

THE RAINBOW COILATION: DIVERSE STREAMS OF RENAISSANCE IN INDIA

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Though the term Renaissance is popular in common parlance, its roots, nature and impact have deeper and denser dimensions that lend to different, even contradictory, interpretations. Owing to fundamental changes taking place in historical perspective, the connotation has undergone drastic metamorphosis that the term has become almost a misnomer. Literally Renaissance means ‘re-birth’. When the great cultural changes which marked the divide between the European Middle ages and what later came to be identified as the Modern Age were being grasped by historians in 19th century, the general perception was that these changes were being brought out by a revival of classical Greek and Roman art and values. But by the 20th Century this partial and distorted version gave to the following conception, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary:

1.The great revival of art and letters, under the influence of classical models, which began in Italy in the 14th century and continued during the 15th, and 16th: also the period during which this movement was in progress.

The word Renaissance indeed is now generally used to denote a whole complex movement of which that revival of classical antiquity was but one element or symptom...

2. Any revival or period of marked improvement and new life in art and literature etc.

The first part of this definition represents the earlier perception and the latter part the present one. Many modern scholars are veering round to this view as exemplified by Will Durant's multi volume "*Story of Civilization*":

The present work aims to give rounded picture of all faces of human life in the Italy of the Renaissance- from the birth of Petrarch in 1304 to the death of the Titian in 1576. The term 'Renaissance' will in this book refer only to Italy. The word does not properly apply to such native maturations, rather than exotic rebirths, as took place in France, Spain, England, and the Lowlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and even in Italy the designation lays undue stress on that revival of classic letters which was of less importance to Italy than the ripening of its economy and culture into their own characteristic forms. (Volume 5, Preface)

In spite of Durant's attempt to free himself from some of the restrictive urges of the past, he is not bold enough to make a clean break. According to this new perception what is described as Renaissance is not "re-birth" but "new birth"? Therefore it seems to me that Indian language equivalents for Renaissance like "Navodhan" or "Navajagaran" etc are more apt than their English original. Here it is evident that even Will Durant's broader

perception is not yet adequate. For example Frederick Engels gives us a more satisfactory and comprehensive evaluation of Renaissance. Engels, who though was writing in the last quarter of the 19th century, this break is complete and clear. He writes:

It was the greatest progressive revolution that mankind had so far experienced, a time which called for giants and produced giants – giants in power of thought, passion and character, in universality and learning, The men who founded the modern rule of bourgeoisie had anything but bourgeois limitations. On the contrary, the adventurous character of the time inspired them to a greater or lesser degree. There was hardly any man of importance then living who had not travelled extensively, who did not speak four or five languages, who did not shine in a number of fields. Leonardo da Vinci was not only a great painter but also a great mathematician, mechanic, and engineer, to whom the most diverse branches of physics are indebted for important discoveries. Albrecht Durer was painter, engraver, sculptor, and architect, and in addition invented a system of fortification embodying many of the ideas that much later were again taken up by Montalembert and the modern German science of fortification. Machiavelli was statesman, historian, poet, and at the same time the first notable military author of modern times. Luther not only cleaned the Augean stable of the Church but also that of the German language; he created modern German prose and composed the text and melody of that triumphal hymn imbued with confidence in victory which became the Marseillaise of the sixteenth century. The heroes of that time were not yet in thrall to the division of labour, the restricting effects of which, with its production of one-sidedness, we so often notice in their successors. But what is especially characteristic of them is that they almost

all live and pursue their activities in the midst of the contemporary movements, in the practical struggle; they take sides and join in the fight, one by speaking and writing, another with the sword, many with both. Hence the fullness and force of character that makes them complete men. Men of the study are the exception - either person of second or third rank or cautious philistines who do not want to burn their fingers. (Dialectics of Nature, page 21 -22)

This broad view of Renaissance is applicable to the Indian experience also as it is valid for Europe. But it would be wrong to conceive Indian Renaissance as a one-to-one repetition of the European phenomenon – with only the chronological gap of three or four centuries. There are two decisive factors, which differentiate the Indian Renaissance from the European. The first factor is that India was under colonial yoke during the Renaissance period. The second factor is the unique Indian social structure marked by the obnoxious caste hierarchy. Though the west had its own specific feudal and pre capitalist forms of hierarchical and inegalitarian and exploitative structures to over come, all of them were in no way comparable to the caste and untouchability system in India. Indian Renaissance, in thought and practice had the indelible stamp of these two factors. Some of the diversities of the Indian Renaissance streams are directly accounted by the specific characteristics of Indian social and historical reality.

In Europe the Renaissance was directed against the pontifical pretensions of infallibility along with temporal and spiritual

dominance of the church. Therefore it was directed at the prevailing societal and political power structure. But in India the fight for the abolition of casteist hierarchy and women subjection was more strident and even violent occasionally. There was occasional violence in Europe but it was perpetrated by the church in the form of inquisition and burning at stake and imprisonment and not in the form of civil strikes experienced in India.

II

The early historians of Renaissance in India were misled by the propagandists of colonialism with their argument that modernization and Renaissance in India were the beneficent result of colonial conquest, dominance and administration. It was even claimed as the “White man’s burden” to civilize the backward, if not barbarian, people of Asia and Africa. Even radicals like Jawaharlal Nehru and intensely revivalist nationalists like R.C. Mazumdar fell victims to this tendentious propaganda. It has almost become axioms for textbook writers. Isolated sentences and passages from Karl Marx’s writings too are culled out in support of this view.

