Chapter 3

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India has a long history of socio-religious reform movements. However, the present work focuses on the social reform movements of Nineteenth century only. The reforms by definition entail change or replacement of the institutions, which have become functionally irrelevant (totally or partly) to the contemporary social order and are responsible for low quality of life, deprivations, unrest an misery to the sizeable sections of the society. Etymologically, ‘reform’ means ‘forming again’, ‘reconstruct’, which can be done only when a system is first demolished; but social reform envisages ‘amendment’, ‘improvement’ etc.; thus entailing peaceful crusading, use of non-violent means for change and change in slow speed. A reform movement is a kind of social movement that aims at making gradual change, or changes in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental changes. A reform movement is distinguished from more radical social movements such as revolutionary movements.

In India, social reform did not ordinarily mean a reorganisation of the structuring of society at large, as it did in the West, for the benefit of underprivileged social and economic classes. Instead, it meant the infusion into the existing social structure of the new ways of life and thought; the society would be preserved, while its members would be transformed. Nineteenth century is the period of turmoil in Indian society. The age-old traditions and practices were degraded and these were replaced by many social evils.
like female infanticide, *sati*, child-marriage, caste system, purdah; ban on female education, and widow re-marriage etc. The beginning of the social reform movements in India in the nineteenth century were clearly the outcome of coming in contact of two different societies- totally different from each other. On the one hand, there is the traditional orthodox Society and on the other hand is the English educated young generation. It is regarded as the product of the English education which brought the young India into contact with the Age of illumination in Europe. It is the age which proclaimed the supremacy of reason over faith, of individual conscience over outside authority and brought in its train new conceptions of human rights and social justice. The introduction of English education helps a lot in bringing about a great transformation in Indian society. A group of young people of India who came in contact with the new system of education became familiar with the liberal and rational thinking of Europe and they revolted against the tyranny of dogma and traditional authorities, beliefs, customs and age-old practices. The impact of English education in India is both positive as well as negative. However, the first and foremost positive effect is that it instilled into the minds of Indians a spirit of rational enquiry into the basis of their religion and society. There was the replacement of blind faith in current traditions, beliefs, and conventions-characteristics of Medieval Age- by a spirit of rationalism, which is the distinctive feature of the Modern Age. In short, there is a transition from the Medieval Age to the Modern Age.

In nineteenth century, a large number of individuals as well as a number of organisations took active role in social reform movement. However, the story of Indian social reform movement practically began with Rāja Rāmmohan Roy (1774-1833). The
advent of Rāja Rāmmohan Roy marks the line of demarcation between the dark middle age and the modern age of ‘enlightment’.5 He is a multifaceted personality - a rationalist, free thinker, a stem fighter against social evils, humanitarian, a social and religious reformer. As a religious reformer, Rāmmohan is opposed to idolatry and polytheism. He aims at establishing monotheism and the worship of one formless God. As a social reformer, he fights for the cause of women, especially to eradicate the evil practice of sati, and abolition of caste discrimination. He supports the spread of Western knowledge.

BRĀHMO SAMĀJ : In 1815 Rāmmohan Roy forms ‘Āmiya Sabhā’ (Association of Friends), an association for holding religious discussions. In 1828, he forms ‘Brāhmo Sabhā’ which later on became famous as ‘Brāhmo Samāj’. This Brāhmo Samāj movement is the most remarkable aspect of the nineteenth century Indian awakening and reform.6 It attacks almost all evils prevalent in the then Indian society and tries to eradicate them. Rāmmohan Roy is the first person in modern India to fight against the social discrimination against women. Among the various reform activities of Rāmmohan, the most significant one is his crusade against ‘Satidāha’ or immolation of the widows at the funeral pyre of their dead husband. In July, 1819, he starts ‘Sambād Kaumudi’, a Bengali journal in which he ceaselessly attacks the practice of sati rite. Some other newspapers like the ‘Samāchār Darpan’ and ‘Bangadut’ supports Rāmmohan’s stand; while the ‘Samāchār Chandrikā’ defends the practice of sati. He writes many articles both in Bengali and in English against this evil practice and tries to make people aware that such practice was not sanctioned by the Vedic religions. He starts an organised movement against this horrible practice. The orthodox section of the society led by Rādhākanta Deb, Mahārāja Kālikṛṣṇa Bāhādur and others severely opposed at
Rāmmohan’s attempt. But these oppositions could not desist Rāmmohan from his objective. At first he is not in favour of state interference for the abolition of this practice. His main intention in this regard is to inject in the minds of the people such enlightenment as to desist them from practicing this evil practice. But when Lord William Bentinck abolished it by Regulation XVII passed on December 1829, he fully supports it.

