UNIT 8: REFORM MOVEMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Know about emergence of reform movements in India
- describe the social evils that plagued the country which eventually led to the rise of reform movements
- understand different reform movements in India, their issues, leadership, and the overall impact of the movements.

8.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous units, we have read about different kinds of social movements, with particular reference to the Indian context. Social movements with a reformist tendency have characterised the socio-political scenario of India, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. In this unit, we shall focus on some such reformist movements in India, their background and the consequent effects.

8.3 REFORM MOVEMENT IN INDIA: EMERGENCE

The Indian society in the 19th century was wedged in a malicious mesh fashioned by religious superstitions and philosophies. All forms of religion in general had become a composite of magic, animism, etc. The priests applied an overpowering effect on the mind of people. The faithful lived in obedience, not only to God, but even to the impulses, fancies, and desires of the priests could be seen. It is important to take cognizance of the fact that the social conditions were equally disheartening, primarily, the position of the women. For example, the birth of a girl was undesirable, marriage of a girl was a liability on the family and her widowhood ill-starred in many sections of the society. Yet another incapacitating factor was the caste system which sustained an organisation of separation, hierarchically predestined on the foundation of ritual status, hindering social mobility and nurtured social partitions. There were countless other practices discernible by constriction, status, authority, intolerance and blind despondency. Rebuffing them as structures of a degenerative society, the reform movements wanted to create a social environment fit for modernization.

The subjugation of India by the British during the 18th and 19th century uncovered some severe flaws and shortcomings of Indian social institutions. The response, undeniably, was varied. However, the necessity to reform social and religious life was a mutually shared belief. The persuasion of social reform also ushered in absolutely fresh sets of ideas and worldview. The introduction to post-Enlightenment rationalism that came to denote modernism brought a transformation in the attitude of a select group of Indians. Much of this was the consequence of exposure to western education and philosophies that had the extensive influence on the Indian society. Through the lens of service, reason, impartiality, and development, a group of individuals began to determine the characteristic of their own society. There was a steady rise of public opinion, which resulted into a self-examination about Indian traditions, organisation, and philosophy. Importantly, the struggle against the colonial rulers also acted as a catalyst to analyse the deep seated social evils of the society. Western culture

swayed the Indian life and thought in numerous ways. The most significant outcome of the influence of western culture was the rejection of blind faith replacing it with an essence of rationalism.

The social reformers lived by the values of individual freedom, liberty, and equality of all human beings regardless of gender, colour, race, caste, or religion. They confronted a number of traditional, totalitarian, and hierarchical social organisations and propelled reform movements to unshackle the Indian women. Although many of the campaigners were principally men, the reform movement targeted at improving the status of Indian women and society at large. These largely involved key concerns line liberation of women from malice like sati, infanticide, child marriage, and also get rid of casteism and untouchability which plagued the larger Indian society. In the religious domain key concerns were idol worship, polytheism, religious fallacies, and corruption by priests.

8.4 BRAHMO SAMAJ, ARYA SAMAJ, PRARTHANA SAMAJ AND OTHER KEY REFORM MOVEMENTS: LEADERSHIP, AND THE KEY CONCERNS

The chief facet of the social reform movement comprised of leadership led from the forefront by the emerging intellectual middle class. It is to be noted that the reform movement took place in different parts of India at various times but had substantial connections. Reformers across the country were convinced that without religious rectification, social reformation was not plausible. Two most important intellectual principles of reform movement were rationality and religious universalism.

The following account highlights some of the key reform movements in India.

- **Bramho 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 also 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.

- **Arya Samaj**

Founded by Swami Dayananda in 1875, Arya Samaj ("Noble Society") is a Hindu reform movement. Through the samaj he endorsed the Vedas and highlighted the principles of brahmacharya (chastity). The first Arya Samaj division was officially established at Bombay in 1875. Later the headquarters of the samaj were instituted at Lahore. Swami Dayanand bequeathed the chant, "Go back to Vedas" since he was of the opinion that priestly section and Puranas had degenerated Hindu religion. In contemporary time Arya Samaj temples are found all over India. The group also has played a significant part in spread of education through its network of schools known by the name of Dayanand Anglo Vedic (DAV) schools.

