THE INDIAN AWAKENING

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CHAPTER II
THE INDIAN AWAKENING

Nineteenth century witnessed tremendous changes in Indian polity and society consequent to the expansion and consolidation of British imperialism in India. The most powerful and enduring effect of the British rule in India reflected itself in the intellectual development of the people on an entirely new line, which in turn brought changes in their political, social and religious outlook. The latter half of the nineteenth century was particularly characterised by the growing spirit of Indian nationalism which aimed at giving back to the nation its lost identity. Though the conflict between British interests and Indian aspirations was not so obvious in the first half of the 19th century, in the early years of the latter half, it became apparent, culminating in the Rebellion of 1857. And in the last quarter of the century Indian nationalism became self conscious and assertive.

It is a historical fact that Indian nationalism was the consequence of an awakening which was marked by momentous changes embracing various spheres of national life. It was a broad movement of regeneration affecting almost all spheres of life such as political, religious, economic, social, educational etc. and is popularly called "Indian Renaissance" or the "Indian Resurgence", though none of these terms is altogether satisfactory.¹ Bengal was the centre of this awakening.

¹ Nemai Sadhan Bose, Indian Awakening and Bengal (Calcutta, 1969), Preface.
because it was in Bengal that British rule was first firmly established, western 
education was introduced and a new economy was set up "leading to the birth of 
middle-class intelligentsia which was in the forefront of the awakening."² 
Naturally the principal social, religious and political movements of the 19th century 
connected with the awakening also emanated from Bengal.

New Middle Class

The awakening of India resulting in the reconstruction of the nation in socio-
political and cultural fields was the result of historical forces unleashed by 
colonialism. The first and foremost among these forces was the emergence of a 
new middle class. This class was constituted by a new class of zamindars created 
by the Permanent Settlement of 1793³ and a new class of merchants who grew rich 
as middlemen in the East India Company's trade. This class played a decisive role 
in the social history of Bengal in the 19th century in the sense that the initiative for 
social reform came first from the educated sections of this class.

The emergence of this new middle class also created the atmosphere for the 
introduction and growth of English education which proved to be an important

² Ibid.

³ This measure of Lord cornwallis led to the transformation of the land revenue collectors 
in the province of Bengal into land holders with permanent tenure. For its own political 
convenience, the East India company thus "created a class of vested interests who became 
the allies of the English rule". See Bhupendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda Patriot 
factor leading to the Indian awakening. The purpose of the introduction of English education, was of course, to meet the imperialist needs rather than popular needs which is clear from the Minutes of Macaulay, the law member of the viceroy's council. He recorded "we must at present do our best to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in morality and intellect". Throughout the colonial period, the British were using English education as a channel through which "they were bringing their own waves to India" and acting as agents for European or Western culture. Yet, it cannot be denied that the British introduced English education in India with the support of the newly emerged middle class. These men were anxious to obtain an English education for themselves and their sons, for knowledge of the rulers' tongue was required to obtain employment. It may be noted in this context that the orthodox and wealthy families of Bengal took a significant part in the foundation of the Hindu college in 1817 which was a "landmark in the history of the growth of English education in India." Further, this proved to be "the most important step in


5 Percival Spear, "The Mughuls and the British" in A.L. Basham, ed; _A Cultural History of India_ (Delhi, 1975), P.360.


b. Jawaharlal Nehru has noted that it was "due to the pioneering efforts of able and earnest Englishmen who gathered enthusiastic groups of Indian students around them that English thought and literature and political tradition were introduced to India see J. Nehru, _The Discovery of India_ (OUP, 15th Imprint, 1998), p.313.
the nineteenth century towards the formation of an educated middle class and an intelligentsia in the western sense of the term, who played a leading role in the movements related to regeneration.

The point needs an explanation. With the introduction of English as the medium of instruction, it became the channel through which India discovered the liberal thought that was then transforming Europe. Western learning put the tools of rationalism and scepticism in the hands of a generation of young Indians. In fact the policy of English education and the establishment of universities in the three presidency cities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in 1857, resulted in the emergence of a class of English-educated elite imbued with western liberalism, who acted as catalysts in bringing about the much needed reform in Indian society and religion.

**Serampore Missionaries**

It will not be an exaggeration to say that in making the Bengali mind receptive to new ideas like social reforms, the activities of the Serampore missionaries had done the ground work. Apart from the educational activities,

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8 The Baptist mission at Serampore (Calcutta) headed by William Carey, Marshman and Ward was the pioneer of missionary movement in Bengal. The Renaissance of the 19th century was very closely interlinked with the development of Bengali language and literature and the latter was deeply indebted to the Serampore mission.
their work covered a wide range of other activities like translation of Bible into vernacular Bengali, publishing books on various subjects like History, Geography and general knowledge, reprinting old Bengali verses, etc, by which the missionaries gave an impetus to Bengali particularly to its prose literature. Though they gave stress on the study of Sanskrit, their main object was to challenge the very citadel of Hinduism i.e. to study and expose the fallacies of the sacred texts all of which were in Sanskrit. Although a few conversions took place, the publication of translated works from Sanskrit language drew the attention of the people into their ancient culture which in turn helped the revival of oriental learning. The crusade against Hindu religion, society, customs and practices was in fact proving a blessing in disguise. At least a minority section of the population began to feel that "everything was not right with Hindu religion and society."\(^9\) Again, the missionary publications created people's interest in the outer world and enlarged the horizon of their knowledge. This immensely helped to correct the prevailing exclusiveness and the sense of satisfaction which had made the Indian society "apparently inert". The net result of the missionary activities in Bengal was that the Bengalis became curious and interested in the wider world. A spirit of self criticism developed and they began to look backward for lessons and inspiration and forward to a future of progress and achievement. Existing religion, society, social norms and practices and sense of values were reexamined and reassessed.

