Intelectual Movements of Nineteenth Century and Nationalism in India-as Reviewed by professor Heimsath

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Abstract:
TO the student of Indian history, the intellectual movements of the nineteenth century present a fascinating subject for study. Never before in India's chequered past had occurred a social and political transformation of the magnitude such as was initiated as a result of the impact of Western ideas. Until now, Hinduism had responded to efforts at cultural penetration by wrapping itself more closely in its own Ivory Tower. Muslim domination, like earlier influences, left the general basis of Hindu beliefs undisturbed. The presence of the British in India, however, brought about a radical change in the entire social perspective. Apart from the introduction of the idea of equality based on a conception of the individual as a repository of values and rights, this contact with the West gave to India, for the first time, a doctrine of social progress — the belief that man can himself, through collective action, change the structure of society. An attempt to historical analysis of this intellectual movement, more particularly as it related to organised efforts at social reform. Not content with providing a purely chronological account:, the social reform movement in the broad perspective of Hindu India's intellectual response to the West. The interaction of social, religious and political forces and the gradual weaving of the complex motif of Indian nationalism are studied with an insight as sharply penetrating as it is coldly impartial. Social Reform in India did not ordinarily mean, as it did in the West, a reorganisation of the entire structure of society with a view to the alleviation of the conditions of the underprivileged; rather, it meant the infusion into the existing social structure of newer ways of life and modes of behaviour. Generally such change was gradual and was initiated only by the upper classes. Social change in India was, for a very long time, based on the 'filtration theory' — the filtration of attitudes and modes of behaviour from the upper layers of society to the lower ones. It was only at the beginning of this century with the growth of organised reform groups that the social basis of Hinduism, the caste system, came to be questioned. Various social service institutions took up the cause of the less fortunate groups in society and sought to lift India from the morass of caste tyranny. What was unique about the social reform movement initiated in the nineteenth century?

I. INTRODUCTION

Even prior to the nineteenth century, there were movements aimed at reform especially in the field of religion. The entire Bhakti cult was in a way a revolt against orthodox Hinduism. However, this was more a negative or sannyasin-renunciative type of movement than one of positive social action. For all its spiritual egalitarianism, the Bhakti movement failed to cure the diseased condition of the Indian social system. Its appeal was more emotional than rational and individual salvation rather than social salvation was stressed. Even in the nineteenth century, one finds Bhaktitype movements, as in the Swami Narayana Sect and the Sanmargha Sangha of Mahatnia Ramalingam and. Heimsath maintains, in the immediate effects of Shri Ramakrishna's mystrical preachings. The Motivating Force The approach of the modern social reform movement was not one nxelusively of religious dedication. Conceived under the influence of Western methods of organisation, propagating and recruiting support mainly from the English educated, and maintaining as its basic premises western concepts of individualism, natural rights and social efficiency, the principal motivating force was sober rationalism and positive social ethics. Heimsath traces the stimulation of modern social reform to two main sources : the introduction of English education and with it the transmission of Western knowledge and experiences and secondly the activities of the Christian missionaries. Broadly considered, the uniqueness of the Social Reform Movement in India lay in the inspiration, the ideas and the motivations of the reformers themselves. While earlier reformers were prompted by a love for the underdog, these modern reformers saw the incompatibility of particular practices with the total progress of society, Furthermore, in their attempt to 'rationalise' the Hindu religion, these reformers sought to distinguish the essential aspects of Hinduism from the nonessential ones, to separate the pristine religion from the subsequent accretions. Throughout the period surveyed, one notices that the movement for social and religious reform and the political movement, though interacting, constituted separate and clearly distinguishable traditions and were together to lay the intellectual foundations for the emergence of nationalism.

