

“Navigating Paradoxes: Print Culture, Reform Movements, and the Indian Social Milieu in the Colonial Era”

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the entwined narrative of print culture and reform movements in Modern India (1757-1947). It explores the symbiotic relationship, intersections, and inherent contradictions between the two pivotal aspects that shaped India's socio-political landscape. The paper scrutinizes the role of print media as a catalyst for social reform movements, examining its impact on political awakening, religious reforms, gender equality, caste-based discrimination, and national identity. Through a multidimensional analysis, this paper aims to unravel the complex dynamics, highlighting both the collaborative and conflicting forces that characterized this transformative period in Indian history.

Keywords: *Print Culture, Reform Movements, Modern India, Intersections and Contradictions.*

Introduction

In the 19th Century, India witnessed various revolutionary events and movements that have had an impact on Indian life even today. By the first half of the century, Britishers had settled down as rulers on the Indian subcontinent. Western education and institutions developed a conducive atmosphere for such a revolution. The spread of print culture and reform movements were its parts. The printing paved a way for mass reach to convey Western ideas and thoughts, whereas the reform movements shaped an era aimed at scrutinizing the existing knowledge and philosophy on which contemporary society stood for centuries in the light of rationalism, humanism and science.

Reform movements, intending to achieve ‘Social Justice’, aimed to make people aware of stagnation in Indian society caused due to orthodoxy and ceremonialism (Naik, 2006, p. 3). Print culture while preaching values essential to live human life with dignity, waged a war against injustice in contemporary society. This complementary role of print culture with reform movements tried to reshape religions in India - Hindu, Islam and Zoroastrianism on a rational basis (Nambiar, 1965, p. 1441). The values on which the present Indian Constitution and society stand, including nationalism, are derived from a synthesis of old and new ideas backed by these two forces. This essay tries to examine the development of print culture and reform movements in colonial India and their influence on colonial Indian social milieu.

Print Culture in India (1780 CE – 1820 CE)

The print culture began with the invention of the printing press by German goldsmith Johannes Guttenberg. Though the Portuguese had introduced the printing press in India in the 16th Century CE, the Print culture received a boom under British rule. James Augustus Hicky started *Bengal Gazette*, the first Indian newspaper printed in Serampore Press on 29th January 1780 (Ray and Gupta, 2017, p. 247). It was closed for publicizing scandalous affairs of Company officials, especially of Lord Wellesley.

Earlier seen as a risky startup, print culture emerged as a major business in Bombay and Madras provinces within two decades. Christian missionaries realized the utility of newspapers as the vehicle for ‘civilizing’ native populations in their languages. Charles Wilkins, by developing Devanagari type nails, made the task easier. The First Bengali monthly *Digdarshan* and newspaper *Samachar Darpan* were published in 1818 (*Ibid.*, pp. 249-50). Battala Book Trade emerged as a major print hub in Calcutta with a variety of literature – world history, mythology, literature, science, etc. However, *Friend of India* in its

report (1822) complained that books printed were trash as more focus was on religious texts (Ghosh, 2003, p. 35). The time was ripe enough for educated Indian intelligentsia to use print culture for their aim of shaping India’s modern history.

Bengal Renaissance and Print Media

Inspired by modern values and thoughts, enlightened Indians started introspecting Indian culture. R. G. Bhandarkar saw Hindu society in 3 tyrannies – political, priestly and social (Naik, 2006, pp. 8-9). They realized the need for reorganization of the entire structure of a society to alleviate the conditions of the underprivileged, and infusion of new ways of behavior into the existing social structure. Raja Rammohun Roy, the first modern man of Asia paved the way for the rejuvenation of Hindu religion in Bengal. Emphasizing monotheism and critical of idolatry, ceremonialism and dominance of the priestly class, he preached ideas of *Brahmo Samaj* through newspapers *Sambad Kaumudi* (1821) and *Mirat ul Akhbar* (1822). In the book *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin*, he asked to measure religion by reason and not on its own internal scriptural evidence solely. Religion should be availed to common man in its simple form to be free of contradiction and thus upholding a beneficial social order (Jones, 2006, pp. 31-32).

