

Socio-Religious movements in India

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The 19th century social religious reforms that took place in India, had a lasting significance into the centuries that followed. Several social and religious reform movements were started with the notion of social reform and religious revival in the country. During the 19th century, religious superstitions and social obscurantism was prevalent across the country. At the same time, social evils such as killing of female infants, child marriage, polygamy and sati were also under practice. Particularly the life and position of the women then was filled with misery and humiliation.

What are 19th Century Social Religious Reforms?

The 19th century social religious reforms in India refer to a series of movements and initiatives that emerged during the 1800s. They were aimed at challenging various social and religious practices prevalent in Indian society. Most of the social religious reforms of the 19th century were driven by a desire to address social inequalities, promote rationality, eradicate social evils, and foster progressive ideas.

List of Social Religious Reforms in the 19th Century

Here is a list of religious and social reform movements in 19th century in India:

Arya Samaj

The Arya Samaj was a Hindu reform organisation founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati on April 7, 1875 in Bombay. Leaders and nationalists namely Pandit Guru Dutt, Lala Lajpat Rai, Swami Shraddhananda and Lala Hansraj were drawn into this organisation. The members of this organisation stood against idol worship, superstitious rituals, animal sacrifice, polytheism and priesthood. Back to Vedas was the motto of this organisation. Its founder, Swami Dayanand Saraswati claimed that any scientific theory or invention which was thought to be of modern origin was actually derived from the Vedas.

Arya Samaj focussed on female education, abolition of child marriage and stood for permitting widow remarriage on certain cases. This organisation played a key role in changing the religious perceptions of the Indians. It was largely a proselytizing movement which led to the rise of a militant Hindu consciousness in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Arya Mahila Samaj

The Arya Mahila Samaj also called Arya Women's Society was founded by Pandita Ramabai in 1882. Soon after the death of her husband, she moved to Pune where she was influenced by the ideals of Brahmo samaj and started the Arya Mahila Samaj. This organisation was started with an aim to elevate the position of women in Indian society. It promoted women education and deliverance from the oppression of child marriage which was then prevalent in the society. It worked on improving the conditions of women in various fronts. In addition to this, Pandita Ramabai also founded Sharada Sadan for helping the deserted and abused widows, particularly the young ones.

Ahmadiyya Movement

The Ahmaddiyya movement was a Islamic revivalist movement that took place in the late 19th century. This movement was started by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian in 1889 to fight against the polemics of christian missionaries and that of the Arya Samaj.

Being influenced by the western liberalism and the religious reform movement of the Hindus, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad based this movement on the lines of universal religion of all humanity. This movement played a crucial role in spreading western education among the Indian Muslims and it also stood against the jihad which was a sacred war against the non-muslims.

Atmiya Sabha

Atmiya Sabha, also known as the society of friends, was established by Raja Rammohan Roy in 1814 at Calcutta. The members of this sabha often conducted sessions and philosophical discussions on the monothestic ideals of the Vedanta. They campaigned against idol worship, superstitious beliefs and practices, social ills such as child marriage, sati etc and caste rigidities. Some of the well known members of Atmiya Sabha were Brindaban Mitra, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Dwaraka Nath Tagore and Sivaprasad Misra.

Brahmo Samaj

Brahmo Samaj, which was earlier known as the Brahmo Sabha, was founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in August 1828. Its initial landmark began in Bengal. The Atmiya Sabha which was established by him in 1814, took the shape of Brahmo Samaj in 1828. This religious society criticized the idolatry and denounced social evils such as sati, child marriage, etc and they laid great emphasis on human dignity. They discarded the faith in incarnations and were against the caste system.

The agenda of Brahmo Samaj was to purify Hinduism and to preach monotheism. It was purely based on the Upanishads and Vedas. Following the death of Raja Rammohan Roy, the religious society was split at various times in the course of the 19th century.

