

CHALLENGING THE CASTE SYSTEM

ARGUMENTS FOR REFORMS OF CASTE

In the Rigvedic period the society was divided into four 'varnas', i.e., the Kshatriyas, the Brahmins, the Vaishyas and the Shudras to affect a division of labour. But with the passage of time these four 'varnas' developed into many castes and sub-castes. Not only this, the caste-system degenerated and many evils crept into it. It was with the aim of removing these defects that caste reforms were initiated. Some of the major evils which necessitated the reforms within the caste system were the following:

- **Cause of Hostility and Jealousy :** With the increase in the number of castes and the rigid attitude that the various castes adopted, the Hindu society was soon divided into so many hostile groups with sharp differences. Their differences and mutual jealousies did not allow the Indians to unite even against the foreign invaders. Thus the caste system proved anti-national and very disastrous to the Hindu society.
- **Main Cause of Untouchability :** The greatest fault of the caste system was that it gave rise to the curse of untouchability. The three upper classes (i.e., the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and the Vaishyas) began to regard themselves somewhat superior to the Sudras, who were nothing more than animals for them. Their very touch was enough to pollute them and their belongings. They began to be regarded as untouchables. The three upper classes refused the entry of the Sudras in the temples, and forbade them to draw water from their wells.

In short, almost all human rights were denied to them. Naturally, many Sudras embraced other religions. This practice of untouchability is very harmful and that is why it has been totally banned by the New Constitution of India.

- **A Check on Religious Advancement :** Because of class pride and rigid caste rules the people belonging to other religions found it difficult to embrace Hinduism. When the status of equality was denied to them they could not easily give up their own faith for the sake of a religion for which they had no attraction. In this way conversion to the Hindu religion was almost completely stopped and a great check was put in the way of its advancement.
- **Responsible for Narrow Outlook :** The caste system has been to a large extent responsible for the development of a narrow outlook among the Indians, because it does not allow the Indians to mix freely with the foreigners and to go to foreign lands. Thus, for a very long time the Indians remained in a state of stay-at-home and could not go to foreign lands either for trade or for education.
- **Against the Feeling of World Brotherhood :** The caste system, with all its exclusiveness and rigidity, is also against the feeling of world brotherhood. This institution has now outlived its utility and must be discarded. In this age of science and inventions the Indians cannot live in seclusion.

IDEAS OF PHULE, VEERESALINGAM, NARAYANA GURU, PERIYAR, GANDHI AND AMBEDKAR

- **Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890)**
Jyotiba Phule was the founder of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. It was founded in AD. 1848 in Maharashtra for the upliftment of the oppressed classes. He opened many schools for the education of the girls of the so-called lower classes. He condemned the caste structure and opened the gates of Satya Shodhak Samaj for every one without any distinction of caste and religion. He was against the supremacy of the Brahmins and started the practice of performing the marriage ceremonies without Brahmin priests. For his good work for the oppressed classes he was given the name of 'Mahatma'.
- **Veeresalingam (1848-1919)**
Kandukuri Veeresalingam was a born crusader against social evils. A man of firm determination he heralded a social revolution in Andhra. He was born on April 16, 1848. Even as a pupil in a primary school he opposed meaningless customs and religious beliefs. While working as a school teacher in his later life he waged a long battle for the rights of women. He encouraged inter-caste marriage and throughout his life he campaigned against the caste system. He waged a long battle against untouchability. Veeresalingam was a versatile writer who, through his plays and essays in the Telugu language, vigorously preached against the caste system. He was a great supporter of the oppressed and the downtrodden. As a tribute to his great contribution towards the society, the posts and telegraph department issued stamps in his honour, after his death on May 27, 1919.

