UNIT 26 REFORM MOVEMENT - I

Structure

26.0 Objectives
26.1 Introduction
26.2 Eastern India
   26.2.1 Ideas of Rammohan Roy
   26.2.2 Young Bengal
   26.2.3 Debendranath and Keshab Chandra
   26.2.4 Vidyasagar and Vivekananda
26.3 Western India
   26.3.1 Early Phase of Nineteenth Century
   26.3.2 Later Phase of Nineteenth Century
26.4 Northern India
26.5 Southern India
26.6 Let Us Sum Up
26.7 Key Words
26.8 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

26.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit you should be able to learn about:

- the purpose of development of new ideas aiming at multi-dimensional change of society,
- the 19th century Indian thinkers and their ideas on various aspects of socio-cultural life, and
- the overall impact of these new ideas on the existing socio-cultural-religious beliefs in India.

26.1 INTRODUCTION

Nineteenth century was a very significant phase in the history of modern India. It was during this period that the country witnessed the emergence of many intellectual currents for national regeneration in all its aspects: religious, social, cultural, economic and political. Although the intellectual endeavours aimed at achieving all-sided improvement, the main emphasis was accorded to social and religious aspects. Despite the vision of the movement being multi-dimensional, social and cultural problems acquired predominance over economic and political ones in thinking. In a word, socio-cultural reform formed the major plank of the nineteenth century Indian intellectual movement.

During the first decades of the century, the movement, however, was a very small affair of a limited number of individuals whose passion for fighting social obscurantism could not pose a major challenge to the advocates of orthodoxy. The movement, however, maintained its momentum and reached its peak during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this Unit we will look beyond the strict chronological limits of this course and also consider developments in the later decades of the 19th century in order to present a total picture.

It is proposed to study here the basic features of the intellectual, social and religious movements oriented towards Reform in India during the nineteenth century. We would first try to study in brief the ideas and activities of individual intellectuals (Unit 26) before making generalisations about the movement in the context of the country as a whole (Unit 27).

The emphasis is not, however, on the biographical sketch of individual thinkers and reformers, but on their ideas which formed the ideological backdrop of the movement.
26.2 EASTERN INDIA

In Eastern India the first significant step to eradicate the social evils was taken by Rammohan Roy. The process of reform that started with Rammohan was carried forward by men like Derozio, Debendranath Tagore, Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen and others in the 19th century. Here, we would discuss the ideas of these reformers on various socio-religious issues and the differences in their approach.

26.2.1 Ideas of Rammohan Roy

Rammohan Roy has been aptly described as the Father of Modern India. A multifaceted personality as he was, he touched upon nearly every aspect of national life and struggled for the regeneration of Indian nations. He learned several languages and was an erudite scholar of his times.

He published his first philosophical work, *Tuhfat-ul Muwahhidin* in 1805 in which he analysed the major religions of the world in the light of 'reason' and 'social comfort'. He denied that religion was merely a matter of faith outside reason and attempted to expose the myth of miracles associated with it.

Rammohan's reform activities were accelerated after he settled down in Calcutta in 1814. He started the Atmiya Sabha and carried on consistent struggle against the religious and social malpractices. He denounced idolatry and advocated monotheism. He blamed the Brahman priests for perpetuating religious evils by keeping people ignorant about the true teachings of the indigenous scriptures. To educate the people he published the Bengali translation of some of the scriptures and profusely wrote in defence of monotheism. His translations into and writings in the vernacular promoted the growth of Bengali language.

Rammohan Roy remained a rationalist during the entire period of his intellectual life. In *Tuhfat* his rationalism was in full bloom. Even in his later writings reason retains its rightful place as the touchstone of reality. Although later he sought the support of the scriptures, that was to promote reform of Hindu society.

In 1828 he established a new society, the Brahma Sabha which later came to be known as the Brahma Samaj. His primary purpose was to rid Hinduism of its evils and to preach monotheism. It incorporated the best teachings of other religions and acted as a powerful platform for the advocacy of humanism, monotheism and social regeneration.

Rammohan was extremely pained at the prevailing social degeneration. In particular he was concerned with the pitiable plight of women in society. He launched a crusade against the evil practice of Sati, the burning of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. His agitation bore fruit finally in 1829 when Lord William Bentinck, the Governor-General of India, enacted a law against that practice. However, the solution which he put forward for the living widows was not widow-marriage but ascetic widowhood.

