Chapter V

THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND AND THE MOVEMENT FOR SOCIAL REFORM

The social composition of Gujarat is made up of the Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsis who are bound only by their geography and the unity of the language in which they write and converse. Their social practices and customs are not uniform. The Hindus, however, being a predominating majority, took a leading part in the movement for social reform, which pertained mainly to their community.

During centuries in the past Hindu society was split up into numerous divisions of self-conscious castes and sub-castes, with tight barricades thrown round them, which rendered free social intercourse between different divisions difficult, if not impossible, and which, as a result, created a sort of social hierarchy in which particular castes and sub-castes were placed on higher scales than the others who were placed lower in the graded scales. Inter-dining and inter-marriages between them were not permitted and a Brahmin would not accept a drink of water from a Bania, who in his turn, would not do so from one who was believed to be socially inferior to him. In fact, each one who was supposed to be socially higher seemed to say, like Shylock, to one whom he considered socially lower, 'I will talk with you, walk with you, but I will not eat with you, drink with you.' Sanction or justification for all social practices and usages was sought from the scriptures and a section of the community was even considered untouchable on the same ground.

This caste-system is not of recent origin or peculiar to Gujarat alone. It forms the basic structure of the Hindu society from times almost immemorial, when society was classified into four main units according to the profession or
vocation they followed. But this acute social consciousness, which was a conspicuous feature of the social life in Gujarat during the last few centuries, was directly the result of its attempt to preserve itself and its religious faith from the fanaticism of the Muslim invaders who overran the country in succeeding waves from time to time. One result of this was that while some sought shelter elsewhere for self-preservation, others threw tight caste barricades round them in a similar bid. In course of time, barricades grew into barriers, which acquired such a rigidity that inter-dining and inter-marriages even between different sub-castes were looked upon as trespasses. The stagnant pool of social life began to stink. Child-marriages, where marriages of bridegrooms aged six and brides aged three were not uncommon, had gone even to the absurd length of arrangement of matches in mothers' wombs. The incidence of female infanticide was alarming. Young widows were not permitted to re-marry and even their presence was considered inauspicious. A voyage overseas was enough to invite the wrath of the entire community, leading to excommunication and ostracization of the erring individual. Superstitions beliefs in ghosts, witches, evil spirits and black magic held many in thrall.

In circumstances like these, the powerful impact of the West through English set many a man in the first half of the nineteenth century thinking on the causes of the rot which had set in the social life of their community, and on the steps to be taken to arrest its decadence and restore it to health. Some of them reacted sharply and, seeing the root of all their political and social misfortunes in the caste-system, advocated a casteless society, as among the English, who were presumed to be what they were because of their freedom in that respect. Others moderately held that there was nothing basically wrong with that ancient structure of the castes and that the only need of the hour was to
liberalize free social intercourse between sub-castes by lifting up bans sanctioned by conventions which had outlived their utility. A few saw in the wholesale adoption of Western customs and manners a panacea for all their ills and even began practising what they preached. A large section of thinking men, however, maintained that the only answer to these problems of decadence, superstitions, soulless conventions and customs incapacitating the individual, was social education, to be given to the masses through assemblies, associations, journals, pamphlets, preaching, practice and literature.

The English, who had stabilized themselves in Gujarat after the Battle of Kirkee in 1818, gave to the people of Gujarat not only a sense of security, but also a system of education, which was fundamentally different from the indigenous one that was generally content with the imparting of instructions in the three R's.

Many of these newly educated young men were also writers who used their writings for social purposes, but unlike Addison who had done much of his reformist writing in prose, these Gujarati writers, mostly used verse for this purpose, verse being a more developed and popular form than prose, which was just then beginning to receive its literary recognition. They were painfully aware of the many unjust and unhealthy customs and practices of the society in which they were brought up. They thought and felt keenly, and strove through their writings and speeches, to reform society and rid it of its inequity, injustice and evils. Social reform became the preoccupation of a band of educated young men and hence the Gujarati poetry of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, in particular, was preoccupied and even obsessed, with the problems and details of social reform, often reducing the poet, for the time being, to the position of a determined propagandist. Social reform then assumed almost the character of a crusade and
composition of Hindu society being socio-religious in its character, religion was also the subject of much comment in this poetry, no less than in life itself.

The movement for social reform in Gujarat is seen to spread itself over three successive stages. Its first stage, which synchronizes with the first impact of the West through English, is generally marked by a swing to the West and is a period of agitation and spade-work. Its second stage is a period of conservative reaction, marked by a swing back to the time-honoured cultural traditions of the country. Its third and final stage is characterized by an objective and intelligent appraisal of things Western or Eastern and is a period of the assimilation of the best of both, where nothing was taken as sacrosanct simply because it was old or Indian and nothing a taboo because it was new or alien.