\(^9\) Bose, n.1, p.21.
Rise of Calcutta as Metropolis

In making Bengal the cradle of Indian awakening, urbanization contributed much. In fact the urban transformation of Calcutta prepared the ground for this. The city of Calcutta hailed in the latter half of the nineteenth century as "the British jewel in the crown of British Empire," "had in the beginning neither physical glamour nor cultural ancestry."\(^{10}\) Until the eighteenth century, Calcutta was a cluster of villages inhabited by occupational group or caste. The very face of it changed with the establishment of Fort William, the trade centre of the East India Company. Soon its population became strikingly heterogeneous. It also developed the "nexus of continental trade\(^{11}\) in cotton cloth. With the growth of industries, people belonging to all castes began to throng there either as agents or writers to foreign merchants or as just fortune seekers. Among these inhabitants included all classes and castes from the Brhamins to the fishermen. Superseding and discarding caste limitations, grew the business community which amalgamated all castes and by the nineteenth century, Calcutta's indigenous business had begun to be dominated by higher caste Hindus like Brahmans and Kayasthas. Many of the high caste men were Banias - "Suppliers of cash and cash keepers". The expanding British trade soon attracted to Bengal a growing number of non-


Bengali Indians who included bankers and merchants, thus adding up new elements to local population of the city. In addition to these people, foreigners belonging to various nationalities, European and Asian also began to come and settle in Calcutta which thus quickly expanded into a cosmopolitan city. And Indo-European co-operation in matters of trade and commerce became an important feature of its economic life.

In making Calcutta a cosmopolitan city, the growth of merchant capitalism and urbanisation had an important role. Bengal remained the major investment outlet for British. The foreign owned and foreign financed industries included cotton, jute, tea and mining. The introduction of railways gave a fillip to these industries. There was an influx of population to Calcutta from other parts of Bengal also in search of employment. Calcutta being the focal point of colonial administration and trade and the seat of political power, became the receptacle of talent and man power and developed a heterogeneous culture which having an original mode of thought often came in clash with old culture and civilization of the place. Naturally the city "acted as a catalytic agent for socio-cultural change". Moreover, increasing volume of trade brought large number of Bengalis into contact with Europeans as agents, interpreters, associates, money lenders, etc. This European Bengali contact infused an element of dynamism into the

12 Ibid., p.232.
"apparently inert society"\textsuperscript{14} and at long last the hitherto unchangeable began to stir and change. The enormous amount of European participation in Bengal's economic life enabled her to take the intellectual lead over the other provinces of India.

Urbanization also created circumstances in which individuals were compelled to break through the orbit of their family occupations and taboos, to find situations inconceivable to earlier generations i.e., members of all castes – the Brahmans and the so called low castes – were entering upon trade and service. In other words, an individual's choice of occupation was no longer conditioned by his belonging to particular caste. This facilitated one's movement from a caste to an economic class and at the same time brought about a revolution in perception. This "Social mobility which shook the caste-ridden organization of Indian society in urban areas\textsuperscript{15} particularly in the metropolitan city of Calcutta resulted in the formation of a new culture. The restrictions of castes were eliminated here. Interdining and intermarriage became frequent. Along with this, there took place an erosion of old values also.\textsuperscript{16} Thus the city of Calcutta did send ripples to the distant corners of Bengal. A new social mobility led to a new awakening. It was

\textsuperscript{14} Poddar, n.10, p.9.

\textsuperscript{15} Tara Chand, \textit{History of Freedom Movement in India} (Delhi, 1984) Vol. II, p.115.

\textsuperscript{16} The situation has been beautifully portrayed in the Bengali works like "\textit{Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj}" by Sivanath Sastri, "\textit{Sekal ar Eakal}" and "\textit{Atmacharit}" by Rajnarayan Bose and \textit{Kalikatha Kamalalya} by Babani Charan Bandopadhyaya.
quite natural that Calcutta which was the nerve centre of modern Bengal should become the cradle of the spirit of renaissance.

**New Literature**

The process of transformation in Bengal was accelerated by the literary resurgence taking shape in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century. Literary creation does not take place in vacuum. It is very often in response to social and cultural changes that literature originates. Literature can also act as an instrument or medium for effecting changes in social outlook. The same is true of Bengali literature which blossomed and enriched itself by drawing inspiration from indigenous and western sources as well. A distinctive feature of the "New Literature" which flourished under the impact of western learning was its humanism and rationalism and its infinite capacity to inspire the masses with patriotic feelings and national sentiments. The entire nineteenth century particularly its first half was marked by ideological conflict, cross currents and contradictions. In different spheres of life, there was a certain amount of inconsistency and hesitancy and this was reflected in Bengali literature of the period. In this age of ideological conflict, the press became the main platform for effective propaganda and the newspapers like *Samachar Darpan, Digdarshan* and

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18 Man and his activities on earth became the theme of Bengali literature, instead of exploits of Gods and Goddesses, which was its main theme till the nineteenth century.
Sambad Kaumudi which appeared during the period between 1818–1829 highlighted these issues and produced a profound impact on the minds of the reading public.

