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## UNIT 8 SOCIAL REFORMS IN 19TH CENTURY INDIA

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### 8.0 OBJECTIVES

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India in the 19th century witnessed a series of reform movements undertaken in various parts of the country. These movements were oriented toward a re-structuring of the Indian society along modern lines. This unit presents a general and analytical view of these socio-religious reform movements. It also seeks to highlight the significance of these movements. Although it does not give a factual account of the ideas and activities of these movements and their leaders, it offers an analysis which would help you to understand these movements.

After reading this unit, you will:

- Know why and how these reforms were initiated in India
- Understand who were the leading reformers and their ideas about the nature of the Indian society
- Grasp the scope and methods of these reforms and highlight their shortcomings

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### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

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The conquest of India by the British during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exposed some serious weaknesses and drawbacks of Indian social institutions. As a consequence several individuals and movements sought to bring about changes in the social and religious practices with a view to reforming and revitalizing the society. These efforts, collectively known as the Renaissance, were complex social phenomena. It is important to note that this phenomenon occurred when India was under the colonial domination of the British.

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### 8.2 WHY REFORM

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An important question for discussion is about the forces which generated this awakening, in India. Was this a result of the impact of the West? Or was it only a response to the colonial intervention? Although both these questions are inter-related, it would be profitable to separate them for a clear understanding. Another dimension of this is related to the changes taking place in Indian society leading to the emergence of new classes. For this perspective, the socio-religious movements can be viewed as the expression of the social aspirations of the newly emerging middle class in colonial India.

The early historical writings on reform movements have traced their origin primarily to the impact of the West. One of the earliest books to be written on the subject by J.N. Farquhar (*Modern Religious Movements in India*, New York, 1924), held that:

The stimulating forces are almost exclusively Western, namely, English education and literature, Christianity, Oriental research, European science and philosophy and the material elements of Western civilization

Several historians have repeated and further elaborated this view. Charles Heimsath, for instance, attributed not only ideas but also the methods of organization of socio-religious movements to Western inspiration.

The importance of Western impact on the regenerative process in the society in nineteenth century is undeniable. However, if we regard this entire process of reform as a manifestation of colonial benevolence and limit ourselves to viewing only its positive dimensions, we shall fail to do justice to the complex character of the phenomenon. Sushobhan Sarkar (*Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays*, New Delhi, 1970) has drawn our attention to the fact that "foreign conquest and domination was bound to be a hindrance rather than a help to a subject people's regeneration". How colonial rule acted as a factor limiting the scope and dimension of nineteenth century regeneration needs consideration and forms an important part of any attempt to grasp its true essence.

The reform movements should be seen as a response to the challenge posed by the colonial intrusion. They were indeed important just as attempts to reform society but even more so as manifestations of the urge to contend with the new situation engendered by colonialism. In other words the socio-religious reform was not an end in itself, but was integral to the emerging anti-colonial consciousness.

Thus, what brought about the urge for reform was the need to rejuvenate the society and its institutions in the wake of the colonial conquest. This aspect of the reform movement, however, introduced an element of revivalism, a tendency to harp back on the Indian past and to defend Indian culture and civilization. Although this tended to impart a conservative and retrogressive character to these movements, they played an important role in creating cultural consciousness and confidence among the people.

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### 8.3 REFORM MOVEMENTS

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The earliest expression of reform was in Bengal, initiated by Rammohun Roy. He founded the Atmiya Sabha in 1814, which was the forerunner of Brahma Samaj organized by him in 1829. The spirit of reform soon manifested itself in other parts of the country. The Paramahansa Mandali and Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra and Arya Samaj in Punjab and other parts of north India were some of the prominent movements among the Hindus. There were several other regional and caste movements like Kayastha Sabha in U.P. and Sarin Sabha in Punjab. Among the backward castes too reformation struck roots: The Satya Sodhak Samaj in Maharashtra and Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sabha in Kerala. The Ahmadiya and Aligarh movements, the Sing Sabha and the Rehnumai Mazdeyasana Sabha represented the spirit of reform among the Muslims, the Sikhs and the Parsees respectively.