II. REFORM MOVEMENT TILL THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Social Reform Movement till the First World War, has a three stage development. The first stage was marked by efforts on the part of individuals to order their personal lives in accordance with standards adopted from the West. The arch type of such individual revolt and reform was Raja Rammohan Roy. The onset of the second stage was marked by the formation of subnational groups and the growth of a new desire for unity between the scattered and culturally diverse social groups. Politically this was the period when the first glimmer of nationalism appeared on the subcontinent. With the turn of the century, social reform came to mean a regeneration of the traditional spirit of the nation — regeneration founded on religious revival and cultural xenophopia. This review will concentrate not so much with the actual reforms effected as on the close interaction of practical and social movements over

the last century and a half. The modern social reform movement properly begins with Raja Rammohan Roy. More than any other Indian of his generation, Roy saw the need for a rational social basis for Hinduism. Combining deep erudition with uncommon wisdom, Roy tried to synthesise the age old Hindu values with the rational elements of the Christian and Islamic traditions. In his effort to attract the educated Bengalis of his time, Roy founded the Brahmo Samaj -- a monotheistic religions body that drew much from the Christian doctrines but which had as its avowed purpose the restoration of the Hindu faith to its pristine purity. Even before the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj, however, Roy had initiated a social reform movement of the first order. Through a succession of polemical battles waged both during discussion in the Atmiya Sabha later the Brahmo Samaj) and in the pages of the Samvad Kaumudi, Roy was able to enlist support for such reform measures as the abolition of 'sati' and 'kulinism' and the introduction of widow remarriage.

III. BENGAL-FIGHT AGAINST ORTHODOXY

With Roy began the rationalising of the Hindu tradition and the clearing of the underbrush of social evils. The thread was taken up by other enlightened individuals in Bengal. Bombay and Madras. In Bengal, Ishwarehandra Vidyasagar shattered the very core of orthodoxy by his monumental crusade for widow remarriage. In Bombay Vishnu Shastri Pandit sought governmental sanction for the same, while in Madras the cause was taken up by Viresa Lingam Pantulu with the formation of the Rajamundhry Social Reform Association. To mention some of the leading lights of the social reform movement in Western India, there was Balgangadhar Shastri Jambhekar, the founder of the Bombay Darpan and a prominent champion of social reform, the Gujaratis Mehtaji Mancharam arid Narmada Shankar and that ebullient literary social critic Gopal Hari Deshmukh Tokahitwadi'. On the practical level, there was syotiba Phule, an ardent reformer and social worker, and Karsondas Mulji of the Maharaja Libel case fame. Even the Prarthana Samaj, formed in 1867 devoted itself to the reconstruction of Hinduism along more rational lines.

IV. DIFFERENT PATTERNS

An important characteristic of the activities of the reformers of Western India was their conscious effort to imbue public opinion with their rationalism. As against the dramatic unconventionality of)the Bengali Reformers, in Bombay there was no complete break with traditional society; rather what was sought was a practical adjustment of religious convictions and social behaviour toward a more open and egalitarian basis. "Totally different was the impact of Swami Dayanand and the early Arya Samaj on Northern India. Dayanand combined in himself several parodoxical dements. Extremely conservative in his thought and beliefs, sometimes to the point of obscurantism, yet astonishingly revolutionary in his attitudes and actions, Dayanand typifies a complex reaction to Western influence, Rejecting the existing caste basis of society, the interior status of women and the system of child marriages, he called for a vigorous programme of social reform aimed not so much at westernising the Hindu religion as in reviving the glory of the Vedic religion. What Dayanand sought was not to help individuals attain personal salvation by isolating themselves from society; he was interested in the salvation of society by means of individual self-assertion and the amelioration of social evils. Of considerable relevance was the effect of Dayanand's militant: spiritualism upon the emergence

and development of extremist nationalism in India. By bringing the dynamism of the past to vivify the modern mould, Dayanand blazed the trail for the extremists in two significant respects: (1) His own deep-rooted xenophobia was carried on to the subsequent generations and served to inspire the militant antiBritish temper of extremist politics at the turn of the century. (2) Connected to this was Dayanand's idea that history could be interpreted in order to justify social action. This attitude was closely followed by Tilak in his interpretation of the Gceta and Savarkar in his interpretation of the 'Indian War of Independence'.

