

The New Indian Renaissance and Reform Movement: Historical Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Renaissance refers to a period of thinker, educational, and social reform in India during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Socio-intellectual revolution in the 19th century is known as the Indian Renaissance. It was portrayed by efforts to: rejuvenate conventional Indian knowledge systems, confront societal practices like caste bias, encourage education and socio-cultural status. The Indian Renaissance consider to a period of socio- cultural , spiritual, and educational revival in India during the 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily during British colonial rule.

Keywords: Renaissance, revolution, democracy, communism, culture, liberalism, secularism, education, and philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The Renaissance is a period of Indian cultural movement covering the 19th and 20th centuries. The impact of modern thoughts gave birth to a new beginning. A vast ancient country like India had been enslaved by a handful of foreigners. In the cultural sphere, there has been an outburst of thrill in creative activity all round. Literature and the fine arts woke up from torpor about a century ago, literature awaking earlier than its sister arts. The only danger now is that technique many supersede vision instead of being its astral body. If we have not grasped the fundamentals of our own culture, we are likely to be swept off our feet by fashions that come from elsewhere, fashions rooted in value-systems that we have not fully grasped. It is better to cling to our roots and readjust or multiply them, if more and other roots are needed, instead of being rootless and attempting to join our stems to root that thrive in other soils.

In G.K. Gokhale and Lokamanya Tilak, we have another pair of patriots of genius. Tilak contributed to the cultural as well as political reawakening. As has been well said, he was the father of Indian revolution. He struck out new paths in politic agitation, education, institution-building, journalism, nation-building, and ideology. Gokhale, his contemporary and compeer, founder of the Servants of India Society, represented the unfoldment of the renaissance in a new direction. He stood for the spirit of liberalism and parliamentary democracy. His participation in the proceedings of executive and legislative bodies was characterized by a remarkable purity of motive, ardent patriotism, and limpidity of speech.

Gokhale was modest and knew his place in Indian history. He said in 1907: "It will, no doubt, be given to our countrymen of future generations, to serve India by successes. We, of the present generation, must be content to serve mainly by our failures". His constitutionalism and liberalism were not a bed of roses. They exacted from him elaborate and painful toil. "Patriotism by itself", said Gokhale, "is not enough. It is a noble powerful exalted emotion. It needs to be directed into useful, fruitful channels. That can be done only if every worker prepared himself by arduous study, by patient survey of the realities of Indian life, and by appreciation on the spot of the varieties of factors involved in each particular case". His integrity was unquestionable.

He handed down to Gandhi the legacy of spiritualization of public life, unity of means and ends, secularism, a deep-rooted sense of national mission, and faith in peace, justice, conciliation and progress. He became to his countrymen a shining example of an ideal parliamentarian with an unshaken faith in parliamentary democracy and a singular purity of motive in his championship of public causes. Gokhale's integrity, sincerity, and talent had almost drawn Gandhiji in the charmed circle of his disciples. But his most distinguished follower was the RT. Hon'ble Srinivas Shastri, the silver-tongued orator of the British Empire. He achieved even greater fame than his master. The cultivation of parliamentary democracy on a national scale was a new experiment in India. But Gokhale and Shastri showed how these outlandish institutions could take root in Indian soil. Their achievements made Indians realize that they could shine in this field as well.

Gandhiji and Vinoba can be taken up next. An illumined humanist, a spiritual experimentalist claiming no finality for his conclusions, Gandhiji, who became the father of the Indian Republic, sacrificed no principle to gain a political advantage.

Truth was infinitely dearer to him than his Mahatmaship which was purely burden. He knew the straight and narrow path and he rejoiced to walk on it. Truth was God. And he saw that truth and love were the obverse and reverse of the same coin. He found beauty in truth and through truth. 'Seek Truth', said Gandhiji, 'and beauty and goodness will be added unto you'.

Gandhiji was both idolator and iconoclast. He endeavoured to raise workers as copartners with capitalists, for he sought to destroy, not capitalists, but capitalism. A classless society was his ideal too. But he would welcome communism only if it came without any violence. Socialism was essentially identical with the Upanishadic doctrine all this is the house of God.

Land should belong to him who works on it. If equal distribution was not possible, we should at least achieve equitable distribution. He regarded an enlightened democracy as the finest thing in the world. But Swaraj would be an absurdity if the majority did not respect the opinion and action of the minority.

Gandhiji thought that the industrial civilization of the West was "satanic" because it was driven madly by the urge for exploitation. He thought that this civilization would destroy itself. What he objected to was the craze for machinery that turned machinery into a snake-hole which might contain from one to a hundred snakes. Heavy machinery for work of public utility had a place; but it should be owned by the State and used for the good of the people. After all, handicrafts and honest labour would remain when the achievements of the machine age would have disappeared.

Gandhiji made the doctrine of non-violence also peculiarly his own. War, he said, was an evil as everyone knew. The super powers should practice non-violence and earn universal gratitude. If an individual did not have the courage to be non-violent, he should preferably cultivate the act of killing and being killed rather than flee from danger in a cowardly manner. If one resorts to satyagraha, this should be done without ill-will and in a law-abiding manner. The non co-operator should be guided by his search for truth, have the capacity to suffer hardships and try to conquer untruth by truth, by expressing the voice of conscience in the national life. Non-cooperation should be a protest against participation in evil and have its roots in love. As for fasts, there can be no real fast without prayer.