The following features are evident from the above account:

- i) Each of these reform movements was confined, by and large to one region or the other. Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj did have branches in different parts of the country yet they were more popular in Bengal and Punjab respectively, than anywhere else.
- ii) These movements were confined to a particular religion or caste.
- iii) An additional feature of these movements was that they all emerged at different points of time in different parts of the country. For example in Bengal reform efforts were afoot at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but in Kerala they came up only towards the end of the nineteenth century. Despite this, there was considerable similarity in their aims and perspectives. All of them were concerned with the regeneration of society through social and educational reforms even if there were differences in their methods.

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## 8.4 SCOPE OF REFORMS

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The reform movements of the nineteenth century were not purely religious movements. They were socio-religious movements. The reformers like Rammohun Roy in Bengal, Gopal Hari Deshmukh (Lokhitavadi) in Maharashtra and Viresalingam in Andhra advocated religious reform for the sake of "Political advantage and social comfort". The reform perspectives of the movements and their leaders were characterised by a recognition of interconnection between religious and social issues. They attempted to make use of religious ideas to bring about changes in social institutions and practices. For example, Keshub Chandra Sen, an important Brahman leader, interpreted the "unity of godhead and brotherhood of mankind" to eradicate caste distinctions in society.

The major social problems which came within the purview of the reform movements were:

- Emancipation of women in which sati, infanticide, child and widow marriage were taken up
- Casteism and untouchability
- Education for bringing about enlightenment in society

In the religious sphere the main issues were:

- Idolatry
- Polytheism
- Religious superstitions
- Exploitation by priests

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## 8.5 METHODS OF REFORM

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In the attempts to reform the socio-religious practices several methods were adopted. Four major trends out of these are as follows:

### 8.5.1 Reform from Within

The technique of reform from within was initiated by Rammohun Roy and followed throughout the nineteenth century. The advocates of this method believed that any reform in order to be effective had to emerge from within the society itself. As a result, the main thrust of their efforts was to create a sense of awareness among the people. They tried to do this by publishing tracts and organizing debates and discussions on various social problems. Rammohun's campaign against sati, Vidyasagar's pamphlets on widow marriage and B.M. Malabari's efforts to increase the age of consent are the examples of this.

### 8.5.2 Reforms through Legislation

The second trend was represented by a faith in the efficacy of legislative intervention. The advocates of this method—Keshub Chandra Sen in Bengal, Mahadev Govind Ranade in Maharashtra and Viresalingam in Andhra—believed that reform efforts cannot really be effective unless supported by the state. Therefore, they appealed to the government to give legislative sanction for reforms like widow marriage, civil marriage and increase in the age of consent. They, however, failed to realize that the interest of the British government in social reform was linked with its own narrow politico-economic considerations and that it would intervene only if it did not adversely effect its own interests. Moreover, they also failed to realize that the role of the legislation as an instrument of change in a colonial society was limited because the lack of sanction of the people.

### 8.5.3 Reform Through Symbol of Change

The third trend was an attempt to create symbols of change through non-conformist individual activity. This was limited to the 'Derozians' or 'Young Bengal' who represented a radical stream within the reform movement. The members of this group prominent of them being Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, Ram Gopal Ghose and Krishna Mohan Banerji, stood for a rejection of tradition and revolt against accepted social norms. They were highly influenced by "the regenerating new thought from the West" and displayed an uncompromisingly rational attitude towards social problems. Ram Gopal Ghose expressed the rationalist stance of this group when he declared: "He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot is a fool and he who does not is a slave". A major weakness of the method they adopted was that it failed to draw upon the cultural traditions of Indian society and hence the

### 8.5.4 Reform Through Social Work

The fourth trend was reform through social work as was evident in the activities of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission. There was a clear recognition among them of the limitations of purely intellectual effort if undertaken without supportive social work. Vidyasagar, for instance, was not content with advocating widow remarriage through lectures and publication of tracts. Perhaps the greatest humanist India saw in modern times, he identified himself with the cause of widow marriage and spent his entire life, energy and money for this cause.

Despite that, all he was able to achieve was just a few widow marriages. Vidyasagar's inability to achieve something substantial in practical terms was an indication of the limitations of social reform effort in colonial India.

The Arya Samaj and the Ramakrishna Mission also undertook social work through which they tried to disseminate ideas of reform and regeneration. Their limitation was an insufficient realization on their part that reform on the social and intellectual planes is inseparably linked with the overall character and structure of the society. Constraints of the existing structure will define the limits which no regenerative efforts on the social and cultural plane can exceed. As compared to the other reform movements, they depended less on the intervention of the colonial state and tried to develop the idea of social work as a creed.

