

Hindu Reformers  
by

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## Hindu Reformers and the Hindu Renaissance

Virtually everyone of the Hindu reformers that contributed significantly to the social development of India in the 19th and 20th centuries were men who had been educated in the English language and with western concepts. Although social reform had a widespread influence the focus of its activity was in the states of Bengal and what is now Maharashtra.

### Rammohun Roy [1772-1833]

Rammohun Roy of Bengal [1772-1833] may be described as the 'father' of social reform in India. M.M.Thomas points out that there were three foundational concepts in his worldview

first, a montheistic faith in the unity of God;...secondly, the conviction that morality is the essence of true religion; that moral degradation is the accompaniment of polytheism and idolatrous worship; and, thirdly, a certain rationalism which, while conscious of its limits, still demands that religion should hold only to beliefs which are reasonable (Thomas 1969: 2).

Rammohan Roy spent a great deal of time in friendship with the Serampore missionaries. A major source of his theistic convictions arose not of Christianity but out of his training in a college of Islamic Instruction. He found considerable identity with the Islamic school of Sufism. He became quite a student of the Bible and interacted vigorously with Marshman on theological issues. He wrote a book entitled, 'The Precepts of Jesus, the Guide to Peace and Happiness'. This work, as was typical of the Hindu Reformers, accepted the ethics and virtues of Christ as being universal ideals but he rejected Christ as the incarnate Son of God. He wrote in 1815

The consequence of my long and uninterrupted researches into religious truth has been that I have found the doctrine

of Christ more conducive to moral principles and better adapted for the use of rational beings than any others which have come to my knowledge (Letter to John Digby 1815).

Rammohan Roy became a strong activist in social reform. He supported the missionaries in their efforts to suppress suttee and to introduce English education.

He established a society which later became known as the Brahmo Samaj. This movement is in some respects a copy of the Protestant Church with very heavy emphasis on 'theism'. The activities of this society were primarily discussion, prayer and worship which included the reciting of the Upanishads, a sermon, and hymns.

#### The Theology of Rammohan Roy

Roy's theology was based primarily on Vedantic thinking as found in the Upanishads. He was highly influenced by deistic thinking from 18th century Europe. Roy rejected the Hindu doctrines of reincarnation and karma. In one sense of the word he was no longer a Hindu as these two doctrines are foundational to the entire superstructure of Hinduism.

#### History of the Brahmo Samaj Movement

Farquhar considers the Brahmo Samaj movement to have gone through four successive stages with the changes of leadership that took place.

First period of the Samaj, 1828- 1842, Deistic theology and Christian ethics.

Second period, 1842-1865: Debendra Nath Tagore: Theism and Religious reform.

Third period, 1865-1878, Two Samajes: Theism and Social Reform...Keshub read a great deal of Christian literature and came more and more under Christian influence.

Fourth period, 1878-1884: Three Samajes; Keshub's New Dispensation (Farquhar 1914:34-54).

After Roy's death in 1833 this society continued to function under the leadership of such men as Debendranath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen,

and P.C. Mozoomdar. The focus of its activities has been on social reform, education, and the publication of journals.

Nehru's assessment of the Brahma Samaj is that it had considerable influence on the newly emerging middle class society of Bengal and had within its ranks some notable persons but as the years have slipped by the movement has lost much of its direction and vitality.

#### Keshub Chandra Sen [1838-1884]

Of all the Hindu reformers Keshub Chandra Sen expressed a deep love and intimacy with Jesus Christ. Sen founded a church movement called the 'New Dispensation.' As a reformer he opposed any form of idolatry, he denied the significance of caste, he urged the emancipation of women, and sought to eliminate excesses connected with religious practices.

Sen was not a strong rationalist like Rammohan Roy. Rather he was a mystic, and preferred an emphasis on bhakti. Some have described the services of the New Dispensation as being more akin to an evangelical evangelistic meeting than to anything Hindu. A message he gave at one such session is representative of his approach,

Brethren! As worshippers of the god of love, it is your duty to love all men as your brethren, and to make charity the ruling principle of your heart. Fling away arrogance and pride, and be humble and meek. Prayerfully rely upon the Lord of Salvation, for without His aid your strength will be but weakness and the light of your knowledge as darkness.... Reform yourselves, your families and your neighbors; train up your children in the knowledge of God and educate your wives and your sisters. Manfully direct your energies against caste, and pull down the strongholds of idolatry (Heimsath 1964: 90).