Rāmmohan Roy is against the perverted caste system of his time. He is of the opinion that caste system is one of the causes of the political subjugation of India. About the demerits of the caste system he writes, “The present system of religion, adhered to by the Hindus, is not at all well calculated to promote their political interest. The distinctions of castes introducing innumerable divisions and subdivisions among them has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling and the multitude of religious ties and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from undertaking any difficult enterprise. It is, I think, necessary that some changes should take place in their religion, at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.” To him, the hereditary claim of a higher caste is absurd. He repudiates Manu’s injunction that the lower caste people cannot study the Vedas. He translates a Mahāyāna Buddhist text ‘Vajrasuchi’ and holds that each one is born a Śudra, becomes a Dwija receiving a sacred thread, a Vipra with the Vedic Knowledge, and a Brahmin with the divine knowledge. He is dead against untouchability and branded it as undemocratic, inhuman and anti-national. A study of his tract ‘Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females’ published in 1822 reveals that Rāmmohan is against polygamy, kulinism and the practice of selling girls in marriage. He has firm conviction that evil practices like kulinism, sati etc. had crept into the Indian society as a result of intellectual
stagnation and misdirected instincts of such law-givers who wanted to maintain their predominance in the society. He dedicates his whole life to abolish the cruel practice of *sati*. He defends the legal rights of women and supports their rights to education. Another great contribution of Rāmmohan is to support modern English education. Evaluating the contribution of Rājā Rāmmohan Roy, Dr. H.C.E. Zacharias writes, “Rājā Rāmmohan Roy and his Brāhmo Samāj forms the starting point for all the various reform movements whether in Hindu religion, society or politics- which have agitated India during the past hundred years and which have led to her wonderful renaissance in these our own days.”

Though Rāmmohan is the pioneer of Indian social reform movement, yet his reform measures fail to touch the basic problems faced by the Indian masses, viz., poverty, ignorance and illiteracy. It is often said that Rāmmohan had no programme of mass education or mass uplift whatsoever. He criticises the prevalent caste system of his time and seeks to abolish caste discrimination. But in his day to day life he uses to put on the sacred thread which is a mark of *Brahmin*. Romain Rolland points out that Rāmmohan’s ‘Universal Religion’ fell short of true universalism since he failed to recognise religious realities in the form of polytheism professed by world’s two-third population scattered all over the world.

After the death of Rāmmohan Roy, the Brāhmo movement is carried on by Debendranāth Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen. **Debendranāth Tagore (1817-1905)** assumes the leadership of Brāhmo Samāj in 1843. It has been rightly said that if Rāmmohan laid the foundation stone of Brāhmoism, it was Debendranāth, its architect, who first raised impressive structure upon it. Rāmmohan Roy denounces the belief in
polytheism, but he never questions the authority of the Vedas, and considers them as infallible. But Debendranāth denies the infallibility of the Vedas and gave the Brāhmo Samāj a distinctly sectarian character. He relies on the Upaniṣads. He sets before himself the task of reform and reorganisation. He introduces a regular form of service. In 1839 he forms ‘Tattvabodhini Sabhā’ which became the main organisational wing of the Samāj. Later it merged into Brāhmo Samāj. In order to popularise the ideals of Brāhmo Samāj he starts the ‘Tattvabodhini Patrika’, a Bengali monthly in August, 1843. On August 1961, he starts the ‘Indian Mirror’, the first English daily journal with Keshab Chandra Sen as its editor. Under his influence a large number of youths joined the Brāhmo movement. However, the Brāhmo movement became an all India movement under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen.

**Keshab Chandra Sen** (1838-1884) joins Brāhmo Samāj in 1857 and assumes its leadership in 1861. He remarks that all social reforms are involved in a great radical reformation-religious reformation. “I do not undervalue social reformation”, he declares, “but make religion the basis on which reorganised, reformed and regenerated India will stand in future.”¹³ He establishes Sangat Sabhā for discussing religious and moral questions. He is in favour of radical reforms which were not liked by the older section of the Samāj. The younger section also opposes the wearing of Brāhmanical thread. Debendranāth Tagore is not against social reform but he and his followers wants to keep social life out of the purview of religious life.¹⁴ All these led to an open conflict between the older and the younger sections and as a result of such conflict Keshab Chandra Sen breaks away from the original Brāhmo Samāj in 1866. He forms a new organisation known as ‘the Brāhmo Samāj of India’ or ‘Bhāratiya Brāhmo Samāj’. The original
organisation, henceforth known as the Ādi Brāhma Samāj, quietly followed the pure monotheistic form of Hinduism. Shortly after the division of the Samāj, Debendranāth Tagore retires from active participation in the work of the Ādi Brāhma Samāj, and Rājnārayaṇ Bose became its president. But in spite of the tremendous personal effort of its leader, it soon went into oblivion.

