Chapter : iv

SOCIAL REGENERATION IN MODERN INDIA

A GLIMPSE OF THE THEN INDIA

In the later part of the 18th century, Indian society was nothing but a torn fabric of culture, morality and religion. Indian spirituality was passing through a dark phase. The holy land of Bhārat was in the pitiful condition. Superstitions predominated spirituality, violence was preferred to virtues, ego outshined ethos, authorities corrupted the culture. India was wriggling to free itself from the vice grip of anarchists.

Debauchery, adultery, alcoholism and other vices were rampant. Illiteracy, ignorance, dogmas, superstitious beliefs, yajñas filled with violence (sacrificing cattle to the so called deity) were the mark of the day. People were misled, misguided and morality was misinterpreted. The degeneration was prevalent everywhere in the society.

Dogmatic and gory rituals predominated Vedic rituals and traditions. The social, economical and moral fabric of the society was torn apart in shreds. India was ransacked by the power hungry state rulers and recklessly left to be exploited by the foreign rulers. Religion had lost its meaning. There was nothing but chaos and mess everywhere. Such was the dark, grave, distorted picture of the, then, glorious India.

India was virtually ruptured and divided. Society was highly influenced by the perverse religion like Vāma Mārga and Śakti cult. Unethical and immoral practices like Saṭī Prathā, infanticides and like prevailed in the name of religion. In fact the social and religious infrastructure of the country was literally crumbling. Internal warfare and
lawlessness and political chaos were common phenomena. Beside religious decadence, poverty, natural calamities and class distinctions worsened the scenario.

**A BREAKTHROUGH**

It was at this juncture that *Lord Swaminarayan* manifested on the earth. He was a total divinity embodied in human form. His divinity foresightedness and selfless service achieved what nothing or nobody could have ever achieved to purify, spiritualize and improvise the physical, mental, social and emotional self of an individual and the society.

At the age of eleven, *Lord Swaminarayan* renounced His worldly attachments and started for the journey. He walked bare footed throughout India. He visited many temples and places of worship. He was extremely grieved to see the morbid state of India. He resolved to set it free.

*Lord Swaminarayan* was not only a mere reformer but also a social activist, He declared the virtual war against the prevailing vices in the society. He launched revolutionary crusade to stop the degeneration and transformed the society into one enhanced by high culture and social values.

After rigorous journey He then settled in Kāthīwāḍ region in Gujarat province and engrossed Himself in the upliftment of the society and welfare of the people. He embarked on His mission of betterment from the grass root level. He guided innumerable downtrodden people and helped many out-streamed castes like Kāthīs to join the main course of civilization.

**AN ERA OF SOCIAL REFORMS**

Reform implies the restructuring of the existing form. There is a difference between Indian and Western idea of social reform. In India, it is not only restructuring of society but also inscribing novel ideas and thoughts into the existing social infrastructure. The reformer is a person who rescues
the society, plagued with the vices of various kinds by introducing innovative humanitarian ideology and moral code of behaviour. He advocates alteration in social customs and traditions to break the traditionally accepted patterns. He convinces the society to entirely modify the way of thinking and behaving and thereby transforms the whole outlook.

Indian society was fortunate enough to have a break through. Saints arose in different parts of the country, intent or correcting the injustices and cruelties of society and redeeming it: Jñāneśvara, Nāmadeva and Ekanātha in Maharashtra, Narasinh Mehta in Gujarat, Čaitanya in Bengāl, Kabīr in Uttar Pradesh, Vallabhācārya in Andhra and others. At that time, the influence of the preachings of three towering stalwarts; Rājā Rāmamohana Roy, Dayānand Saraswati and Sahajānand Swāmī was felt in almost every corner of human endeavour in India.

Rādhākrṣṇan had rightly remarked, “....All these stirred the people with a new feeling of devotion, love and humanity. They stressed that one’s religion was tested not by one’s beliefs but by one’s conduct. No heart which shuts out truth and love can be the abode of God.”

Rāmamohana Roy, the founder of Brāhmo Samāja is also called the father of Modern India. He was foremost among the campaigners for abolition of Saṭī and against British administrative injustice. For the abolition of Saṭī rite in 1829, he worked ceaselessly. He advocated culturally based education systems having both Indian and European subjects and encouraged translation and distribution of religious texts of the Upaniṣadas in Bengālī and English. He lived and died as a reformed Hindu.