However creative literature began with socio-religious reformers of the nineteenth century. An important point to be noted in connection with literary renaissance in Bengal is that all pioneers of early Bengali literature were active social reformers of outstanding moral stature.\(^\text{19}\) Eg: Raja Ram Mohun Roy (1774-1833) the great social reformer used literature a means for giving expression to his social and religious ideas which were based on reason and shastras. The "new age" found expression for the first time in his writings. Equally great literary figures like Babani Charan Banerjee, Iswar ChandraGupta, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Akshay Kumar Dutta highlighted in their writings contemporary social issues like Kulin System,\(^\text{20}\) women's education, widow remarriage etc. By highlighting such issues, the literature of the time was serving as a reforming agency. In fact their writings could create a great stir in Bengali society.

The period witnessed the development of all branches of literature like poetry, novel and drama which helped in bringing attitudinal changes in society. The contemporary poets were influenced by both Western and Sanskrit literature

\(^{19}\) Krishna Kripalani, "Modern Literature" in Basham, n.5, p.412.

\(^{20}\) The custom of girls being married away to (old) men of kulin (noble) or Brahmin caste.
which is quite evident in the poems of Hem Chandra Banerjee (1838-1903) and Nabein Chandra Sen (1837-1909). Contemporary poetry made a profound impact on the educated intelligentsia from among whom the nationalists of the period came.

It has been remarked that the flowering of the Renaissance began with the poetry of Madhusoodan Datta, the drama of Dina Bandhu Mitra and the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. In the words of J.N. Sarkar: "Each of them reigned over one branch of literature and turned it into a new channel where it has since flowed, at his bidding". Michael Madhu Sudan Datta (1824-1873) who was the foremost Bengali poet of modern style, through his compositions exposed social abuses. The main purpose of his writings was to awaken national consciousness by breaking down the old traditional values. His famous work *Virangana* which occupies a unique position in Bengali literature caught the spirit of the movement for emancipation of women led by Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar.

Dina Bandhu Mitra (1828-1873) made his mark as a playwright of unsurpassed promise by his famous drama *Nila Darpan* which gave expression to popular indignation against the brutal tyranny of the indigo planters in Bengal. All his works are charged with the spirit of realism and a deep sympathy for the people and they give a vivid picture of contemporary social life. There was a close

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relation between Bengali stage and nationalism and in stirring the feelings of the people against the worst evils of the British rule, the dramas of Dina Bandhu did play a vital role.

The nineteenth century Bengal produced a great patriot like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) known as "the literary prophet of Indian nationalism". The spirit of patriotism found its finest expression in his novels. "By choosing socio-cultural themes for writing, he was preparing the ground for a political awakening which was to come later". Of all his works, the most important was his immortal work *Anandamath* which became a source of inspiration for the entire generation of nationalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The famous song "Bande matharam" which it contained, became the national hymn and inspired people to be ready to sacrifice every thing for their motherland. Thus the new literature which embodied the national spirit and aspirations was shaping the ideals of Indian nationalism. It may be added that not only the Bengali literature, but literature in other regional languages also developed similar trends in the nineteenth century and naturally served as a medium for promoting national consciousness among the Indians.

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Work of the Orientalists

Political awakening in India was preceded by a Cultural Renaissance. The work of the Orientalists like William Jones, Max Muller and Monier Williams contributed much in bringing the Cultural Renaissance. Their increased interest in the study of India's past, her classical lore, resulted in the translation of many Sanskrit works into English and other foreign languages through which the world came to know of the cultural attainments of India. The Asiatic Society of Bengal founded by William Jones in 1784 did creditable work in revealing the greatness of ancient Indian culture to the Westerners. This created a new interest among the Indians to know more about their past and shed their inferiority complex. The Cultural Renaissance which India witnessed in the early years of the nineteenth century proved to be a very significant force in producing a new awakening, and in generating creative activities. This cultural awakening had an abiding impact on the ideology of Ramakrishna – Vivekananda Movement which played a significant role in bringing Spiritual Renaissance in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Socio-Religious Movements

Of the various forces that brought forth the Indian Awakening, the Socio-Religious Movements of the nineteenth century had a decisive role. These movements were an expression of the rising national consciousness and spread of liberal ideas of the West among the Indian people. These movements, says A.R.
Desai, "increasingly tended to have a national scope and programme of reconstruction in the social and religious spheres". 23

A deep analysis of these movements will reveal the fact that a major concern of them was religious reform; yet none of these movements was "exclusively religious in character". 24 Strongly humanist in inspiration, their attention was focused on worldly existence. This is clear from the agenda of reform proposed by reformers like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Swami Vivekananda and others. Vivekananda even emphasized the secular use of religion and used spirituality to take cognizance of the material conditions of human existence. 25 At the same time all these reformers worked for religious reform because of their conviction that in India the religious beliefs and social practices were so closely connected that reform in this direction was a pre-requisite for social progress. As advocates of political freedom, they were also guided by the notion that "political freedom can have no meaning and reality without social freedom and equality". 26 Therefore it was natural that the Socio-Religious movements of the nineteenth century – whether they were reformistic or revivalistic – should affect

25 Ibid.
the growth of national consciousness in the country. An analytical study of the movement requires an investigation into the milieu in which they originated.

Challenge from the West

It may be noted that the nineteenth century for India was one of the great moments of cultural confrontation, confrontation between modern scientific culture and a traditional culture. It was accepted that the West which had become the creators and representatives of a virile culture and civilization and whose aim was material prosperity had come to India through England in the nineteenth century. The dominant European culture came to India through the new system of education introduced by Macaulay in 1936. Before the dazzling civilization of the West, the tradition-bound Indian society could put up only a poor show.