#### Check Your Progress 1

- 1 Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (×)
  - i) The reform movements of the 19th century were purely religious movements.
  - ii) Different reform movements emerged in different parts of the country at the same time.
  - iii) The initiative for these reform movements was taken in Bengal.
  - iv) 'Young Bengal' represented the radical stream within the reform movement.
- 2 Name the various reform movements undertaken in various parts of the country in the 19th century.  
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- 3 What were the various methods of reform adopted by the 19th century reformers? Write on a separate sheet.

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## 8.6 IDEAS

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Two important ideas which influenced the leaders and movements were rationalism and religious universalism.

### 8.6.1 Rationalism

A rationalist critique of socio-religious reality generally characterized the nineteenth century reforms. The early Brahma reformers and members of 'Young Bengal' had taken a highly rational attitude towards socio-religious issues. Akshay Kumar Dutt, who was an uncompromising rationalist, had argued that all natural and social phenomena could be analysed and understood by our intellect purely in terms of physical and mechanical processes. Faith was sought to be replaced by rationality and socio-religious practices were evaluated from the standpoint of social utility. In Brahma Samaj the rationalist perspective led to the repudiation of the infallibility of the Vedas and in Aligarh movement founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, to the reconciling of the teaching of Islam with the needs and requirements of modern age. Holding that religious tenets are not immutable, Sayyid Ahmad Khan emphasised the role of religion in the progress of society: if religion did not keep in step with the times and meet the demand of society, it would get fossilized as had happened in the case of Islam in India.

Although reformers drew upon scriptural sanction e.g. Rammohun's arguments for the abolition of sati and Vidyasagar's for widow marriage, social reforms were not always subjected to religious considerations. A rational and secular outlook was very much evident in positing an alternative to the then prevalent social practices. In advocating widow marriage and opposing polygamy and child marriage, Akshay Kumar was least concerned with searching for any religious sanction or finding out whether they existed in the past. His arguments were mainly based on their noticeable effects on society. Instead of depending on the scriptures, he cited medical opinion against child marriage.

Compared to other regions there was less dependence on religion in Maharashtra. To Gopal Hari Deshmukh whether social reforms had the sanction of religion was immaterial. If religion did not sanction them he advocated that religion itself be changed, as what was laid down in the scriptures need not necessarily be of contemporary relevance.

### 8.6.2 Universalism

An important religious idea in the nineteenth century was universalism a belief in the unity of godhead and an emphasis on religions being essentially the same. Rammohun considered different religions as national embodiments of universal theism and he had initially conceived Brahma Samaj as a universalist Church. He was a defender of the basic and universal principles of all religions—monotheism of the Vedas and unitarianism of Christianity—and at the same time he attacked the polytheism of Hinduism and trinitarianism of Christianity. Sayyid Ahmad Khan echoed almost the same idea: all prophets had the same din (faith) and every country and nation had different prophets. This perspective found clearer articulation in Keshub Chandra Sen who tried to synthesise the ideas of all major religions in the break away Brahma group, *Nav Bidhan*, that he had organized. "Our position is not that truths are to be found in all religions, but all established religions of the world are true."

The universalist perspective was not a purely philosophic concern; it strongly influenced political and social outlook, until religious particularism gained ground in the second half of the nineteenth century. For instance, Rammohun considered Muslim lawyers to be more honest than their Hindu counterparts and Vidyasagar did not discriminate against the Muslim in his humanitarian activities. Even to the famous Bengali novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterji who is credited with a Hindu outlook dharma rather than specific religious affiliation was the criterion for determining the superiority of one individual over the other. This, however, does not imply that religious identity did not influence the social outlook of the people in fact it did very strongly. The reformer's emphasis on universalism was an attempt to contend with this particularising pull. However, faced with the challenge of colonial culture and ideology, universalism, instead of providing the basis for the developing of a broader secular ethos, retreated into religious particularism.

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## 8.7 SIGNIFICANCE

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In the evolution of modern India the reform movements of the nineteenth century have made very significant contribution. They stood for the democratization of society, removal of superstition and abhorrent customs, spread of enlightenment and the development of a rational and modern outlook. Among the Muslims the Aligarh and Ahmadiya movements were the torch bearers of these ideas. Ahmadiya movement which took a definite shape in 1890 due to the inspiration of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, opposed *jihad*, advocated fraternal relations among the people and championed Western liberal education. The Aligarh movement tried to create a new social ethos among the Muslims by opposing polygamy and by advocating widow marriage. It stood for a liberal interpretation of the Quran and propagation of Western education.