In religious reformation, Rāmamohana Roy had one point programme. As Śivanāth Śāstri says, “The mission of Rāmamohana Roy was simple,
namely to call his country man to discard idolatry and come to the worship of One-True-God.”

The second social reformer Dayānand Saraswāti, the founder of Ārya Samāja was rugged individualist and a great thinker. His works were mainly focused on reformation and regeneration of Hinduism on the basis of Vedic study and the Vedic authority. He was opponent of idolatry, temple worship, pilgrimages and other religious practices. He sought purification of belief as well as practices By establishing virtually a new religion, the Vedic faith, based on reasoned interpretation of Vedas.

Another religious reformer in the 19th century was Mahātmā Rāmalingam (1823-1874) of the South India. He was a religious poet, too. He started with his small body of disciples, the sanmārga sangha. His preachings are centered against injustice of the caste system and inequality of man and woman.

On the other hand, Rāmkṛṣṇa Paramahansa was a mystic of dynamic force in Bengāl. Rāmkṛṣṇa’s impact on Bengāli thought has been inestimable and he has been credited with assisting the growth of national self-consciousness to a large extent. He gifted India with a revolutionary saint – Vivekānand who greatly influenced the pace of social reform. The Rāmkṛṣṇa Matha and mission have successfully led the dual purpose of contemplation and social action.

Comparing Him with other contemporary reformers Rājā Rāmamohan Roy, Keshub Čandra Sen, Dayānand Saraswatī and others, the late justice Mahādev Govind Rānade writes; “but the difference between all these and Swaminarayan lies in the fact that while they were influenced in one-way or the other by light from the western world, He was wholly untouched by any alien influence and was as purely Hindu in his mental and spiritual
constitution as any in the long role of teachers and reformers of our times, for in Him we see Hinduism in its purest and most indigenous form.”

**INNOVATIONS BY LORD SWAMINARAYAN**

> “vijñāne vilayam gate prasarati kṣonyām tamsyāntare
digmūdheshu bhavādhvageṣu parihaḥa pidaiśeṣe vidhau
kārūnyādavatūrya muktijanarnī śikṣāmadādhyāmimīm
sadādakṣārdhvadhyāmnilayastamanvaham cintaye”

When knowledge degenerated and ignorance prevailed in the world and people were confused in the performance of their duties; the scriptures were so misinterpreted as to justify actions which inflicted injuries on living beings, the Lord of *Aksārdhām* incarnated Himself on the earth out of compassion and gave to the mankind the most precious and eternal gift - *Śikṣāpatrī*.

*Lord Swaminarayan’s* innovations affected all the strata of the society, ranging from the lowest including the out caste of the society to the royal classes. By His love and compassion, His knowledge and practical ability, His foresightedness and divinity, He entirely changed the social and national scenario.

*Lord Swaminarayan* launched a crusade against literally every evil of the society. He made the people aware of their rights and duties. He brought about dynamic and drastic changes in the social order in which *Śikṣāpatrī* played the major role throughout the endeavour.

**Paramhansa movement**

To meet the gigantic challenge of reforming the society at all levels from all the dimensions, the most outstanding task that *Lord Swaminarayan* performed was the initiation of five hundred *paramahansas*. The striking feature of this phenomenal was that all of them were initiated in a span of
just one night. The Lord trained them physically, mentally and spiritually to remain unmoved in their crusading zeal, their swadharma and saintliness in order to pacify the enormous job of uplifting the society.

**Education**

To transform and uplift the society and to start a new era of self-respect and self-consciousness, social awareness is inevitable. The only effective media of bringing about the mass awareness is proper education – the education that influences not only the social behaviour and social status but also one’s mind and soul creatively. By appropriate education one can develop a self-discipline and thinking pattern that leads to social stability. Therefore, Lord Swaminarayan says,

“A ṭhaśālā (school) for teaching Sanskrit should be established and a learned preceptor should be appointed therein to impart the knowledge of sadvidyā.; for, varily, propagation of the spiritual lore is an act of great benediction.” ⁵

“My Brahmin devotees shall study these scriptures, and teach and narrate them to others.” ⁶

**Festival Purity and Ahimsak Yajñas**

The degradation of Hindu festivals was another evil in the contemporary society. In the name of religion and under the guise of propitiating deities, the caretaker of religion misled the society. They introduced false mode of devotion like immoral and evil rituals, adultery, gambling, partaking of meat and liquor as prasād. In fact, the festivals had become a media for the gratification of the senses.