V. GENESIS OF NATIONALISM

By the 1870's already there had emerged a new stage in the modern development of Indian intellectual life. No longer was social protest confined to individual revolts against established patterns of conduct. With the building up of the infra-structure of social mobility — a rapidly growing system of communication, the expansion of educational facilities and the increase in the number and circulation of newspapers — a new set of group loyalties began to sweep over the various sections of the educated populace. Thus it was that the first glimmer of national consciousness began to appear on the Indian intellectual horizon. Discussing the emergence of nationalism in India, Heimsath refuses to give credence to the assumption that it was a logical-historical outgrowth of 19th century political reform activities. Nor is it accurate, he believes, to suggest that Indian rationalism was a single and unified movement. In fact, the author maintains that what we term Indian nationalism consists actually of a congeries of several separate nationalisms. The reason for this, Heimsath says, was that the subcontinent had few if any of the preconditions which bring a single nation into being. What developed as Indian nationalism, Heimsath says was actually a myth based on consciously propagated ideas and one which was more a product of the personal preferences of the so-called nationalists than an enunciation of social realities. He believes that once this was lone, through a process of rationalisation, an attempt was made to relate this myth to shared religious, linguistic and geographic identifications. In short, the author suggests that there was nothing spontaneous about the appearance of nationalism in India; it was consciously and carefully contrived by an "eminent company of intellectuals" (p 135).

VI. NEW SET OF GROUP LOYALITIES

Such a conception of nationalism is undoubtedly stimulating. However, one should not be led by this interpretation to believe that the genesis of nationalism in India was uniquely different from that in other countries. in essence, nationalism results from the confrontation and interaction of two distinct levels of group solidarities. There is, on the one hand, the solidarity that covers a whole continent, civilisation or culture. This we shall term Culturalism. On the other hand, there is a smaller, more chauvinistic kind of solidarity based on the identification of local customs, habits of living and social attitudes. This we may term Localism or Parochialism. Now, if nationalism is an artificially inducible stimulation resulting from consciously propogated ideas, this requires the manipulation of certain deep-rooted social symbols. Nationalism thus becomes a matter primarily of social communication. According as these symbols are derived from the wider or the narrower of the above discussed solidarities, the ambit of nationalism extends toward culturalism or toward localism. This interpretation applies to the development of

nationalism as much in the West as in the newer nations. In a consideration of the emergence of India nationalism, therefore three important factors have to be analysed: who were the agents for such stimulation? What is the character or type of the solidarity desired? "And what are the types of symbols manipulated? Answers to these questions ultimately would provide the due as to the actual nature of the nationalism that would evolve. Several scholars date the emergence of nationalism with the. Founding of the Indian National Congress, The early Congress idea of nationalism was elitist and gradualist in conception. Broadly it was based on the theory of filtaration of ideas from the top to lower layers of society. "The dominant nationalist group, which was responsible for the founding of the Indian National Congress, supported the creation of conditions that they fell, from their knowledge of the West, should exist before a nation embodying all of India's people could make its identity felt. Those were mass education, economic advancement, social reform, and a unity of a kind that Western nations enjoyed. Having at its base an antitraditional, liberal-democratic, secular .and politically oriented concept of the nation, the nationalism of the early Congress could properly encompass all Indian cultures and religions". Though, conceptually the Congress had a clear notion of nationalism, the precise strategy for the mobilisation of popular support was not. Carefully worked out by the early Congress nationalists.

VII. PAROCHIAL NATIONALISM

Alongside this there had emerged another distinct effort at stimulating "national feeling." This initiated by Rajnarain Bose in the 1860's, later taken up by N abagopaI Mitra, that zealous organiser of the Hindu. Mela, this movement sought to develop ties on the basis of religion. "The Hindus are destined to become a religious nation" (P 137). The most brilliant advocate of this type of nationalist-parochial sentiment was Bankim Chandra Chatterji. Though Bankim thought in terms of a parochial nationalism - - his evocation in 'Bande Mataram' was to Bengal not to India - no one realised more clearly than him how this solidarity was to be evoked. To Bankim social solidarity could be achieved primarily by stirring religious and cultural loyalties and by working out a close identification of the individual with a particular community. What this ultimately amounted to was that the basis of nationalism was to be religious revivalism. No longer was nationalism viewed as a theoretical concept; it became a vibrant collective consciousness. Another important noticeable feature was the stress on the vernacular as the vehicle of this nationalism. The relevance of this extremist — moderate conflation for the development of the social reform movement was nowhere more dramatically evident than in the debate over the Age of Consent Bill. The background of the Age of Consent controversy is common knowledge. Consciously advocated by moderate reformers lik.- Malabari and Gidumal the movement against Infant Marriage grew in vigour and evoked the active response of the reformers or the Social Conference. However, when Gidumal suggested a legal remedy in the amendment of the Age of Consent Act, opposition grew extraordinarily fierce. In Bengal, the controversy centred on the religious question of the 'garbhadhana', while in Madras both reformers and antireformers were equally active. The vernacular press viewed this unwarranted interference in religious affairs with suspicion and mistrust.