There might have been societies in which the law of the jungle prevailed. The rule of law prevails in modern society. But in the ideal society of Gandhiji's dreams, love and law would be one. Nationalism should be based on broad and spiritual foundations. Gandhiji observed that he himself would prefer truth and non-violence to India's liberty: "I would prefer that India perished rather than that she won freedom at the sacrifice of truth."

Gandhiji's was a working philosophy which was fairly coherent and consistent, indicating lines of development and progress both for the individual and the collectivity. And its uniqueness lay in the fact that it was made operative not only in Gandhiji's own personal life but in the life of a whole people in spite of their bewildering diversity. His experiments with truth were personal and, at the same time, made on a nation-wide scale. This was Gandhiji's unique role and his great opportunity. The nation was totally involved in his experiments since he had identified himself with it. Gandhiji was thus able to write a great chapter in the history of humanity by employing, for the first time, a philosophy of spirit as a programme for winning the political freedom of India.

Another major achievement of Gandhiji was the fact that during his long years of leadership, whether within or without the Congress, he drew within his magic circle iron men like Sardar Patel, idealists like Pandit Nehru, astute men of the world like C. Rajgopalachari, simple and devoted leader-lieutenants like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, and poets like Sarojini Naidu, so that when freedom came, there were seasoned leaders in all fields and in all the province of India to take over the administration. Gandhiji had multiplied himself at many levels and carried the message of economic, political, cultural and spiritual freedom to the commonest man in the street.

Vinoba Bhave, Gandhiji's chosen disciple in the realm of spirit, stood on the atlantean shoulders of his master and saw farther ahead. He summed up the Gandhian gospel neatly in his philosophy of Sarvodaya, walked in the footprints of his master from one end of India to the other, pleading for, and succeeding here and there in bringing about an equitable distribution of land, insisting on Dan, and sincere and spontaneous self-sacrifice. It was only in this way that red revolution and the spilling of blood could be avoided. C.F. Andrews called Vinoba, one of the few pearls in the Wardha Ashram, one who came not to be blessed by the Ashram, but to bless it. This "god who gave away land" and "looted people with love" gave a new dimension to Gandhian thought and constructive activity and brought about, as Shri Srirani Naryan has said, a "socio-economic" renaissance, a minor revolution in the minds of men.

Coming to the last pair-Pandit Nehru and Tagore-Nehru was the westernized disciple of the typically eastern saint. If Gandhiji were to be considered as Plato, Nehru would be his Aristotle. Since the days of Asoka there were hardly any idealist statesmen except Akbar who had the opportunity to implement his ideas and inject them into a whole people.

Nehru's greatest work was done as a rebel. But he was also a great prime minister. Authorship was only one aspect of his multifaceted personality. He wrote his Autobiography, Discovery of India, and Glimpses of World History when in prison.

Life was greater in his eyes than literature. On his whirlwind tours in India both as a rebel and as a Prime Minister, he loved to speak to the "masses" of India. He would have liked to be a teacher and this is how he satisfied his teaching impulse by trying to "educate our masters".

It influenced as he was by Karl Marx as much as by Gandhiji, Nehru had an innate preference for humanism and socialism. He had his spiritual longings too, as is seen in his glowing tribute to the Ganges in his Will and Testament and in several other colourful paragraphs in his writings. But his agnostic ambivalence was part of the Hamlet-like indecision which made him so lovable and so vulnerable at the same time.

Three great achievements stand out to his credit as the Prime Minister The five-year plans that he initiated put India, in spite of all limitations, firmly on the path of modernization and industrialization. The village panchayats that he conceived and established in all the Indian states are still functioning in an experimental way. But when they take root and from, they are sure to be the backbone of the world's greatest democracy. Thirdly, his advocacy of pancha shila peaceful co-existence and non-alignment raised India's status and made her impeat perceptible in the eyes of the world.

Nehru has been bracketed with Tagore rather than with Gandhiji, for they shared several things in common. Nehru had a passion for beauty, for the red rose, for literature, and the creative arts. In spite of these mystical perceptions, Tagore was also something of a humanist, the advocate of the Religion of Man, and the worshipper of Jeevan Debata. Both Tagore and Nehru were nationalists and internationalists.

Tagore was the first to express in his creative as well as critical writings, the new aesthetics of the Indian Renaissance, an aesthetics that comprehended Eastern as well as Western terms and yet was essentially of its own place and time. He expressed it in a number of literary forms and attained the hallmark of excellence in each one of them. His Nobel Laureateship was, in a great measure, responsible for the wide diffusion of his impact at home and abroad and this made him the symbol and spokesman of the new literary resurgence in India. He spoke longingly of Universal Man and Shantiniketan and Sriniketan, which were grandly conceived and designed, built up and maintained a really national and international atmosphere of learning and creative education for a long time. Guru Dev Tagore became the poet and prophet of New India.