As the new education advanced, imitation of the West began to spread and very soon the traditional culture ceased to have any hold on the English educated generation. The proselytization of Christian missionaries who indulged in wholesale vilification of Hindu religion, further tended to weaken the hold of religion on the minds of the western educated Hindu youth. As such it was believed that India was to lose her culture and her soul as well.
Social Conditions

The Indian society itself was caught in a vicious web created by superstitions and social obscurantism. The Hindu religion had fallen on evil days. The religion of the Upanishads and the Gita had degenerated into meaningless formalism. Superstition was rampant. The race had almost lost its spirit of independence and fearlessness due to long subjection to an alien rule.

Social conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage a burden and her widowhood inauspicuous. Hindu society was characterised by the prevalence of such evils like female infanticide, child marriage and sati.

Another debilitative factor was caste which "sought to maintain a system of segregation hierarchically ordained on the basis of ritual status". The rules and regulations of the caste system hampered social mobility, fostered social divisions and sapped individual initiatives. It is a natural consequence that social rigidity and exclusiveness would nurture many an injustice and oppression. Above all was the humiliation of untouchability which militated against human dignity. The dynamic conception of life taught by the Upanisads had given place to a static complacency. There was a languishing of spirit everywhere in Indian society during the nineteenth century.

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27 Bipan Chandra, n.24, p.84.
It was into this old bottle of "social and national life that, was poured the new wine of European culture".\(^\text{28}\) There was a ferment, unrest and questioning which issued forth in a Renaissance of the Spirit of India.

It may be recalled in this context that the impact which the Western ideas produced on Indian society, particularly Bengali society was varied. The orthodox section revolted against the new ideas outwardly but searched inwardly for a change. The intellectuals found it necessary to rationalise the traditional society. The new ideas made them conscious of the need to change their society. The learned discovered common grounds on which Hinduism, Islam and Christianity met, since the essence of all religions were the same. A wave of unrest swept over the thinking minds in the early years of the nineteenth century. Out of that unrest "the Indian Renaissance" began to take shape.

**Raja Rammohun Roy and Indian Awakening**

At the head of this movement in its first phases, guiding it to a healthy direction stands the personality of Raja Rammohun Roy, the "Father of Indian Renaissance". As a reformer he had perceived religion as the dominant ideology of the times and believed that it was not possible to undertake any social action without coming to grips with it. He also realized the need of religious and social

regeneration to precede the political regeneration which he gave expression in 1828. He wrote:

I regret to say that the present system of religion adhered to by the Hindus is not well calculated to promote their political interests. The destruction of castes introducing innumerable divisions and sub divisions among them has entirely deprived them of patriotic feeling and the multitude of religious rites and ceremonies and the laws of purification have totally disqualified them from understanding any difficult enterprise. This, I think necessary that some change should take place in their religion at least for the sake of their political advantage and social comfort.²⁹

These words represented the immediate Indian response to the dissemination of colonial culture and ideology, resulting in an inevitable introspection about the strengths and weaknesses of indigenous culture and institutions. They also project the deep feeling of Rammohun that, even for the attainment of political freedom, social reform was essential.

Rammohun's passionate love for reform led him to found the Brahmo Samaj in 1828 which inaugurated the first important religious reform movement that

"fairly dealt with the Western challenge and the new ideas that came from the West". In meeting the challenge he had adopted a method acceptable to the educated Indians who had come in contact with the sciences of Europe and who hungered for a faith consistent with modern rationalism. Quite distinct from some other social reformers of the time, Rammohun dealt with the rationalist, utilitarian and liberal challenge of the West by incorporating all that could be incorporated therefrom into Hinduism and by discovering afresh in Hinduism "the real source of its universal humanism and ethical monotheism which had been concealed by the inertia and thoughtlessness of an overgrown priest craft and a lethargic populace".

Thus on the one side Rammohun wanted to preserve Hinduism by re-interpreting it, but at the same time, his mind was broad enough to recognize what was good and assimilable in the message of the West. From this it follows that his Brahmoism was not a rebel child of Hinduism, instead he sought to keep it close to Hindu moorings. In fact he founded the Samaj to save Hinduism from Christian attacks by purifying it from within. The reinterpretation of Hinduism that he made as a means of making it more humanistic found its fulfilment later in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda movement which strengthened India's struggle for self-discovery and self-realisation as a nation.

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31 Ibid.
It is true that the reform movement started by Rammohun went a long way towards liberating the Hindu society in Bengal from the clutches of superstitious customs and practices which in turn invoked a sense of value of political freedom. But under Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-1884), it took a radical turn. The reformistic movement initiated by Keshab Chandra intended to mark a radical break with the traditional Hindu society and provoked a reaction to it in the mind of the parent body. The educated youth particularly of Bengal were searching for the discovery of their national self. They aspired much more than what was stated by reformistic Keshabsen, whose leanings towards Christianity, the religion of the rulers, did not fit in well with the Indian identity which was then seizing the youthful minds.

The point needs an explanation. Keshab Chandra Sen who joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1857 wanted to reform the Hindu society on Western lines. His belief in the cult of great men and his acceptance of Christian idea of original sin and repentance began to have an impact on the activities of the Samaj. Such trends were not liked by other leaders of the movement like Devendranath Tagore who did not share Keshab's zeal for social reform like giving up sacred threads, inter-caste marriages, etc. This group who did not want to break with the Indian moorings, soon came in clash with Keshab Chandra and his followers resulting in a schism within the Samaj. That indicated the development of new trends in the process of Indian reform movement, i.e., a trend for reform, by keeping the national identity.
It was but natural that the initiative for religious and social reform soon passed from Keshab Chandra Sen and the Samaj to other reformers of India like Dayananda Saraswathy (1824-1883) and Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa (1836-1886) whose message was rooted in Indian tradition and derived strength from indigenous ideas.

