

The Beginning of Modern Age in Europe – Reformation

The Reformation

The Reformation was a religious movement which took place in Europe in the sixteenth century. It began as an attempt to reform the Roman Catholic Church, and finally resulted in the establishment of the Protestant churches. The Reformation created a split in the Christian Church. People who remained loyal to the Church came to be known as **Catholics**, and those who opposed the Catholic Church established separate churches for themselves. These people came to be known as **Protestants**.

The Reformation took place in several countries such as England, France, Germany, Switzerland and Czechoslovakia.

The Reformation is called so because it was aimed at reforming the Catholic Church.

Causes of the Reformation

The Catholic Church had become very powerful in the mediaeval ages. The Pope was the supreme head of the Church and exercised his powers autocratically. Some corrupt practices of the Church:

- In the Middle Ages, the Church had vast property. Besides, land resources, people also had to pay religious taxes called '**tithe**' to the Church. In addition, the Church collected another sum called 'Peter's Pence' from the people.
- As the Pope needed money to build St Peter's Church, he issued certificates called 'Indulgences'. Anyone who committed sin had to buy these indulgences to become free from the sins committed by them.
- The positions in the Church were given to the highest bidder. These practices annoyed not only the common people but also the rulers of the state.
- As the Church had become a wealthy institution, the church officials began to live a luxurious life and started neglecting their duties. Further, the priests promised salvation to the people in exchange for fees. These practices were severely criticised by the people. Erasmus wrote a book 'In Praise of Folly' and prepared the ground for the Reformation.
- As the Popes became powerful, they began to interfere in the political affairs of the state. The kings wanted to tax the Church which owned vast wealth. This was resisted by the Papacy. King Henry VIII of England obtained the lands of the Church and passed an act for the dissolution of monasteries.
- Martin Luther was a German priest who opposed the sale of indulgences by the Church. In 1517, Luther wrote ninety-five theses criticising the practices of the Church and nailed them on the doors of the Church at Wittenberg in Germany. Martin Luther was presented before a Grand Diet held at Worms known as the Diet of Worms. The diet ordered Luther to be outlawed. However, the latter had the support of the German rulers, and so, no action was taken against him. This movement came to be known as the German Protestant Movement. This led to the beginning of the Reformation Movement in Europe. This event is considered the immediate cause of the Reformation Movement.

Impact of the Reformation

The Reformation deeply impacted the European society in the following ways:

1. Rise of Powerful States

- The Reformation led to the rise of powerful nation states. Nation states refer to the countries with well-defined natural boundaries with people following common culture, history and ethnic principles.
- It gave rise to the feeling of nationalism mainly in Germany and England. The kings of the European states declared themselves not only as the head of the state but also as the head of the government.

- In England, King Henry limited the powers of the Church and passed orders in the Parliament to nullify the authority of the Pope over the Church. This made him the supreme head of the Church of England.
- England, France, Spain, Portugal and Holland were some first nation states which had become powerful. The Reformation thus reduced the power of the Church and made rulers the supreme powers in their countries.

2. Schism within the Church

- The Reformation led to strong disagreements and divisions among the members of the Church. The uniformity in doctrines, dogmas and rituals also came to an end. The Church itself was divided into Catholic and Protestant.
- In Germany, the Protestant movement became successful. The German rulers supported the movement to weaken the authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church.
- The Reformation in England started more of a scuffle between the Catholic Church and the rulers. King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church, and he made himself the supreme head of the Church of England.
- In Switzerland, Ulrich Zwingli spread Lutheranism. He condemned idol worship, rituals and unnecessary ceremonies.
- John Calvin was a French scholar who popularised the Protestant movement in Switzerland after the death of Zwingli. He declared the Bible as the sole authority for attaining salvation. Calvinism emerged as a reform movement.
- In the Scandinavian countries of Denmark, Norway and Sweden, the Protestant Lutheran Church became the official Church.

3. Counter Reformation

- During the Reformation, the Church was split into the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. A large number of Catholic Christians introduced many reforms within the Catholic Church. This came to be known as the Counter Reformation.
- As a result of the Counter Reformation, many religious orders were founded. Some of these were the Society of Jesus founded by St Ignatius of Loyola.
- St Francis Xavier, a follower of St Ignatius of Loyola, travelled to China and Japan for the propagation of Christianity.

4. Mercantilism

- Mercantilism is an economic theory which aims at maintaining favourable balance of trade by discouraging imports and encouraging exports. The rulers of the states aimed to ensure the prosperity and security of the state.
- This term was first used by Adam Smith in his treatise 'The Wealth of Nations' in which the European states imposed restrictions over both internal and external trade. Some features of mercantilism were
 - According to the theory of mercantilism, the strength and the richness of the country depend on two things—the possession of gold and silver mines and the favourable balance of trade (when export exceeds imports).
 - Wealth is considered the ultimate source of power.
 - Mercantilists were in favour of charging interests on the money for registering profits. However, they advocated the charging of low interest rates.
 - Mercantilists consider land and labour as the only factors of production. They advocated self-sufficiency in food grains.
 - They emphasised on having a large population for increasing production and for participating in the wars. They further supported equal rights for immigrants.
 - The mercantilists advocated maintaining favourable balance of trade by restricting import of foreign goods.