



Socio-Religious Reform Movements: Part I

What are Social Religious Reform Movements?

- 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.
- Some enlightened Indians like [Raja Ram Mohan Roy](#), [Ishwar Chand Vidyasagar](#), **Dayanand Saraswati** and many others started to bring in reforms in society so that it could face the challenges of the West.
- The reform movements could broadly be classified into two categories:
 - **Reformist movements** like the Brahmo Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Aligarh Movement.
 - **Revivalist movements** like Arya Samaj and the Deoband movement.
- The reformist as well as the revivalist movement depended, to varying degrees, on an appeal to the lost purity of the religion they sought to reform.
- The only difference between one reform movement and the other lay in the degree to which it relied on tradition or on reason and conscience.

What are the Factors which gave Rise to Reform Movements?

- **Presence of colonial government on Indian soil:** 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.
- **Religious and Social Ills:** Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism.
- **Depressing Position of Women:** The most distressing was the position of women.
 - The killing of female infants at birth was prevalent.
 - Child marriage was practiced in society.
 - The practice of polygamy prevailed in many parts of country.
 - The widow remarriage was not allowed and the sati pratha was prevalent on a large scale.
- **Spread of Education and Increased Awareness of the World:** 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 types of inhuman practices, superstitions etc.
- **Awareness of the Outside World:** During the last decades of the nineteenth century, the rising tide of nationalism and democracy also found expression in movements to reform and democratise the social institutions and religious outlook of the Indian people.

- Factors such as growth of nationalist sentiments, emergence of new economic forces, spread of education, impact of modern Western ideas and culture and increased awareness of the world strengthened the resolve to reform.

What was the Brahmo Samaj Movement?

- Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded **Brahmo Sabha** in **1828**, which was later renamed as **Brahmo Samaj**.
- Its chief aim was the worship of the eternal God. It was against priesthood, rituals and sacrifices.
- It focused on **prayers, meditation and reading of the scriptures**. It believed in the unity of all religions.
- It was the **first intellectual reform movement in modern India**. It led to the emergence of **rationalism and enlightenment** in India which indirectly contributed to the nationalist movement.
- It was the forerunner of all social, religious and political movements of modern India. It split into two in 1866, namely **Brahmo Samaj of India** led by **Keshub Chandra Sen** and **Adi Brahmo Samaj** led by **Debendranath Tagore**.
- **Prominent Leaders:** Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, Pt. Sivnath Shastri, and Rabindranath Tagore.
 - Debendra Nath Tagor headed the **Tattvabodhini Sabha (founded in 1839)** which, along with its organ **Tattvabodhini Patrika in Bengali**, was devoted to the systematic study of India's past with a rational outlook and to the propagation of Rammohan's ideas.
- Rammohan Roy progressive ideas met with strong opposition from orthodox elements like Raja Radhakant Deb who organised the **Dharma Sabha** to counter Brahmo Samaj propaganda.

What was the Prarthana Samaj?

- The Prarthana Samaj was established in Bombay by **Dr. Atma Ram Pandurang** in 1876 with the **objective of rational worship and social reform**.
- The two great members of this Samaj were **R.C. Bhandarkar** and **Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade**.
 - They devoted themselves to the work of social reform such as inter-caste dining, inter-caste marriage, widow remarriage and improvement of the lot of women and depressed classes.
- The four point social agenda of Prarthana Samaj were
 - Disapproval of caste system
 - Women education
 - Widow remarriage
 - Raising the age of marriage for both males and females
- Mahadev Govind Ranade was the founder of the **Widow Remarriage Association (1861)** and the **Deccan Education Society**.
 - He established the **Poona Sarvajanic Sabha** as well.
 - To **Ranade**, religious reform was inseparable from social reform.
 - He also believed that if religious ideas were rigid there would be no success in social, economic and political spheres.
 - Although Prarthana Samaj was powerfully influenced by the ideas of Brahmo Samaj, it did not insist upon a rigid exclusion of idol worship and a definite break from the caste system.

What was the Satyashodhak Samaj?

- **Jyotiba Phule** organized a powerful movement against upper caste domination and brahminical supremacy.
- He founded the **Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers' Society) in 1873**.
- The main aims of the movement were:

- Social service
- Spread of education among women and lower caste people
- Phule's works, **Sarvajanik Satyadharma** and **Gulamgiri**, became a source of inspiration for the common masses.
- Phule used the symbol of **Rajah Bali** as opposed to the brahmins' symbol of Rama.
- Phule aimed at the **complete abolition of the caste system and socio-economic inequalities**.
- This movement gave a sense of identity to the depressed communities as a class against the Brahmins, who were seen as the exploiters.

What was the Arya Samaj Movement?