- **Sri Narayana Guru (1854-1939)**
What Jyotiba Phule did in Western India, Shri Narayana Guru did in Kerala. He fought to the last for the emancipation of the oppressed sections of the society, especially for the Ezhavas, a caste in which he was born. This caste was considered untouchable by the so-called people of the upper castes. Shri Narayana Guru could not tolerate this injustice. He acquired a deep knowledge of the Sanskrit language and fought vehemently for the uplift of the Ezhavas and other oppressed people. He laid the foundation of many temples without the image of Gods and Goddesses. He founded the Shri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, for propagating social reform. He regarded all distinctions based on religion and caste as meaningless. He advocated the principle of "One God and One Religion".
- **Periyar Ramaswami (1879-1973)**
Periyar Ramaswami was a reformer of Tamil Nadu. He was born in the Indian state of Madras (now Tamil Nadu) in 1879 and lived a long life of about 95 years and died in 1973. He was pained to note that the Dalit, or low caste men had remained untouchable since many centuries. According to him the members of this caste were denied education, participation in social activity and contact with other castes, except when their services as scavengers or hide flayers were required. When he attempted to take a number of people to a temple in Kerala, he was arrested along with his followers.
He set up an organisation, Dravida Kazhgam by name, for the benefit of casteless Hindus. This organisation fought for the reservation of the low caste people in government jobs. As a result of this agitation the first amendment in the Indian Constitution was made to safeguard the rights of discriminated caste Indians. Since the lower castes could not pay heavy amount to the priests at the time of marriage of their wards very simple marriage ceremony without the priests. In this respect he was akin to Jyotiba Phule who did the same thing in Maharashtra. Some of the sayings of Periyar are still famous. At one place he says, "There cannot be any caste among mankind. To speak of caste differences among us, who are of the same country, is sheer mischief."
At another place he says, "The caste system that teaches notions of superiority, inferiority, high and low depending on level should be scotched at the very base".
- **Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)**
Mahatma Gandhi was as great in the political field as he was great in the social field. The services he rendered for the reform of the caste system and upliftment of the depressed classes will be remembered till posterity.
 - (i) He condemned untouchability in the worst possible terms. For him it was a satanic act like that of General Dyer's at Jallianwala bagh.
 - (ii) According to him, untouchability has no sanction whatever in the Hindu Shastras taken as a whole.
 - (iii) Again, according to him, temple entry is the most potent factor in eroding the evil of untouchability.
 - (iv) He believed in the doctrine of equality as was taught by Lord Krishna in the Gita. According to him, "The Gita teaches us that member of all four castes should be treated on equal basis."
 - (v) Mahatma Gandhi suggested the application of non-violent methods for the eradication of untouchability and for the right to temple entry. If one tried to achieve anything by force it only creates bad feelings.
 - (vi) Mahatma Gandhi undertook fast unto death when the British Government, through its policy of divide and rule and by the communal Award of 1932, tried to separate the Harijans from the Hindus.
 - (viii) He founded the Harijan Sewak Samaj in 1932 for the uplift of Harijans.
 - (ix) He began the publication of a weekly paper Harijan in 1933. It continued till the independence of the country. Through it Mahatma Gandhi took up the cause of Harijans. For Mahatma Gandhi, Harijan meant the 'Children of God'.
 - (x) He himself began to live with the Harijans in their colony, known as Harijan Colony. It still exists on the Mandir Marg in Delhi. While living with the Harijans he once remarked, "I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn pray that I should be born again as untouchable".
For all his great work done to remove the caste system or untouchability, the worst from of the caste system, the Mahatma won praise of every one.
- **Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1891-1956)**
Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, was also a good reformer. From the beginning to the end of his life he preached against the caste system and fought for the rights of the untouchables and downtrodden. The work he had done for the eradication of the caste system and the upliftment of the

untouchables made his name immortal in the annals of history. The work he did in this direction deserves special mention.

(i) In 1924 he laid the foundation of the Akhil Bharatiya Bahiskrit Parishad to improve the lot of the depressed classes and to promote education among them.

(ii) He rendered free legal help to the depressed class so that they could fight against any injustice done to them from any quarter whatsoever. Soon he emerged as the saviour of the depressed classes.

(iii) He advised the depressed class to give up their bad habits of drinking and gambling, etc., and inculcate among them good habits of reading, writing and social service.

(iv) Ambedker received higher education which he used for writing various books, articles, pamphlets, etc., against the caste system and the supremacy of the Brahmans. He condemned untouchability as an inhuman institution.