Lord Swaminarayan advocated the sāttvic kinds of yajñas and sacrifices. He opposed the sacrifices in which animals were being killed. He
propagated the most appropriate method of performing sāttvic yajñas. He said,

“.... The correct procedure of sāttvic yaj纳斯 is to withdraw the ten senses and the eleventh mind from whatever objects they are attracted to and they should be offered into the fire of Brahma. Such yajña is called yoga yajña.”

“My disciples of means shall perform ahimsak yajnas.....”

To purify the festivals and uproot the innumerable evils that prevailed in the name of religion, Lord Swaminarayan says,

“None shall kill animals such as goat etc, even for the purpose of performing sacrifices or for propitiating a deity; for non-violence itself is avowedly held as the highest ethical code.”

“No one shall ever eat flesh, be it the remnant of offerings in a sacrifice....”

**Upliftment Of Woman**

It is rightly said that only such society and nation would prosper where the woman folk is duly respected and honoured. But it is seen that women had been neglected by society in all the spheres of life. They could hardly acquire even formal education. So, the question of religious instruction was beyond their reach. In fact in the history of Indian culture Lord Swaminarayan was the first person to liberate women in the true sense of the word. He not only arranged for the formal education but also took bold revolutionary steps to introduce special arrangements for the female devotees to read the scriptures and reach an exalted spiritual status.

*Sati prathā* i.e. a system whereby a lady whose husband expired was compelled to burn herself alive along with the dead body of her husband on the pyre. This prathā was predominantly prevalent in the society. Beside this
prathā there was also a system of killing a newborn baby girl by drowning her in a vessel filled with milk.

*Lord Swaminarayan* put a ban on all these evils and unethical social practices without any assistance from the government and paved a new way for the women in the society to live a respectable and dignified life. He also laid the foundation of a social atmosphere where even the widows could live their life with security and self-esteem. At the time when widows in the society were considered as a blot and inauspicious, *Lord Swaminarayan* in *Śiksāpatrī* inscribed fourteen out of two hundred and twelve verses which highlights His concern.

*Lord Swaminarayan’s* history is full of evidences where one comes across the incidents of welfare and upliftment of the most downtrodden women like prostitutes, for instance at the time of a *yajña* at Jetalpur, near Amadavad. For performing a service of grinding the wheat He blessed a prostitute with salvation equivalent to one of the elderly *paramahansa* Muktānand Swāmī.

Many a times *Swaminarayan* sect is accused of degrading the women but it was one of the *paramahans* - Muktānand Swāmī who at the command of *Lord Swaminarayan* authored *Sati Gītā* elaborating the norms and rules for the chaste women. This book also explains the spiritual significance of overcoming the *sati prathā*.

For the woman and widows to live a socially dignified and spiritually oriented life, *Lord Swaminarayan* in *Śiksāpatrī* says,

“..... married women should make only a round mark of *kumkum*.”

“Women whose husbands are away from town shall not decorate themselves with rich garments or ornaments, shall not visit another’s house and shall abstain from gossip and frivolity.”
“Widows shall not give anything in charity if the funds available with them are barely sufficient for their subsistence. Funds in excess thereof may be given in charity.”

“Widows shall avoid the company or touch a woman who advocates abortion; nor shall they indulge in speaking about or listening to amorous talks about males.”

“Young widows shall never keep the secluded company of young men, even if they are closely related to them except under unforeseen exigencies.”

“Widows shall serve God with the same fidelity with which they served their husbands and shall always remain under the authority of their father or sun, but shall never behave freely.”

LORD SWAMINARAYAN – A SAVIOUR OF CULTURE AND RELIGION

The contribution of Lord Swaminarayan to the preservation of cultural and religious values is also remarkable. It is mentioned in ‘Gujarat no rājakiya ane sanskrātik itihās’ that, “At this time, Swāmī Sahajānand started the revival of dharma while remaining within the confines of the traditional and societal Hindu frame work.”

