

Social and Cultural Awakening in the First Half of the 19th Century

THE IMPACT of modern Western culture soon gave birth to a new awakening in India. Western conquest exposed the weakness and decay of Indian society. Thoughtful Indians began to look for the defects of their society and for ways and means of removing them. While large number of Indians refused to come to terms with the West and still put their faith in traditional Indian ideas and institutions, others gradually came to hold that modern Western thought provided the key to the regeneration of their society. They were impressed in particular by modern science and the doctrines of reason and humanism. Moreover, the new social groups—the capitalist class, the working class, the modern intelligentsia—demanded modernisation since their own interests demanded it.

The central figure in this awakening was Rammohun Roy, who is rightly regarded as the first great leader of modern India. Rammohun Roy was moved by deep love for his people and country and worked hard all his life for their social, religious, intellectual, and political regeneration. He was pained by the stagnation and corruption of contemporary Indian society which was at that time dominated by caste and convention. Popular religion was full of superstitions and was exploited by ignorant and corrupt priests. The upper classes were selfish and often sacrificed social interest to their own narrow interests. Rammohun Roy possessed great love and respect for the traditional philosophic systems of the East; but, at the same time, he believed that Western culture alone would help regenerate Indian society. In particular, he wanted his countrymen to accept the rational and scientific approach and the principle of human dignity and social equality of all men and women. He also

wanted the introduction of modern capitalism and modernity in the country.

Rammohun Roy represented a synthesis of the thought of East and West. He was a learned scholar who knew over a dozen languages including Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, English, French, Latin, Greek and Hebrew. As a youngman he had studied Sanskrit literature and Hindu philosophy at Varanasi and (he Koran and Persian and Arabic literature at Fatna. He was also well-acquainted with Jainism and other religious movements and sects of India. Later he made an intensive study of Western thought and culture. To study the Bible in the original he learnt Greek and Hebrew. In 1809 he wrote in Persian his famous work *Gift to Monotheists* in which he put forward weighty arguments against belief in many gods and for the worship of a single God.

He settled in Calcutta in 1814 and soon attracted a band of youngmen with whose cooperation he started the Atmiya Sabha. From now on he carried on a persistent struggle against the religious and social evils which were widely prevalent among the Hindus in Bengal. In particular he vigorously opposed worship of idols, rigidity of caste, and prevalence of meaningless religious rituals. He condemned the priestly class for encouraging and inculcating these practices. He held that all the principal ancient texts of the Hindus preached monotheism or worship of one God. He published the Bengali translation of the Vedas and of five of the principal Upanishads to prove his point. He also wrote a series of tracts and pamphlets in defence of monotheism.

While citing ancient authority for his philosophical views, Rammohun Roy relied ultimately on the power of human reason which was in his view the final touchstone of the truth of any doctrine, Eastern or Western. He believed that the philosophy of Vedanta was based on this principle of reason. In any case, one should not hesitate to depart from holy books, scriptures, and inherited traditions if human reason so dictates and if such traditions are proving harmful to the society. But Rammohun Roy did not confine his application of the rational approach to Indian religions and traditions, alone. In this he disappointed his many missionary friends who had hoped that his rational critique of Hinduism would lead him to embrace Christianity. Rammohun Roy insisted on applying rationalism to Christianity too, particularly to the elements of blind faith in it. In 1820, he published his *Precepts of Jesus* in which he tried to separate the moral and philosophic message of the New Testament, which he praised, from its miracle stories. He wanted the high moral message of Christ to be incorporated in Hinduism. This earned for him the hostility of the missionaries,

Thus, as far as Rammohun was concerned there was to be no blind reliance on India's own past or blind copying of the West. On the other hand, he put forward the idea that new India, guided by reason, should acquire and treasure all that was best in the East and the West. Thus he wanted India to learn from the West; but this learning was to be an intellectual and creative process through which Indian culture and thought were to be renovated; it was not to be an imposition of Western culture on India. He, therefore, stood for the reform of Hinduism and opposed its supersession by Christianity. He vigorously defended Hindu religion

and philosophy from the ignorant attacks of the missionaries. At the same time, he adopted an extremely friendly attitude towards other religions. He believed that basically all religions preach a common message and that their followers are all brothers under the skin.