Although the New Dispensation was instrumental in leading several Indians into an experience of salvation in Christ it was not a great organizational success. One of the major reform contributions of Sen was

in his agitation to bring about marriage reform. They continued the struggle to put down child marriages. This samaj redesigned the Hindu marriage ritual after Christian principles. Also there was a genuine spirit of concern for meeting the needs of those afflicted by famine and epidemics.

Several ideas converge in the Church of the New Dispensation. Chandra Sen begins to think of himself as the newly commissioned leader of the ultimate religion. The symbol of the church was a designed which combined the Hindu trident, The Christian cross and the Muslim crescent. The central tenet of the New Dispensation was as follows,

Our position is not that truths are to be found in all religions; but that all established religions of the world are true...The glorious mission of the New Dispensation is to harmonize religions and revelations, to establish the truth of every particular dispensation, and upon the basis of these particulars to establish the largest and broadest induction of general and glorious proposition (Farquhar 1914: 57-58).

The synthesis he tried to bring about utilized an admixture of Hindu and Christian concepts. On the one hand he addressed God as Mother, re-established the fire sacrifice, compromised on idolatry and polytheism and prayers were addressed to nature deities. On the other hand he introduced the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's table. He emphasized the moral attributes of Jesus Christ of great value to man. He stressed the sense of man's sinfulness and the need for utter self surrender. The New dispensation church sought to address those problem abd excesses in society which gave rise to social abuses and injustice.

Tragically he moved increasingly into the mystical, intuitive realm and as a result the later years of his life were somewhat inconsistent

with his previously stated conviction.

Dayananda Saraswathi [1824-1883]

Dayananda is one reformer in India who proves to be the exception to the rule stated in the opening paragraph. He was a Gujarati, who had no formal training in English. Yet he displayed a remarkable ability to take Western ideas and principles and incorporate them into his organization. In fact, it has been said that everything the missionaries from the west attempt to do in India the Arya Samaj does also.

Dayananda was born into the home of a wealthy Brahman family in the western Indian state of Gujarat. His first misgivings about traditional Hinduism probably came about through a combination of circumstances one of which was the service of Sivaratri. During the all night vigil at the temple of Siva, Dayananda observed the rats and mice scurrying about over the sacred idol of Siva. This raised some serious questions in his fertile fourteen year old mind. His father attempted to explain how the idol was indeed the Supreme Being the great Mahadeva but this did not satisfy Dayananada. Another factor, which set him on a course away from Hinduism as it was, was the influence of a Jain sect in his area of Gujarat that rejected all forms of idolatry. There is no doubt that the third factor which decidely influenced him in his formative years was limited contact with Christian missionaries.

Dayananda's personality has been deeply engraved in the entire structure and policies of the Arya Samaj Movement. Jones describes him as, "intelligent, aggressive, and restless, a man who throughout his life remained unsatisfied with the answers he found, continuing to

search for truth as he saw it" (Jones 1966:52). He gave to his movement a strong militant stance which is rather unique to Hinduism in that it tends to be a passive religion; it also created a much needed therapeutic climate for a nation which had been dominated by colonial rule for over eight hundred years.

At the age of 21 he fled from home to escape the demands of his parents for his marriage. He joined himself to swami who was encamped on the banks of the Nerbudda river. Swami Virajanand Saraswati was a blind Punjabi Brahman with a volatile temperament. In fact, he hit Dayananda with such force across the hand that he scarred him for life.

The teaching of this Swami was strongly focused on the Vedas and with it he rejected all modern learning as froth. This gave to Dayananda a weapon which became a powerful sword in his movement. To counteract the claims of both the Christians and the Muslims that the Bible and the Koran were considered infallibly inspired by the respective religion, Seunarine describes the universalistic effect his teaching gave to the Arya Samaj movement. "Dayananda therefore set up Vedic infallibility and authority to match and counteract the infallibility of the Christian's Bible and the Muslim's Quran. It was upon the infallibility of the Vedas that Dayananda ventured to purify Hinduism and to give to that religious tradition a universalist stance" (1977: 25).

Dayananda's militancy was not only directed at non-Hindu religions in India but against degraded practises in popular Hinduism. He wrote, "I do not defend the falsehood of the faiths and religions of this country, but expose them fully in like manner, I deal with the religions

of other countries" (Prasad viii).