- The Arya Samaj Movement was **revivalist in form though not in content**, as the result of a reaction to Western influences.
- The first Arya Samaj unit was formally set up by **Dayananda Saraswati** at Bombay in 1875 and later the headquarters of the Samaj were established at Lahore.
- **Guiding principles of the Arya Samaj are:**
 - God is the primary source of all true knowledge;
 - God, as all-truth, all-knowledge, almighty, immortal, creator of Universe, is alone worthy of worship;
 - The Vedas are the books of true knowledge;
 - An Arya should always be ready to accept truth and abandon untruth;
 - Dharma, that is, due consideration of right and wrong, should be the guiding principle of all actions;
 - The principal aim of the Samaj is to promote world's well-being in the material, spiritual and social sense;
 - Everybody should be treated with love and justice;
 - Ignorance is to be dispelled and knowledge increased;
 - One's own progress should depend on the uplift of all others;
 - Social well-being of mankind is to be placed above an individual's well-being.
- The nucleus for this movement was provided by the **Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (D.A.V.)** schools, established first at Lahore in 1886, which sought to **emphasise the importance of Western education**.
- The Arya Samaj was able to **give self-respect and self confidence to the Hindus** which helped to undermine the myth of superiority of whites and the Western culture.
- The Arya Samaj started the **shuddhi (purification) movement** to reconvert to the Hindu fold the converts to Christianity and Islam.
 - This led to increasing communalisation of social life during the 1920s and later snowballed into communal political consciousness.
- The work of the Swami after his death was carried forward by Lala Hansraj, Pandit Gurudutt, Lala Lajpat Rai and Swami Shraddhanand, among others.
- Dayananda's views were published in his famous work, Satyarth Prakash (The True Exposition).

What was the Young Bengal Movement?

- The young Bengal movement was a movement led by thinkers of the **Hindu College of Calcutta**. These thinkers were also known by the name Derozians.
 - This name was given to them after one teacher of the same college, **Henry Louis Vivian Derozio**.
- Derozio **promoted radical ideas** through his teaching and by organizing an association for debate and discussions on literature, philosophy, history and science.
 - They cherished the ideals of the **French Revolution (1789 A.D.)** and the liberal thinking of Britain.
 - The Derozians also **supported women's rights and education**.

- The main reason for their **limited success** was the **prevailing social condition** at that time, which was not ripe for the adoption of radical ideas.
 - Further, **support from any other social group or class was absent.**
 - The Derozians **lacked any real link with the masses**, for instance, they failed to take up the peasants' cause.
 - In fact their radicalism was bookish in character. But, despite their limitations, the Derozians carried forward Roy's tradition of public education on social, economic, and political questions.

What was the Ramakrishna Movement?

- **Ramakrishna Paramhansa** was a mystic who **sought religious salvation** in the traditional ways of renunciation, meditation and devotion.
- He was a saintly person who recognized the fundamental oneness of all religions and emphasized that there were many roads to God and salvation and the service of man is the service of God.
- The teaching of Ramakrishna Paramhansa formed the basis of the **Ramakrishna Movement**.
- **The two objectives of the movements were:**
 - To bring into existence a band of monks dedicated to a life of renunciation and practical spirituality, from among whom teachers and workers would be sent out to spread the Universal message of Vedanta as illustrated in the life of Ramakrishna.
 - In conjunction with lay disciples to carry on preaching, philanthropic and charitable works, looking upon all men, women and children, irrespective of caste, creed or color, as veritable manifestations of the Divine.
- **Swami Vivekananda** established Ramakrishna Mission in 1897, named after his Guru Swami Ramakrishna Paramhansa. The institution did extensive educational and philanthropic work in India.
 - He also represented India in the first Parliament of Religion held in Chicago (U.S.) in 1893.
- He used the Ramakrishna Mission for humanitarian relief and social work.
- The mission stands for religious and social reform. Vivekananda advocated the **doctrine of service- the service of all beings**.
 - The service of jiva(living objects) is the worship of Shiva. Life itself is religion.
 - By service, the Divine exists within man. Vivekananda was for using technology and modern science in the service of mankind.

Mains Question

Q. What was the character of socio-religious reforms in the 19th century and how did they contribute to the national awakening in India?

Q. Characterize the main features of the Indian Renaissance?

Q. In what way did Ramakrishna infuse a new vigour and dynamism into Hinduism?

Prelims Question

Q. Which of the following statements is/are correct about Raja Rammohan Roy?

1. He was in the opposition of inter-caste and inter-racial marriages.
2. He established a new religious society based on the twin pillars of 'reason' and 'the Vedas and Upanishads'.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

A. 1 only

B. 2 only

C. Both 1 and 2

D. Neither 1 nor 2

Q. Consider the following statements about Arya Samaj:

1. It believes in infallibility of Vedas and takes them as the only truth and source of all knowledge.
2. It accepted the Brahmanical dominance of spiritual and social life of Hindus.
3. It started the shuddhi movement to reconvert to the Hindu fold to those who were converted to Christianity and Islam.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

A. 1 and 3 only

B. 3 only

C. 2 and 3 only

D. 1, 2 and 3

Q. Satya Shodhak Samaj organized

A. a movement for upliftment of tribals in Bihar

B. a temple-entry movement in Gujarat

C. an anti-caste movement in Maharashtra

D. a peasant movement in Punjab

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