The new organisation of Keshab Chandra Sen adopts radical reforms such as abolition of Purdah, caste system, child-marriage, and polygamy; encourages widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage. Though both Rāmmohan Roy and Debendranāth Tagore repudiate caste system yet it is Keshab Chandra Sen who repudiates it without involving any scriptural authority. Keshab Chandra realises that unless the difference between the classes and masses, between the high castes and low castes, between the various creeds are eliminated, no national unity is possible, and consequently no solution of problems is possible. He is also pioneer in starting the Depressed Class movement which is the precursor of the Harijan Movement of M.K. Gāndhi. Along with his followers he set up a number of educational institutions for female education. It is because of the active efforts of the Bhāratiya Brāhma Samāj, the Native Marriage Act (Act III) is passed in 1872. It legalised unorthodox casteless marriage and banned polygamy. It fixes the minimum marriageable age of the girls at 14 and of the boys at 18. But Keshab Chandra himself violates this Act in case of the marriage of his elder daughter and this creates conflict among his followers. Consequently, some Brāhmos breaks away from his organisation and forms Sādhāraṇa Brāhma Samāj in 1878.
The Brâhmo movement of Keshab Chandra Sen takes a new turn when he comes in contact with Sri Râmakrishna. The Bhakti element becomes stronger in him and in 1880 he declares his ‘Naba-bidhân’ or the ‘New Dispensation’. It gives much emphasis on ‘Mother Goddess’. This is a remarkable change from original Brâhmo movement- a shift from ‘Jnana’ (knowledge) to ‘Bhakti’ (intense devotion). A feature of this new trend is the growth of Nagar Sankirtan. Scholars like Max Muller and Christopher Isherwood have attributed this change of Keshab Chandra Sen’s religious ideas and convictions to the influence of Sri Râmakrishna.

The Brâhmo Samâj movement gives a new life to Indian society in its all spheres. It leads the first organised movement against the evil practices of Hindu society and religion, and paves the way for other movements. It adopts many progressive steps like inter-caste marriage, education of women, widow re-marriage and the like as practical measures for removing social evils. It opens a large number of educational institutions which contributes in enlightening and modernising the Indians. It helps in building national sentiments among the Indians. But the main drawback of Brâhmo Samâj is that it could not break the walls of conservation and communicate its ideologies to the common people.

**YOUNG BENGAL MOVEMENT**: Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-1831), a young Anglo-Indian teacher of Hindu College initiates this movement. His followers were also known as Derozians. Rev. Krishnamohan Bondopâdhyây, Tarachand Chakraborty, Dakshinaranjan Mukhopâdhyây, Ramgopal Ghosh, Ramtanu Lahiri, Paryachand Mitra were the important members of this group. Derozio inspires his
students to think rationally and freely. His motto is: ‘he who will not reason is a bigot; he who cannot is a fool, and he who does not is a slave’. Most of the supporters of this movement were Christians by faith. They use to follow Western culture, dress, food and manners. The Derozians were dead against the old, obsolete social customs of Hindu society of that time and protests against idolatry, polygamy, child-marriage, dowry, caste system, and the system of purdah. They were supporters of female education, widow re-marriage, individual liberty, abolition of *Sati* etc.. One remarkable contribution of the Derozians is the establishment of the Calcutta Public Library in 1935 which later on becomes National Library, the biggest library in the country. They advocates for mass education, particularly education for women, and supports Western education. They set up a few schools at their own cost and they were in favour of introduction of mother tongue as the medium of instruction.

But the followers of this movement were radicalists and their radicalism is bookish. They consider everything of Hinduism as bad, obsolete and valueless. They failed to grasp the realities of Indian society and as a result it could not last long. Nemai Sādhan Bose remarked that the Young Bengal Movement was like a mighty storm that tried to sweep away everything before it. It was a storm that lashed society with violence causing some good and perhaps naturally, some discomfort and distress. Though this movement is short lived, yet it contributed immensely to the reform movement of 19th Century.

**PRĀRTHANĀ SAMĀJ:** The Prārthanā Samāj was established by Dr. Ātmārām Pandurang (1823-1898) in Mahārāstra in 1867. It is an offshoot of Brāhmo Samāj and
K.C. Sen is a source of inspiration for this organisation. R.G.Bhānderkar, and Mahādev Gobinda Rāṇāde were the main pillars of this Samāj. It is under the leadership and guidance of Rāṇāde (1842-1901) that Prārthanā Samāj takes active role in social reform. It emphasises universal brotherhood and equality of all castes. Rāṇāde believes that there was an ideal Hindu society in old days, but evils crept in it during a period of depression, when in panic and weakness, a compromise was made with the brute forces of ignorance and superstition. To Rāṇāde, therefore, reform is merely the work of liberating society from the restraints that were wrongly imposed upon it. His vision of reform is so sweeping as to cover all aspects of human life. In his scheme of social reform, the whole existence is to be regenerated. He says, “The change which we should all seek is a change from constraints to freedom, from credulity to faith, from status to contract, from authority to reason, from blind fatalism to human dignity”. He considers social reform as an obligatory duty and not mere pastime. To him, a true reformer has not to write on a clean slate, but to complete the half written sentence.

