

Indian and World Social Reformers and Revolutionaries - Thought and Works

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Socio – Religious Reform Movements in 19th Century of India

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Abstract-

During the 19th century, religious superstitions and social obscurantism was prevalent in India. The social evils such as killing of female infants, child marriage, polygamy and sati were also under practice. The status of position of women filled with misery and humiliation. There are many social reformers played a vital role to removal of superstitions and decadent customs, spread of enlightenment and development of a rational and modern outlook. They were led to the national awakening in India. The socio – religious reform movement, as a whole was against backward element of traditional culture in terms of both religious and social evils. In this article throw light on the role of Raja Ram Mohan Rai and Jyotirao Phule in Socio – Religious Movement in India. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a champion of women's rights in India. He revolted in opposition to the subjection of women and pleaded for the restoration of their rights. He advocated in favour of abolition of sati and widow remarriage. Due to the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the British Government passed a law in 1829 abolishing the custom of sati. Another greatest social reformer was Jyotirao Phule. He was the first person in modern India to launch a movement for the liberation of caste-oppressed toiler and women irrespective of the caste. He offered a socio-cultural analysis that was deeply integral of Caste-Varna domination. He started a great work of education by starting various schools in and around Poona.

Key Words: Funeral Pyre, Sati, Widow Remarriage, Brahmo Samaj, Atmiya Sabha, Satya Sodhak Samaj,

Introduction

Indian society experienced turbulence during the nineteenth century. The age – old traditions and practices were degraded and these were replaced by many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child-marriage, caste system, purdah system, ban on female education and widow re-marriage etc.

Objectives of the Study:

To bring out the efforts taken by Raja Ram Mohan Roy to promote thereformation in India.

To explain the role played by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and his Brahmo Samaj in bringing about religious reforms in India

To discuss the importance of socio –religious reform movements during the 19th century in India.

To highlight the Revolutionary Social Reforms of Jyotirao Phule.

Research Methodology:

Historical method has been adopted in this study. The study used analytical,

interpretative and descriptive methods. The source materials have been critically analyzed and investigated.

Causes of the Socio-religious reforms movement:

In India the 19th century was entangled in a web of dogma and superstition brought forth by religion. The status of women was the most upsetting. Caste was another hindering issue. It aimed to uphold a hierarchy-based system of segregation based on ceremonial rank that hindered social mobility and cultivated social divisions.

Socio - Religious Reforms of Raja Ram Mohan Roy:

In the nineteenth century, a large number of individuals as well as a number of organizations took an active role in social reform movement in India. However, the story of Indian social reform movement practically began with Raja Ram Mohan Roy. ³⁶Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a great social reformer. The goal of Raja Ram Mohan Roy was to establish a new society founded on the values of tolerance, compassion, and reason,

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where the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity would be upheld by all, and where man would be liberated from the historical chains that had held him captive for so long. He yearned for a new society which would be cosmopolitan and modern. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's methods of social reform were multifaceted. He combined all possible means, including even those which were commonly believed to be incompatible.

Abolition of Sati:

Sati was an ancient Hindu custom. This custom in which a woman burns herself either on the funeral pyre or her deceased husband or by herself after his death is now referred to as sati.

In 1811 Roy witnessed his brother's widow being burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. This incident crushed his mind. This personal experience thus termed as a fuel for this activity against the evil social custom of sati. During those days Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried his level best to stop and ban this custom of Sati. He was the first Indian to protest against this custom. He was strictly opposed to this system of Sati. He advocated that this was completely against the women's right to live in the society as a human being. He tried a lot to make people enlighten against the Sati system. He started a campaign for the abolition of 'Sati System' in which the wife of the dead burned herself on the funeral pyre of her husband. He also condemned polygamy, denounced casteism, advocated the right of Hindu widows to remarry etc. Raja Ram Mohan Roy spearheaded the campaign for the elimination of the practice of Sati.⁴³ He tried to convince the people that Sati was not prescribed by the shastras and that its resurgence only reflected the degeneration of Hindu ethos. Raja Ram Mohan Roy's argument against sati was opposed by a section of society that based their arguments within the scriptural discourse and attempted to cast a shadow of doubt on the credibility of Raja Ram Mohan Roy's interpretation. However, the prevailing social set up in pre-independence India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy was well aware that any effort made by the colonial administration to abolish the practice of Sati would not achieve any desired result. Thought Raja Ram Mohan Roy staunchly advocated the abolition of Sati.

Atmiya Sabha:

In 1814, Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded Atmiya Sabha⁴⁸ – an association for the dissemination of religious truth and the promotion of free discussion of theological subjects, which later on developed into Brahma Samaj in 1828. He desired that monotheists of different religions should come together and discuss the formless, eternal and unsearchable concept of God. Thus he did not want himself to be banded as belonging to one group or another, but should be regarded by all as the follower of universal religion.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Brahma Samaj:

Raja Ram Mohan Roy founded Brahma Samaj in 1828 to purify Hinduism from the evils of orthodoxy, superstition and ritualism.¹ It was one of the most influential religious movements which is responsible for the making of modern India. The Brahma Samaj was the first attempt by Indians in the nineteenth century to reform Hindu society. It is a cosmopolitan religious organization based on the positive sides of all the prevailing religions. Initially, the reform was named as 'Brahma Sabha', and later, known as Brahma Samaj. The formal opening of the Brahma Samaj was made on January 23, 1830. Raja Ram Mohan Roy made an extensive study of both Islamic and Christian theology and developed a thoroughly modern as well as cosmopolitan philosophy. He built up a central concept of the formless God with attributes and a lofty monotheistic creed.

