



A perspective on reliability of renaissance

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Abstract

The changes in the social and cultural life they sought to materialize emerged out of this colonial order demanded a refashioning of the social world of the colonized, at the same time there was considerable social pressure to maintain traditional social practices. The social and religious reform witnessed in 19th century India, which was an attempt to reconcile the cultural world of the middle class with the demands of the new way of life, emerged out of this dynamic. As a result, unlike in Europe, reformation took precedence over renaissance in India. This is in fact the tragedy of the Indian renaissance. Its values – humanism, rationalism and universalism are relevant even today, particularly because casteism, religiosity and social violence are ruling society. But the values of the renaissance have lost their salience as they do not gel with the spirit of an aggressive capitalist order. The possibility of retrieving those values also appears to be difficult, if not impossible, partly because of the absence of linkages with the prevalent cultural ethos and partly because they are not within the ideological world of the hegemonic classes.

*“Many of the ills of contemporary Indian society can be traced to the unfinished agenda of the Indian renaissance. Its impact was limited to a very small section of society. Yet, it did **generate a cultural and intellectual** break without which the later reform movements would not have been possible”*

Introduction

Among the Hindus in India, reform goes back to the intellectual efflorescence of the fifth century A.D. to the efforts of innumerable heterodox sects in the 18th century. The general tendency is to identify them as Indian versions of the

Renaissance or to trace the roots of modern social movements to these early manifestations. Neither appears to be quite appropriate as such characterizations tend to overlook the historical specificity of these movements. Their impact was also vastly different. of them did not lead to powerful social churning



even if they challenged the existing power relations in society. For some, the present was not altogether devoid of merit, and therefore they sought regeneration within the existing social organization, while others strove for changes through protest and dissent and yet others stood for a rejection of the present and the construction of an alternative future. These tendencies were prevalent in Indian society from the time of the Buddha and developed through medieval times, as expressed in the Sufi and Bhakti movements. The Social and cultural regeneration of the 19th century was, however, qualitatively of a different order than these pre-colonial manifestations of reform. What distinguishes the intellectual, cultural and social regeneration during the early phase of colonialism in India, generally described as "renaissance", from the movements of reform in the pre-colonial period were the linkages the former had with modernity. The attempt to reform prevalent socio-religious practices is quite common in all civilizations; it is a part of the reformers' efforts to refine and refurbish the inner resources of their civilizations. It is through such processes of renewal that all

civilizations try to overcome internal stagnation and meet external challenges.

Pre-Colonial Movements

The pre-colonial movements were attempts to bring together cultural elements and intellectual resources in order to cope with the changing social situation. The Bhakti movement, for instance, was engaged in ironing out religious and caste differences by propagating the idea of monotheism in a language and idiom accessible to the common man and foregrounding the virtues of an egalitarian social order. The poetic rendering of these ideas by Bhakti and Sufi saints not only made them popular but also helped the common man internalize them. Yet, neither the Bhakti nor the Sufi order was able to break out of the feudal ethos and serve as the ideological harbingers of a progressive transition. Instead, in the course of time, these movements tended to reinforce the social differences they had once questioned.

Therefore, the indigenous movements of the pre-colonial era did not play a socially transformative role but confined



their activities to a number of self-contained sects without much communication or interaction with one another. The only activity in which most of them indulged was the annual congregations, which were so ritualized and repetitive that their influence steadily waned. By the end of the 18th century, Bhakti had lost its verve, Sufi influence had become limited to a few packets and heterodox sects did not have much of a following. In the absence of an innovative and critical spirit, orthodoxy and obscurantism, which sapped the energy and initiatives in society, reigned supreme. However, there was no paucity of dissent or protest in pre-colonial India, but they did not serve as ideological inspiration for breaking away from the feudal ethos.

The social and religious reforms witnessed in 19th century India were neither a continuation of past efforts nor their rein vocations to face contemporary challenges. While the pre-colonial movements were trapped in feudal ethics, the 19th century regeneration occurred in the context of an emerging middle class which mainly developed its social vision, political beliefs and

cultural ethos from the history of Western societies, received through the medium of the ideological apparatuses of the colonial state.

The European Renaissance was characterized by the discovery and triumph of humanism and the re-emergence of man to the center of history with sensitivity to his creative ability, reflected in his achievements in the past. The Renaissance paintings that celebrated the human body are a reflection of the rebirth of man. The emergence of man to the centre stage also meant emancipation from social bonds, particularly religious bonds, which provided the inspiration for the Reformation and the necessary intellectual freedom for Enlightenment. A new world of scientific knowledge and social thought were opened before him. Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment formed an interconnected triad from which modernity drew its strength, character and vision.

