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Ten Principles of Arya Samaj

- God is the primary cause of all true knowledge.
- God is Absolute, Almighty, Infinite, Beginningless, Omniscient, Omnipotent, Omnipresent, Eternal, and Creator of the Universe and alone is worthy of worship.
- The Vedas are the books of true knowledge.
- All should be ready to accept truth and renounce untruth.
- All acts should be performed in conformity with Dharma (virtue and righteousness).
- The primary aim of Arya Samaj is to promote the welfare of the whole world and physical, spiritual and social progress of all human beings.
- All should be treated with love and justice.
- Ignorance must be dispelled and the knowledge should be promoted.
- No one should be contented with his own welfare alone, but every one should regard his or her prosperity in the common welfare of all.
- One should subordinate oneself for the common welfare of the society while one is free to act for one's own welfare.

This movement was responsible for creating communal tensions in the regions of United Provinces and Bihar and it is remembered as a controversial legacy of Arya Samaj. However, the Samaj based its social programme on the authority of the Vedas conditioned by rationalism and utilitarianism. The DAV institutions spread over the length and breadth of the country.

Ramakrishna Movement

The teachings and ideas of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-86) was the main inspiration behind this socio-religious movement. He was a priest at a temple at Dakshineswar near Calcutta. He had faith in all religions and performed religious exercises in accordance with Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. All the different religious views are different ways leading to the same goal – was the message of Ramakrishna. He believed that service to mankind is service to God as man is the embodiment of God. The two objectives of the Ramakrishna movement were:

- To foster band of monks who base their life on renunciation and practical spirituality. The teachers and workers among these monks would spread the universal message of Vedanta as exemplified in the life of Ramakrishna.
- To carry on preaching, philanthropic and charitable works treating all men, women and children as manifestations of the Divine irrespective of their colour, caste or creed.

Towards the first objective, Ramakrishna himself founded the Ramakrishna Math with his monastic disciples. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) formed Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 after the death of Ramakrishna to fulfil the second objective of carrying out philanthropic and charitable works. Its headquarter is at Belur, near Kolkata.

- It stands for religious and social reforms.
- It is based on the Vedantic doctrines and ideals.
- It emphasizes the development of the highest spirituality inherent in man.
- It runs many schools and hospitals and also help the society during the times of natural calamities like floods, earthquakes etc.

Vivekananda's followers included people of all strata, including princes and priests. In 1893, he attended the famous "Parliament of Religions" at Chicago. He delivered lectures on Hindu philosophy as enunciated by Ramakrishna Paramahansa at various places in the UK and the USA. He wanted to make the society strong and free from social evils. His mission was to bridge the gulf between spirituality and the practical day-to-day life. He advocated the doctrine the service of all beings and considered Life itself as a religion. Vivekananda favoured using technology and modern sciences in the service of mankind.

Prarthana Samaj

It was formed by Dr. Atmaram Pandurang with the help of Keshub Chandra Sen in 1867. The Samaj suggested the worship of one Almighty. It advocated social reforms like:

- It opposed the caste system.
- It advocated women's education.
- It encouraged widow remarriage. With this end in view it opened widow ashrams.
- It was against the child marriage and supported raising the age of marriage for both males and females.
- It also started a plan for adult literacy, and hence it played a significant role in reforming the social practices which discriminated against women in the society.
- In order to end social evils it started institutions like orphanages.

One of the main leaders of this Samaj was Justice Ranade who believed that religion and society are inseparable and interact and influence each other. Under his leadership the movement got an all India character. It was due to his efforts that the Deccan Education Society was founded in 1884 which played an important role in the propagation of education. He also founded the Widow Remarriage Association in 1891 to encourage and support the widow remarriages.

Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded in the United States in 1875 by Madame H.P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) and Colonel M.S. Olcott, who were inspired by Indian thought and culture. Later in 1882, they shifted the headquarters of the Society to Adayar, on the outskirts of Madras in India.

In India, the movement gained popularity when Annie Besant (1847-1933) assumed its leadership in 1907.

- Theosophists believed in the universal brotherhood of man.
- They advocated the revival of the ancient religions of Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.
- They believed in the transmigration of soul, doctrine of reincarnation and karma.
- The society was inspired by the philosophy of the Upanishads, Samkhya, Yoga and Vedantic traditions. It held that a special relationship could be established between a person's soul and God by contemplation, prayer, revelation, etc.

- The society tried to investigate the mystical laws of nature and the powers latent in human beings.
- Since the movement glorified Indian religious and philosophical traditions, it came to be allied with the Hindu Renaissance.

Annie Besant

Born in Ireland in 1847, Annie Besant was initially linked to the socialist movement in Ireland. She arrived in India in 1893 and was closely associated with the Theosophical Society. She raised her voice for the equality of man and woman, rights of workers, land reforms, etc. She was in awe of the ancient Hindu religion and culture. In 1898, she established 'Central Hindu College' at Banaras.

She also participated actively in Indian freedom movement and started the Home Rule Movement along with Tilak in 1916. She also published 'Common weal' and 'New India'. She was chosen the first woman president of Indian National Congress at its annual session at Calcutta.

However, subsequently, differences between Ms. Besant's views and those of the Congress and Gandhi relegated her to the background in the political scene. Ms. Besant felt that the Montagu Chelmsford reforms were a means to free India, but Gandhi thought them inadequate and unacceptable. As a result, at the Congress' Amritsar session, she could not get through an amendment to the main political resolution. She also felt that non-cooperation and boycott of foreign goods would "lead to a very terrible impasse from which liberation will only come after cruel sufferings". Ms. Besant did not attend the 1920 session at Nagpur. In the last 13 years of her life, she gave up active participation in politics altogether. She died in 1933.

Veda Samaj

Known as the Brahmo Samaj of South India, it was established by K. Sridharalu Naidu. He was inspired by Keshub Chandra Sen while the latter was on visit to Chennai in 1864. Its philosophy is similar to that of Brahmo Samaj in the theistic principles. Veda Samajis were in opposition to all sectarian views and caste distinction. They were against polygamy and child marriage, and supported widow remarriage.

Paramahansa Mandali

Atmaram Pandurang along with Balkrishna Jaikar and Dadoba Pandurang founded Paramahansa Mandali at Mumbai in 1849-50. It was linked to the social reforms in Maharashtra. It supported monotheism, widow remarriage, women's education and opposed discrimination based on caste.

Swaminarayan Sect

Established by Swami Sahjanand in the early 19th century in Gujarat, this sect propagated monism and denounced the ritualistic Vaishanava practices which had become prevalent at that time. This movement also focused on vegetarianism and renunciation of intoxicating and sedative substances.

Jat-Pat todak Mandal

It was formed on the initiative of Bhai Parmanand in the annual congress of Arya Samaj in 1922 at Lahore. It aimed at the abolition of caste system and untouchability.