VIII. TILAK AND RANADE

It was in Bombay, however, that the debate took on the magnitude of a national issue. This was largely due to the publicity given to it by Tilak. Though Tilak recognised that this was primarily a religious issue, he was concerned rather with strengthening the political forces at that time moving in the direction of extremist opposition to British rule. What was most important for him was not any particular programme of social or political reform, hut the awakening within the masses of a political and social consciousness. Accepting Bankings uLea that nationalism could only be based on a solidarity that was deep-rooted in the consciousness of the masses, Tilak saw that such consciousness could only be developed through the evocation of religious and cultural loyalties. Only in this way could India be liberated from the yoke of foreign tyranny. Admittedly, these racial evils to be curbed; but to argue in favour of legislation of social reform seemed to imply acknowledgement that India's advancement was dependent upon the British (p 163). Few reformers could counter this argument advanced by Tilak. Even Ranade, who formulated the classic moderate argument for social reform had to seek conciliation with Tilak at the Fourth Social Conference in 1890. The ultimate passage of the Bill was, however, interpreted as a victory for the Sudharakas. The Social Reform movement itself gained, for the first time, a national recognition. Yet, it was no more than a pyrrhic victory. The growing xenophobic reaction to Governmental interference in social and religious affairs came to be steadily harnessed by the extremist political leaders and, by the lust decade of llus century, extremism had reached its peak. In his assessment of the Age of Consent controversy, the real issue was the confidence of Indians in Western inspired political and social change, and to a lesser extent, their faith in the British Government. In 1891, he says this confidence and faith outweighed the desire to define and manage India's advance along traditional lines, One is curious to know what the term "Western inspired political and social change" exactly means in this context. If it means Government initiated social reform, this is patently incorrect: as Heimsath himself admits, no major social reform legislation was passed between 1891 and 1929. As for political change, this controversy marks the beginning of the transition of nationalism from an elitist movement to a popular mass movement; relying not so much on Western liberal ideas as on the manipulation of indigenous cultural symbols. As for restoring faith in the British Government, it was with Tilak that the idea of 'Purna swaraj' crystallised and found popular acceptance. Emphasis on Social Reform One of the most urgent questions the nationalist movement faced in its very early stages, was whether social reform should precede political reform or vice versa. The earlier moderates tried to bypass this problem by assigning social reform to private action on the local level, while political reform was considered on the national level and through public discussion. the Indian National Congress deliberately kept aloof from social questions. However it was Ranade who sought to give national recognition to the social reform movement, by attaching the National Social Conference to the Indian National Congress as its counterpart. The National Social Conference itself was soon to split into two distinct schools. On the one side, there was the Ranade-Telang school which adhered to the doctrine of "progress along the line of least resistenee". According to them, reformers must "flow with the tide of social change". For Telang, this meant a greater emphasis upon political reform, which he feltwas easier to achieve in his day. This approach sought to effect change only in "constructive channels" and