He condemned polygamy, early marriage and opposed the subjugation of women and their inferior status in society. He related their problems to the root cause of absence of property rights. To him, female education was another effective method to free Indian society from social stagnation.

He propagated the introduction and spread of modern education which could act as a major vehicle for the dissemination of modern ideas in the country. For its promotion he provided enthusiastic support to David Hare who, along with many Indian notables of Calcutta, founded the famous Hindu College in 1817. He also ran an English School in Calcutta at his own cost. In 1825 he founded the Vedanta College which offered both Indian and Western learning.

Rammohan laid stress on India's need for Western scientific knowledge, Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Anatomy and other useful sciences. He understood the causes underlying the development of Western intellectual progress and wanted Indians to acquire the fruits of Europe's progress. His goal was the fusion of the best in the East and the West.

Rammohan took up not only social and religious problems but also political and
economic issues of the times. He stood for the Indianisation of services, trial by jury, separation of powers between the executive and the judiciary, freedom of the press, and judicial equality between Indians and Europeans. He criticised the Zamindari system for its oppressive practices.

Rammohan was a progenitor of nationalist consciousness, and ideology in India. His every effort of social and religious reform was aimed at nation-building. Through his reform he wished to lay the foundations for the unity of Indian society, divided into divergent groups. In particular he attacked the rigidities of the caste system which, according to him, had been the source of disunity among Indians. He held that the monstrous caste system created inequality and division among the people on the one hand, and 'deprived them of patriotic feeling' on the other.

Rammohan was an internationalist, libertarian and democrat in his orientation. He took active interest in international affairs and wanted amity among nations. His concern for the cause of liberty, democracy and nationalism led him to cancel all his social engagements when he came to know of the failure of the Revolution in Naples in 1821. By giving a public dinner he celebrated the success of the Revolution in Spanish America in 1823.

Whatever his limitations, Rammohan Roy was certainly the first luminous star on the Indian intellectual firmament of the nineteenth century. In 1833 this great Indian passed away leaving behind his ideas and the message of modernisation for others to pursue.

1. Rammohan Roy

26.2.2 Young Bengal

About this time new and radical ideas began to be propagated by a band of young Bengali intellectuals known as the Young Bengal. This movement was largely initiated by an Anglo-Indian teacher of the Hindu College, Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-1831). A free thinker and a rationalist, he helped promote a radical and critical outlook among his students who questioned all authority, loved liberty and worshipped truth. His followers known as the Derozians attacked old and decadent customs and
Social and Cultural Change

traditions, and began to question the whole fabric of Hindu society and religion. The Derozians, the followers of Derozio, were staunch rationalists; they measured everything with the yardstick of reason. Derozio was dismissed from the Hindu college in 1831 because of his radical views, and shortly afterwards he died of cholera at the young age of 22.

2. Henry Vivan Derozio

26.2.3 Debendranath and Keshab Chandra

In the meanwhile the impetus to reform given by Rammohan had lost much of its momentum. Debendranath Tagore, father of Rabindranath Tagore, again put life into it. In 1839 he established the Tattvabodhini Sabha to carry on Rammohan's ideals independent of the Brahma Samaj. It aimed at counteracting the rapid progress of Christianity in India and advocated the development of Vedantism.

Under the aegis of the Tattvabodhini Sabha emphasis on indigenous language and culture became much more pronounced. Bengali texts in all subjects were published. A Tattvabodhini Press was established and in 1843 the Tattvabodhini Patrika, a journal of the organisation was started for the propagation of ideas. Debendranath Tagore became a Brahmo in 1843 and he reorganised the Brahmo Samaj in the same year.

Another great intellectual associated with the Brahmo Samaj was Keshab Chandra Sen. Keshab laid stress on female emancipation. He emphasised universalism as against Debendranath's stress on national Hindu identity. Despite doctrinal differences among themselves the Brahmasamajists collectively contributed to the propagation of Rammohan's ideas and changing Bengal's society. They denounced priestly intermediation in religious matters and stood for the worship of one God. They supported widow-marriage, monogamy and women's education.