There were many other celebrated personalities that helped to lead India on her path of self-finding and self-exceeding. Swami Ram Tirth and Bhagawan Ramana Maharshi; Dr. S. Radha Krishnan, who won for Indian philosophy world audiences and became one of its most brilliant exponents; Maulana Azad, and Dr. Zakir Hussain; the great scientists of India including J.C. Bose and C.V. Raman; leaders like-Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, Pherozechah Metha, C.R. Das, and M.N. Roy, who changed over from communism to scientific humanism.

The value-system within which this culture functions may be summed up in this way: each individual has to be a conqueror of his own self and master of his environment. Personal salvation is barely half the goal. The culture we evolve has to satisfy all the faculties in man: faith and reason, intellect and emotion, will and intuition. An excess of the instinctive life is like living in lush grass. An excess of the intellect makes a desert of one's life. To be excessively emotional is like living beneath a waterfall. A life of mere action is a step in the dark.

The intuition has to be awakened and trained to perceive reality. Instinct and emotion, faith, reason and intellect will have to be subordinated to and transfigured by it. Beauty, truth, goodness, love and power have all to be cultivated if life, the rose with five-coloured petals, has to yield all its secrets. "According to Sumit Sarkar, the pioneers and works of this period were revered and regarded with nostalgia throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, however, due to a new focus on its colonialist origins, a more critical view emerged in the 1970s" (Sarkar, Sumit (1997:104) Evil is an aberration, a deformity in this universe. The world is not to be shunned as transitory and evil. It has to be transformed so as to reflect fully the light of the Supreme. The medieval mystic believed only in the infinity of spirit. The modern scientists believe in the infinity perceived by the physical senses and the intellect. The highest meaning of life is open to us only when we accept the three

factors of existence - the Soul, the World Soul, and the Transcendent Divine. India had forgotten the middle term during her period of stagnation. It was the Western impact that helped her to correct herself.

In the economic sphere, India believes in an equitable distribution of land, promotion of small scale industries, nationalisation of major industries, and a classless society neither rooted in violence nor arising out of it. Politically speaking, a socialist republic, fostered through parliamentary democracy and village panchayats, is the destination. The policy of non-allignment and peaceful co-existence should prevail in the sphere of international relations. "Colonial provisions at the time consisted mainly of village schools teaching literacy and numeracy, Arabic and Islamic studies being taught to Muslims in madrasas, and tols, where pandits instructed Sanskrit texts to Brahmins, which were supported by endowments." (Killingley, Dermot 2012:36) In the social sphere, there is general agreement that there should be no discrimination between man and man, on the basis of caste, language, religion, colour, or class. Indeed, variations of community, region, and language may bring charm and variety, once the basic unity and value system have been established. A just and balanced thinking in national terms on all these matters has to be actively taught and practised till this is achieved. "Historians have traced the beginnings of the movement to the victory of the British East India Company at the 1757 Battle of Plassey, as well as the works of reformer Raja Rammohan Roy, considered the "Father of the Bengal Renaissance," born in 1772" (Samanta, Soumyajit (2008)

In the sphere of religion, there was a tremendous revolt against superstitious and ignorant customs from the days of Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Dayanand. The religious programme for each day for every individual has to be revised in accordance with the needs and exigencies of our times; what exists was prepared for other times and other conditions. "The Bengali Renaissance originated in the Bengal Presidency of the British Indian Empire, but more specifically, its capital city of Kolkata, then known as Calcutta. This colonial metropolis was the first non-Western city to use British methods of teaching in their school system" (Sarkar, Sumit 1990)

There is hardly any religion left today, whether for daily life or for festive or sacred occasions, for lack of religious reform, which is in tune with our new social structure. "The Bengal Renaissance, also known as the Bengali Renaissance, was a cultural, social, intellectual, and artistic movement that took place in the Bengal region of the British Raj, from the late 18th century to the early 20th century" (Dasgupta, Subrata 2011:2)

If the essence of religion has not been active in our daily lives, its mere name and form have played havoc in our social and political life. Sectarianism and communalism have eaten into our vitals. This is where the doctrine of secularism should hold sway. Secularism need not mean that all religions should be neglected and allowed to rot and decay. Since religions are going to stay, they have to be rationalized, revised, and revived sooner rather than later. At the same time, the doctrine of secularism has to be fostered and asserted firmly so that a programme and an ideology, that were meant for promoting individual and domestic culture, are not projected into our social and political life, clashing with other religious programmes and ideologies.

CONCLUSION

Our education system needs a drastic reorientation. It is the one sphere of life that has not yet renewed itself with each stage of our renaissance. It has therefore clogged national progress. But there are signs that here too things have begun to move. The renaissance was a movement in which the entire nation was involved. The Indian Renaissance has to be evaluated from all angles so that the total picture of national resurgence and reorientation may emerge in a clearer outline. One will then be able to see vividly the unity that underlies the pattern. This unity of the renascent motif can be brought into clearer relief, if the representative thinking of each great community in the country were to be analyzed and presented in its evolution towards modernism.

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