### Ten Principles of the Arya Samaj

1. God is the primary source of all true knowledge and all that is known by its means.
2. God is existent, conscious, blissful, formless, almighty, just, merciful, un-begotten, infinite, unchangeable, beginningless, incomparable, the support of all, the lord of all, all pervading, omniscient, unaging, immortal, fearless, eternal, holy and creator of the universe. To him alone is worship due.
3. Vedas are the Scriptures of all true knowledge. It is the paramount duty of all Aryas to read them, teach them, recite them and hear them being read.
4. All persons should always be ready to accept truth and renounce untruth.
5. All acts ought to be performed in conformity to Dharma - after due consideration of right and wrong.
6. The prime objects of Arya Samaj is to do good to the world - to ameliorate physical, spiritual, and social condition of man.
7. All ought to be treated with love, justice, righteousness and due regard to their merits.
8. Ignorance ought to be dispelled and knowledge disseminated.
9. No person should remain contented with his own well-being but he should regard his well-being in the well-being of others.
10. In all matters affecting the well-being of the society the individual should subordinate his personal likenings; in matters affecting him alone he is to enjoy the freedom of action (Farquhar 1914: 120).

### Impact of the Arya Samaj on Indian Society

The Araya Samaj Movement has had some postive reform influence on India. Idolatry has been modified especially in the Northwest part of India where the movement is strongest. Rescue homes, homes for children and for women have been established. For a time educational institutions were established by the Arya Samaj but soon proved unprofitable in terms of the teachings of the movement. A few schools of higher learning still remain.



Although the Arya Samaj movement is not Brahmanical yet it has produced a process of Sanskritization upon the lower castes. The practice of a simple fire ceremony around which worship is conducted in 'congregational' style is unique for Hinduism.

The Arya Samaj party rejects caste, yet insists on the teachings of karma and transmigrations of the soul. These latter two dogmas will rapidly recreate suppression of lower castes even though the movement may temporarily lift a caste out of subservience.

On the negative side of the ledger the Arya Samaj movement has heightened communal tensions in India, especially between the Hindus and the Muslims. It has aided in the passing of anti-conversion legislation against the advance of Christianity. The movement has brought pressure to bear upon nominal Christians and significant numbers have been reconverted to Hinduism through the ceremony of suddhi.

The teachings of Dayananda have also had some negative repercussions. His insistence on the sacredness of cows and the need for cow protection has now become a political weapon in India. The result is the growing cow population continues to bring India to the brink of national disaster as food grains are consumed that ought to go to feed the poor. Another weakness of Dayananda was the exegetical style he used to interpret the Vedas. He insisted that all the modern day technological advances were described in the Vedas. This delusional idea gives many illiterate Hindus an aire of unreasonable pride and arrogance.

#### Ramakrishna Mission

The Ramakrishna Mission is in many respects similiar to the Arya

Samaj. Both are attempts to defend the old Hindu religion in the light of progressive modernization. Both systems are patterned after the western missionary agencies in India. Both take a very defensive posture toward Christianity. However the Ramakrishna movement has as its theological-philosophical base the principles of Vedantic Advaitism while the Arya Samaj had as its foundation the Vedic literature.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa [1833-1886]

As with many other of the reformers in India the name Ramakrishna was given to him by his guru when he took his vow of dedication. The term Paramahansa was a title given to him by his devotees at a later stage in his life.

He was a worshipper of Kali, the goddess. He addressed her as mother and had many mystical experiences when he was in a trance like stupor [samadhi] before her image. He like many other Hindus came to the conviction that all religions are true after receiving visions of Jesus and Mohammed. M.M. Thomas has described the essential belief system of Ramakrishna as being, "an individual man's experience of God in the inwardness of his spirit; and it was based on renunciation of the world" (1969: 115).

Ramakrishna reacted vigorously to the Christian doctrine of sin and the idea that man needed salvation from sin. He considered the desires of the senses to be the roots of sin. He was not enamoured with the Brahma Samaj's view of God and preferred to think of God as a formless Absolute.

Although Ramakrishna was not a theologian he had a profound influence on all who came to hear him. His disciples actually worshipped him

as God. Men like Keshub Chandra Sen of the Brahmo Samaj altered their views radically after being with this man.

