UNIT 7: RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Religious Movement in India: Emergence

7.4 The causes behind the rise of religious movements in India

7.5 Overview of the religious movements in India**:** Issues, consequences

7.6 Let Us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check your Progress

7.9 Model Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to -

- Know about the background of religious movements in India
- Gain an overall understanding of different religious movements in India
- Know the broad causes and implications of such movements in India

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Religious elements, and the attached sentimentality of the society towards such entities have been found to be a significant factor in shaping social, political and economic circumstances of people at different points in time in history. Movements based on religious tenets have, therefore, emerged to be important markers of social evolution. In this unit, we shall focus on the religious reform movements in India, their background, rise, causes, etc.

7.3 RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT IN INDIA: EMERGENCE

At the very onset it is imperative to acknowledge that India is potpourri of diverse culture, community, language and religion. This diversity also reared varied social evils like caste system, sati system, purdah system and more, creating layers of marginalisation in the society.Several socio-religious factors prohibited the society's progress. History stands testimony to the fact that many sections of the Indian society were rigid and adhered to many practices which were not in tandem with humanitarian principles. The social malice in the country reached a point wherein the need to change the society was felt strongly.

Social reform started by struggling for ushering in changes in the religious domain. It was believed that at the core of the social evils were religious norms that were regressive. Such regressive practices marginalised the women, people from the lower caste and hampered the growth of the society. According to the reformers, society must be founded on the ideas of liberty and equality both for men and women, and this was probablewith the dissemination of modern liberal philosophies and scientific education. The movements that took place in different parts of India came to be known as socio-religious movements,since the reformers of 19th century recognised that no transformation is possible in a society without remodelling religion. The reformers had to face many challenges as well as confrontation from the orthodox Indians, but that did not deter the progression of the religious movements across the length and breadth of India in the 19th century.

Numerous unsympathetic practices like sati, female infanticide, purdah system, child marriage, etc. coupled with superstitious dogmas and composite rituals made life of the masses in India miserable. Socio-religious reformers of the time comprehended the social practices were exceedinglypredisposed by religion and no development is imaginable unless religion is decontaminated.

On the foundation of this understanding, the reformers confronted the rigidity and delusory practices in religion. They quoted the scriptures to

show that the practices predominant during 19th century find no endorsement in them. The free-thinking and the rationalistic probed the popular religion which was filled with superstitions and was abused by the fraudulent priests. The reformers soughtthe society to admit the rational and scientific attitude. They also believed in the value of human dignity and social egalitarianism of all men and women. The reformers worked for elimination of caste system and untouchability, purdah system, sati, child marriage, social inequalities and illiteracy. They toiled to make people acknowledge the fact that such systems are unscientific, anti-social, and inhuman and hinder holistic growth of society.

7.4 THE CAUSES BEHIND THE RISE OF RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

The rise of the religious movements in India can be attributed to a multiplicity of social political, economic factors, amongst others. However, certain phenomena, incidences, and circumstances have been identified as very crucial factors behind the rise of religious movements in India. Some of such factors have been highlighted in the following account.

- **Influence of Western Education**

  One of the most important influencing factors in the upsurge of religious movement wasthe spread of western education. Modern education disseminated western ideas of democracy, freedom, equal opportunity and nationalism. The Indians of the time who went abroad for higher education came under the direct influence of these concepts. On their return to the country they were aggrieved to see the lack of consciousness among the Indians about such ideas. The erudite individuals carried out the spade work for the dissemination of these principles. It has to be acknowledged that Indian nationalism and modernism are fundamentally the result of the determinations of the English educated Indians from different parts of the country.

- **British Raj and Political Harmony**

  Religious movement in India also got an additional impetus since the country at that point in time was politically united due to the expansion and consolidation of British raj. This unification in turn led to the understanding of multifacetedproblems that the Indian society faced in those times. The characteristic of the British rule and economic strategiesmotivatedseveral educated Indians to find out the reasons of the misery and dilapidation of the society.

- **Rekindling Of India's Glorious Past**

  Renowned western scholars like Max Muller and William Jones revived and revisited India's past by studying the intellectual works of Indians of the ancient times. They redirected people's attention to the rich cultural heritage of India which according to many scholars was grander to the western culture. Many literary and religious texts were translated which received global appreciation. Also, it is of prime importance to understand that socio-religious movement though reached its zenith from the 19th century, its roots were sown by the likes of Srimanta Sankardev from the medieval period onwards. As is known Srimanta Sankardev, instituted the Neo-Vaishnavite religion in Assam which is known as the EkSharan Naam Dharma as a measure to eliminate the social tribulations and religious incongruities, prevailing in the society. Such revival of the past in turn made the educated Indians nurture faith in Indian culture and rid it off the socio-religious malevolence.