**Arya Samaj and Indian Awakening**

The national awakening which found expression in Brahmo Samaj, assumed a new dimension through Arya Samaj founded in Bombay in 1875. Its founder Swami Dayananda Saraswathi was guided by the belief that the Indians could not rise as a nation unless they radically transformed their social system. He was also of the opinion that India had been subjected to foreign rule because Indian life and society suffered from manifold defects and vices and that without the necessary religious and social reform political subjection of India was to continue. Therefore he sought to found a religious reform movement on national and indigenous lines.

The Arya Samaj which took its final form in 1877,\(^32\) undertook the task of reforming the Hindu religion by attacking the hereditary caste system and untouchability, which recording to Dayananda had "no sanction in the vedas".\(^33\) He also attacked polytheism and idolatry as being inconsistent with the teachings of the

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\(^32\) The principles of Arya Samaj were finally defined in June 1877 at Lahore (Punjab).

Vedas. The interpretation which he gave to the Vedas were similar to the religious and social reforms that other Indian reformers were undertaking. His ideas made him a liberal orthodox, according to Max Muller, the nineteenth century orientalist.

A dreamer of splendid dreams, Dayananda visualised an India purged of her superstitions, filled with fruits of science, worshipping one God, fitted for freedom, having a place in the comity of nations and restored to her ancient glory. And all these he hoped to be accomplished by rejecting outright the accumulated superstitions of centuries and returning to the "pristine purity" of the vedas. His watchword "Back to the Vedas" was the first religious watchword leading to the political principle "India for the Indians". By this slogan he meant a return to the pure teachings of the Vedas which would gradually fit the people of India for self rule and eventually for independence. However since the Arya Samaj retained its narrow Hindu basis, national unity that it proclaimed could not gather into its fold the non-Hindu communities such as the Mohammedans and the Christians.

Yet it cannot be denied that the Arya Samaj was a crusading and reforming movement. Its crusade against untouchability, child marriage etc. on the strength of the authority of the Vedas went a long away towards taking the Hindu society on the path of progress. And as a reforming movement its principles and teachings

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34 His call for a return to the Vedas was a call for India's social, economic and political regeneration in accordance with the changed religious and social ideas of his times. In fact he had made social and religious reform a necessary pre-condition to the reconstruction of India's past.
fostered patriotism. In the words of A.R. Desai "it played a progressive role in the earlier stages when the national awakening was just sprouting".\footnote{Desai, n.23, p.292.} It was the progressive features of the movement like attack of religious superstitions and superiority of Brahmins, adoption of a programme of mass education, of the elimination of sub-castes, of the equality of man and woman etc. that perhaps drew to itself hundreds of nationalist Indians inspite of its narrow Hindu basis. How the Samaj was able to strengthen the spirit of patriotism in a natinalist like Lala Lajpat Rai is expressed by him in the following words:

All that was good and creditable in me, I owe to the Arya Samaj. It was the Arya Samaj that taught me to love the vedic religion and to be proud of Aryan greatness . . . . It was Arya Samaj that instilled into me love for my nation and that breathed into me the spirit of truth . . . . and of liberty. It was Samaj again that taught me that society, Dharma and country command our worship and that those shall inherit the kingdom of Heaven who make sacrifices to serve these.\footnote{Lajpat Rai in The Bengalee, 14 June, 1905, cited in Sankar Ghose, n.30, p.40.}

It was cultural nationalism that was promoted by this reform movement which would in turn strengthen political nationalism. But it failed to see that in
India national unity had to be secular and above religion so that it would embrace the people of all religions. A movement which would preach the fundamental unity of all religions, at the same time would impregnate Hinduism with the loftiest ideals of a non-sectarian religion, a movement which with its "man-making" and "nation building" messages would give a mighty fillip to India's anti-British struggle, was the need of the hour. Ramakrishna Movement which was started by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) towards the close of the nineteenth century fulfilled this need.

**Ramakrishna Mission and Indian Awakening**

In spite of the activities of the reformers like Rammohun Roy and Swami Dayananda Indian society had not achieved the desired measure of reform. It may be recalled in this context that in the latter half of the 19th century faint rumblings were heard here and there as an echo of Brahmo Samaj. The Prarthana Samaj of Bombay which was an offshoot of the Brahmo Samaj founded in the sixties of the nineteenth century was another attempt at keeping alive the ancient light. Later another religious movement, the Theosophical Society (1878) made its appearance in India from abroad which was a western fad of Eastern occultism and it played a similar role in Madras. Of course, the movement helped to check to a certain extent the influence of Christian as well as materialistic thoughts of the period.
But neither the early reform movements like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj nor the later movements like the Prarthana Samaj and Theosophical society were yet successful in restoring India's national ideals and cultural integrity. Neither was there any definite sign of Indian regeneration. The country had to be given back a sense of direction and faith in herself. The nation needed not only a philosophy of action but also a man who could articulate such a philosophy. The kind of man India needed was in the words of Swami Vivekananda:

One who in one body would have the brilliant intellect of Sankara\(^{37}\) and wonderfully expansive, infinite heart of Chaitanya,\(^{38}\) one who would see in every sect the same sect, working the same God, one who would see God in every being, one whose heat weep for the poor, for the week, for the outcaste, for the downtrodden . . . such a man was born . . . \(^{39}\)

He was none other than Sri Ramakrishna whom the French philosopher Romain Rolland introduced to the West as the "Messiah of Bengal". According to him Sri Ramakrishna was "the consummation of two thousand years of the spiritual life of

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\(^{37}\) Sankaracharya (A.D. 788-820) was one of the greatest saints and philosophers of India, the foremost exponent of Advaita Vedanta. He was born at Kalady, Kerala.