Jyotirao Phule and his Revolutionary Social Reforms in India:

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule, also known as Mahatma Jyotirao Phule, was a social worker, activist, teacher and writer, philosopher, theologian, scholar, editor and revolutionary from Maharashtra, India in the nineteenth century. His extraordinary impact may be seen in areas like education, agriculture, the caste system, the upliftment of women and widows, and the elimination of untouchability. Phule was a staunch opponent of child marriage and also encouraged widow remarriage as he recognized that these were ways of subordinating women. In 1873, he established the Satyashodhak Samaj, with the foundational principles being that all human beings are equal. He was a well-known social activist and thinker who contributed to the

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Volume: I

development of women's education in India, especially in Maharashtra. Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born in a village called Katgun in Khatav Taluka of Satara district of Maharashtra on 11th April 1827.² His original surname was Gorhay and he belonged to Mali caste, their occupation is gardener and vegetable farming. His grandfather Shetiba Gorhay was engaged in selling flowers, garlands and flower decorations at religious and family functions at Pune. At the age of 13, he was married to Savitribai as chosen by his father. In 1848, when he attended the wedding of a Brahmin friend, he was rebuked and insulted by his friend's parents, as Jyotirao belonged to lower caste. As per customs during those days, lower castes are not actively allowed to participate in Brahmin's marriages and other social functions. After this incident, he was realized the injustice faced by caste system to the different lower castes and awakening and also to create a new social order. He inspired the Shudras and Ati-Shudras to fight united against caste dogmas and social oppression. His attack on Brahmin domination, social evils, orthodoxy ignorance, illiteracy and all the oppressive features of the Varna - based Hinduism had made him a historic figure. Jyotirao read the book 'Rights of Man' written by Thomas Paine which influence him very much and developed a keen sense of social justice. Phule had read biographies of George Washington and Chhatrapati Shivaji. They were source of inspiration for him.³ He realized that 'lower castes' and women were at a disadvantage in emancipation. Phule was influenced by the books and based on his observation in society, in place of exploitative Indian social order, he wanted to establish a society founded on principles of Individual liberty and in place of Hinduism he would have like to put universal religion.

Jyotirao Phule and Satya Shodhak Samaj:

Satya Shodhak Samaj was founded by Jyotirao Phule in 1873, with a purpose to give education to the lower case, Scheduled caste, scheduled tribes and made them aware of the exploiting tradition of the society.⁴ Jyotirao Phule was against the social practices of untouchability and caste system and condemned caste hierarchy and orthodox nature of religion. He was against child

marriage and sati practice. Discriminations prevailed in society based on socio-economic strata in society and on gender foundation. Jyotirao Phule refused to regard Vedas as sacrosanct and opposed idolatry. He opened many schools and colleges for girls and untouchables. He was a staunch supporter of widow remarriage. He was nominated as member of Poona Municipality in 1876. Jyotirao Phule tried to help in the severe famine which took place in Maharashtra in 1877. He raised his voice for poor's and landless peasants. Condemning the prevalent religion Jyotirao Phule established Satya Shodhak Samaj with simple religious principles.⁵ Samaj was a non-political body which against the objectives was to make amends for the neglect of Natural Rights of human beings especially of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras over the past centuries. It sought to restore their rights and also to take remedial action for their misery. In fact it insisted the members to worship only our creator and honour the pure rights that have been given by the creator to all human beings by rejecting the belief that some men are born inferior and by refusing to treat any one as inferior. Each member also required to give education to his children, so that they may understand their rights. Further the Samaj insisted that education is essential especially English education which play an vital role not only for providing occupational skills but also for the intellectual emancipation of the low castes. Educational propaganda figured prominently in the agenda of action plan of Satyashodhak Samaj. Phule proposed the programme and appealed the Samaj that worship our own supreme God (creator) and avoid the role of the Brahman priest in performing the socio-religious ceremonies thereby dispensing the hegemonic ideology of the Brahmins and establishing the Shudras and Ali-Shudras as a new moral community. During 1873 to 1890 a large number of rural masses nearby Pune and Bombay attracted towards the activities of Samaj. The progress of the Samaj is as follows. Membership of Satya Shodhak Samaj was 225, 232 and 316 in 1874 and 1876 respectively.

From 1873 to till his death, Phule was the central figure in Satya Shodhak Samaj

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Phule's immediate circle comprising the leaders like Krishnarao Bhalekar, Narayana Lokhande, Ramayya Ayyavaru, Rajanna Lingu, Narayana Nagarkar, Dr. Santuji Lad and others also hooded considerable influence over the Samaj. After Jotirao's death the Satyashodhak movement in Maharashtra become decreased to a Brahmin versus non-Brahmin conflict. There were much of Jotirao's rationalism and belief in universal brotherhood was lost. In the post-Independence era, while democracy has been transmitted into power in the hands of non-Brahmins, the threat of inter-religious conflicts appears large. Jotirao's ideology can diffuse this potential danger. His message that truthful conduct is the only real religion stands as a powerful guiding light for all.

Conclusion:

The 19th century reformers undertook a two-fold task. A critique of the Indian society was made. Institutional like caste, Sati, widowhood, child-marriage etc. came in for a sharp attack. Superstitions and religious obscurantism were condemned. In India, during the 19th century, both Raja Ram Mohan Rai and Mahatma Jytirao Phule were well –known social reformer and thinker. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was a man of multidimensional personality and a greatest creative personality of the nineteenth century in India. He undertook a lot of social reform to charge the society and worked to uplift the status of women in India. Besides Jytirao Phule also pioneered the anti-caste movement and promoted education for women.⁶ The Satya Shodhak Samaj as a lower caste body had a great role in breaking down the barriers among the Marathas and the creation of the Maratha identity. Its contribution to the emerging domination of the Marathas in the political scene and their upward mobility in social status was no small one.

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