Rāṇāde attacks many existing social customs and practices only because of their uselessness in his time. He strongly protests against infant or child-marriage and considers it as harmful, unjustified and unscientific. He strongly denounces the institutions of polygamy and polyandry. Rāṇāde is one of the seventy two all India leaders launched the Indian National Congress in 1885. He is of opinion that political movements and social reforms should go together. But when he found that Congress restricted its sphere of work to politics only, he forms the Indian National Social Conference in 1887. He becomes its General Secretary and develops principles of the movement as a whole in relation to the political and religious movements of his time.
The followers of Prārthanā Samāj establishes a few associations like the Widow Remarriage Association, Deccān Educational Society, the Depressed Classes Mission etc. in Mahārāstra and carries on social and religious reform movements through them. They devote themselves to reform works such as inter-caste dining and marriage, remarriage of widows and improvement of the lot of women. They severely attack the prevailing caste system of that time. They emphasises on the principle of increasing the age of marriage for both male and female. They were in favour of women education and takes active role in spreading education among them. Prārthanā Samāj had several branches in other states like Andhra Pradesh and Karṇātaka.

ĀRYA SAMĀJ : Swāmi Dayānanda Saraswati (1824-1883) is an important figure in Indian socio-religious reform movement. He says, “The world is fettered by the chain forged by superstition and ignorance. I have come to snap asunder that chain and to set slaves at liberty”. He establishes the Ārya Samāj in Mumbai on April 10, 1875. Later on several branches of this organisation has been formed in different parts of the country. The main aims of this organisation were--abolition of image worship and sub-castes, to provide social service through education and charitable enterprises.

From the very beginning, it is anti-West in its tone. It has its foundation on the Vedas and through it Swāmi Dayānanda gives a call ‘Go back to the Vedas’. He pleads that the study of the Vedas be made open to all. He strongly criticises the hereditary basis of caste system and the belief in the superiority of Brāhmins over the other caste groups. The Ārya Samāj for the first time focuses attention on the deplorable condition of the untouchables. It startes a crusade against untouchability and tries to ameliorate the social
status of untouchables. It pleads equal rights for both male and female. It severely
criticises the practice of child-marriage and the minimum marriageable age for girls and
boys being fixed respectively at 16 and 25. Ārya Samāj opposes polygamy, purdah,
practice of Sati etc. and encourages inter-caste marriage. But the most remarkable feature
of Ārya Samāj is the ‘Śuddhi Movement’. It is an effort to take back the converted
Muslims and Christians into Hindu-fold after purifying them. Two distinctive features of
Ārya Samāj were social services like famine relief and spread of English education.

Ārya Samāj emphasises removal of illiteracy to dispel orthodoxy and darkness
from the society. It establishes a large number of educational institutions in India for the
education of both male and female. Gurukuls provide education mostly of Sanskrit, the
Vedas, Āyurvedas etc. Dayānanda Anglo Vedic (DAV) schools and colleges provide
modern education in Humanities and Sciences. It also contributes towards arousing
national consciousness. Many national leaders like B.G.Tilok, Lālā Lājpat Rai and G.K.
Gokhale were deeply influenced by the philosophy and principles of the Ārya Samāj.

Ārya Samāj is little more extreme and more conservative and angular in its
outlook towards the Vedic scripture. Jawāharlāl Nehru remarked that Ārya Samāj was a
reforming movement from within as well as a defence organisation for protest against
external attack.\textsuperscript{18}

**THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY** : It is founded in 1875 at New York by Madame
H.P.Blavatsky and Col. H.S. Olcott. Theosophical Society is not a sect or religion. The
members of this society were free to follow their own religion. The leaders of this society
want to spread their activity in India. In 1878 they open correspondence with Swāmi
Dayānanda Saraswati and seek to work together. Accordingly the International headquarter of the society has been shifted to Ādyar, near Chennai in 1882. It becomes an all India movement when Mrs. Annie Besant assumes its Presidentship in 1907. It has changed the attitude of English educated youths from contempt and scepticism towards their religion and culture to that of love and enthusiasm for them. The Theosophical society is responsible for the revival of the Eastern faiths, the checking of the destructive effects of missionary zeal, the establishment of an Indian ideal of education, the inspiring of self-respect in Indians, of pride in their past, of hope in their future, and the creation of the national spirit now throbbing throughout the land.¹⁹

