CHAPTER IV

NATURE OF SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORMS
Nature of Reform Movements:

In Nineteenth Century the socio-religious reform movements were based on the twin doctrines of Reason (Rationalism) and Humanism, though they also sometimes tended to appeal to faith and ancient authority to bolster their appeal. Moreover, it was to the rising middle classes, whose inspirations they expressed, that they appealed most. The humanist aspect of the religious reform movements was expressed in the general attack on priesthood and rituals and the emphasis on the individual's right to interpret religious scriptures in the light of human reason and human welfare. The social reform movements were an embodiment of this humanitarian morality. Apart from purely religious considerations, these religious reform movements fostered among Indians greater self respect, self-confidence and pride in their country. The reform movements fall in two categories - (i) Reformist movements like The Brahma Samaj, The Prarthana Samaj, The Theosophical society (ii) Revivalist movements like The Arya Samaj, The Ramkrishna mission. Both the reformist and revivalist movements depend on a varying degree on an appeal to the lost purity of the religion they sought to reform. The only difference between one reform movement and the other lay in the degree to which it relied on tradition or on reason and conscience.

Another aspect of all reform movements was their emphasis on both religious and social reform. This was primarily due to two main reasons. (i) Almost every social custom and insti-
tution in India derived sustenance from religious injunctions and sanctions. This meant that no social reform could be undertaken unless the existing religious notions which sustained the social customs were also reformed. (ii) Indian reformers well understood the close interrelation between different aspects of human activity. The main characteristic of these reform movements was that their programme was not restricted to the task of merely reforming religion but extended to that of reconstruction of social institutions and social relations. This was due to the fact that in India religion and social structure were organically interwoven. Caste hierarchy, sex inequality, untouchability, social taboos, flourished because of the sanction of religion. Social reform, consequently, constituted a part of the platform of all religious reform movements. While rationalizing religion, these movements also aimed at rationalizing social institution and relations.

All the socio-religious reform movements and their reformers based their ideals on the principles of Rationalism and Humanism. The development of science and scientific outlook had affected every sphere of activity. The new scientific outlook, the doctrine of rationalism and humanism particularly impressed the English-educated class. The reformers, stimulated by the new knowledge, sought to reform Hinduism from within and sought to purge it of superstitious beliefs and practices. All the reform movements started within the society, to reshape the existing social institutions according to the needs of the time.

Most of the reform movements started in a stereotyped way, ultimately, became secular. The new concept of secularization
was born in nineteenth century. The term secularization implies that what was previously regarded as religious was no longer regarded as such. The magic wand was moved by rationalism i.e. the emergence of a tendency to regulate individual religious and social life in accordance with the principles of reason and to discard traditional beliefs and practices which cannot stand the test of modern knowledge.¹

The socio-religious reform movements represented attempts to revive the old religion in the spirit of new principles of nationalism and democracy, which were the conditions for the development of the new society. The spirit of nationalism was needed to unite the Hindus into a joint effort to solve the national problems. Democracy was the another principle which the social and religious reformers, and the early pioneer nationalists like Ram Mohan Ray, Debendra Nath Tagore, Keshub Chandra Sen, M.G. Ranade, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda etc. in varying degree extended to the sphere of religion. The socio-religious reformers strove to extend the principle of individual liberty to the sphere of religion. The reform movements like The Brahma Samaj, The Prarthana Samaj, The Arya Samaj, The Ramkrishan Mission, and other endeavoured to recast the old religion into new form suited to meet the needs of the new society.² Thus all reform movements were attempts to extend the principle of liberalism to religion.

The Indian socio-religious reformers were not rehabili-
tating any past period of society but only consolidating the rising new society. No movement wanted to introduce a new religion, but only to reform it. They wanted to revive the past glory of ancient Indian culture. Therefore, the ideals of socio-religious reformers were mostly based on ancient Indian texts, specially Vedas and upnishads. Alongside the intricate weave of nativism, vitalism, revivalism, and cultural reinterpretation, there also was a deep search for identity — for meaning and values that were the essential components of Indian-ness. No reformer was satisfied with the prevailing situation, but most of them, for this reason, were not willing to disown their heritage. In their reflections and writings, an effort was made to relate the past to the present and to seek solutions to the contemporary predicament from the ancient wisdom of India as well as from the modern achievements of the west. The Universalism and humanism were the dominant notes in the philosophy of most of the thinkers of this era.