The British policy in India was generally to refrain from participating in or interfering with the Indian people's social and religious beliefs and practices, except, later on, under pressure of the Indian people themselves, passing legislation, for instance, prohibiting the sati and early marriages. The influence of English in the social and religious fields, therefore, worked indirectly though potently, through their presence in the country, the Western type of education which they introduced and the new cultural and political climate prevailing in the country since their advent.

Poet Narmad, who was educated in the newly established Elphinstone Institute at Bombay, was among the first to respond to this influence. Poet Dalpatram who had not received this education, was also among the pioneers of social reform, which points to the fact that the urge for social reform was not confined to those who had received the Western type of education, but was shared, in varying degrees, by all those who lived in that new atmosphere and changed
climate. Whatever the immediate source of their inspiration, a number of young men in Gujarat thought and felt keenly on the necessity of social reform and worked earnestly and ceaselessly for it. They were the pioneers and torchbearers, who ushered in a new era of social awakening and awareness in Gujarat.

At first, their ideas of social reform generally fell in line with the Western ideas of social justice and equity, which they had imbibed from their Western type of education, or from their study of Western thought through books, or from the living contact with the English whom they encountered as teachers, officers or administrators.

Their conception of social reform was truly broad and their aims high. For instance, Poet Narmad defined reform as 'something that led to a well-organized physical, mental and material improvement of the nation'.

Poet Dalpatram, in a poem specially composed for his address to the 'Buddhivardhak Sabha' in 1859, summed up the hopes and aspirations of the young reformers when he stressed in this new social programme the need to 'open new schools in every place, to write and publish books, to agitate against the shameful customs relating to marriage ceremonies; to promote industries and relieve unemployment; to handle the beggar problem, to purify religion, to import and use with discrimination machinery from England; to remove the disabilities of women and to educate them'. This programme may perhaps sound a little too ambitious, but the reformers themselves had no doubts about its successful implementation. Narmad, for instance, expresses his optimism in one of his poems ('Hinduoni Padati') thus: 'The day is not far off when there would be no child-marriages and there would be marriages by choice, educated wise women would bring up their children with care; the barriers of castes would be broken; people would travel abroad, see there all that is new and

serve the country on their return'. In words reminiscent of the words of Wordsworth greeting the bright new era of hope inaugurated by the French Revolution, Narmad further remarked, 'The night is over, the dawn had appeared; the sun shines with glory; its tender light is like glittering gold and all omens are favourable'. This optimism was shared by Poet Dalpatram, who, holding the English example before his people, said in his poem called 'Gujarati Hinduoni Sthiti' that 'the Gods of fire, wind and water worked for the people of England and drew their vehicles. The Goddess of electricity was their housemaid', and added that if the English example were emulated, the land would flow with milk and honey. Dalpatram went so far in his optimism as also to prophecy that 'in course of time, all English customs and manners would come and there would be no caste distinctions'.

The two main centres of the social reform movement in Gujarat were Bombay and Ahmedabad. Hence, men working in these two centres were sometimes referred to as belonging to two distinct groups or schools. Narmad was the representative of the former and Dalpatram of the latter. The difference between the two groups, however, did not consist in their ideals or methods, but only in the amount of acceleration which they thought fit to give to the movement for reform. The Bombay group, headed by Poet Narmad, believed in going ahead at full steam, its slogan being 'Plunge into the battle; success is assured', while the Ahmedabad school represented by Poet Dalpatram favoured going slowly, its slogan being 'Reform by slow gradual stages'. The work of those who believed in going ahead at full speed and of those who believed in hastening slowly was equally valuable in the results achieved.

Though these two poets probably by virtue of their literary status, were prominent among those who worked in the field of social reform, it need not be
assumed that they alone carried the movement on their shoulders or that theirs was the only contribution. As a matter of fact, active bands of young reformers were already working in the various fields of social reform at great personal risk, braving the consequences of their association with the movement in the teeth of orthodox opposition even before Dalpatram or Narmad joined their ranks. Durgaram Mehtaji (1809-1876), for instance, who challenged the magicians and exposed the hollowness of their pretensions, was one of the earliest champions of widow-remarriage and an advocate of fair treatment to the untouchables.

Propaganda and agitation for social reform were carried on vigorously through the instrumentality of various Associations, addresses, journals, pamphlets, periodicals and literature to fight against the evils of caste barriers and untouchability; for the eradication of superstitious beliefs; against the custom of child-marriages and the causes of female infanticides; and for the promotion of widow-remarriage, foreign travel and equality of sexes.