### Vivekananda

Vivekananda was the disciple of Ramakrishna who popularized his ideas. He formulated Ramakrishna's sundry concepts into a philosophic system and then developed an organization and system to spread these teachings.

As a young man he had been exposed extensively to both western ideas and Christian teaching. For a time he was attracted to the Brahmo Samaj movement but as soon as he met Ramakrishna the future course of his life was set.

He took the teaching of Ramakrishna regarding Dualism, Qualified non-dualism, and Absolute non-Dualism as stages of development and incorporated them into his philosophic system "Dvaita, Visishtadvaita, and Advaita are three phases of a single development, of which the last-named constitutes the goal" (Thomas 1969: 117).

He vigorously claimed that Vedanta is the only universal religion and repudiated the claim that Christians made to Christianity being the universal faith. He said that Vedanta was established on the rock of the 'eternal impersonal principle' whereas Christianity was established on the shifting sands of an historical personality.

He took Ramakrishna's concept of Ishtam and elaborated it to mean, "Your way is very good for you, but not for me. My way is good for me, but not for you....We have no quarrel with any religion in the world. We have each our Ishtam" (Thomas 1969: 118) He actually quotes a saying of

Jesus to substantiate his argument, "Let the churches preach doctrines, theories, philosophies to their hearts content, but when it comes to worship...it should be as Jesus says, 'When thou prayest, enter into thy closet and when thou hast shut thy door, pray to the Father which is in secret'" (Thomas 1969: 119).

Farquhar has summarized his message into four distinct concepts.

All religions are true and good; and therefore, every man ought to remain in his own religion.

God is impersonable, unknowable, non-moral. He is manifested in the whole world, in all men, in all gods, and in all incarnations. The human soul is truly divine. All men are saints. It is a calumny and a sin to say that any human being can be guilty of sin. Idolatry is a very healthy and spiritual form of worship. Every particle of Hinduism is of value and must be retained. The reformers are mistaken. In trying to uproot the weeds, they are tearing up the precious wheat also.

Hindu civilization, since it springs from the oldest and noblest of religions, is good, beautiful and spiritual in every part... All the criticism of European scholars is erroneous, and everything that missionaries say on the subject is wickedly slanderous. The Hindu nation is a spiritual nation

European nations and western civilization are gross, material, selfish and sensual; therefore their influence is most seriously degrading to the Hindu. It is of the utmost importance that every Hindu should do all in his power to defend his religion and civilization, and save Hindu society from the poison of Western influence. The Hindu must even give up his vegetarianism, and become a meat eater, in order to become strong, and build up a powerful civilization once more on the soil of India (Farquhar 1914:203-204).

At the same time that Vivekananda struck out against Christianity he also caustically castigated his own people for their plight which he considered was due to too much religion. He writes

...Full of ugly, diabolical superstitions which come naturally to those who are weak and hopeless of the future; without any standard of morality as their backbone.... There

is danger of our religion getting into the kitchen. We are neither Vedantists ... nor Puranics, nor Tantrics. We are just 'don't touchists'. Our religion is in the kitchen. Our God is in the cooking pot and our religion is 'Don't touch me, I am holy.' If this goes on for another century, every one of us will be in a lunatic asylum (Heimsath 1964: 27).

C.F.Andrews has captured very succinctly the unique contribution of Vivekananda when he says, " Vivekananda's religion is an attempt to synthesize Advaita Vedanta with Christian philanthropy" (Andrews 1912: 129).

The weakness of the advaita Vedanta system as popularized through Vivekananda is that it designates ignorance rather than sin as the root of man's trouble. Heimsath has phrased it well when he said, " [Vedanta] has failed to provide a meaningful moral guide for the majority of men, whose experience was with human will and emotion and not with intellect... there is little doubt that religious beliefs upholding the dualistic view of the world provide a stronger support for ethics based on a sense of ultimate good and evil, righteousness and sin" (1964: 31).

Vivekanada died suddenly at the age of 39. Before his death he had established and organized the Ramakrishna Mission which set out to provide social relief in many remote parts of India. Schools, colleges, hospitals and orphanages have been opened by this mission. The work of this mission is especially active in the tribal areas of India. The government currently uses this mission as a means of holding down conversions to Christianity in Arunachal Pradesh, and other parts of N.E. India.

Vivekananda interpreted Indian thought to the people of the west. He made a profound impact at the Parliament of Religions. He was not