(v) Like Jyotiba Phule before him, Ambedker laid great emphasis on the importance of education. For him education was the greatest weapon to force the progress of the depressed classes. For this purpose he established the Depressed Classes Education Society and through it opened many schools and colleges to promote education among his own downtrodden people.

(vi) He vehemently fought for the social and political rights of the depressed classes. He encouraged them to draw water from the common wells and encouraged their entry in the Hindu temples. Not only this he forced the British government to remove all the restrictions on the entry of the depressed class to different government and semi government jobs. It was through his efforts that depressed class got many seats in the Legislative Assemblies and Legislative Councils.

From the above account it becomes quite clear that Dr Ambedker proved a true Messiah of the depressed classes.

CONSEQUENCES AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE REFORMERS

The Indian reformers played an important role in the 19th and the early 20th century to reform and regenerate the Indian society and religion. Without their efforts it would have been quite difficult to cure the diseased Indian religion and society or to raise the edifice of Indian nationalism on strong footing. Their contributions deserve a special mention.

- They Cured the Indian Religion and Society of Many of Their evils : The Indian society In the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries suffered from many social evils. The chief among them were, the caste system, deplorable condition of women, illiteracy, child marriage, the Sati system, polygamy, the dowry system, etc. As discussed above, various reform movements like the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, the Indian Social Conference, the Aligarh Movement, etc., were started to combat the above evils. No doubt, it was much because of their continuous efforts and hard labour that many of the above social evils were rooted out. Social evils like the child marriage, the Sati system, the practice of polygamy, miserable plight of women, the purdah system were vehemently attacked day by day.
- The Indian Reformers Encouraged the British Government to Pass Many Acts Against the Social and Religious Evils : Without the great work done by the Indian reformers in the field of social and religious reforms, the English Government would have been the last to pass any act. It was the pressure put by the Indian reformers that the British government had to pass various laws from time to time to abolish the different social and religious evils. In 1829 the Sati system was abolished, during the Governor-Generalship (1828-1835) of Lord William Bentinck. Also during his times laws were passed to suppress female infanticide and human sacrifice. By a law passed in 1856 the widows were allowed to remarry. A law passed in 1872 sanctioned inter-caste marriages while another passed in 1891 aimed at discouraging child marriages.
- The Indian Reformers Played a Vital Role in the Birth of Indian Nationalism and in Making a New India : These social and religious reform movements played a great role in the birth of Indian nationalism. They cured the society of many of its ills and thus prepared it to take up the cause of national struggle in right earnest. Moreover, as a result of their efforts, people began to acquire a secular and national outlook by giving up their narrow outlook. The reform movements united the people. By and by, the spirit of nationalism started prevailing among the people as they had abandoned the sectarian approach.

Exercise - I

UNSOLVED PROBLEMS

I. Match the Column :-

Column 'A'

Column 'B'

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|---------------------|---|
| 1. Mahatma Gandhi | (a) Satyashodhak Samaj |
| 2. B.R. Ambedkar | (b) Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalan Yogam. |
| 3. Jyotiba Phule | (c) Hitkarni |
| 4. Sri Narayan Guru | (d) All India Harijan Sangh |
| 5. Veerasalingam | (e) All India Depressed Classes Association |

II. Name the following :-

1. He was one of the leaders of Prarthana Samaj
2. She founded Sharda Sadan in Pune in 1890.....
3. He started the news paper Rast Guftar.....
4. The greatest disciple of Rama Krishna
5. He started Young Bengal Movement
6. He was called the father of Indian Constitution
7. He set up an organisation Dravida Kazhagam
8. He was called the father of the nation
9. Give a brief account of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the organisation he founded.
10. Who was Sri Narayan Guru ? What was his contribution.
11. Who was Jyotiba Phule ? What efforts did he make for the uplift of depressed classes.
12. What was the impact of social reform movements on India ?
13. Write short note on Periyar Ramaswami.
14. What were the contribution of Kandukari Veerasalingam to the social reform movements.