The Reaction

The powerful impact of the West had in the first phase resulted in an intense activity in the various fields of social reform, which, in its original pattern, was inspired by some of the social concepts of the West. Thus, for instance, caste restrictions were looked upon as a nuisance; child-marriages were opposed; widows were permitted to remarry; women were educated; equality of sexes was canvassed and foreign travel was encouraged — all of which constitute the familiar features of the social life of the West. But a large section of conservative society in Gujarat was not reconciled to these reforms. Barring a number of educated and enlightened men, who preached and practised social reform to the best of their ability, the majority of the people, it seems, had not reached that stage of preparedness, which would make revolutionary changes on a
The leaders of the movement for social reform in Gujarat apparently were too far ahead of those whom they led, consequently creating a distance, and then wide gap between them and the people. Legislation likewise seemed to be ahead of life, for though the law permitting widows to remarry was passed in 1856, it took fifteen long years before the first widow-remarriage took place in Gujarat and even after it, for many years widow-remarriage was rather an exception than a rule in Gujarat. The erratic behaviour of some of those educated on Western lines, who ate meat and drank wine, who dressed and conducted themselves as if they were Englishmen born in Gujarat much against their liking, discredited not only Western education but also the West itself in the eyes of many men. Reaction against the culture of the West, which earlier had been confined to a few conservative diehards, gathered strength and acquired formidable proportions. The behaviour of some of the reformers themselves contributed to this reaction, which was the result of many forces working together. In the first place, the time given to the society to prepare and adjust itself to the change was short and in the second, the over-emphasis on the Western model hurt the deep-rooted conservatism of a considerable section of the community, which saw in the change not only its ancient traditions and customs, but also its very religion in the danger of being swallowed up or submerged. Dalpatram's cautious approach, unlike Narmad's, was, in these circumstances, wiser, but the earlier reformers proceeded on Narmad's lines, with the result that 'the dogmatic insistence on reform engendered an equally dogmatic insistence on conservation.'

laughing-stock of the people and the movement of social reform suffered a temporary set-back.

Poet Narmad, who had played a leading role in bringing about a social awakening through his vigorous championship of certain reforms, was compelled, in the light of his experience, to revise his earlier views and recant much of what he had preached before. Though Narmad was among the first to greet the Western influence in the reformation of Hindu society, he was also among the first to react to it. His 'Dharmavichar' was his New Testament of revised beliefs. Narmad was not a reactionary, but only a spokesman of the reaction that had set in against the indiscriminate and over-zealous attempts at introducing Western ways of life in society, which then in panic rushed back to its old values.

Manilal Nabhubhai, sometimes described as the spiritual heir of Narmad, strove, through his writings, to rehabilitate Hindu society on the basis of its ancient traditions of philosophy, history and culture. Like Narmad, he was a student of the Elphinstone College in Bombay, from where he graduated. He was deeply studied in philosophy and Sanskrit, which inculcated in him a profound reverence for the traditions and culture of ancient India. Manilal opposed the Western type of social reform and advocated the conservation and revival of the old graces of Hindu religion and culture. That neither Narmad nor Manilal can be singled out in his opposition to social reform on Western lines is proved by innumerable tracts, books, pamphlets and poems written in disparagement of the Western type of reforms, which found a ready public response at that time. 1

Over-zealous application of ideas, derived from the West, to social problems at the hands of enthusiastic reformers of Gujarat had thus brought

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in a conservative reaction and a temporary set-back to the movement of social
reform, but it need not be assumed that the country was going back for ever
and in all respects to its past. In 1864, Narmad wrote almost in despair,
'There was a time when resolved to break all the barriers of castes; to encourage
widow-remarriage; to break the back of corrupt Vaishnavism and reform religion;
to meet and exchange views; to fight against superstitions - but those days,
alas, are gone!' But Navalram, in his 'Historical Commentary on Reform' came
cut with his spirited reply to Narmad's contention and declared, 'If it is
admitted that English education is the animating spirit of reform, Narmad's
contention falls to pieces, since English education is still a living and a moving
force. If the animating spirit is alive, there is no point in saying that the
spirit of reform is dead. It may be that it is caught in a temporary fit of
indisposition, which would pass away by itself and the spirit of reform would once
again be active'.