7.5 OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS IN INDIA: ISSUES, CONSEQUENCES

The religious movement in India was carried out using various means to create an impact on the minds of the people. For instance creation of consciousness among people by publicationof articles in newspapers, journals and books as well as conducting debates on numerous issues. Raja Ram Mohan Roy spearheaded this process when in 1818 and 1819

he printed the famous pamphlets on sati which got extensive public attention. Initially written in Bengali, these were translated into English titled “A Conference between an Advocate For and An Opponent of, The Practice of Burning Widows Alive” and “A Second Conference between an Advocate For and An Opponent Of, the Practice of Burning Widows Alive”. Correspondingly, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar also published leaflets on widow remarriage which had deepinfluence on the Indian society.

Legislative intervention was another method adopted to fight back the socio-religious evils. Reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen in Bengal, Mahadev Govind Ranade in Maharashtra and Veersalingam in Andhra Pradesh were staunch believers of the idea that social reforms could only be achieved with state support. Thus, the colonial rulers were appealed for ratifyingappropriate legislations. Some such legislations that were passed, include banning sati and allowing widow remarriage.

The third system that was adopted was by way of representing themselves as ciphers of change through non-conformist personalaction and an inflexible attitude concerning social evils. The group led by Derozions or Young Bengal movement and the methods adopted by it, are an exemplification of such an attempt

Last method embraced by some of the reformers was social service. For instance Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was one such reformist who did not limit his efforts to writing leaflets and creating awareness. He dedicated his whole life for the cause of widow remarriage. Socio-religious organisations like the Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission also promulgated the ideas of reform through various social services.

Some of the noteworthy religious movements in India are highlighted below.

- **Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) And Brahmo Samaj**

  As a reformist ideology, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a believer of modern scientific attitude and philosophies of human self-esteem and social equality. He put his conviction in monotheism and composed “Gift to Monotheists”. He also translated the Vedas and the Upanishads into Bengali to demonstrate his belief that ancient Hindu texts endorsed monotheism. In 1821 he established “Sambad Kaumudi” a Bengali

weekly newspaper published from Kolkata and recurrently editorialised against Sati, disapproving it as barbarous and un-Hindu. The paper became the primary tool of crusade against Sati. In August 1828, Roy instituted the Brahmo Sabha (The society of God), with the aim of venerating and adulating the eternal, unsearchable, unchallengeable God. The samaj defied idol worship and remained away from exercise of priesthood and sacrifice. Brahmo Samaj played a pivotal role as the first intellectual movement of India. It disseminated the philosophies of rationalism and enlightenment in modern India.

- **Gopal Hari Deshmukh**

  Gopal Hari Deshmukh was a champion of new learning and social-religious reform in Maharashtra, he was famously known as 'Lokahitawadi'.He made influential rationalist attacks on Hindu orthodoxy and preached religious and social egalitarianism.

- **Jyotiba Phule & Satyashodhak Samaj**

  Jyotiba Phulebelonged to a so-called lower caste from Maharashtra and wasconscious of the dishonouredsituation of the untouchables and non-Brahmins.He waged a life-long war against upper caste supremacy and Brahminical hegemony through his Satyashodhak Samaj which was established in the year 1873. The primarytargets of Satya Shodhak Samaj were to unfetter the lower castes and shield them from mistreatment and carnagesmeted out by the upper caste, dissemination of education among women and lower caste people.. The main leadership of the samaj came from the backward classes like the Malis, Saris, Telis, Kunbis, and DhangarsThis movement gave rise to a consciousness of individuality among the dejected communities as a class opposing the Brahmins.He also initiated the widow remarriage crusade in Maharashtra.Phule's works, Sarvajanik Satyadharma and Ghulamgin, became source of encouragement for the common people.

- **Aligarh Movement**

  The Muslim reform movement comparatively started a late since in the initial stages theyrejected western education. The Aligarh

Movement was initiated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98) to further the cause of social and educational progression of the Muslims in India. He battled against the medieval repressiveness and promoted a rational attitude towards religion. In 1862, he established the Scientific Society for carrying out translation of English books on science and other subjects into Urdu. The English- Urdu journal was also started by Syed, through which he promulgated the ideas of socio-religious reforms.By the dint of his initiative, the Mohammedean Oriental College was established which later advanced into becoming Aligarh Muslim University. Being a socio-religious reformer Syed Ahmad khan crusaded against the purdah system, polygamy and the Muslim structure of divorce. He accentuated the need for eliminatingillogical social customs while preserving the spirit of Islam and boosting a rational elucidation of the Koran.

One of the great poets of modern India, Muhammad Iqbal (1876-1938) also,intenselyimpacted the reform movement and the younger generation of both Muslims and Hindus,through his poetry, the philosophical and religious outlook. He insisted on the acceptance of a dynamic viewpointthat would aidto transform the world.

There were numerous other socio-religious reform movement which in many ways assisted in the national awakening of the Muslims. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad had instituted the Ahmediya Movement in 1899. Under this crusade, a number of schools and colleges were establishedacross the country, ushering modern education. In the domain of religion, the supporters of this movement highlighted the universal and humanitarian nature of Islam. They championed the cause of Hindu and Muslim unity.

- **Deoband School**

The conformist segment among the Muslim Ulema started the Deoband Movement, a revivalist movement with dual objectives. The first objective was to proliferate among the Muslims the uncontaminated teachings of the Koran and the Hadis. The second objective was to nurture the spirit of jihad against the foreign rule.