Deoband Movement

The Deoband movement was started by Mohammad Qasim Nanotavi and Rashid Ahmed Gangohi in 1866 at the Darul Uloom. It was a revivalist movement which was organised by the orthodox section of the Muslims. The main objectives of this movement were to propagate the teachings of Quran and Hadis among the Muslims and to support jihad against the foreign rulers. Repeated manifestations around purification of ritual practices was the vital part of the movement. This Deoband school was originally designed to prepare students for their role as members of the ulama.

Deva Samaj

Deva Samaj was a religious sect founded by Shiv Narain Agnihotri in 1887 at Lahore.

The samaj emphasised on the supremacy of Guru and the need for good actions. It advocated widow remarriage, women education, social integration of castes and the abolition of child marriage and sati. In 1892, its founder advocated the dual worship of God and himself and later he discarded the worship of God. Apart from that, they also prescribed moral ethics such as abstaining from intoxicants, violence, bribery and gambling activities. The philosophies followed by the Deva Samaj and their teachings were compiled in a book called Deva Shastra.

Faraizi Movement

The Faraizi movement, also known as the Fara'id movement, was started by Haji Shariat Ullah in 1818 in East Bengal. Initially the movement focussed on religious purification and discarding of improper beliefs and un-islamic practices. It insisted the Bengali muslims to follow the obligatory duties of Islam such as daily prayers, fasting in Ramzan, paying charities and pilgrimage to Mecca.

Around 1830's, the movement became enmeshed in political and economic issues. Due to the clash between Faraizi peasants and Hindu landlords on paying taxes, many of the Fara'id peasants were suspected and persecuted. Eventually in 1840, the movement was taken over by Dudu Miyan, who turned the social and religious movement into a revolutionary movement.

Prarthana Samaj

Prarthana Samaj was founded by Atmaram Pandurang with the help of Keshab Chandra Sen in Bombay in 1867. Mahadev Gobind Ranade was the man behind the popularity and work done by the samaj. Paramahansa Sabha which was a secret society working on spreading the liberal ideas, was the precursor of Prarthana Samaj. Similar to Brahmo Samaj, this religious society also preached monotheism, denounced idolatry and priestly dominations. Their 4 point social agenda was

- Disapproval of caste system
- Widow remarriage
- Women's education
- Raising the marriage age for both males and females.

The samaj succeeded in establishing libraries, free reading rooms, schools and orphanages in some parts of the country.

Ramakrishna Movement

In the second half of the 19th century, the Brahmo Samaj of Bengal began to weaken and it paved the way for the emergence of the Ramakrishna movement. Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a great teacher who expressed and taught great and deep philosophical thoughts in simple language, found many followers. He believed that service to man was service to God, for man was the embodiment of God on earth. He was a staunch believer of the ideology that there was an underlying unity among all religions and only the methods of worship were different. His teachings were spread across the country by his followers and it came to be known as the Ramakrishna movement.

Ramakrishna Mission

After the demise of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna mission in 1896. He spreaded the messages and teachings of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and also tried to reconcile them to the needs of contemporary society. This mission believed in idolatry and the philosophy of Vedanta. The key objective of the mission was to render social service in the country. To serve that purpose, a number of schools, orphanages, hospitals and libraries were established throughout the country. Apart from that, it offered help to the people who were affected by the natural calamities such as earthquakes, tsunami, floods, famines and epidemics.

Satyashodhak Samaj

This society was founded by Jyotiba Phule in Pune on 24 September 1873. He founded this social reform society with an aim to educate the lower sections of the society and make them aware of their rights. By doing this, he tried to liberate the depressed class of Indian society. Only the members belonging to lower castes or shudra samaj were admitted into the society. It rejected the caste system and was also against the social and political superiority of the Brahmanas. They also rejected the Upanishads, Vedas and the dominance of the Aryan society. The society emphasized that no medium or intermediaries were required to communicate with gods and tried to set the people free from all religious and superstitious beliefs.