Renaissance and Modernity

Modernity in India had a different trajectory. Its origin was not in indigenous intellectual and cultural churning but in the



influences disseminated by the colonial state and its agencies. The consumers and propagators of this modernity were the newly emerging middle class linked with the colonial administration and thus exposed to Western cultural. They were drawn towards a new cultural situation through their association with the colonial rulers as trading intermediaries and subordinates in the administration.

Such a situation, first developed in the Presidency towns of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and in other parts of the country later on, led to the emergence of a new breed of Indians who idealized the West, adopted a Western-modern way of life and subjected tradition to critical inquiry. The relationship between the traditional and the "colonial-modern" was not dialogical but mainly one of domination. Restricted by prevailing caste and religious practices and attracted by the "colonial-modern" life, this new breed of Indians experienced the tension between what was possible in the new world and what was practiced in the traditional.

The changes in the social and cultural life they sought to

materialize emerged out of this colonial order demanded a refashioning of the social world of the colonized, at the same time there was considerable social pressure to maintain traditional social practices. The social and religious reform witnessed in 19th century India, which was an attempt to reconcile the cultural world of the middle class with the demands of the new way of life, emerged out of this dynamic. As a result, unlike in Europe, reformation took precedence over renaissance in India.

The cultural creativity and intellectual efflorescence that were the hallmarks of the European Renaissance were conspicuous by their absence in the Indian situation. The period of renaissance was not particularly known for creativity, which received an impetus only when renaissance and reformation merged with nationalism and tried to usher in an alternative modernity. The Indian intelligentsia had to undergo a long period of incubation before they could try to redefine the renaissance by exploring their cultural and intellectual roots. Such an enquiry, however, got enmeshed in religion,



leading to sectarian consciousness, which in turn undermined some of the core values of renaissance such as religious universalism. What reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Devendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen and Narayana Guru did to propagate monotheism and the unity of the godhead was indeed significant, but in a multi-religious society, the invocation of Vedanta as the source of inspiration adversely affected the principle of universalism which all of them upheld. This contradiction, which remained unresolved, had serious repercussions for the state of secularism in post-Independence India.

Constrained by Tradition

What is celebrated in India as the renaissance was actually an attempt to reorder existing social and cultural practices in light of the lived reality in the life of the middle class and the demands of the changing social and cultural world. The practices to which the middle classes were traditionally subjected were obscurantist, inhuman and irrational. The quest for an alternative to these practices, in which the intelligentsia were involved, did not lead to a

reinvention or reinterpretation of the past but only to an invocation of tradition to gain legitimacy for creating new cultural and ideological conditions. The debates on the abolition of sati or child marriage are examples. The social or cultural break brought about by such an attitude towards the past was rather superficial towards the past was rather superficial as the critique of tradition did not interrogate its ideological foundations.

It was not based on traditional or Western resources, and as a consequence, an element of ambiguity characterized the attitude towards tradition, on the one hand, and colonial modernity, on the other. Imitation rather than ingenuity, therefore, became the dominant feature of the modernity that the renaissance sought to usher in. The very term renaissance to describe what happened during the colonial era is, therefore a misnomer, not because it was far removed from the European phenomenon but because most of its ideas were either borrowed from the West or uncritically invoked from sectarian religious sources. The attitude towards tradition was textual rather than experiential.



Almost all reformers referred to the Vedas, the Upanishads or the Quran; at the same time, none of them invoked the syncretic tradition of the Bhakti or Sufi movements. The rebirth of man which the Renaissance connoted hardly happened in India.

That raises the question whether Indian society really experienced a renaissance and whether it was later enriched by enlightenment. What Indian society witnessed was reform, both social and religious, which, caught between tradition and colonial modernity, and could not fulfill its historic mission. The intelligentsia involved in this effort, ranging from Ram Mohan Roy to Narayana Guru, valiantly struggled to realize their vision of a humane society but found them defeated by forces over which they had no control. Their tragedy was that they either trusted the benevolence of colonialism, as Ram Mohan did, or overlooked it as in the case of Narayana Guru. Their inability to confront the cultural ideological domination of colonialism made them increasingly irrelevant.