Like the Ārya Samājists, the theosophists also gives special attention to the depressed classes of the society. They try their best to better the condition of these people. But unlike the other organisations of that time, they looked the problem from the point of view of health and hygiene and not from the point of view of religion. The greatest contribution of this society in India is the establishment of several educational institutions for spreading education among the masses as well as for promoting higher education. Mrs. Besant opened a number of schools at Ādyar in the South and Benāras in the North. She took a leading role in the establishment of Banāras Central Hindu School which ultimately merged with Benāras Hindu University. The theosophists were against child-marriage and they campaigns for post puberty marriage. It plays a considerable part in re-awakening of India. But after the death of Annie Besant in 1933, this organisation lost its importance and soon went to oblivion. In his book ‘Renascent India’, Zacharias ends his chapter on theosophy thus, “I think it is no exaggeration to say that, in India at least, it is already a thing with only a past and without a future”.²⁰
PANDIT ISWAR CHANDRA VIDYĀŚĀGAR & SOME OTHER REFORMERS:

Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyāśāgar (1820-1891) was born in an orthodox Hindu Brāhmin family, but he was very liberal in his outlook. He feels sorry and compassionate for the poor, weak and needy. For his charity and philanthropy he is known as ‘Dayār-sāgar’- ocean of kindness. He prefers to work for social reform without being associated with any socio-religious organisation of his time. He dedicates his whole life for the betterment of the condition of the child widows of the Hindu society. He works particularly for the upliftment of Indian women. He raises his voice in favour of the marriage of the widows and a movement emerges in its favour under his leadership. Because of his continuous efforts, the Government passed the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act in 1856 which legalised the marriage of widows. The first lawful Hindu widow remarriage among the upper castes is celebrated in Calcutta on December 7, 1856, under the supervision of Vidyāśāgar. He is against child-marriage and launches a powerful agitation against kulinism and polygamy. Kulinism was a remarkable system that had evolved in Bengal during the reign of Ballāl Sen in the 12th Century. Due to the shortage of kulin bridegrooms, a large number of girls were used to be married to the same groom, often simultaneously on the same nuptial night. So polygamy was the natural result of kulinism. Sometimes very young girls were married to very aged persons who were on the verge of death, and as a result there were speedy widowhood. A kulin brāhmin groom used to take honoraria to visit his wife and naturally it becomes a means of livelihood for him; and so he used to marry as many women as he could. Rāmmohan Roy also protests against kulinism and polygamy, but it was Vidyāśāgar who starts a powerful crusade against the entire system. He continues to write against these practices
and tries to make people aware of its evil effects. However, with the spread of education and change of public attitudes, kulinism died a natural death.

Vidyāsāgar’s heartfelt for the oppressed section of the society and he tries his best to better their condition. He is against untouchability and even dined with them. He opened the doors of Sanskrit College for the lower caste students which were previously meant for Brāhmin students only. He is in favour of education of the girls and set up nearly 35 girls’ schools, many of which were run at his own cost. He rendered yeoman’s service to the cause of women’s education in Bengal.

KENDUKURI VEERESĀLINGAM: Veeresālingam (1848-1919) worked for the social reformation in Andhra Pradesh. Throughout his lifetime he works for the betterment of the condition of women. He dedicates his life in eradicating social evils concerning Indian women. He supports the cause of Western education, education of women and co-education. He raises his voice against the prevalent social evils like child-marriage, dowry and marriage of young girls with aged persons. He preaches against corruption and the system of Devdāsis and prostitutes. He starts ‘Widows’ Remarriage Society’ in 1881 and supports and arranges the remarriage of widows. He starts several educational institutions of different categories: day schools for adult women, night schools for workers, and schools for Harijans. He gives stress on vocational education. Because of his immense service for the betterment of women, Mahādev Gobinda Rāṇāde calls him Iswar Chandra Vidyāsāgar of the Deccān.

VIṢNU ŚĀSTRI PANDIT (1827-1876) did the same work in Mahārāstra. He is known as the Vidyāsāgar of Mahārāstra for his crusade for widow re-marriage.
JYOTIBĀ PHULE: Jyotibā Phule (1827-1890) is a leading social reformer of the nineteenth century India from Mahārāstra. Along with Justice Mahādev Gobinda Rānāde he founded Satya Shodhak Samāj (Truth Seekers’ Society). The main objective of the Samāj is to make the lower class people aware of their civil rights and free themselves from religious and emotional slavery imposed by Brahminical scriptures. He asserts that all men are children of one God and protests against priesthood. Phule launches a powerful movement against the supremacy of Brāhmins and fights for the cause of lower class people. He is against untouchability and tries his best to eradicate this evil practice from society. He advocates equal rights of freedom to all human beings without discriminating sex, caste, religion and colour. Through his writings and deeds he makes continuous efforts to improve the condition of women and masses. He is the mouthpiece of native Indians and the suppressed women who fought for their equal rights. He led a movement against the prevailing caste restrictions in India and revolts against the domination of the Brahmins. Through his Satya Shodhak Samāj, he fights for the rights of the peasants and other lower caste people. He tries to instil courage, enthusiasm and self-reliance among them and to make them aware of their rights. Phule is in favour of female education and establishes schools for them. He supports widow re-marriage and takes active steps to propagate the remarriage of widows. He is believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children.