26.2.4 Vidyasagar and Vivekananda

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar — A great Sanskrit scholar. Vidyasagar became the principal of the Sanskrit College in 1851. He introduced the study of western thought in the Sanskrit College and opened its gates to non-Brahmin students. He wrote a Bengali Primer and helped evolve a distinct modern prose style in Bengali.

His great contribution, however, lay in the field of female emancipation. Widow-marriage was the specific social issue he devoted his entire life to. His agitation for legalising the re-marriage of widows fetched support of the enlightened sections from various parts of the country and finally such a law was enacted. Under the supervision of Vidyasagar the first legal Hindu widow-marriage among the upper castes in India was celebrated in 1856. Through his endeavours nearly 25 widow marriages were solemnised between 1855 and 1860. This was certainly a major breakthrough in the history of radical social reform, and was a great advance from Rammohan's idea of
ascetic widowhood. He promoted the higher education of women for their general uplift. As Secretary to the Bethune School, founded in Calcutta in 1849, he was instrumental in leading the movement for women’s education. He also campaigned against child-marriage and polygamy.

The last of the great thinkers of 19th century Bengal who created a Stir in Hindu society was Narendra Nath Datta, known as Swami Vivekananda. His guru or spiritual preceptor was Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1834-1886). Ramakrishna stressed universalism in religions and denounced religious particularism. However, his primary concern remained with religious salvation and not social salvation.

His message was popularised inside and outside India by his famous disciple, Swamy Vivekananda (1863-1902). Vivekananda condemned the caste system and people’s obsession with rituals and superstitions. In 1896 he founded the Ramakrishna Mission to carry on humanitarian and social work. The main motto of the Mission was to provide social service to the people, and it carried on its mission by opening schools, hospitals, orphanages, libraries, etc. in different parts of the country.

Check Your Progress 1

1) Explain in 100 words Rammohan Roy’s views on religion and the condition of women in India.

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2) Write short note on each of the following in three sentences.
   Young Bengal Movement.

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Social and Cultural Change

Brahmo Samaj

Tattvabodhini Sabha

26.3 WESTERN INDIA

In western India the main focus of reform movement was on social ideas rather than religious and philosophical. Throughout nineteenth century there developed a general awareness among the various lower castes against many forms of social discrimination. Thinkers like Vishnubawa Brahmachari, Jyotiba Phule, Ranade and others played very significant role in the development of this social awareness.

26.3.1 Early Phase of Nineteenth Century

The first soundings of intellectual revolt in Maharashtra were heard in the early decades of the 19th century. Among the early intellectuals who initiated and led the movement, the most prominent were Bal Shastri Jambhekar (1812-1846), Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1814-1882) and Bhasker Pandurang Tarkhadkar (1816-1847) Gopal Hari Deshmukh better known as 'Lokahitwadi' (1823-1882) and Vishnu Bhikaji Gokhale (1825-1873), popularly known as Vishnubawa Brahmachari, for he remained a life-long bachelor.

Jambhekar was the pioneer of the intellectual movement in Maharashtra. He laid its foundations through his numerous writings, in the early 1830s. Dadoba gave it an organisational shape; he founded the Paramhansa Sabha in 1840, the first reform organisation of nineteenth century Maharashtra.

Bhaskar Pandurang distinguished himself as the militant nationalist critic of the colonial rule in India. It was he who first articulated the exploitative character of the British rule in India. He wrote in 1841 a series of eight long letters in the Bombay Gazette, one of the oldest newspaper in the Presidency, and exposed nearly every aspect of colonial domination.

The main contribution of Lokahitwadi was in broadening the scope of the movement. In the Prabhakar, a Marathi Weekly, he wrote his hundred letters, the famous 'Shatapatren', between 1848 and 1850. This constituted the magnum opus of the early intellectual endeavours in Maharashtra. These letters taken together are all-encompassing in dimension; there is hardly any aspect of the society which is left untouched.

Brahmachari was against caste distinctions and believed in the oneness of humanity. Although himself a Brahmin, he employed a Muslim cook and ate food served by anyone. He thus openly challenged the rigidity of the caste system and worked for an equitable social order.