Lord Swaminarayan not only propagated and preached the law of humanism but also practiced the same to its grass root level. He tried to put an end to the social evils like exploitation and corruption. Taught His devotees in particular and mankind in general to respect the elders, the sick and the learned. He also advocated the principle of generosity. Moreover, He virtually launched a war against the prevailing evil system of untouchability, caste system and superstitions.

“It is said that samanvaya that is reconciliation is the outstanding feature of Indian culture. One can find such samanvaya in Lord
Swaminarayan's social philosophy out and out. Though He was a staunch Vaiśnava, He accepted the identity of Nārāyaṇa and Śiva. "Samanvaya or reconciliation was the main cause, if not the only cause of his immense popularity from the day He arrived in Gujarat. That remains true till today."

Lord Swaminarayan uprooted malpractices, hedonistic and superstitious beliefs embedded in different sects and cults. In spite of strong opposition and resistance from many sects, He sawed the seeds of the high standard of ethics, morality and purity of character in His disciples through Śikṣāpatrī. To protect His disciples from the polarities prevalent in different sects, Lord Swaminarayan advises in Vaśanāṁṛta to abstain the company of evil persons, He says,

"There are four kinds of evil persons, kudāpanthīs (followers of a sect which propagated debauchery), Śaktipanthīs (followers of a sect devoted to goddess of Śakti – power), Śuṣka Vedāntī (followers of the barren Vedānta philosophy) and Nastik (atheists). The company of kudāpathīs causes a person to fall from the path of swadharma by tempting him to break his sacred vows. The company of shaktipanthi makes a person eat meat and drink wine, and thus causes him to fall from the path of swadharma. The company of Śuṣka vedāntī tries to falsify the divine abode of God and His divine form and other forms of images of his various incarnations and thus, makes the devotee to degrade from his devotion and service into God. The atheist tries to disprove the very existence of God, Bhagavān Śrī Kṛṣṇa. He tries to establish the supremacy of Karma and will make the person degrade from the path laid down by the holy scriptures."19

In this way Lord Swaminarayan diverted His disciples from pseudo sect towards the Bhagavat dharma.
“With a fervent faith in His special relationship to a theistic God, He encouraged His followers to regard Him as an incarnation of the Divine, comparable to Kṛṣṇa. Although, typically tolerant of different faiths, Swaminarayan made two exceptions and attacked vigorously the monistic teachings of Śankarā and atheism of Jain religion, whose stronghold was in Gujarat.”

**LORD SWAMINARAYAN – A REVOLUTIONARY**

The condemned animalistic behaviour needs evolution. The evolution is the ascendancy of the race, its ascendancy of culture, qualities, merits, intellect, morality and spirituality.

But, the task of Lord Swaminarayan differs from the other contemporary social reformers such as Rājā Rāmamohana Roy, Dayānand Saraswātī, Keśuv Čandra Sen. While these reformers tried to decrease evils and crimes; Lord Swaminarayan demolished them from the human instinct. He not only demolished evils, but also replaced them by virtues. He replaced swords by rosaries.

*Lord Swaminarayan* transformed ordinary characters into great personalities that created history. A renowned decoit – Joban Pagi in Saurashtra (Gujarat) who was known for his wrath and uncouth ways was transformed into a dedicated devotional character and a living symbol of spiritual principle by *Lord Swaminarayan*. There are innumerable instances of His revolutionary work. He changed the lives of many from sheer animalhood to living legends of spirituality.

In fact it was *Lord Swaminarayan*’s social work and social reforms that were the foundations on which He built the monument of His divine mission, i.e. *Bhāgvat Dharma* – the cardinal work of His life time. Indeed it’s a hallmark in history of spirituality.
One of the significant revolutions that Lord Swaminarayan undertook in the field of spirituality was the total separation of men from women in religious congregations and meetings. *Nîškām dharma* was one of His leading principles. He for the first time laid down strict discipline for the *sādhus* and *paramahansas*. He insisted to follow the eightfold path of celibacy.