All his life Rammohun Roy paid heavily for his daring religious outlook. The orthodox condemned him for criticising idolatry and for his philosophic admiration of Christianity and Islam. They organised a social boycott against him in which even his mother joined. He was branded a heretic and an outcaste.

In 1829 he founded a new religious society, the Brahma Sabha, later known as the Brahmo Samaj, whose purpose was to purify Hinduism and to preach theism or the worship of one God. The new society was to be based on the twin pillars of reason and the Vedas and Upanishads. It was also to incorporate the teachings of other religions. The Brahmo Samaj laid emphasis on human dignity, opposed idolatry, and criticised such social evils as the practice of *Sati*.

Rammohun Roy was a great thinker. He was also a man of action. There was hardly any aspect of nation-building which he left untouched. In fact, just as he began the reform of Hindu religion from within, he also laid the foundations of the reform of Indian society. The best example of his life-long crusade against social evils was the historic agitation he organised against the inhuman custom of women becoming *Sati*. Beginning in 1818 he set out to rouse public opinion on the question. On the one hand he showed by citing the authority of the oldest sacred books that the Hindu religion at its best was opposed to the practice; on the other, he appealed to the reason and humanity and compassion of the people. He visited the burning ghats at Calcutta to try to persuade the relatives of widows to give up their plan of self-immolation. He organised groups of like-minded people to keep a strict check on such performances and to prevent any attempt to force the widows to become *Sati*. When the orthodox Hindus petitioned to Parliament to withhold its approval of Bentinck's action of banning the rite of *Sati*, he organised a counter-petition of enlightened Hindus in favour of Bentinck's action-

He was a stout champion of women's rights. He condemned the subjugation of women and opposed the prevailing idea that women were inferior to men in intellect or in a moral sense*. He attacked polygamy and the degraded state to which widows were often reduced. To raise the status of women he demanded that they be given the right of inheritance and property.

Rammohun Roy was one of the earliest propagators of modern education which he looked upon as a major instrument for the spread of modern ideas in the country. In 1817, David Hare, who had come out to India in 1800 as a watchmaker but who spent his entire life in the promotion of modern education in the country, founded the famous Hindu College. Rammohun Roy gave most enthusiastic assistance to Hare in this and his other educational projects. In addition, he maintained at his own cost an English school in Calcutta from 1817 in which, among other subjects, mechanics and the philosophy of Voltaire were taught. In 1825 he established a Vedanta College in which courses both in Indian learning and in Western social and physical sciences were offered.

124 Rammohun Roy was equally keen on making Bengali the vehicle of intellectual intercourse in Bengal. He compiled a Bengali grammar. Through his translations, pamphlets and journals he helped evolve a modern and elegant prose style for that language.

Rammohun represented the first glimmerings of the rise of national consciousness in India. The vision of an independent and resurgent India guided his thoughts and actions. He believed that by trying to weed out corrupt elements from Indian religions and society and by preaching the Vedantic message of worship of one God he was laying the foundations for the unity of Indian society which was divided into divergent groups. In particular he opposed the rigidities of the caste system which, he declared, "has been the source of want of unity among us." He believed that the caste system was doubly evil: it created inequality and it divided people and "deprived them of patriotic feeling." Thus, according to him, one of the aims of religious reform was political uplift.

Rammohun Roy was a pioneer of Indian journalism. He brought out journals in Bengali, Persian, Hindi and English to spread scientific, literary, and political knowledge among the people, to educate public opinion on topics of current interest, and to represent popular demands and grievances before the Government.