There were many such reform movements throughout the country but most of them were regional in approach.
RĀMAKRISHNA-VIVEKĀNANDA MOVEMENT: The 2nd half of the 19th century witnessed a tremendous upheaval in the religious, social and cultural arena. It is the direct outcome of the Rāmakrishna-Vivekānanda movement.

Sri Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886), earlier known as Gadādhar Chattopādhyāya, is a great spiritual leader of India. Though he has not received the so-called higher education, yet he was an ocean of true knowledge. He practised various religious forms and ultimately came to the realisation ‘Yata mat tata path’ i.e., different creeds are but different paths to reach the same God. He used to lead a very simple life and tried to explain different social and religious issues in very eloquent language. He realised the inherent divinity of human beings and emphasised the service of mankind as a means of salvation. Swāmi Vivekānanda is his greatest disciple who carries the message of his Master all over India as well as in Western countries.

Vivekānanda was born at a time when Brāhmo Samāj under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen was exerting powerful influence upon the minds of the educated peoples, especially, the youths. Naturally, Vivekānanda, known as Naren at that time was also got attracted towards it. But he is not a blind follower of Brāhmo Samāj. His contact with Sri Rāmakrishna at the age of 18 in 1881 marks a turning point in his life. Young Naren becomes very much influenced by the simple but practical teachings of Sri Rāmakrishna. Under the influence of his Master he gave up his thought of own salvation and dedicates his whole life for the uplift of the masses. Though a monk and a spiritual personality he does not turn off his eyes from the problems faced by Indian society. On
the contrary, he tries to penetrate deep into the root of the problems and to find out their solutions.

During his wandering throughout the country he got the opportunity to meet people from various strata of the society and to have direct acquaintance with their problems. So he got practical knowledge about the condition of the society and the need for reforming them. But unlike the so-called reformers of his time he is against any sudden and outward change. He has sound knowledge of the history of India and on the basis of that knowledge he declares that reform is a thoroughgoing process and in India there was no want of reformers in the past. According to him, Śaṅkara, Buddha, Nānak, Chaitanya, Kabir, Dādu all were great social reformers and they tried to reform the society of their time. They tried to bring back of the Indian masses to the pristine purity of the Vedāntic religion. They said, “You have been good, but let us now be better”. Rāmānuja felt for the lower classes and throughout his life he tried to admit even the Pāriah to his community.

Vivekānanda makes a detailed analysis of the concept of social reform, its needs in Indian society as well as the required qualities of a social reformer. He analyses the whole situation of India from the standpoint of an historian. He holds that India has been governed by the kings from time immemorial and those kings used to look after the subjects. Now the days of the kings are gone and the foreign government. Fashion its ways according to the growth of public opinion. He says that it will take a long time to make a healthy, strong public opinion which will solve its own problems, and in the interim we shall have to wait. According to Vivekānanda, for social reform, the first duty
is to educate the people. Then a time will come when the people will be able to realise the
depth of their problem and they can solve those problems by themselves. In his own
words, “you must go down to the basis of the thing, to the very root of the matter. That is
what I call radical reform.” Vivekānanda reminds us that the solution of the problem is
not so easy, as it is a big and vast one.

He says that reform does not mean mere imitation of the Western ideas and
cultures. He says that we must grow according to our own nature. In his own
words,”......but I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been
inconsiderate imitations of Western means and methods of work; and that surely will not
do for India; therefore, it is that all our recent reform movements have had no result”.
Vivekānanda is not against everything that is Western; rather he ready to accept whatever
is good in the Western ideals and methods. He says that evils are there in every society.
But compared to the other races and nations of the world, people of our country are the
most moral and most godly...... So, he is not in favour of any momentary social reform.
He says, “My ideal is growth, expansion, development on national lines.” Vivekānanda
says that it is not the reformers who have to think out certain reforms for the society at
large. The necessity for reform has to be felt and unless, those who have to feel that
necessity are thoroughly awakened it is useless even for a few thoughtful people to apply
abstract ideas of liberty, justice or equality to certain grades of society or accomplish
their reform irrespective of their apathy. Reform is not a medicine to be injected into the
body politic; rather it is the process of supplying the fundamentals of life to the nation at
large. When a seed is sown in the ground, it is our duty only to supply light, air and water
to the seed which then will grow by virtue of its inherent law of growth. Vivekānanda
even refuses to recognise the right of the reformer to think out what reform is needed for the nation. Again, he points out that the whole problem of social reform resolves into the question- where are those who want reform? He gives stress on making them first.