The entire period of nineteenth century was the period of Indian Renaissance. It began with Raja Ram Mohan Ray and continued through the time of swami Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Ramkrishna, Swami Vivekanand, Annie Beasant etc. "The saint reformers of the movements concentrated themselves towards religious activities, since that represented the culture in its totality. The reason for this limitation was that social consciousness was out of its scope nor the socio-political consciousness was strong enough to influence the religious current. The advent of European science,
technology, logic and philosophy and people were all responsible for a review of Indian religious principles and traditions, which were conceived as perfect ones, till the beginning of nineteenth century. The Indian society was perhaps afraid of the scientific progress, adventure and action oriented organisation of European Christian who came to India. Therefore, the purpose and objective of the Indian socio-religious reformers was not to surrender before the might of European merits but to seek a coordination and adjustment with that. "

The word 'Renaissance' is said to mean rebirth or a fresh beginning. Naturally it stands with entirely different expression as regards revival. Revivalism refers to repitition of old system to replace the prevalent one. But renaissance refers to fresh edition, interpretation, learning and progress. All reform movements depended on Vedant in one way or the other. In the light of Christian faith and the scientific achievements, India had to depend on Vedant during 19th Century, in order to save its identity from being faded away. Vedant provided the very basis and source of inspiration to all the Hindu socio-religious reform movements during the nineteenth century. All the reform movements like The Brahma Samaj, The Arya Samaj, The Prarthana Samaj, The Ramkrishna Mission, The theosophical society etc. received their inspiration from the philosophy of ancient religious texts. All reformers wanted to answer the current problems in a modest way whether they were religious or social.
The approach of these reformers were mostly upto middle intelligentsia, not the common people. The rural masses were affected marginally, but in the urban areas their impact was pronounced. Moreover, it was to the rising middle classes, whose inspiration they expressed, that they appealed most. The Indians came in contact with the western culture when intellectualism and individualism were its dominant feature. Many liberal Indians took up western education introduced in India by christian missionaries, thereby came in contact with western concept of democracy, liberty, equality, nationalism etc. The Indian Nationalism and modernism was largely the result of the efforts of the English educated Indians in different fields of life. The mad race towards westernisation was checked by the educated Indians, they protested against it and started several socio-religious movements, to revive the glory of their own culture and attempted to reform it. Thus one of the characteristics of socio-religious reform movements was that they all started by western educated modern intelligentsia. "The nineteenth century intelligentsia diligently cultivated the self image of a middle class------ it searched for its model in the European middle class, which, as it learnt through western education, had brought about the great transformation from medieval to modern times through movements like the Renaissance." 4

The reform movements were past their peak in Bengal was obvious enough after the 1870s, with the Brahmos torn by
internal quarrels and losing influence, and Iswarchandra Vidyasagar retiring into tragic isolation. The pattern was by no means so unambiguous in western India, where M.G. Ranade remained a commanding influence in the intellectual world till his death. Alongwith his friend K.T. Telang, Ranade followed a cautious policy of pursuing social reform along the lines of least resistance - a caution which by the late 1890s was being attacked by men like R.G. Bhandarkar and N.C. Chandavarkar. A reform group had also emerged in the south under the leadership of Virasatingam, who founded Rajamundari Social Reform movement in 1878 with promotion of widow remarriage as its principle objective. A Hindu Social Reform Association was also started in Madras in 1892. For the first time, something like an all India social reform movement had been launched with Ranade from 1887.

In Bengal, the intellectual mood had been changing under a variety of influence from 1870s. Defence of Hindu traditions became more respectable as scholars like Max Muller rediscovered the glories of ancient Aryans, and as a romantic cult of the exotic orient developed in the west, bearing strange and more than a little dubious fruit in the Theosophical movement of Oicott and Blavatsky sophisticated and intellectualized revivalism was best represented by Bankimchandra and Krishna prasanna Sen, who claimed Shastric precedents for all the discoveries of modern western society. But revivalism was most effective when it sought to appeal to emotions rather than to the intellect, through the neo-
Vaishnavism of the Amrita Bazar Patrika, and above all through Ramkrishna Paramhansa, the Saintly priest who cast a spell over the sophisticated intellectuals through his eclecticism and rustic simplicity. His disciple Vivekananda was very far from being an obscurantist or revivalist in any crude sense. The Ramkrishna Mission founded by him, proved an efficient philanthropic organisation with no claims to social radicalism. Yet in eclecticism precisely lay the strength of Vivekananda's appeal, and his mixture of Patriotism with the cult of manly virtues, vague populism, and evocation of Hindu glory was to prove heady wine indeed for young men in the coming period. In Maharashtra, revivalism had its centre at Poona. M.G. Ranade started socio-religious movement in Maharashtra. In south India, movements of reform or revival were relatively week, The theosophical society founded at Adyar acquired considerable influence among English educated, particularly after the arrival of Annie Besant, who attacked social reformers and extolled the virtues of traditional Hinduism, through her views.

The reform movement that made spectacular advance in 1880s and 90s was Arya Samaj, founded by Dayananda Saraswati. It critical many existing Hindu practices with an extremely aggresive assertion of purified Hinduism based on vedic infallibility. The specific nature of the social reformers were thus absorbed into a dominant pan- Hindu revivalist framework. Arya Samaj based its social programme entirely on authority of Vedas, conditioned
by rationalism and utilitarianism. It emphasised on education of
Indians. The nucleus for its education movement was provided by
the Anglo Vedic School established at Lahore in 1886. Alongwith
social and religious reforms, all the socio-religious movements of
19th century always remained in the forefront of political movement,
and produced many eminent leaders.
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