As a consequence, when political struggles gained ground,

movements for social reform were marginalized. By the 20th century, Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaji increasingly lost their appeal. Arya Samaj ceased to be a social force, Satya Shodak Samaj could not sustain its radicalism, and the Sree Narayana Movement had given up its concern for reform. The social space thus vacated by these movements have been colonized by conservative and obscurantist forces, giving way for the return of the socio-religious practices that the reformation had tried to eliminate.

RELIGIOUS REFORMS

The transition from feudalism to colonial engagement with prevalent religious practices. The criterion of the critique was neither exclusively Western nor entirely indigenous. The renaissance would appear to be a product of Western liberalism, which undoubtedly exercised a decisive influence on it. Yet, it was not entirely a result of the impact of the West as it's often suggested in colonial historiography. Indigenous intellectual sources did help shape the character and agenda of the changes attempted during the renaissance. Invoking the traditional system helped the



renaissance gain wider support and more importantly, social legitimacy. That accounts for the centrality of Vedanta in their religious philosophy, regardless of their caste affiliation.

Liberals and conservatives alike conducted their debate on sati and child and widow marriages by drawing upon the prescriptions of the Vedas. The exposure to Western and traditional values, however did not lead to critical attempt to marry traditional values and beliefs with modernity. Within the renaissance, therefore, two streams emerged: one gave greater importance to tradition and the other to modernity. Eventually, both moved. Invoked tradition moved towards revivalism, whereas those who advocated modernity tended to discard tradition. The dichotomy thus developed adversely affected the possibility of retrieving the creative potential in tradition as well as charting out the path of an alternative modernity, distinct from the colonial and the traditional.

All major movements of religious reform during the 19th and 20th centuries – Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prathana samaj, Satya shodak Samaj, Sree Narayana

Dharma Paripalana Sangham, Sadhu Jana Samaj, the self- Respect Movement, and so on were engaged in changing the existing pattern of worship as it was the main source of exploitation of the laity by priests. All religious events were observed with elaborate rituals prescribed by priests, most of them rooted in irrational and superstitious beliefs. The priests held believers to ransom by officiating during the performance of rituals over which they exercised a monopoly.

The main features of the reform were congregational form of worship, anti-idolatry and rejection of the mediatory role of priests. These changes released individuals from irrational beliefs as developed around the practice of idolatry and their exploitation by the priestly order. Consequently, the traditional form of temple was replaced by centers of community prayers where reformed" men and women could congregate in pursuit of their spiritual quest. The mediation of idols and priests as necessary concomitants for communion with God was firmly rejected. Although idol worship and temple rituals continued to hold their sway over the minds of believers, the



renaissance put forward an alternative that helped question some of the cruel and inhuman practices perpetrated in temples in the name of God.

WOMEN'S ISSUES

Social reforms mainly centered on the emancipation of oppressed and marginalized groups such as women and Dalits. Subjected to patriarchal authority, women had to put up with neglect, social isolation and violence. Their right to life was a male concession infanticide and sati represented their helplessness. The reformers intervened to ensure their right to life and freedom of choice. The abolition of sati and infanticide represented the former and widow marriage the latter.

The initiative for these changes was undertaken by "reformed" men who were seeking enlightened female companionship. However, changes in the condition of women that the reformers advocated did not transgress the patriarchal authority. Although women were allowed limited freedom, they hardly enjoyed equality even in the domestic sphere. Not only was the right to

take decisions vested with the male, he also commanded a privileged and superior position compared with the women in the family. The patriarch was omnipresent and his authority was unquestioned. Even the reformers were not able to free themselves of this inherited domestic culture as is evident from the reminiscences of Ramabhai Ranade, wife of the reformer and nationalist leader Mahadev Govind Ranade. Yet, the renaissance efforts did succeed in bringing about an initial breakthrough in the condition of women.

RESTORING SOCIAL DIGNITY

The social reforms advocated during the renaissance had two dimensions. The first was related to the need to simplify the elaborate rituals performed on different occasions such as birth, marriage and death. Apart from the expenditure involved in the m which the relatively poor found difficult to arrange, these occasions were used by the powerful and by priests to assert their authority. One of the major achievements of the renaissance was the implementation of a code of conduct for all such occasions. The process was started by Devendranath Tagore when his



father passed away. It later became a concern of all reform movements.