Vivekānanda vehemently criticises the so-called social reformers of his time....”....you talk about social reform? But what you do? All that you mean by your social reform is either widow remarriage, or female emancipation, or something of that sort......Such a scheme of reform may do good to a few no doubt, but of what avail is that to the whole nation? Vivekānanda admits that there is need of social reform. But that reform is not what the so-called reformers aims at. He says that most of these social reforms touch only the first two castes, and does not touch the poor masses because they have already those things--the widow remarriage, female emancipation, etc. His method of treatment is also different. While the other reformers tried to treat the problem outwardly, Vivekānanda tries to take out by the roots the very causes of the problems and not to keep them suppressed.

He says that the modern reformers are very busy about widow remarriage. He is sympathetic towards the widows, but at the same time he declares that the fate of a nation does not depend upon the number of husbands their widows get, but upon the condition of the masses. According to him, “our reformers do not see where the wound is; they want to save the nation by marrying the widows......The whole defect is here: the real nation who lives in cottage have forgotten their manhood, their individuality....They are to be given back their lost individuality. They are to be educated.” He says that our duty is to put the chemicals together; the crystallisation will come through God’s laws. Our
duty is to put ideas into their heads, and they will do the rest. This is what Vivekānanda means educating the masses. He further says that a Hindu seeks to uplift himself by being the servant of all. That is how the Hindus should uplift the masses, and not by looking for any foreign influence. Again he exhorts, “let any one of our reformers bring out that life, ready to serve even a Pariah, and then I will sit on his feet and learn, and not before that. One ounce of practice is worth twenty thousand tons of big talk”. Though Vivekānanda has not commented much on child-marriage, yet his occasional remarks on this issue reveal that he has strong hatred for this evil practice. He considers it as a sin and says, “....it is the great sin for which our nation has to suffer......I must set my foot to the best of my ability upon the devilish custom of child-marriage.” He further says that the prevailing child-marriage is one of the main reasons of the large number of widows in India. So he strongly protests against child-marriage and gives emphasis on educating the girl child.

Vivekānanda has immense respect for women and he firmly believes in their potentiality. He says that there is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on only one wing. He considers women as the living image of ‘Śakti’ and holds that the principal reason for the degeneration of India is its loss of respect for women. Vivekānanda always stands up for equal rights for women. So he gives stress on the improvement of the condition of women and says that unless the condition of women are bettered in India, the country will continue to remain as backward as it was at that moment. He maintains that women must be put in a position to solve their problems in their own ways. No one can or ought to do this for them. For achieving this goal he gives emphasis on the need of imparting right
education to them. He says, “Educate your women first and leave them to themselves; then they will tell you what reforms are necessary for them. With such an education they will solve their own problems.” He further says that all the mischief to women has come because man undertook to shape the destiny of women. Again, the so-called social reformers of that time sets before Indian women the ideal of Western women, but Vivekānanda wants them to absorb the good things of the West only without losing the good national characteristics they already possess.

Vivekānanda criticises the deformed caste system of his time due to its evil consequences, yet he is not in favour of abolishing it altogether. Rather he wants to re-establish it in its original pristine state. Regarding the question of caste and of social reformation Vivekānanda declares that he is neither a caste-breaker nor a mere social reformer. He says, “I have nothing to do directly with your castes or with your social reformation.......It is love and love alone that I preach, and I base my teaching on the great Vedantic truth of the sameness and omnipresence of the soul of the Universe”.31

In his ‘My Plan of Campaign’ Vivekānanda boldly declares, “To the reformers I will point out that I am a greater reformer than any one of them. They want to reform only little bits. I want root-and-branch reform. Where we differ is in the method. Theirs is the method of destruction, mine is that of construction......I do not dare to put myself in the position of God and dictate to our society......I simply want to be like the squirrel in the building of Rama’s bridge, who was quite content to put on the bridge his little quota of sand-dust. That is my position. This wonderful national machine has worked through ages, this wonderful river of national life is flowing before us. Who knows, and who
dares to say, whether it is good and how it shall move?........Feed the national life with the fuel it wants, but the growth is its own; none can dictate its growth to it”.32 Vivekānanda holds that he is the real friend of mankind who helps them to find out a way out of their difficulties. In this regard he mentions about the story of the drowning boy and the philosopher. When the philosopher was lecturing the drowning boy, the boy cried, “take me out of the water first”. In the same way, the suffering masses of our country have had enough lectures, enough societies, enough papers etc., now what they really need is the man who will lend them a hand to drag them out. Vivekānanda exhorts, “Ay, that man is wanted. That is where I differ entirely from these reform movements”.33 Vivekānanda is a preacher of spirituality. He is the first thinker who attempts to tag social reform to spiritual realisation. He says that in India, social reform has to be preached by showing how much more spiritual a life the new system will bring; and politics has to be preached by showing how much it will improve the one thing that the nation wants--its spirituality. So, every improvement in India requires first of all an upheaval in religion. He says, “before flooding India with socialistic or political ideas, first deluge the land with spiritual ideas”. He compares the country with a ship and says that with the passage of time, perhaps through our own faults it has become little damaged, has sprung a leak. It now our duty to repair the holes and not to curse it. Echoing the voice of the ancient Rishis, he asserts that helping others, reforming them socially means:

(i) Imparting spiritual knowledge to them,
(ii) Providing intellectual help,
(iii) Lastly, providing physical help.
Ordinarily social reform is identified with the last one. But Vivekānanda courageously points out, “in considering the question of helping others, we must always strive not to commit the mistake of thinking that physical help is the only help that can be given. It is not only the last, but the least, because, it cannot bring about permanent satisfaction.” He is of the opinion that helping man spiritually is the highest help that can be given to him.