Roy received mixed opinions from masses like that of Henry Derozio, a young Anglo-Indian professor dismissed from Sanskrit College for criticizing Hinduism in the weekly *The Parthenon* (*Ibid.*, p. 29). He stopped the publication *Mirat ul Akhbar* against the Regulation Act of 1823 and the deportation of James Buckingham, the editor of the *Calcutta Journal* for criticizing the company rule (Ray and Gupta, 2017, p. 253). As a result of a proposal signed by him and Jagannath Shankarshet against evil *Sati* system, Lord Bentinck passed ‘The Prohibition of Sati Act, 1829’ (Shirodkar, 2009, Para 20-22). On the other hand, *Sambad Prabhakar*, started by Radhakant Deb, a leader of the Dharma Sabha, waged a rhetorical war against reformists and *Sambad Kaumudi* (Ray and Gupta, 2017, pp. 253-4). After Roy, Tattvabodhini Sabha led reformist front in Bengal. It started *Tattvabodhini Patrika* under Debendranath Tagore and Akshaykumar Dutta with a series of articles against polygamy, child marriage, and caste egoism (*Ibid.*, pp. 256-7).

Print Culture and Reform Movements in Western and South India

Meanwhile, Bombay witnessed the growth in number of English newspapers after C. J. Fair’s *Bombay Gazette*. Bal Shastri Jambhekar started *Bombay Darpan*, first Marathi newspaper. Inspired by him, Bhau Mahajan started Marathi periodicals *Prabhakar*, *Dhumketu* and *Gyan Darshan* in the 1840s with the motto *Desh Kalyan* i.e. welfare of the country (Naik, 2006, p. 26). Through well-reasoned, hardworking criticism he demolished the notion of the ‘civilizing mission’ of the British. Bhau Mahajan published *Shatpatre* of Lokhitawadi Gopal Hari Deshmukh which were critical of prevalent obscurantism and social slavery of caste-ridden Hindu society (*Ibid.*). Dadoba Pandurang Tarkhadkar’s book *Dharma Vivechan* advocated a total change in social structure with the base of rationality and equality emphasized on moral behaviour and knowledge. This provided a base for the formation of Paramhansa Sabha and Prarthana Samaj (1867) in future.

Educated Parsis in Bombay under Nauroji Furdonji, Dadabhai Naoroji, K. R. Cama established *Rahnumai Mazdayasnan Sabha* to initiate reforms in hurricane religion to restore its purity and made the newspaper *Rasta-Gofter* its mouthpiece (Grover and Mehta, 2018, p. 282). Prarthana Samaj led by Bhaskar Pandurang, Justice Ranade, R.G. Bhandarkar and K.T. Telang, rejected infallibility of scriptures, idolatry and casteism and supported widow remarriage and female education. J. V. Naik (2006) termed Prarthana Samaj as Protestant Hinduism that tried to revive *Bhagwat Dharma* with fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man (p. 30). Justice Ranade, an agnostic, in his work *Theist’s Confession of Faith* preached the importance of monotheism in achieving salvation (Tope, 2016, pp. 107-8). The Samaj backed Gujarati

reformers Mehtaji Mancharam, Narmada Shankar and Karsandas Mulji in their fight against child marriage and female infanticide (Nambiar, 1965, p. 1442).

Mahatma Jotiba Phule, the erstwhile Prarthana Samajist and founder of Satyashodhak Samaj tried to create consciousness among depressed classes through his writing and work. *Deenbandhu* edited by labor leader N.M. Lokhande became a mouthpiece of Samaj. Influenced by Thomas Paine and Theodore Parker, Phule preached universal humanism and rationalism as *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (Naik, 2006, p. 33). For the cause of social reforms, G. G. Agarkar started his newspaper *Sudharak* after resigning as the editor of *Kesari* after a long debate with Lokmanya Tilak on what should be the first - social or political reforms.