In Bengal the movement had begun with a religious and philosophical note, in Maharashtra strictly social issues came to occupy a prominent place in the scheme of reform. The early intellectuals of Maharashtra were not essentially religious thinkers, concerned with the philosophical subtleties. Their approach was much practical in
nature. For example, the Paramhansa Sabha’s principal objective was the demolition of all caste distinctions. Each new recruit to the Sabha had to undergo initiation ceremony, and take the pledge that he would not observe any caste distinctions. He had to eat a slice of bread baked by a Christian and drink water at the hands of a Muslim. The Sabha was, however, a secret society; its meetings were conducted in the strictest secrecy for fear of facing the wrath of the orthodox. The challenge to the caste system and other social evils thus remained limited to the participation of its few members only.

26.3.2 Later Phase of Nineteenth Century

The reform movement gained strength during the second half of the century. A host of towering personalities emerged on the intellectual scene. The most notable among them were Vishnu Parashuram Shastri Pandit (1827-1876), Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), Ramkrishna Gopal Bhandarkar (1837-1925), Narayan Mahadev Permanand (1838-1893), Mahadev Gobind Ranade (1842-1901), Vishnushastri Chiplunkar (1850-1882), K.T. Telang (1850-1893), Ganesh Vasudev Joshi (1851-1911), Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar (1855-1923) and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (1856-1895).

Pandit began his public career with the advocacy of widow-marriage. He was a leading figure in the sphere of the agitation for female emancipation. He started the Vidhava Vivaha Uttejaka Mandal (Society for Encouragement of Widow Marriage) in 1865 and worked as its Secretary. He set an example by marrying a widow in 1875. Phule, born in the Mali caste, emerged as a champion of the depressed sections of the society. He was the first Indian to start a school for the untouchables in 1854. He also championed the cause of the liberation of Indian women. In 1851 he and his wife started a girls’ school at Poona.

By his profound scholarship Bhandarkar earned the title of ‘Maharshi’ for himself. In the teeth of conservative opposition he allowed and arranged the marriage of his widow-daughter in 1891. He was one of the very few to strongly advocate Hindu Muslim unity. Paramanand, writing under the pen name of the ‘Political recluse’, was one of the constructive critics of the British administration, besides being a great social reformer.

Ranade was a man of many-sided activity. A product of the Elphinstone College, Bombay, he was Judge of the Bombay High Court during 1891-1901. He held that the caste distinction was the main blot on Indian social system. He realised that social reform movement could not move the people unless it assimilated religious reform. Under his guidance the Paramhansa Sabha was reorganised in 1867 under the name Prarthana Samaj. He guided the movement in Maharashtra with intellectual strength and pragmatism till the end of his life. The Prarthana Samaj preached monotheism and denounced priestly domination and caste distinctions. Its activities also spread to South India through the efforts of the Telugu reformer, Veeresalingam.

Chiplunkar started his famous Nibandhmala in 1874, a monthly Marathi magazine, devoted to the cause of social reform. He died very young at the age of 32. Telang was instrumental in introducing compulsory primary education in Bombay. He was the first Indian Vice-Chancellor. Joshi greatly identified himself in the sphere of politics. He provided a brilliant critique of the economic policy of the British government. He was, however, one with other intellectuals in emphasising education to be the most effective agent of social change.

Chandavarkar, basically a philosopher, was a great leader of the Prarthana Samaj. Agarkar was an iconoclast and uncompromising rationalist. He was very pungent in his denunciation of any blind dependence on tradition or false deification of India’s past.

Other reformers in Bombay were Naoroji Furdonji, Dadabhai Naoroji and S.S. Bengalee. In 1851 they started a religious association called the Rehnumai Mazadayasan Sabha. It stood for the modernisation of Parsi religion and social customs. It launched a struggle for the introduction and spread of education among women, grant of a legal status to them and for uniform laws of inheritance and marriage for the Parsi community.
The social and religious reform in North India was spearheaded by Swamy Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883) who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. Swamy attacked idolatry, polytheism, Brahmin-sponsored religious rites and superstitious practices. He stood for adult and inter-caste marriages and female education. However, his bent towards the Vedas which he regarded as infallible gave his teachings an orthodox hue.