- **Young Bengal Movement**

Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was an Indian poet and assistant headmaster of Hindu College. He was profoundly influenced by the radical ideas of freedom, equality and fraternity. He inspired his students to think realistically and liberally, to question authority, to endear liberty, equality and freedom and to venerate truth. He disseminated his radical thoughts by organising debates on history, literature, philosophy and science.

The movement led by Derozio was called the Young Bengal Movement and his supporters were known as the Derozians. They criticised religious rites and ceremonies, and appealed for the elimination of social evils and propagated the cause of female education and development in

the situation of women. They carried out public campaigning for the revision of the Company's Charter, the freedom of the Press, better handling of Indian labour in British colonies overseas and many more. However, owing to the extreme radical philosophy of Derozians, it lacked support, and slowly the movement declined.

- **Prarthana Samaj**

M G Ranade along with his friends Dr Atmaram Pandurang, Bal Mangesh Wagle and Vaman Abaji Modak, established the Prarthana Samaj, a Hindu movement motivated by the BrahmoSamaj, advocating philosophies of progressive theism founded on the ancient Vedas. The four point social schema of Prathana Samaj operating in Maharashtra were 1) condemnation of caste system 2) promoting womens education 3) endorsing widow remarriage 4) increasing the marriageable age for both males and females.

- **Annie Besant and Theosophical Society**

Theosophical society led by Annie Besant had played a pivotal role in the history of the religion, society and culture of modern India. Theosophical society was founded in the USA by a Russian spiritualist Madame H.P. Blavatsky and an American Col. H.S. Olcott in the year 1875. The aim of the society was to encourage scholarships in ancient religions, philosophies and science, cultivate the divine powers dormant in man and create a collective brotherhood of man.

The Society was introduced to India in the year 1879 and it's headquarters were set up at Adyar neighbouring Madras in 1886. Society's influence spread under Annie Beasant in 1893 who played a significant role in India's struggle for freedom. She and her allies encouraged the revitalisation and consolidation of the ancient religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism. They also accepted the principle of the transmigration of the soul. Annie Besant helped in imparting to the educated Indians a sagacity of pride in their own country. Annie Beasant's crusade was a movement headed and reinforced by westerners who adored Indian religious and philosophical customs, which helped Indians to recuperate their confidence.

- **Arya Mahila Samaj**

Pandita Ramabai was a distinguished social reformer of Maharashtra who fought for the privileges of women and spoke against child marriage. She worked for the promotion of girl's education and started the Arya Mahila Samaj in1881, in Pune, to develop the ailment of women, particularly child widows. In 1889, she instituted the Mukti Mission, in Pune, a shelter for young widows who had been abandoned and ill-treated by their families. Alongside, she also founded Sharda Sadan with an aim of offering housing, schooling, vocational training, and medical facilities to orphans, widows, and the visually challenged.

- **Ahmadiya Movement**

This movement was founded by Mirza Ghulam Ahmed in the year 1889. It was founded on liberal philosophies and it defined itself as the torch bearer of Mohammedan Renaissance, having faith on the value of universal religion of all humanity, opposing jihad. The movement disseminated the idea of western liberal education among the Indian Muslims.

- **Aligarh Movement**

In a bid to encourage the process of development among Indian Muslims by means of better education and employment prospects, a group of Muslims led by Syed Ahmed Khan founded the Aligarh movement in the 19th century. The movement spread liberal ideas with its seat of activity being the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh. The prime aim of the movement was disseminating modern education among Indian Muslims without abating their commitment to Islam. It was also felt that social reforms were needed among the Muslims pertaining to purdah, polygamy, women's education, widow remarriage, slavery, divorce and more.

- **Sri Narayan Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Movement**

SNDP Movement was an instance of a provincial movement which emerged out of struggle between the deprived classes and upper non-Brahmin castes. The movement in its totality brought transformation in the structure by facilitating ascending social mobility, modification in traditional dispersal of power and formation of associations of backward castes into a large composite.