The new Deoband leader Mahmud-Hasan (1851-1920) wanted to divulge a political and rational content to the religious philosophies of the school.The liberal elucidation of Islam generated a political awakening among its supporters.Maulana Abul Kalam Azad,a scholar of Deoband School taught that there is no battle between nationalism and Islam.

- **Sikh Reform Movement**

Like all other parts of the country, Punjab too came under the invocation of reforms. Baba Dayal Das founded the Nirankari Movement, through which he insisted on the worship of God as nirankar (formless).Another movement, known as the Namdhari Movement, was initiated by Baba Ram Singh, in which his followers wore white clothes and gave up the consumption of meat.

In 1870 in Amritsar and Lahore the Singh Sabhas started, which were aimed at reforming the Sikh society. The sabhas led to the formation of Khalsa College at Amritsar in 1892. Additionally, theyalso encouraged Gurumukhi and Punjabi literature.In 1920, the Akalis spearheaded a crusade to get rid of the dishonest Mahants (priests) from the Sikh gurudwaras, with the help of laws enforced by the colonial rulers.

- **Parsi Reforms Movement**

The Parsi Religious Reform Association was originated at Bombay,founded by Furdunji Naoroji and S.S. Bengalee in 1851. They encouraged the spread of women's education. They also soughtto reform their marriage rituals. Naoroji printed a monthly journal named the Jagat Mithra. The impetus generated through these transformation movements went a long way in inspiring the whole community.By the middle of the 20th century many from the community mademomentous contribution to India's development.

- **Self-Respect Movement**

In South India a diverse kind of reform movement emerged led by EV Ramasamy Naiker (Periyar) who challenged Brahminical religion via the Self-Respect Movement. It started in the mid-1920s. The movement targeted at nothing short of a denunciation of Brahminical

religion and culture, which Naicker felt, was the prime apparatus of mistreatment of the lower castes.

- **Vaikom Satyagraha**

  Vaikom Satyagraha was led by K P Kesava, and launched in Kerela This movement demanded the opening of and making accessible the Hindu Temples and public roads to untouchables.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1) What is religious movement?

.....

.....

Q2) What are the different ways of bringing about socio-religious reforms?

.....

.....

Q3) Who are leading religious reformers of India from the 19th century?

.....

.....

Q4) What were the social evils prevalent in the India of the 19th century?

.....

.....

Q5) Did the socio-religious reforms help in bettering the plight of the women?

.....

.....



7.6 LET US SUM UP

- Religious reform movements in India ascended among all groups across the length of the country.
- Religious reform movements confronted prejudice, superstition and the hegemony of the priestly class.

- These movements functioned for the elimination of social problems like the caste system and untouchability, purdah system, sati, child marriage,social discriminations and illiteracy, etc.
- It is to be noted that some of these reform movements were supported either openly or covertly, by the British administrators, by enacting laws.Sati was stated to be illegal (1829). Widow Remarriage was legalised by a law passed in 1856. Marriageable age of girls wasraised up to ten by a law passed in 1860. Further, a law passed in 1872, endorsed inter-caste and inter-communal marriages. For the deterrence of child marriage,the Sharda Act was passed in 1929.
- Many individuals, reform societies and religious groupsfunctioned hard to propagate education among women, to avertchild marriage, abolish the purdah and sati systems, to implement monogamy, and to empower middle class women to take up vocationsor jobs in the public sector.
- The spread of western education, collective animosity of Indians towards the British, rekindling of the glorious past of India have ben identified as some of the effective reasons behind the rise of religious reform movements in India.
- Initiatives taken by the Brahmo Smaj, Ahmadiya movement, deoband movement, parsi and sikh reform movements, Satyashodhak Samaj, Self-respect movement, etc., amongst others, are identified as example of religious reform movements in India.



7.7 FURTHER READING

1) A Guide to New Religious Movements (1924), Enroth, Ronald M. (ed). IVP Books, 2005

2) Modern Religious Movements in India, Farquhar, J.N. Kessinger Publishing Co, 2003

3) Neog, Moheswar, SriSri Sankardev, Guwahati, 1978

4) Barpujari,H.K.(ed),Comprehensive History of Assam, Vol.I, Guwahati, 1990

7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No1: Movement to bringing in liberal thoughts and eliminate radical and superstitious norms that plague the society.

Ans to Q No2: Bringing in change in philosophy, development of scientific temperament, modern education and social service.

Ans to Q No3: Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Henry Louis Vivian Deroizo, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule

Ans to Q No4: Sati system, Purdah system, female foeticide

Ans to Q No5: Yes, sati system was banned, female education gained prominence, etc.



7.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Short Questions (Answer each question within 150 words)

Q1. Describe the efforts of the Theosophical Society in promoting ancient Indian religions.

Q2. Examine the reforms carried out by the Sikhs and the Parsis to make their society enlightened.

Long Questions (Answer each question within 300-500 words)

Q1. Elucidate the role played by Raja Rammohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj in bringing about religious reforms.

Q2. Deliberate on the contribution of the Aligarh Movement towards cultural and educational reforms amongst the Muslims