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Mains Practice Questions

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Q. The Socio-Religious reformers of the 19-20th century aimed at modernization rather than westernization. Discuss. (150 words)

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Approach

- In the introduction briefly explain about the socio-religious reforms of the 19-20th century.
- Write a line about the difference between modernization and westernisation.
- Discuss how such socio-religious reforms aimed at modernisation rather than westernation.
- Conclude with the positive impacts of the reforms on Indian society.

Introduction

- From the early 19th century, debates and discussion about social customs and practices took a new character due to the development of new forms of communication.
- Various reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Ishawarchandra Vidyasagar, Swami Dayananda Saraswati persuaded people to give up degraded age-old traditions like Sati, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide etc. by adopting a new way of life.
- They were keen to spread knowledge of modernization in the country and bring about greater freedom and equality for women and “lower caste” people.

Body

Westernisation vs Modernisation

- In simple terms, Westernization is a process of imitation of culture and values of western countries by non-western countries.
- On the other hand, Modernization has a wider connotation. Adopting the modern style or modern ways and ideas of thinking, living, etc is ‘Modernization’. Modernization is a change or modification which offers the promise of the preservation of the past.

19-20th century socio-religious reforms aimed at modernisation rather than westernisation

- The aim of these reformers was never to replace the local culture of India with the western culture. Rather they simply assimilated some western values which they saw as desirable for the development of the society such as humanism.
- They emphasised more on the interpretation of scriptures and simplification of rituals rather than outrightly imitating westernisation.
- Swami Vivekananda sought to bring reform through reinterpretations of the Vedas in the context of the changing world. He stressed on the ideal of social service and selfless action.

- Similarly, Raja Rammohun Roy had great respect for the western way of thinking, yet gave utmost respect and importance to Vedas and Upanishads.
- Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar used the ancient texts to suggest that widows could remarry. His suggestions were adopted by British officials, and a law was passed in 1856 permitting widow remarriage.
- Such thinkers were against certain social evils like Sati, idolatry, polytheism, untouchability etc but they believed in the essence of scriptures as a persuasive truth and not that was not compatible with the modern notions of equality and dignity of all individuals.
- In India, social reform did not ordinarily mean a reorganisation 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.

Conclusion

- In the evolution of modern India the reform movements of the 19-20th century have made very significant contributions. They stood for the democratization of society, removal of superstition and abhorrent customs, spread of enlightenment and the development of a rational and modern outlook.
- By the end of the 20th century, women themselves were actively working for reform. They wrote books, edited magazines, founded schools and training centres and set up a women's association.
- These women, later on, joined various kinds of nationalist and socialist movements and contributed immensely in the freedom struggle.