\(^{38}\) A prophet born in A.D. 1485, who lived at Navadvip, Bengal and emphasized the path of divine love for the realisation of God.

three hundred million people".\textsuperscript{40} It meant that this great saint from Dakshineswar (near Calcutta) represented an India which remembers herself in her ancient Vedas and Upanishads, in Buddha and Sankara and which continues to exist as a beacon of spiritual hope for man everywhere. "In him India's hoary spiritual legacy became alive and vital".\textsuperscript{41}

Sri Ramakrishna\textsuperscript{42} appeared at a psychological moment in the history of India. The country was in a transitional phase, resulting from the conflict of rationalism and empiricism which led to never-ending controversies between the modern reformers and the traditionalists. A new phenomenon which would be a genuine growth from within and which would strike a balance between the two was the need of the hour. In other words a re-examination, a reinterpretation and a re-adjustment of ancient Indian religion and ethics in the light of the most advanced modern thought were needed. In fact Sri Ramakrishna appeared in the spiritual horizon of Bengal to fulfil that need. As Swami Nirvedananda observes:

In him the orthodox society found a pre-eminent seer who had the potency of bringing about a mighty awakening of the old religion of Hindus with all that it stands for. The radicals too found in the

\textsuperscript{40} Romain Rolland, \textit{Life of Ramakrishna} (Calcutta, 1947 edn.), p.14.


\textsuperscript{42} For his biographical details see (1) \textit{Life of Sri Ramakrishna}, Advaita Ashram (Calcutta, 1924); (2) Rolland, n.40.
realization of Ramakrishna a wonderful solution of their intellectual doubt.\textsuperscript{43}

What is implied in this observation is that Sri Ramakrishna was not an ordinary Indian monk. He expressed the highest wisdom or greatest truth in simple sentences and parables. His simple comments struck an even balance between the orthodox and the radicals, "incorporating the best of both and thus leading to the emergence of something which was characteristically Indian in its approach and yet universal in its application".\textsuperscript{44}

**Universalism of Sri Ramakrishna**

It may be noted that the British after the Rebellion of 1857 had intensified their policy of "divide and rule" in India. Therefore, the need of the hour was a philosophy which would pinpoint the central unity in the diversity of creeds. The contemporary religious reformers failed to display that panoramic vision of religion which pinpointed the underlying unity of all religions. It was at such a time that Sri Ramakrishna appeared with his ideal of unity of all religions. His concept of religion was universal. To be religious, according to him was to struggle to realise God, nothing more and nothing less. Spirituality is the core of religion and to be spiritual meant to be humanistic and service minded. He used to say that dogmas


\textsuperscript{44} Shukla Das, "India's Awakening and Sri Ramakrishna" in *SAMVIT*, No.7, March 1983.
and doctrines were as stones to a hungry man. They divide and lead to conflict and these conflicts have brought religions into conflict.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Sri Ramakrishna and that which made him distinct from other social reformers of the time, was his effort to bring all religions together "in a golden bond of understanding and love". He showed the underlying unity behind the multiplicity of religions and proved the validity of each through direct perception and disciplined experiments. The conclusion that he arrived at, was expressed in his famous saying "yata mat tata path" which meant that all religions of the world are but different ways of reaching God. Thus he went beyond his contemporaries in proving that all religions were "not partly but wholly true". This was synthesis and not mere eclecticism or syncretism. This amounted to acceptance and not mere toleration. Ramakrishna’s universalism and cosmopolitanism did not lead to mechanical uniformity but to unity in diversity. In fact this spirit of universalism, he salvaged from the hidden depths of Hinduism and released it, liberalising all sectarian views.

This marked a new era in the evolution of religious thought which recognized the individual identity of each sect or religion. By highlighting identity and individuality of religion Ramakrishna exposed the hollowness of religious conversion which was one of the serious challenges faced by Hinduism in those

45 C.A. Stark, God of All - Sri Ramakrishna's Approach to Religious Plurality (USA, 1974).
days. This also indicated his originality in thinking in regard to the question of Christian proselytism of the time.

**Humanitarian Ideals**

Apart from this, Sri Ramakrishna gave a new interpretation to the concept of God worship according to which "the jiva was none other than Siva" meaning that every creature was god himself in a particular garb of name and form. This interpretation implied that one could realize god by serving him through the poor as through an image. His emphasis on service to humanity, not mercy or pity was the strongest protest ever made against the prevailing social inequalities, discrimination and domination. This social content of his teachings together with its universalism became an integral part of the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, the most noted and the most favoured disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. These two ideals were the motivating force behind the founding of the Ramakrishna Order of monks by him.

One of the principal targets of criticism by Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century was the so called Hindu idolatry. Sri Ramakrishna's clear and decisive reply to this criticism was that God is with form and without form, which implies that both views of God are not contradictory but complementary. It is for the individuals to select his path according to his predilection. "Sree Ramakrishna thus spoke about the harmony of religions and taught about a God who is above all
gods, a religion which ascends above all our religiosities, transcending all
dogmatism, rituals and contrivances".46

Yet another ideal preached by Ramakrishna was the development of
code. In fact he regarded the development of character as superior to
knowledge. The idea of character development was given prime importance by
Swami Vivekananda in his scheme of national regeneration.