According to him, three things are necessary for a social reformer. The first is to feel; the second is to discover truth; and the third is to preserve it even at the cost of his/her own life. “The first thing is to feel. He or she is to feel for others, for the misery, ignorance, superstitions in the world and be sympathetic to others. You must next think if you have found any remedy. The old ideas may be all superstitions, but in and round these masses of superstitions are nuggets of gold and truth. One has to discover the means by which to keep the gold alone, without any of the dross......A real reformer should be ready to sacrifice everything, even his life for the sake of his duty.”

Vivekānanda is against forcible legislation on reforms. He is of opinion that a reform must be based on individual and social initiative. His views on the method of reform are revolutionary and are of far-reaching importance. His method of reform is not an abolition, but only re-adjustment; not destruction, but construction; not revolution, but evolution. Vivekānanda is not a traditionalist and did not accept anything only because it is traditional. On the contrary, he believes that traditionalism may bring stagnation and obscurantism. Commenting on Vivekānanda’s view of social reform R.C. Majumdar says, “he did not altogether discard the old nor deny the merit of the new, but pointed out the synthesis between the two. The conflict between the thesis represented by the Anglican Reformists,
and the anti-thesis represented by the reactionary orthodox Hindus was resolved by the synthesis propounded by Swāmi Vivekānanda.” His value sense did not convert him to social reformer, but transformed him to accept changes, changes being inevitable, and to move on, to fight divisiveness created by perverted religious thoughts like casteism, untouchability etc. Vivekānanda says that we have not done badly in the past, our society is not bad, but good; only we need to do better. In his own words, “not from error to truth, nor from bad to good, but from truth to higher truth, from good to better, best. I tell my countrymen that so far they have done well—now is the time to do better”.

Vivekānanda is of opinion that the motives and methods of the reform movement of the nineteenth century were fundamentally wrong. The reformers opted blindly the Western means and methods of altering society. Their attitude was destructive, rather than constructive. They wanted to demolish everything old and traditional as meaningless and they blamed religion for all the social evils. He did not attach much importance to the isolated social reform movements of his time. Instead he plans for a total uplift of the country— moral, spiritual, cultural, economic. He has a programme of root and branch social reform aiming at eradicating poverty and ignorance of the masses. In this regard he is more radical than his contemporaries. He wants reform not from above, but from below.

He says that being a conquered race, we are taught that we are nobodies and we are weak. We have lost Śraddhā and for this reason the country has gone to ruin. Śraddhā must be brought back once more to us, the faith in ourselves must be
reawakened and then only all the problems which face our country will be solved. It is this Śraddhā which the social reformer essentially lacked.

D. V. Athalya in his ‘Swami Vivekananda — A Study’ commented that the ideal type of reform that Swāmi wanted contained in it two elements: discriminating but enthusiastic respect for and attachment to the past as well as readiness to absorb new ideals and methods and throw away whatever has become lifeless and degenerate in the social organisation of the people. He stood for equal rights and equal opportunities for all and for all-round progress of all. He is not against anything that is Western rather; he is ready to absorb the good elements from them. He insists that social reform should not be brought about at the cost our religion, or in other words, at the cost of all the great and good things we have inherited from our Rishis.

Notes and References:


9. Kulinism evolved in Bengal in 12th century, during the reign of Ballal Sen. He had conferred the title ‘kulin’ Brahmin on 19 selected Brahmins as they had possessed certain desirable characteristics. But eventually the title came to be hereditary. The kulin Brahmins were much sought after as prospective bridegrooms and they naturally made a living out of the entire system and married as many women as they could-----R.C. Majumdar, (1965), *Social Reform in British Paramountry and Indian Renaissance*, Bombay : Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Part III.


21. Devadasi is a group of women who danced in the temple premises. The term devadasi literally means slave (dasi) of God (deva). She is dedicated to a divine husband who can never die.— Sahoo, A.P., *A Brief History of Devadasi System*.

22. Sri Ramakrishna’s famous saying ‘*Yata mat tata path*’ is not found in *Kathamrita* of Mahendranath Gupta. It is taken later from a small book compiled by Swāmi Brahmānanda on the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna.


32. Ibid, p.213.