The reform movements within the Hindu community attacked a number of social and religious evils. Polytheism and idolatry which negated the development of individuality or supernaturalism and the authority of religious leaders which induced the habit of conformity were subjected to strong criticism by these movements. The opposition to caste was not only on moral and ethical principles but also because it fostered social division. Anti-casteism existed only at a theoretical and limited level in early Brahma movement, but movements like the Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj and Rama Krishna Mission became uncompromising critics of the caste system more trenchant criticism of the caste system was made by movements which emerged among the lower castes. They unambiguously advocated the



abolition of caste system, as evident from the movements initiated by Jotibha Phulle and Narayana Guru. The latter gave the call—only one God and one caste for mankind.

The urge to improve the condition of women was not purely humanitarian, it was part of the quest to bring about the progress of society. Keshub Chandra Sen had voiced this concern: “no country on earth ever made sufficient progress in civilization whose females were sunk in ignorance”.

An attempt to change the then prevalent values of the society is evident in all these movements. In one way or the other, the attempt was to transform the hegemonic values of a feudal society and to introduce values characteristic of a bourgeois order.

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## 8.8 WEAKNESSES AND LIMITATIONS

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Though the nineteenth century reform movements aimed at ameliorating the social, educational and moral conditions and habits of the people of India in different parts of the country, they suffered from several weaknesses and limitations. They were primarily an urban phenomena. With the exception of Arya Samaj, the lower caste movements which had a broader influence, on the whole the reform movements were limited to upper castes and classes. For instance, the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal was concerned with the problems of the *bhadralok* and the Aligarh movement with those of the Muslim upper classes. The masses generally remained unaffected.

Another limitation lay in the reformers' perception of the nature of the British rule and its role toward India. They believed quite erroneously, that the British rule was God sent — providential—and would lead India to the path of modernity. Since their model of the desirable Indian society was like that of the 19th century Britain, they felt that the British rule was necessary in order to make India Britain-like. Although they perceived the socio-religious aspects of the Indian society very accurately, its political aspect that of a basically exploitative British rule was missed by the reformers.

### Check Your Progress 2

1 Write five lines each on the following:

i) Rationalism

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ii) Religious Universalism

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2 Read the following statements carefully and mark right (✓) and wrong (×).

i) Reformers critique of the Indian socio-religious reality was not devoid of rationalism.

ii) Universalism managed to keep itself free from religious particularism.

iii) The Aligarh movement opposed polygamy.

iv) The impact of most reform movements was confined to upper caste and class.

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## 8.9 LET US SUM UP

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The 19th century reformers undertook a two-fold task. A critique of the Indian society was made. Institutions like caste, Sati, widowhood, child-marriage etc. came in for a sharp attack. Superstitions and religious obscurantism were condemned.

An attempt was made at the modernisation of the Indian society and appeals were made to reason, rationalism and tolerance. The scope of their activities was not confined to religion only but included the society as a whole. Although they devised different methods and were also separated by time, they showed a remarkable unity of perspective and objectives. They gave a vision of a prosperous modern India and subsequently this vision got incorporated in the Indian National Movement.

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## 8.10 KEY WORDS

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**Revivalism:** An attempt to revive and glorify the past

**Retrogressive:** Backward

**Sati:** The custom of the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband

**Idolatry:** Practice of image worship

**Polytheism:** Belief in many Gods

**Infanticide:** The killing of an infant child

**Age of consent & Bill:** A bill passed to increase the marriageable age of girls to 12 years. Bill was opposed by some Congressmen including Tilak

**Monotheism:** Belief in one God a custom in some societies in which a woman can be married to more than one man at the same time

**Jihad:** Religious war against the infidels

**Trinitarianism:** Belief in the Christian Trinity i.e. the union of the father, son and holy spirit in one God.

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## 8.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

1 i) ×    ii) ×    iii) √    iv) √

2 See Section 8.3

3 Read Section 8.5 and write your own answer

### Check Your Progress 2

1. See Sub-sec. 8.6.1 and 8.6.2

2. i) √    ii) ×    iii) √    iv) √