He was also the initiator of public agitation on political questions in the country. He condemned the oppressive practices of the Bengal zamindars which had reduced the peasants to a miserable condition. He demanded that the maximum rents paid by the actual cultivators of land should be permanently fixed so that they too would enjoy the benefits of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. He also protested against the attempts to impose taxes on tax-free lands. He demanded the abolition of the Company's trading rights and the removal of heavy export duties on Indian goods. He also raised the demands for the Indianisation of the superior services, separation of the executive and the judiciary; trial by jury, and judicial equality between Indians and Europeans.

Rammohun was a firm believer in internationalism and in free cooperation between nations. The poet Rabindranath Tagore has rightly remarked: "Rammohun was the only person in his time, in the whole world of man, to realise completely the significance of the Modern Age.

He knew that the ideal of human civilisation does not lie in the isolation of independence, but in the brotherhood of inter-dependence of individuals as well as nations in all spheres of thought and activity." Rammohun Roy took a keen interest in international events and everywhere he supported the cause of liberty, democracy, and nationalism and opposed injustice, oppression, and tyranny in every form. The news of the failure of the Revolution in Naples in 1821 made him so sad that he cancelled all his social engagements. On the other hand, he celebrated the success of the Revolution in Spanish America in 1823 by giving a public dinner. He condemned the miserable condition of Ireland under the oppressive regime of absentee landlordism. He publicly declared that he would emigrate from the British Empire if Parliament failed to pass the Reform Bill.

Rammohun was fearless as a lion. He did not hesitate to support a just cause.

All his life he fought against social injustice and inequality even at great personal loss and hardship. In his life of service to society he often clashed with his family, with rich zamindars and powerful missionaries, and with high officials and foreign authorities. Yet he never showed fear nor shrank from his chosen course.

Rammohun Roy was the brightest star in the Indian sky during the first half of the 19th century, but he was not a lone star. He had many distinguished associates, followers, and successors. In the field of education he was greatly helped by the Dutch watchmaker David Hare and the Scottish missionary Alexander Duff. Dwarkanath Tagore was the foremost of his Indian associates. His other prominent followers were Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Chandrashekhar Deb, and Tarachand Chakra- varti, the first secretary of the Brahma Sabha.

A radical trend arose among the Bengali intellectuals during the late 1820's and the 1830's. This trend was more modern than even Rammohun Roy's and is known as the Young Bengal Movement. Its leader and inspirer was the young Anglo-Indian Henry Vivian Derozio, who was born in 1809 and who taught at Hindu College from 1826 to 1831. Derozio possessed a dazzling intellect and followed his most radical views of the time drawing his inspiration from the great French Revolution. He was a brilliant teacher who, in spite of his youth, attached to himself a host of bright and adoring students. He inspired these students to think rationally and freely, to question all authority, to love liberty, equality and freedom, and to worship truth. Derozio and his famous followers, known as the Derozians and Young Bengal, were fiery patriots. Derozio was perhaps the first nationalist poet of modern India. For example, he wrote in 1827:

My country I in the days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,
and worshipped as a deity thou wast,
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou,
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee save the sad story of thy

misery I And one of his pupils, Kashi Prasad Ghosh, wrote:

Land of the Gods and lofty name;
Land of the fair and beauty's spell;
Land of the bards of mighty fame,
My native land! for e'er farewell! (1830)

But woe me! I never shall live to behold,
That day of thy triumph, when firmly and bold,
Thou shalt mount on the wings of an eagle on high.
To the region of knowledge and blest liberty, (1861).