For a fairly long time, the renaissance in India was almost exclusively identified with the concern for modernization among the "upper castes". The movements for reform among them have been treated as synonymous with the renaissance. More inhuman of all social discriminations was the treatment meted out to members of the "lower castes". The caste distinctions were observed not only among them has been treated as synonymous with the renaissance. More in human of all social discriminations was the treatment meted out to members of the "lower castes". The caste distinctions were observed not only among Hindus but also among Muslims and Christians. The "lower castes", variously described as 'untouchables', "Harijians", Scheduled Castes and Dalits, could not be part of the social mainstream: they could not enter temples, use public roads or draw water from wells. They were forced to live in segregated parts of the village. This inhuman treatment was opposed by reform movements, particular by those from within the "lower

castes". Some of the important reform movements of this kind were those initiated by Mahatma Phule, Narayana Guru, 'Periyar' E.V. Ramaswamy, Ayyankali, Ayothee Das and Bhimarao Ambedkar. Most of these movements were mainly about gaining social dignity and political rights and less about economic rights.

Both social and religious reforms were caste or religion specific. Brahmo Samaj Addressed the issues of the "upper castes". So was the case of Prarthana Samaj in western India. The appeal of Arya Samaj was mainly to the intermediary castes. As a result, these three major reforms although opposed to caste were not concerned with the problems of "the untouchables" and confined their activities to the "upper castes" and classes. Only when movements arose among the Dalits did the question of their exclusion became a public issue. Paradoxically, most of these movements agitated for equality with the "upper castes" in matters of worship, civic rights and education. As a result, the rights of Dalits to worship in temples from which they were earlier excluded, to use public roads, to draw water from



village wells and to send their children to schools became issues around which protests were organized.

Organizationally, almost all reforms and agitations were confined within caste and religious boundaries, a consequence of which was that this eventually led to caste and religious solidarity movements. In fact, most of them later survived because of caste affiliation. Those without such affiliation such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and Prarthana Samaj withered away, whereas caste-based movements such as Kayastha Sabha, Sarin Sabha, Nair Service Society and Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Sangham have survived. Such a transformation is true of Muslims and Sikhs also. None of them anymore function as reform organizations but tend to act as political and social pressure groups. They hardly have the legacy of their former reform organizations in whose name they continue to wield influence.

INTERNAL WEAKNESSES

The reason for this denouement can be partly traced to the internal weaknesses of the

renaissance itself. Two tendencies that have a bearing on this development gained ground during the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. The first was a disjunction between political and socio-cultural concerns. The renaissance in India was a response to human suffering as expressed in social and religious practices; yet, it was not sensitive to the problem of political subjection. The attitude of the leaders of the renaissance towards the feudal order and colonial rule was, at best, ambivalent. Many of them, such as Dayananda Saraswathi and Vivekananda, maintained friendly relations with India's rulers. They could neither associate themselves with anti-colonial movements nor give lead tot anti-feudal opposition. As a result, when anti-colonial agitations gained strength, struggles for sociocultural changes became increasingly weaker and isolated from the political mainstream. The tendency to look inward within a caste or religion, therefore, became a possible option for consolidation.

Secondly, tradition was conceived in religious terms and rationalization of or opposition to change was drawn from religious



texts. In almost all cases of advocacy for change – the abolition of sati and infanticide or support for widow marriage – the exchanges between the supporters and opponents of reform were based on interpretations of the scriptures. The primacy religious tradition thus commanded circumscribed the reform itself, be it among Hindus or Muslims.

This brought about ambiguity towards religious change and internal contradictions within the reformation. Moreover, invoking religion either for approval or opposition helped the development of religious particularism, which eventually led to an unbridgeable gulf between different communities. An inevitable consequence of this contradiction was the undermining of the religious universalism that was central to the renaissance thought. The transformation of universalism, which championed the unity of all religious to particularism adversely, affected the development of the secular ethos.

The manner in which tradition was invoked for purposes of reform also contributed to the growth of particularism. Almost every leader of the renaissance, from

Ram Mohan Roy to Narayana Guru, drew upon Vedanta as the philosophical inspiration for their social vision. It was from the influence of Vedanta that they derived their belief in monotheism and universalism. The renaissance in India was not based on a rejection of tradition but on its selective incorporation.

But tradition was conceived in religious and not secular terms. The secular tradition was not invoked even when the unity of the godhead was accepted as the guiding principle. The reformation invariably harped back to the Vedas for legitimacy, and almost every renaissance leader was involved in the propagation of the ideas of Vedanta: Ram Mohan translated the Upanishads into Bengali and English, Devendranth devoted his life to the dissemination of the philosophy of Vedanta from which he earlier received enlightenment, and Keshab Chandra Sen propagated Vedanta through popular publications. Narayana Guru also was inspired by Vedanta even though he belonged to a “lower caste” and his teachings were the ideological influence of a “lower-caste” movement.