rarely sought to undermine the foundations of Hindu society. The opposite school of reform, led by Chandavarkar and the Madras reformers (particularly the Hindu and the Social Reformer) called for a vigorous campaign of social reform, Chandavarkar appealed to men and women to act from a free conscience and stand up against social evils. Such divergences naturally affected the overall efficacy of the movement for social reform. This was further vitiated by the fact that the social reformers themselves failed to live up to their high precepts. They yielded in the face of precisely those elements against which they should. have stood up (e g Ranades 'prayaschita', his second marriage to a child of eleven; Raghunatha Rao's reluctance to attend the marriage of a widow, etc). It is against this background that one sees the strength of Tilak's insistence that social reform should be completely set aside and that the all important. task was that of invigorating the political movement. The early moderate nationalists tried to define a new India in terms of categories derived from European political and social experiences. These efforts failed inasmuch as the general masses of people were unaffected. What was needed was a completely new alignment of political and social forces. The formation of the Muslim League and the theory of two separate streams of cultural consciousness cut at the roots of the earlier Congress stand on nationalism. Slowly, nationalism in the early years of this century became Hindu and adopted Hindu symbols and traditions on a mass scale. The paathfinders of this new religio-polirical movement were the practitioners of political extremism like B C Pal, Tilak and Aurobindo. The basic requisites for the reconstruction of nationalism, the extremists believed, were: (a) the incorporation of the masses into the political movement and (b) the identification of the nation with religious ideas. These were linked together and gave to the movement a strong militant and revivalist character. As Aurobindo said (p 313) Swaraj was "the fulfilment of the ancient life of India under modern conditions, the return of the 'Satyayuga' of national greatness . . '. If the national spirit was to penetrate beneath the English-educated intellectual groups, and be truly Indian, only a cultural and religious awakening could effect this. In the held of social reform, Annie Besant, after an initial attempt to bolster the orthodox position, came out in her book "Wake Up India: A Plea for Social Reform" with a vigorous plea for all the major planks of the social reformer's programme including remarriage of virgin widows and the emancipation of the depressed classes. Further, the Theosophical Society carried her concern into endeavours of a social service or educational nature. Another figure on the intellectual horizon was Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda was profoundly struck by the malaise of his own society. Much of the country's tragedy, he felt, could be ascribed to the hopeless quest for mukli. Vivekananda wanted to go to the very root of this malaise and effect a radical reformation. This he felt was possible only by means of a spiritual rejuvenation. "Put the tire there (at the level of the masses) and let it burn upwards and make the Indian nation." Vivekananda condemned the so-called reformers as having done no good "excepting the creation of a most vituperative and most condemnatory literature." Rather- than endorse the ornamental reforms advocated by the Social Conference, he sought to bring a new life for 'all' of India's women and for the lower classes Vivekananda's thought marked the culmination of the 19th century social revolt, As Heimsath says: "The challenge Vivekananda presented to Indians to reform totally their religious and social life was not accepted, because on the one hand it called for too great a sacrifice from the still complacent educated and privileged groups and on the other hand,

demanded an uprooting of traditions, customs and beliefs unacceptable to the general populace"

IX. REVIVALIST NATIONALISM

The impact of this new revivalist nationalism upon the social reform movement is of much significance in that the new nationalists stimulated the reformers belief that all groups in society must benefit from the advances modern India was making. Even the National Social Conference responded by enlarging the scope of social reform by expanding it to cover housing, education of the masses and other welfare activities and objectives. In a very important sense, Mahatma Gandhi synthesised the two approaches (the moderate and the extremist) and evolved an altogether new response to the British influence. Like the social reformers, sometimes even mote vehemently, Gandhi insisted that social progress, especially (for the untouchables, was a condition for political progress. However, Gandhi's method of evoking popular response and of social communication differed radically from the traditional methods of the social reformers. His emphasis was not always on reason and empirical evidence but rather on an ethical imperative. Further and most effectively, he impressed by the strength of personal example. Yet, again, he refused to accept the moderates' stand that true national unity could only be achieved by the complete removal of caste barriers. Even in the political field. Gandhi emerged as the most successful synthesiser. While he wielded the xenophobic spirit that had been roused by the earlier extremist, his rejection of violence in politics changed the very strategy of the national movement. Gandhi thus was able to rouse the masses but he taught them to wield a different weapon. Again, though he appealed to the masses through the conscious use of symbols borrowed from Hinduism, he was prompt to stress his universalism and prevent the national movement from becoming a mere communal congregation. Gandhi's success in the mobilisation of the nation was very evident so long as the predominant aims of the movement were negative. The precise utility of these very same weapons and symbols for the purpose of positive action and reconstruct ion of the nation is, however, being questioned today.

X. CONCLUSION

Heimsath concludes his study with the assertion that Social Reform and nationalism are irrevocably linked as living processes and as organised movements in India as well as elsewhere. Following Lerner, he believes that nationalism and social reform emerge as a result of transformation of traditional societies and the transfer of individual loyalties from the family and caste groups to larger societies of the city, region and nation. It is basically from this social perspective that Heimsath views change and reform in India. Written with extraordinary breadth of vision and sensitivity, Heimsath's analysis is as refreshing in style is it is original in interpretation. The author combines painstaking research with the intellectual simplicity that goes with true scholarship to provide us with a definitive work on the subject.