The Arya Samajists played a progressive role in furthering the cause of social reform in North India. They worked for the improvement in the condition of women, advocated social equality and denounced untouchability and caste-rigidities. Although the Vedas were venerated as infallible, the reforms advocated were the product of modern rational thinking.

The movement for reform arose relatively later among the Indian Muslims — only after the 1860s. Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) urged the Muslims to reject the decadent medieval thought, and to imbibe modern scientific knowledge and outlook. He condemned the custom of polygamy, and advocated removal of purdah and spread of education among women. He taught tolerance and urged the people to develop rational outlook and freedom of thought.

He was greatly concerned with the promotion of modern education for which he worked throughout his life. In 1875 he founded the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh for the spread of Western education. Later this developed into the Aligarh Muslim University.

He viewed the Quran as the most authoritative and rational religious text for the Muslims. He respected all religions and spoke against religious fanaticism and bigotry. Some of his followers desisted from joining the emerging national movement and believed that the two communities might develop along separate paths.

In the South of India a leading light of the social reform movement in the early stages was Kandukari Veeresalingam (1848-1919). Unlike many of his contemporaries in the social reform movement in Calcutta or Bombay, Veeresalingam was born in a poor family; by profession he was a school teacher for the major part of his life. Prolific in writing, he produced a large number of tracts and pamphlets on social reform in the Telugu language. Hence he is claimed to be the father of modern Telugu prose literature. His missionary zeal on issues like re-marriage of widows, female education and generally on the upliftment of women and removal of social vices, made him the father-figure of the later generation of Andhra social reformers.

In what was then called the Madras Presidency the response to the all-India wave of social reform was given a distinctive hue by the presence of caste associations and caste mobility movements of various kinds. By the turn of the century a number of caste association began to play a significant role in ‘reform movements’ which were often not unconnected with the social elevation of the caste concerned. This was to be observed in the case of, for example, the Kongu Vellala Sangam of the Gounder Caste in Tamil Nadu, the Vokkaliga and Lingayat Associations in Mysore, the S.N.D.P. Yogam of the Irvas of Kerala, etc. The caste leaders of the caste movements formed an elite, often in non-traditional careers, who stressed a common heritage of caste members and pushed forward changes in social and ritual practices. A notable feature was that caste associations, originally concerned with internal reforms, slowly graduated into the form of strong political forces. We cannot pursue here this course of development which matured in the 20th century.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Discuss the major trends of socio-religious reform movements in Maharashtra during the 19th century. Answer in 100 words.
2) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) wrong (X) against them.

A) The Arya Samajists denounced untouchability and caste rigidities.
B) The Arya Samajists did not advocate inter-caste marriages.
C) Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan was in favour of religious tolerance and advocated freedom of thought.
D) Veeresalingam, the key figure of Andhra social reform movements, was not in favour of female education.
E) The caste associations in South India did not play any role in socio-religious reforms.

26.6 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, the identification of the socio-cultural evils constituted an important starting point for the nineteenth century attempt at social renewal. The degraded position of women, child-marriage, sati, polygamy, enforced widowhood, caste system, untouchability, idolatry, polytheism, ritualism, priesthood and other superstitions prevalent in the society were brought under severe intellectual attack in varying degrees.

The identification of the existing defects was interwoven with an attempt to renovate the social order. The upliftment of the position of women, abolition of infant marriage, monogamy, widow-marriage, elimination of caste distinctions, monotheism, spiritual worship and the end of social bigotry and superstitions were the goals of the reformers by and large, although each individual mentioned above did not promote each and every one of the goals. The underlying concern was the all-round progress of Indian society on the foundations of a reformed socio-cultural system.

26.7 KEY WORDS

Monotheism : Belief in one God.
Rationalist : Person who judges all religious belief and practice in terms of reason and logic.
Universalism : No discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or community.

26.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1
1) Your answer should include preaching of monotheism, abolition of idol worship, emphasis on rationalism, abolition of sati, female education, property right to women, etc. See Sub Sec. 26.2.1.

Check Your Progress 2
1) You have to write about ideas of different thinkers on socio-religious evils and to focus on the development of a new consciousness in Maharashtra against upper caste domination and untouchability. See Sec. 26.3.

2) A) ✓  B) X  C) ✓  D) X  E) X