Among Muslims also, the influence of religious texts was evident. Be it for a Makthi Tangal in Kerala or a Syed Ahmed Khan in northern India, reforms were to follow scriptural prescriptions. However, they tried to interpret scriptures in such a fashion that the demands of a modern society could be accommodated. It was such perspective which informed Syed Ahmed Khan's efforts to reconcile Islam with modernity or Makthi Tangal's attitude towards the study of languages.

Triumph of faith

This attitude towards tradition was against the two basic ideas of renaissance – rationalism and universalism which led to the coexistence of reason and faith. There was an internal struggle within the renaissance to reconcile them, but without much success. As a result, commitment to the application of reason to social practices receded to the background and faith became the dominant criterion. This was possibly because tradition and modernity were divorced from each other as the latter did not emerge out of the former. Like modernity, rationality was also borrowed from the West

through the colonial agency and therefore had no roots of its own. Faith on the other hand was rooted in indigenous culture and belief. Hence, the triumph of faith over reason undid much of what the renaissance tried to do.

Two major thinkers of the renaissance – Akshay Kumar Dutta and Ram Mohan – had advanced a rational critique of social and religious practices and had tried to establish primacy of reason over faith. Interestingly, they derived their ideas from entirely different sources – Akshay Kumar from the Western and Ram Mohan from the indigenous. An element of reason was initially present in the thought of all renaissance leaders to varying degrees. In most cases, reason guided their social interventions. But neither they nor the movements they inspired could sustain the commitment to reason.

Idol worship was a case in point. The popular belief was that the idol represented God and that worship of the idol was worship of God. The renaissance questioned this assumption and linked it to the exploitation of believers by the priestly order. Temples were identified as the locus of this



exploitation, and therefore, a major aspect of reformation was the adoption of an alternative system of worship.

Both Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj eliminated idols from their places of worship, where prayers were led by a member of the congregation. In the reformed form of worship, priests, to whom Ram Mohan attributed all superstitions, had no role to play. The relevance of the temple itself was questioned as it was argued that temples were not necessary to achieve communion with god. Nayarana Guru defied the existing position of priests by consecrating an idol on his own.

Reason, however, floundered at the altar of practice. The impact of the renaissance was limited to a minuscule section of the burgeoning middle class in the cities, linked with the commercial and administrative activities of colonial rule. Their interest in the renaissance was limited to a reconciliation of their belief systems and practices with their new conditions of life. Therefore, they were not able to provide a strong social foundation for the renaissance, which remained a caricature confined to reformation,

that too within the confines of each caste and religion.

This social dynamic had a serious effect on the universalistic perspective that the renaissance represented. On the basis of the conception of monotheism and the unity of the godhead, renaissance thinkers put forward the idea that different religions were nothing but national embodiments of one universal truth. As such, believers of all religions, despite their different locations and different culture belonging, partook of the elements of the same idea. But the renaissance was unable to articulate this universalistic idea in social and political terms. As a result, rather than secularism, communal differences gained ground. This is in fact the tragedy of the Indian renaissance. Its values – humanism, rationalism and universalism are relevant even today, particularly because casteism, religiosity and social violence are ruling society. But the values of the renaissance have lost their salience as they do not gel with the spirit of an aggressive capitalist order. The possibility of retrieving those values also appears to be difficult, if not impossible, partly because of the



absence of linkages with the prevalent cultural ethos and partly because they are not within the ideological world of the hegemonic classes.

Conclusion

The renaissance in India was an attempt to create a cultural world which would suit the "modern" requirements of an emerging middle class so that it could emancipate itself from the shackles of feudal practices. It partially succeeded in this social task: inhuman social practices such as sati and infanticide were abolished, cruel religious rituals such as hook swinging and human sacrifices were abandoned, and women managed to gain some element of freedom from patriarchal control. Although the renaissance brought about a qualitative change in perspectives and practices, its impact was limited to a very small section of society. Yet, it did generate a cultural and intellectual break without which the later movements would not have been possible. In this sense, the regeneration of the 19th century was a precursor to modernity in India. Not with standing this positive contribution, the renaissance

promoted by the colonial intelligentsia was not powerful enough to overcome the cultural backwardness of society. Many of the ills of contemporary Indian society can be traced to the unfinished agenda of the renaissance.

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