An important characteristic feature of his teachings is that Sri Ramakrishna
expressed the highest wisdom or greatest truths in simple sentences and parables.
Here he differed from the contemporary intellectuals like Rammohun,
Devendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandrasen who tried to build up a spiritual
unity, with their approach being more intellectual and academic. Sri Ramakrishna,
by his direct and simple approach could reach the hearts of people from all walks of
life. Referring to the Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna a translation from Bengali, which
contains these conversations and parables, Aldous Huxley has remarked: "To read
these conversations, is in itself a liberal education in humility, tolerance and
suspense of judgement".47

That was a time when under the influence of rationalism of the West, the
intellectuals of Bengal used to look down upon the idea of god and religion. But

46 Das, n.44, p.22.

47 Aldous Huxley in his Foreword to Nikhilananda, Swami, ed. & tran., Gospel of Sri
Ramakrishna (Madras, 1969).
Sri Ramakrishna, whenever he met them would correct their flippant attitudes towards things spiritual by his humble yet piercing remarks. Even for a vexed question like caste which had become a target of attack by the missionaries as well as radical reformers, Ramakrishna had a solution to offer. In reply to a question as to how the caste distinctions could be removed, he said:

There is only one way to remove them, and that is by love of God. Lovers of God had no caste. Through this divine love the untouchable becomes pure, the pariah no longer remains a pariah.48

The above passage reveals the humanism of Sri Ramakrishna, his love for the poor and the lowly in whom he saw the divine. His teachings were so original and appealing that even the radical reformers like Keshab Chandra Sen came under his profound influence so much so that his 'Navavidhan' or New Dispensation became "a practical representation of the truths which Ramakrishna had taught for a long time".49 Thus the universalism and humanism of Ramakrishna gave the Hindu revivalism a new dimension of spiritual significance.

48 Nikhilananda, n.47, p.89.
Foundation of the Ramakrishna Mission

It was to keep up the ideals preached by this noble soul and to rejuvenate the Indian society based on them that Swami Vivekananda established the twin institutions, the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 with Belur as its headquarters. Both these wings together came to be known as the *Ramakrishna Order of Monks*. Among the various factors that influenced the foundation of the Order, the influence of Sri Ramakrishna, Buddhist influence, influences of Christian monasteries and the Brahma Samaj, the first hand experience which Swamiji had during his travels in India during 1891-92 etc. are to be considered. But his conviction that in a country like India which had fallen into stupor under alien rule, no great cause could succeed without an organization, was what actually prompted him to found the Order. In other words, to awaken the nation from the age old slumber a machinery of dedicated and selfless sanyasins and lay disciples of Sri Ramakrishna was needed. He organized the machinery of Ramakrishna Order with that conviction and it was quite natural that it should play a crucial role in the awakening of the nation. The rules and regulations governing the organization which contain its aims and objectives, and the activities it carried out indicate the role it played in strengthening the emerging national consciousness in India.
Uniqueness of the Movement

The Ramakrishna Movement was unique in the sense that it represented India's inward quest for spiritual awakening. If the Brahmo movement of Rammohun Roy was an outcome of external influences emanating from the enlightenment and rationalism of modern West, the movement represented by Ramakrishna and his disciples was "the result of an inner resurgence of the Hindu spirit to recover and reassert itself".  

Secondly, though the Mission was organised on the Principle of Organization borrowed from the West, its main thrust was on social service, which is an integral part of nation building activity. When compared to other movements of the time, the Ramakrishna Order had its novelty in that it preached not only god-realisation, but also service to humanity. The concept of social service which was enjoined with the Order was a revolutionary concept. As Swami Tapasyananda has noted:

In India monks traditionally were expected to confine their activities exclusively to study, meditation and wanderings from one holy place to another. To engage oneself in activities of any other kind including work of service in the field of education.

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health, etc. relating to worldly needs of men, was considered outside the pale of monastic ethics. It was in this respect that Swami Vivekananda produced a revolution by including active social service as a part of the Sanyasin's spiritual discipline.\(^{51}\)

To ask the monks in India to approach service as a spiritual discipline was a revolutionary step. By creating this order with service as its central thrust, Swamiji gave monasticism a new meaning, a new dimension and a new dignity.

It may also be added that the Mission took up the work of social service basing it on Vedantic ideals. How the intellectuals of the time were struck by this new approach and tried to assess its significance is revealed in the editorial articles which appeared in Poona daily "Native Opinion" dt. 12 July 1900 which observed:

The work of the Ramakrishna Mission utterly proves the hollowness of the contention that the vedantic system of philosophy preaches a gospel of extreme selfishness. The members of the Ramakrishna Mission are vedantists to the hilt and in trying to relieve distress in a particular manner, they are simply following the noblest dictates of their creed. It is indeed difficult to conceive how a system, the corner-stone of which is

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the oneness of life, can ever be charged with being selfish by those who have really understood its creed.  

It showed that the Mission was offering social service not in the conventional sense, its service was for the sake of service, demonstrating the truth that the same self is immanent in all beings.

It also indicates that Vedanta which had been viewed by Rammohun Roy as a "positive impediment to modernity and progress" or dismissed as a "false system of philosophy" by Vidya Sagar did stage a comeback towards the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was through Ramakrishna Mission that Vedanta acquired a practical dimension.

Yet another feature of the Movement was its non-sectarian character. Though rooted firmly in ancient Hindu monastic ideals of chastity and absence of possession, the Ramakrishna Order was not committed to any particular creed, community or country. It stood for humanity itself. "Its source of strength is its universalism, its readiness to accept every thought, every emotion that comes from the pure spirit of man". Moreover the movement proved itself to be a progressive one in the sense that it accepted both Indian tradition and Western science.

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development was recognized by the Mission as a must, in view of its conviction that "you cannot speak religion to an empty stomach" as Ramakrishna used to say. So, to remove poverty and also to remove superstitions, the study of science was welcomed. The ideal of East-West Synthesis and Synthesis between spirituality and science as conceived by Rammohun Roy reached its consummation in the Ramakrishna Movement.