Tattvabodhini Sabha

The Tattvabodhini Sabha was founded by Debendranath Tagore in Calcutta on October 6, 1839. At the time of establishment, it was known as the Tattva Ranjani Sabha. It is considered to be the splinter group of the Brahmo Samaj. They were formed with an

objective to promote a rational and humanist form of Hinduism based on Upanishads and Vedas. It made a systematic study of India's glorious past with a rational outlook and spread them among the intellectuals of Bengal.

Tattvabodhini Sabha propagated the social welfare programmes through their monthly journal named Tattvabodhini Patrika. Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rajendra Lal Mitr, Peary Chand Mitra, Akshay Kumar Datta, Tara Chand Chand Chakravarthi and few other people from the elite section of the society became the members of the sabha.

Theosophical Society

The Theosophical Society was founded by Madame H.P. Blavatsky and Colonel M.S. Olcott in 1875 in the United States. Later in 1882, the headquarters of the society was shifted from the United States to Madras in India. In 1888, Annie Besant joined the society in England and it was under her leadership, the movement became popular in India.

The beliefs of the society were a mixture of religion, philosophy and occultism. It believed in the universal brotherhood of man and transmigration of soul, doctrine of reincarnation and karma. The ideologies of the society were inspired from the Upanishads, Samkhya, Yoga and Vedantic traditions. It also preached that by contemplation, prayer and revelation, one could establish a special relation between a person's soul and God.

Young Bengal Movement

The origin of the Young Bengal movement is owed to Henry Vivian Derozio, who was the principal inspiration behind this movement. He was a teacher at Hindu College of Calcutta from 1826 to 1831. Being inspired by the ideals of the French revolution, he taught about rational thinking, liberty, equality and freedom to his students and initiated provocative ideas in their minds. His students, who were later called the Derozians, spread the ideas and teaching of Henry Vivian Derozio to the people in Bengal. 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.

Other Important Social and Religious Reforms in the Early 19th Century

Some of the other important social and religious reforms in the early 19th century include the following:

- In 1827, Bharat Dharma Mahamandala was started by Pandit Din Dayalu Sharma, in order to bring together the orthodox educated Hindus and work together for the preservation of Sanatan Dharma.
- Another Hindu orthodox society named Dhara Sabha was founded by Radhakant Deb in 1839. The society promoted western education and advocated abolition of sati practice.

- The Radhaswami movement was started by Tulsi Ram of Agra in 1861. The followers of this movement believed in one supreme being, the supremacy of Guru, simple social life and company of pious people.
- The Veda Samaj was formed by Keshab Chandra Sen and K.Sridharalu Naidu in 1864. After studying the Brahmo Samaj movement from Calcutta, K.Sridharalu Naidu renamed the movement as Brahmo Samaj of South India.
- In 1892, the Madras Hindu Social Reforms Association was founded by Veresalingam Pantulu. It was a social purity movement and it fought against the devadasi system that was prevalent then in south India.
- In the 1860s, the Satya Mahima Dharma was founded by Mukund Das (Mahima Gosain) along with Govinda Baba and Bhima Bhoi, to preach the existence of only one god (Alakh Param Brahma) who was formless.
- The Paramahansa Mandali was founded by Bal Shastri Jambhekar and Dadoba Panderung in 1849. The seven principles of this movement were: God alone should be worshipped; spiritual religion is one; real religion is based on love and moral conduct; every individual should have a freedom of thought; our actions and speech should be consistent with reason; mankind is one caste; and the right kind of knowledge should be given to all.
- In 1888, a movement called Aravipuram movement was started by Sri Narayan Guru. This movement defied the religious and social restrictions that were placed on the Ezhava community (low caste).
- Baba Dayal Das launched the Nirankari movement in the 1840s. This movement emphasised on the worship of formless God (Nirankar) and rejected the idolatry and rituals associated with it.
- In 1873, Thakur Singh Sandhawalia and Giani Gian Singh founded the Singh Sabha of Amritsar. It was a Sikh religious reform movement of the 19th century. They aimed to restore the purity of Sikhism and to involve the Britishers in educational programmes of the Sikhs.

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