In South India, Madras Mahajan Sabha led by G. Subramanya Aiyer started a weekly *The Hindoo* which became a major group in the National Social Conference pressing for complete reforms (Nambiar, 1965, pp. 1443-4). Veda Samaj started a journal *Salom Patriot* improve the socio-moral condition of society. Sri Narayan Guru, the leader of the Ezhava community in Kerala, initiated the temple entry movement that resulted in the establishment of *Sri Narayan Dharma Paripalan Yogam* which erected temples exclusively for the community. He gave the slogan ‘One religion, One Caste, One God for all humankind’ (Jones, 2006, pp. 179-80).

New Currents in Major Indian Religions

Madame Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, in her work *Isis Unveiled*, compared Hinduism and Buddhism with Christianity. She withdrew her support from Arya Samaj after *Humbeggary of the Theosophists* flyer incident. Dr. Annie Besant, one of the leading Theosophists in the book ‘*Wake Up India: A Plea for Social Reform*’ advocated for the remarriage of virgin widows and the emancipation of depressed classes (Nambiar, 1965, p. 1442). In northern plains, Arya Samaj movement took shape under leadership of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. He showed several paradoxical elements - Extreme conservative in thoughts and beliefs but revolutionary in attitude and actions (*Ibid.*). He never wanted westernization but revival of glory of Vedic religion that is observable in initiatives like *Shuddhi* movement. His work *Satyarth Prakash* asked for ‘Back to Vedas.’

The Renaissance rays approached the Muslim community after the Revolt of 1857. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a progressive reformer, in his work *Commentary on the Quran*, criticized the narrow outlook of traditional interpretation based on rationalism and scientific knowledge. He propagated his social ideas in the newspaper *Tahdhib ul Akhlaq* (Grover and Mehta, 2018, pp. 280-1). He started Muhammadan Anglo Orient College at Aligarh which is at present known as Aligarh Muslim University. The Deoband school, a Muslim revivalist group issued fatwas against him and asked people to fight the British first rather than social reforms. In Punjab, Sikhs started a movement against corrupt mahants under Singh Sabha. Sikh revivalist groups such as *Nirankaris* and *Namdharis* became active during this period emphasizing on teachings of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh respectively to fight social evils especially casteism prevailed in society (Jones, 2006, pp. 87-8, 90-1).

Though the reform movement was India’s intellectual response, their appeal was more emotional than rational. The like-minded people derived inspiration from the leader, but after his demise, the ideological differences partitioned the institutions which further weakened them. Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj faced the same fate. Swami Vivekananda considered preaching religion and philosophy to hungry humans as a sin and thus criticized the ornamental efforts of the National Social Conference and its earlier counterparts. His neo-Hinduism, a synthesis of Hindu reformism and Hindu revivalism showed the Western world the real essence of Indian culture (Majumdar and Mirza, 1965, p. 130-1). Though the rise of

extremists affected the reform movement after controversy over the Age of Consent Act (1891), the Sharda Act (1930) reintroduced the front with the active participation of oppressed classes in the fight for human rights. The entry of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar changed the course of reform movement providing it mass support. His fortnightly *Bahishkrut Bharat*, *Janata* and *Samata* became the mouthpiece of the movement.

Conclusion

The history of ‘Social Justice’ in India is a history of selflessness and pain. While rejuvenating Indian cultural life, reformers tried to get rid of spiritual dryness that moved the Indian mindset within a cycle of prescribed ceremonialism. The factions in the movement hampered its progress, though a large section of society remained outside of its ambit. After the death of Justice M. G. Ranade, the breach of priority to *Swaraj* or Social Justice further affected it. Institutionalized efforts of reformers had made the subalterns in the society aware to raise their voice for the rights to achieve ‘Social Justice,’ quintessential for building modern India. In this process, print culture acted as a double-edged sword as both conservatives and reformists used it to reach up to commoners. While diverting the Indian mindset towards the political cause in the first two decades of 20th century, the print culture raised the voice for subalterns in 1930s-40s with the rise of Dr. Ambedkar. Both print culture and reform movements gradually shaped a sense of nationalism and became a guiding force to achieve a dignified life for all.

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