The Mission was unique also in its approach to the question of social reform. Quite distinct from the nineteenth century reform agencies like Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission did not take up social reforms as its programme of action. In fact the Mission was kept away from political activities and social reform through the discerning insight of Swami Vivekananda. His contention was that if individuals reformed themselves, there was no need of social reform. What was needed was to create a climate for the elimination of evils in society through "a man-making education" and "a man-making religion" – the two ideals which the Mission was entrusted to carry out. Similarly, Swamiji also believed that a national awakening would lead to the liberation of the country from colonial regime. The Mission's task was again, to work in this direction. Hence, no need of it directly involving in the political struggle for freedom. However, the Mission repudiated casteism in all its forms and untouchability in its all kinds of manifestation. By not keeping any distinction of caste either among the permanent
residents or among visitors and also by starting schools and hostels for the study of the Harijans and tribals, the Mission tried to fight such evils.

Finally, the process of regeneration in the nineteenth century "derived its main strength and support, not from emotional appeals to the masses of the common people, but from the sympathy of the rising educated classes". The Ramakrishna Movement, too first worked among modern educated youths and through them went out in wider and wider circles. This resulted in a general uplifting of Indian masses.

A brief study of the unique features of the Ramakrishna Movement was attempted here, in order to show that it was these features which enabled the Mission to silently prepare the Indian mind for revolutionary social changes which became an integral part of national regeneration.

In general, the Indian awakening was the cumulative effect of various historical forces that were generated by colonialism. Yet, the Socio-Religious Movements had an unstinted role in creating national consciousness. Their significance lies in the fact that they embodied the democratic yearnings which the Indian nationalism felt from its birth. In varying degrees, these movements sought to eliminate privilege from social and religious fields to democratize social and religious institutions of the country to reform and dissolve such disruptive

institutions as caste which were obstacles to national unity. They sought to equal rights of all individuals irrespective of caste or sex. The reformers in general argued that such democratization of institutions and social relations was vitally necessary to build up a sound national unity to achieve political freedom and social, economic and cultural advancement of the Indian people.

Secondly during the period of the Religious Reform movements, the people of India began to look beyond the limits of India. The broader vision and comparative outlook which developed, awakened the people of India to a realisation of their achievements and capabilities. The Indian discovered himself anew and this discovery gave him hope and strength. This religious revival and the growth of national consciousness affected each other. As K.C. Vyas has observed, "the stream of socio-religious movements merged itself into the bigger stream of the national movement for the regeneration of India".55

The Awakening – A Process of Self-Renewal

The above discussion on the Indian awakening leads us to an enquiry into the actual nature of the process. Rabindra Nath Tagore had once remarked that "the Indian nationalism was not fully political, but began to give voice to the mind of our people".56 What he meant by this observation is that the national movement

was directed to the search of India's national soul. In this search for national soul first effort was made in the socio-religious sphere and that involved a process of self-discovery and self-renewal.

A study of the Indian past will reveal the fact that Indian society has always kept itself alive by retaining most of its basic values and nature through a process of socio-cultural regeneration, revival and reconciliation. The forces of self-renewal have played a significant role in shaping and preserving Indian society whenever the country faced cultural crisis which often followed foreign invasions. During the Islamic invasions in the medieval period, the Bhakti movement kept the torch burning. Through this movement which implied religious awakening, the cultural potentiality of India was expressed itself. This movement of self-preservation acted as the main force in keeping the Indian society alive and afresh under changed circumstances. The cultural synthesis achieved under the Mughul Emperor Akbar, Prince Dara Shikoh and others was primarily an outcome of Hindu awakening.

But the process of self renewal received a temporary set back due to colonial intervention in the 18th century. As a consequence of British occupation, the country came into grip with all the evils of colonial subjection. Under such

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circumstances, the Indian society became helpless and developed an acute inferiority complex. The proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries and their sharp attacks on most of the Hindu traditions, practices and beliefs, besides the sweeping current of western education, created doubts, distrust and aversion in the minds of the educated youth about many aspects of Hinduism. A process of de-Indianization commenced. The Hindu society for a while became totally perplexed as there was no one to lead and guide. It was at this time that the Socio-Religious movements took their origin. Under the pioneering leadership of Raj Rammohun Roy the renovation of Hinduism began. In fact, the self-renewal process got a restart with him. His propagation of Vedantic monotheism and Upanishadic liberalism through Brahmo Samaj was an attempt in that direction. This process continued under Dayananda who revived the militant spirit in Hinduism besides a deep sense of nationalism. Other parallel movements of this period also contributed to the mainstream of social life, national awakening and modern Indian Renaissance. The consummation of this process reached in Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, who really succeeded in renewing the Hindu soul and reviving the noblest values of ancient Indian culture based on Universal Religion. In fact the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Doctrines combined the best elements of other reform movements and ensured allround progress of Indian society. How the self renewal process attained its fulfilment in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement has been evaluated by Sri Aurobindo in the following words.
The movement associated with the great names of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda has been a very wide synthesis of past religious motives and spiritual experience topped by a re-affirmation of the old asceticism and monasticism, but with new living strands in it and combined with a strong humanitarianism and zeal for missionary expansion.58

It was by propagating the ideals like unity, service and sacrifice and by inculcating a sense of pride in India's past that Ramakrishna Movement represented the culmination of the process of self renewal. Through this movement, ethical nationalism was recreated which indirectly paved the way for political libertion.

58 Aurobindo Ghose, Renaissance in India (Pondicherry, 1951), p.54.