Taking note of the same, Shri N.A. Thoothi has rightly quoted that "It may be mentioned, also, that evils within the Vallabhi fold bloom especially large before the public eye only because of the publicity given to them in the Maharaja Libel Case. On examination, the other *sampradāyas* would not escape censure. No wonder, therefore, that due to such deplorable practices, the first and the most important reform urged and carried out by *Swaminarayan* was that males and females were not allowed to enter for worship in one another's room in a temple." 21

A renowned scholar and author of Gujarat, Kishorelāl Mashurwālā summarizes this work in *Sahajanand Swāmī athawā Swaminarayan Sampradāya* : "At a time when Gujarāt – Kāthiawād was steeped in darkness, turbulence and turmoil, *Lord Swaminarayan* enlightened infinite broken and depressed hearts. He inspired thousands to dedicate their lives for the benevolent cause. He uprooted the looting instincts of many Kathis and Kolis. He re-established the extinct *Brahmaçarya āśrama*. He enlightened the renunciate order that had become uncontrolled and wanton. He laid down the ideals of self-control for the Guru and Ācāryas who were fallen. He uplifted the woman by well-defining their status in society and the *sampradāya*. He accepted non-Hindus in to the main-stream of Hindu dharma. He preached the purity of conduct to the *śudras* (low castes). He promoted literature, music and arts. He propounded *ahimsak yajnas*. He preached the motto of forget and forgive. He was a founder of righteous
conduct and purity of life. He governed paths of pure bhakti and jñāna. He taught Bhāgvat dharma and extolled the principles of Ved Vyās.

If incarnations do occur on earth, then Lord Swaminarayan can, without doubt, be addressed as ‘SARVĀVATĀRĪ’ and Swaminarayan sect as ‘WORLD RELIGION’.”

Even if any stranger glances at Lord Swaminarayan’s life and philosophy, the way of His working, the life and life style of His devotees, the scriptures written by Him, the boons that He has conferred upon the mankind, he would definitely conclude that all these can never be done by any ordinary saint, prophet or messenger of god, but it is only possible with the divinity in Toto and the Supreme power incarnated.

ŚIKŚĀPATRĪ AND HUMANISM

Humanism is defined as “Any system or thought or action that is concerned with merely human interest (as distinguished from divine) or with those of the human race in general.”

The religion that is universally and unanimously accepted the world over is the religion of humanity. Great sages, social reformers, and other prominent personalities of the world have laid great significance on humanity.

The principle of ahimsā is based on the faith of unity of the existence. If ultimate reality is all-pervasive and does not create any barrier between man and man, then the denial of equality to all human being is not only politically unjust but spiritually sinful. Gandhiji says, “There cannot be happiness for any of us until it is won for all.” This was the underlying principle at the root of his inspiration for the crusade against British imperialism in India.
Similarly, the concept of universal goodness underlies Vinobā Bhāve’s mission of Bhūdān movement that was in line with Gāndhījī’s Sarvodaya movement. Vinobājī’s unaltered faith in the essential goodness of men made Bhūdān a spiritual pilgrimage to the shrine of a new odour of society.

The chief characteristics of humanism is antifetalism, faith in human destiny, synthesis of religion and philosophy, emphasis upon moral values. Humanist lays emphasis upon practical nature of truth. He harmonizes individual welfare with social welfare. Humanism in Indian philosophy is called spiritual humanism as it emphasizes upon the spiritual nature of man.

The prime principle of humanism is to think of the fellow man who is in distress and help him accordingly. Carefully examining the act of helping other we come to the end reality that though apparently we help the world but really we are helping ourselves. It is not the receiver but the giver who is blessed. Be thankful that you are allowed to exercise your power of benevolence and mercy in the world and thus become pure and perfect.

Only the blessed have the knowledge and ability to serve their fellow men. Those who serve the society with all their ability are freed of all the sins. This is the underlying principle of Hindu socialism based upon the guidance for the evolution of man towards Godhood.

The righteous attitude towards our fellow beings and other living creatures has been promoted by almost every religion through certain ethical and moral values for the upliftment of humanity. Vyās reveals this in the simple but profound aphorism, ‘paropakārāya punyāya, pāpāya, parapidānam’, doing good to others is virtue, harming others is sin.
To lay down a strong footing for the cause of humanity and to sustain it for the time eternal, He encoded the sublime principles of humanity in His Śīkṣāpatrī in which He says that,

“One who has engaged servants should take proper care according to his means of their food and clothing.”

“...My disciples should be charitable and compassionate to the poor according to their means.”

“In the event of any man-made or nature-inflicted calamity or sickness, one shall try to take precautions to save one’s self and others; but none should behave otherwise.”