Navalram put the whole thing in the right perspective. Social reform
'was caught in a temporary fit of indisposition', it had suffered a temporary
set-back, but what it had already achieved was also substantial. People had
learnt to meet and think collectively, much was achieved in the matter of foreign
travel; public opinion was educated about superstitions, child-marriages, widow-
remarriages and caste restrictions and some results were achieved. If action
and reaction are equal and opposite, the excesses of early reforms could lead
to the excesses, in the opposite direction of conservatism. The swing to the
West was followed by a swing to the East, but later developments in the field
of social reform showed that the movement for social reform was not to be dominated
either by ideas of the West or those of the East, but by a judicious assimilation
of the best of both.
The Period of Assimilation

The third phase of the movement for social reform was characterized by the efforts of the reformers to assimilate the ideas of the East and the West, without sacrificing ancient social traditions of the country merely on the ground of their being ancient, or succumbing to the glamour of the Western customs simply because they were Western - the only criterion being the suitability of a particular reform for the people for whom it was meant. Even the conservatives were not opposed to the principle of reform. Manilal, conservative as he was, was in whole-hearted agreement with reforms like the prevention of child-marriages and the promotion of foreign travel. He opposed, on the other hand, widow-remarriage, not because he had no sympathy for the unfortunate plight of some of the widows, but because the widows, in his eyes, symbolised a spirit of resignation and renunciation, which was not to be discounted. The conservative reaction to the movement of reforms was largely based on the ground that those reforms cut at the very root of the cherished cultural traditions of the past. Later on, therefore, the reformers themselves were, so to say, reformed and learning by experience, concentrated on introducing reforms suitable to the soil, without seeking to destroy the old basic structure of society. Reform was then sought to be effected, not at the expense of, but in harmony with the spirit and cherished ideals of the ancient Hindu culture. This approach was applied to the problem of castes and their numerous divisions and sub-divisions, the general attitude swinging back in the direction of utilizing them as agencies for reform within the units. As Dr. A.B. Dhruv put it, 'All ornaments are substantially gold; all castes are fundamentally composed of human beings. To melt all caste-distinctions in the furnace of nationalism appears to be sheer vandalism. Our true aim should be, not to liquidate all castes, but to press them into the
the service of the country'. 1

The new school of thinkers and reformers was substantially at one with Victor Hugo, who once observed, 'Let us attack, but let us distinguish. Some things must be destroyed and some things must be merely cleared up and investigated. Let us not, therefore, carry flame where light alone will suffice'. The new school would not carry flame where light alone sufficed. They would not burn the entire edifice; they would not destroy everything. They would clear up, investigate, throw light and then proceed to destroy that which deserved to be destroyed and preserve that which deserved to be preserved. The fullest expression of this objective and synthetical approach was found in Goverdhanram (1855-1907), who was one of the finest specimens of Indians educated on the Western lines and nourished on the finest in Indian literature and culture. He maintained that 'to dislocate social customs without a scientific investigation of what was beneficial or otherwise in the entire social structure of the Hindus was beset with risks'. 2 It is this approach that distinguished Goverdhanram from the preceding thinkers and reformers, who were moved more by their zeal and passion than by their historical and scientific approach. In his monumental novel 'Sarasvatichandra', Goverdhanram took as his social background life in a joint Hindu family, incidentally weighed its merits and demerits and suggested that the old institution despite the drawbacks, was not something to be wantonly discarded. Goverdhanram was a visionary, who advocated the assimilation and integration of the finest points in the cultures of the East and the West, which falls within the scope of the next chapter.

Conclusion

The history of the impact of the West on the movement for social reform in Gujarat is the history of its action, reaction and assimilation. The process, which began in the second quarter of the nineteenth century under the influence of the English, continued for about a hundred years, passing through three phases. After its first swing to the ideas of the West, followed by a conservative reaction with its insistence on ancient Indian traditions, social reform, in the third phase, was marked by a spirit of synthesis and assimilation, freed from irrational or emotional preferences or prejudices for the East or the West. The failure of the early reformers to carry the masses with them brought the conservatives on the scene, who in their turn having failed to satisfy the progressive elements of the society, activated others, who adopted neither the destructive nor the conservative approach of their predecessors, but an objective and a constructive approach of assimilating the best of both the East and the West. Though the process of assimilation and synthesis is by no means complete, what is already achieved is not unsubstantial. Superstitious fears, which held the people in the past in thrall, have lost their grip; aspiring individuals are no longer prevented from crossing the seas; child-marriages are almost a thing of the past; female infanticide is rarely heard of; young widows are free to remarry; and the equality of sexes has passed the stage of academic discussion and come to be increasingly practised in life, giving women an honoured place in society. Most of the Gujarati poetry for about half a century between 1852 and 1900 and even beyond, was occupied with the preaching and propaganda of social reform and consequently, it provides a very good index of the trends seen in this field from time to time.
The impact of the ideas from the West through the English which affected the social life of the people of Gujarat, also affected their religious life, generating considerable ferment and fervour in that field. But another factor of considerable significance, the revival of Sanskrit influence, in the second phase of Indian Renaissance, after the establishment of the Universities in 1857, had also emerged and begun to work as a co-relative of the Western influence. The following pages would show how these two influences affected the religious and cultural life of Gujarat, producing the same familiar pattern of action, reaction and assimilation.