Derozio was removed from the Hindu College in 1831 because of his radicalism and died of cholera soon after at the young age of 22. The Derozians attacked old and decadent customs, rites, and traditions. They were passionate advocates of women's rights and demanded education for them. They did not, however, succeed in creating a movement because social conditions were not yet ripe for their ideas to flourish. They did not take up the peasant's cause and there was no other class or group in Indian society at the time which could support their advanced ideas. Moreover, they forgot to maintain their links with the people. In

fact, their radicalism was bookish, they failed to come to grips with the Indian reality. Even so, the Derozians carried forward Rammohun's tradition of educating the people in social, economic, and political questions through newspapers, pamphlets, and public associations. They carried on public agitation on public questions such as the revision of the Company's Charter, the freedom of the Press, better treatment for Indian labour in British colonies abroad, trial by jury, protection of the ryots from oppressive zamindars, and employment of Indians in the higher grades of government services. Surendranath Banerjea, the famous leader of the nationalist movement, described the Derozians as "the pioneers of the modern civilization of Bengal, the conscript fathers of our race whose virtues will excite veneration and whose failings will be treated with gentlest consideration."

The Brahmo Samaj had in the meanwhile continued to exist but without much life till Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, revitalised it. Debendranath was a product of the best in the traditional Indian learning and the new thought of the West. In 1839 he founded the *Tatvabodhini Sabha* to propagate Rammohun Roy's ideas. In time it came to include most of the prominent followers of Rammohun and Derozio and other independent thinkers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Dutt. The *Tatvabodhini Sabha* and its organ the *Tatvabodhini Patrika* promoted a systematic study of India's past in the Bengali language. It also helped spread a rational outlook among the intellectuals of Bengal. In 1843 Debendranath Tagore reorganised the Brahmo Samaj and put new life into it. The Samaj actively supported the movement for widow remarriage, abolition of polygamy, women's education, improvement of the ryot's condition, and temperance.

The next towering personality to appear on the Indian scene was Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the great scholar and reformer. Vidyasagar dedicated his entire life to the cause of social reform. Born in 1820 in a very poor family, he struggled through hardship to educate himself and in the end rose in 1851 to the position of the principalship of the Sanskrit College. Though he was a great Sanskrit scholar, his mind was open to the best in Western thought, and he came to represent a happy blend of Indian and Western culture. His greatness lay above all in his sterling character and shining intellect. Possessed of immense courage and a fearless mind he practised what he believed. There was no lag between his beliefs and his action, between his thought and his practice. He was simple in dress and habits and direct in his manner. He was a great humanist who possessed immense sympathy for the poor, the unfortunate and the oppressed.

In Bengal, innumerable stories regarding his high character, moral qualities, and deep humanism are related till this day. He resigned from government service for he would not tolerate undue official interference. His generosity to the poor was fabulous. He seldom possessed a warm coat for he invariably gave it to the first naked beggar he met on the street.

Vidyasagar's contribution to the making of modern India is many-sided. He evolved a new technique of teaching Sanskrit. He wrote a Bengali primer which is

used till this day. By his writings he helped in the evolution of a modern prose style in Bengali. He opened the gates of the Sanskrit college to non-Brahmin students for he was opposed to the monopoly of Sanskrit studies that the priestly caste was enjoying at the time. To free Sanskrit studies from the harmful effects of self-imposed isolation, he introduced the study, of Western thought in the Sanskrit College. He also helped found a college which is now named after him.

Above all Vidyasagar is remembered gratefully by his countrymen for his contribution to the uplift of India's down-trodden womanhood. Here he proved a worthy successor to Rammohan Roy. He waged a long struggle in favour of widow remarriage. His humanism was aroused to the full by the sufferings of the Hindu widows. To improve their lot he gave his all and virtually ruined himself. He raised his powerful voice, backed by the weight of immense traditional learning, in favour of widow remarriage in 1855. Soon a powerful movement in favour of widow remarriages was started which continues till this day. Later in the year 1855, a large number of petitions from Bengal, Madras, Bombay, Nagpur and other cities of India were presented to the Government asking it to pass an act legalising the remarriage of widows. This agitation was successful and such a law was enacted. The first lawful Hindu widow remarriage among the upper castes in our country was celebrated in Calcutta on 7 December 1856 under the inspiration and supervision of Vidyasagar. Widows of many other castes in different parts of the country already enjoyed this right under customary law. An observer has described the ceremony in the following words:

I shall never forget the day. When Pandit Vidyasagar came with his friend, the bridegroom, at the head of a large procession, the crowd of spectators was so great that there was not an inch of moving space, and many fell into the big drains which were to be seen by the sides of Calcutta streets in those days. After the ceremony, It became the subject of discussion everywhere; in the Bazars and the shops, in the streets, in the public squares, in students' lodging-houses, in gentlemen's drawing-rooms, in offices and in distant village homes, where even women earnestly discussed it among themselves. The weavers of Santipore issued a peculiar kind of woman's sari which contained woven along its borders the first line of a newly composed song which went on to say "May Vidyasagar live long."

For his advocacy of widow remarriage, Vidyasagar had to face the bitter enmity of the orthodox Hindus. At times even his life was threatened. But he fearlessly pursued his chosen course. Through his efforts, which included the grant of monetary help to needy couples, twenty five widow remarriages were performed between 1855 and 1860.

In 1850, Vidyasagar protested against child-marriage. All his life he campaigned against polygamy. He was also deeply interested in the education of women. As a Government Inspector of Schools, he organised thirty five girls' schools, many of which he ran at his own expense. As Secretary to the Bethune School, he was one of the pioneers of higher education for women.

The Bethune School, founded in Calcutta in 1849, was the first fruit of the powerful movement for women's education that arose in the 1840's and 1850's. While the education of women was not unknown in India, a great deal of prejudice against it existed. Some even believed that educated women would lose their husbands! The first steps in giving a modern education to girls were taken by the

missionaries in 1821, but these efforts were marred by the emphasis on Christian religious education. The Bethune School had great difficulty in securing students. The young students were shouted at and abused and sometimes even their parents were subjected to social boycott. Many believed that girls who had received western education would make slaves of their husbands.

The impact of Western ideas was felt much earlier in Bengal than in 'Western India which was brought under effective British control as late as 1818. In 1849 the Paramahansa Mandali was founded in Maharashtra. Its founders believed in one God and were primarily interested in breaking caste rules. At its meetings, members took food cooked by low caste people. In 1848, several educated youngmen formed the Students' Literary and Scientific Society, which had two branches, the Gujarati and the Marathi *Dnyan Prasarak Mandlis*. The Society organised lectures on popular science and social questions. One of the aims of the Society was to start schools for the education of women. In 1851, Jotiba Phule and his wife started a girls' school at Poona and soon many other schools came up. Among active promoters of these schools were Jagan- nath Shankar Seth and Bhau Daji. Phule was also a pioneer of the widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra. VJshnu Shastri Pundit founded the Widow Remarriage Association in the 1850's. Another prominent worker in this field was Karsondas Mulji who started the *Satya Prakash* in Gujarati in 1852 to advocate widow remarriage.

An outstanding champion of new learning and social reform in Maharashtra was Gopal Hari Deshmukh, who became famous by the pen' name of 'Lokahilawadi'. He advocated the reorganization of Indian society on rational principles and modern humanistic and secular values. Jotiba Phule, born in a low caste Mali family, was also acutely aware of the socially degraded position of non-Brahmins and untouchables in Maharashtra. All his life he carried on a campaign against upper caste domination and Brahmanical supremacy.

Dadabhai Naoroji was another leading social reformer of Bombay. He was one of the founders of an association to reform the Zoroastrian religion and the Parsi Law Association which agitated for the grant of a legal status to women and for uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for the Parsis.

EXERCISES

1. Bring out the contribution of Raja Rammohun Roy to the social and cultural awakening in the 19th century.
2. In what ways did Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar contribute to the making of modern India?
3. Write short notes on:
 - (a) Henry Vivian Derozio (b) Young Bengal, (c) Debendranath Tagore; (d) The Bethune School, (e) Religious reform in

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