“Anyone who enters the temple with a desire to have food shall be so served and treated hospitably according to the means available.”

“My disciples shall serve their parents, preceptors and ailing persons till they live to the best of their ability.”

“My disciples of means shall celebrate the religious festivals in temples with great pomp and enthusiasm and shall give alms to the deserving Brahmins.”

“...The householders shall give alms according to their means and the ascetics shall worship God.”

“And then, they shall read hymns or a religious text as suited to their ability, and should who are not acquainted with Sanskrit may sing a song in praise and adoration of Śrī Kṛṣṇa.”

“All my devotees shall invariably follow the course prescribed above and shall also study religious works in Sanskrit and vernacular to the best of their knowledge.”

“All my devotees shall as a rule read the Śīkṣāpatrī daily and those who cannot read it shall listen to its recital with great devotion.”

“None shall praise devotion to Śrī Kṛṣṇa disregarding religious tenets nor shall he give up the worship of Śrī Kṛṣṇa for fear of calumny by the ignorant.”
"In the event of affliction caused by an evil spirit, recourse should be taken to the chanting of Nārāyanā Kavaṭa or the Hanuman Strotam; but in no case invocation of any inferior deity be resorted to." 35

LORD SWAMINARAYAN – PROPOUNDER OF SPIRITUAL HUMANISM

It is a kind of humanism in which service is not focused merely on the outer entity as physical body, but on the inner entity as a divine body. It creates an example of pure and righteous living. It is practicing moral, religious and spiritual life either personally or collectively.

One qualifies himself to serve the God only when he learns to serve man. Lord Swaminarayan says, when any action that is performed only with the motive of the welfare of others is called sevā. It is not the prerogative of the wealthy and powerful. It can be in the any form i.e. a word of sympathy, sharing sorrows, instilling optimistic thoughts in desperate souls, directing them towards God, showing the way of honesty to the dishonest and likewise.

RadhaKrishnan in his book ‘An Idealistic View of Life’, says that humanism is a substitute to religion. It is possible that a layman might not understand the principles of religion and spirituality. So, in order to reach the climax of spirituality, one may start with humanism and then gradually switch over to the principle of spiritual humanism where God and not the man exist at the center of every activity.

Being a pioneer in the field of human service, Lord Swaminarayan knew the fact as long as the people are poor and hungry, they can never understand the idea of humanity or God nor would they be able to
understand the ethics and spirituality. That’s why He personally arranged and monitored the primary needs of His devotees and society at large.

In the name of religion, misbeliefs and superstitions were rampantly prevalent. Lord Swaminarayan convinced the society to opt for ways and means that were not degenerative and inhuman.

Jesus Christ said, ‘Service unto mankind is service unto God’. This was perhaps the first direct reference to humanity as a path to attain God. Lord Swaminarayan moved a step ahead and explained, Serve your fellow devotees (humans) as my own self. He still went farther, to say, I am the sevak of the most lowly servant of God. In the history, this perhaps is the ultimate reference of ultimate humanism.

“Swaminarayan’s social reform doctrine was based on humanitarianism and the religious premise of the equal accessibility of salvation to all, through Bhakti.”

Lord Swaminarayan has distinctively remarked, “My innate nature is that ‘I am the devotee of a true devotee of the Lord. I offer my devotion to the Lord’s devotee. This is the only great virtue in Me’.” He finally conveys His sublime principle as, “The only surest way to please the Lord is to serve His devotee by mind, word and deed and the only surest way to displease the Lord is treachery of His devotee.”

Thus, spiritual humanism as propounded by Swāmī Sahajānand is the only solution to the ills of present day society and the world. Different problems like individual frustration and social chaos could be solved by the remedies of spiritual humanism. In it, man, society and God are interwoven in a subtle and comprehensive way. Individual, family, social groups and country as a whole are transformed and directed towards the single aim of divinity.
The spiritual humanism of Lord Swaminarayan is universal and dynamic. It appeals to all human beings alike irrespective of caste or creed. It does not admit of any boundary, frontier or geography. It is idealistic and altruistic. Its aim and inspiration is to eliminate ego, vanity, selfishness and to promote welfare, goodness and spiritual benevolence. Such an enlightening way of life and activity is the only panacea for the whole mankind.

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