- **Savitribai Phule**

Savitribai Jyotirao Phule was a social reformer and poet and is known as "one of the first-generation modern Indian feminists". She, along with her husband Jyotiba Phule instituted the first women's school at Bhide Wada in Pune in 1848. Challenging the casteist patriarchy which is deep rooted in the Hindu religious system, she fought for the abolishment of caste discrimination and gender inequality.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. When did reform movement start in India?

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Q2. Who were the flag bearers of reform movement in the country?

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Q3. Did social reform aim to emancipate the Indian women?

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Q4. Could India be modernised without social reforms?

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Q5. List some factors on which reform movement lay its foundation.

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8.5 IMPACT OF REFORM MOVEMENTS IN INDIA

Despite the antagonism from the conformist sections of the society, the reform movements contributed significantly towards emancipating people from the various social abuses. The religious manuscripts were translated into vernacular languages and stress was laid on the interpretation

of holy texts and streamlining of rituals, thus making worship a more personal involvement.

The reform movement gave confidence to the forthcoming middle class cultural backgrounds and lowered the sense of embarrassment that the British administrators had generated. Contemporary, cogent, secular, and scientific attitude was encouraged recognising the requirement of the modern era. The reformers targeted at modernisation rather than downright westernization.

A constructive social milieu was formed to bring to an end India's cultural and intellectual sequestration from the world. This was an outcome of the continuous undertakings of the reformers like the abolition of Sati and validation of widow-marriage which were accomplished during this time. There was a lot of intellectual passion, sustained campaigning and critical debate during this time which helped to elevate the level of awareness among the masses. The philosophies and undertakings of the intellectuals were directly or indirectly associated with the mission of nation-building and national restoration. The social reform movement, one must understand, was not an insulated occurrence; it was encumbered with broader national political and economic deliberations.

Some legislative measures for women as a fallout of the reform movement were: Bengal regulation (1829): It banned Sati.

- Bengal Regulations (1795, 1804): It declared infanticide illegal
- Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act, 1856
- Age of Consent Act, 1891
- Sarda Act, 1929
- Special Marriage Act, 1954
- Hindu Marriage Act, 1955
- Hindu Succession act, 1956
- Maternity Benefits Act, 1961
- Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961
- Equal Remuneration Act, 1976

Despite its influence in the transformation of traditional Indian society, the reforms also had their limitations. In particular, the reform movement

had a constricted social base and affected a very small section. Only the educated and urban middle class was involved in the social reform movement, while the needs of vast majority of peasants and the urban poor were ignored. Owing to extensive illiteracy the reform movement did not spread across in rural areas. Additionally due to the lack of modern and varied communications network the reach of the movement was primarily urban-based. Thus, even in the context of its practical entreaty the movement continued to be urban.

Yet another factor like casteism remained resilient and many religious and social observances did not fade away. Caste and rituals were difficult to eliminate from the Indian mind. The propensity of the reformers to charm to the immensity of the past and to depend on scriptural power led to the categorisation of religions as also distancing high caste from lower caste Hindus. Over emphasis on religious, metaphysical facets of culture while underplaying secular characteristics led to the Hindus admiring ancient Indian History and Muslims restricting to the medieval history, which in turn created a concept of two distinct segments of people and augmented communal consciousness.



8.6 LET US SUM UP

- The Indian society in the 19th century was characterised by religious superstitions, social backwardness, etc.
- There were countless practices discernible by constriction, status, authority, intolerance and blind despondency in the society at those times. Rebuffing them as structures of a degenerative society, the reform movements wanted to create a social environment fit for modernization.
- The key social problems which came in the radar of the reforms movements were liberation of women from malices like sati, infanticide child marriage, casteism ,untouchability, etc. which plagued the larger Indian society.In the religious domain key concerns were idol worship, polytheism, religious fallacies, and corruption by priest.

- Brahmo Samaj played a pivotal role as the first intellectual movement of India It spread the philosophies of rationalism and enlightenment in modern India. The samaj defied idol worship and remained away from exercise of priesthood and sacrifice
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