Though even now this concept circulates in the form of axiomatic received wisdom, more and more historians are entering the field to challenge this colonialist shibboleth. Among them K.N. Panikkar is the foremost. He says:

The emergence of modern ideas and the development of social protest and religious dissent in the nineteenth century have been generally viewed as a

consequence of the introduction of European ideas and institutions in India. To the British colonial and administrator – historians, this impact – response framework was useful in projecting the civilizing role of British rule and the manifold blessing bestowed upon the people of India by the dissemination of western knowledge. The formula was very simple: familiarity with European history, institutions and language and the concomitant influence of the European ideas of liberty, rationalism and humanism acted as the ‘open sesame’ which made Indians critical of their own institutions and consequently led them to embark upon a career of reform. Many assumptions of this approach, notwithstanding its inherent ideological justification of British rule can be found in the writings of Indian historians. Some have viewed the emergence of socio-religious movements as a contribution of the missionaries to Indian cultural life, while others have ascribed the development of modern ideas exclusively to the influence of western education. Without belittling the importance of western influence, it should be pointed out that such analyses not only ignore the complexities of the social and intellectual developments during the nineteenth century, but also overlook the elements of protest and dissent in the Indian intellectual tradition and the potentialities of social development in the eighteenth century before British intervention. Above all, they totally ignore the material conditions within which these developments occurred.(Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectuals and social consciousness in colonial India, 1995, page 3-4)

Then Panikkar goes on to demolish another piece of “received knowledge” about the modern history of India which takes for granted that the 18th Century of modern Indian history was a period of darkness and decline, with no remarkable political or cultural

developments worth investigating. Its logic is simple. In 1707 Aurangzeb the last of the great Mughal Emperors died and the empire was slipping down to disintegration. Though Robert Clive by means of bribery and deceit managed to oust Nawab Suraj - ul - Daula and gain a foothold after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, British suzerainty over a viably respectable area was still many decades away. So in the absence of a powerful monarch or emperor ruling India from Delhi or thereabouts, how could one speak about a culturally vibrant country that is India. This state or empire – centered view of cultural advance in a large multinational country like India is inane to say the least. This theoretically unsound concept does not tally with the experience of India in general and her national units in particular. Panikkar gives a number of factors to prove that the 18th Century, which immediately preceded the juggernaut of colonial march was not devoid of, reform movements and intellectual advances. He says:

Without going into details, the importance of the changes that occurred in the pre-colonial period may be underlined by referring to religious conditions in the eighteenth century and changes in the structure and organization of caste. Undoubtedly, Hinduism was beset with idolatry, polytheism and superstition. But these religious beliefs and practices were being challenged by a large number of heterodox sects which emerged in almost all parts of India- the Satnami, Appapanthi and Shivanarayan sects in Uttar pradesh, the Karthabhajas and Balramis in Bengal, the Chandradasis in Rajasthan and the Virabrahmas in Andhra Pradesh, all

of whom denounced polytheism, idolatry and caste distinctions, The Karthabhajas met in congregations twice a year in which caste distinction were renounced: they ate together as equals and addressed one another as brother and sister. Like the later nineteenth – century reformers, Charan Das invoked Vedic authority for anti-idolatry and anti-casteism. He claimed that his attempt was to propagate Vedic truth in simple Hindi for the benefit of the common man. He was opposed to all rituals including the use of tulsi leaves for worship. These sects, again like the nineteenth-century reformers, placed a high premium on personal morality. Numerically, they were certainly not insignificant: most of them had a following of twenty to thirty thousand. They were indeed different in methods of organization and functioning from the religious movements of the nineteenth century, but to dismiss them on that account as personal revolts without much social significance is to miss their real import. They have to be assessed and understood primarily as an expression of a developing trend of protest and dissent in the religious life of the people, characterized at the time by superstition and the tyranny of priests. Their failure or success apart – and this depended upon various factors including the subsequent socio-economic developments – they ‘testify to the reform movements manifesting in society even independently of foreign influence’

This line of enquiry is also relevant to other aspects of eighteenth century society. A closer look at the changes in the structure and organization of caste and the major trends in literary and artistic expression would be particularly rewarding. The present state of our knowledge of the eighteenth century, a no-man’s-land ignored both by medieval and modern historians, does not permit detailed analysis of these issues. But there is enough evidence to indicate the broad trends. For instance, it is

possible to show that substantial changes were occurring within the institution of caste: fragmentation, occupational mobility and Sanskritization, for instance. In the realm of intellectual activity, the eighteenth century, like all other periods of Indian history, was not devoid of individual brilliance. Artistic and literary activities displayed a very high level of creativity, especially in literature and painting. The move towards popular literature, both in form and content, rejecting 'the painted, the powdered and the obsequious' – a trend, which had started in Malayalam and Bengali literatures as early as the Sixteenth Century – gained emphasis during this period. What happened to these tendencies after the British conquest of India is another story. It may not be rewarding to speculate upon the course of their possible development if colonial intervention had not taken place. Yet a proper appreciation of these tendencies would enrich our understanding of the intellectual scenario of the Nineteenth Century. It would also help us to look for alternative explanations to the rather simplistic impact-response formula.(Ibid pp 4-7)

III

Most of the movements and reformers mentioned above had come from the Hindu community though their struggles were against its in-egalitarian structure and oppressive customs. It is true some of them interacted with Muslims and Sikhs, as along with these were a number of Muslim reform movements like the Sufis, Wahabis, Farazis etc. Though these movements spilled over into the Nineteenth Century, their roots go back to Eighteenth Century and even earlier. Most of them, especially of the Wahabis and Farazis had mixed character of being peasant struggles as well as religious

reform movements against priestly corruption, out-dated customs etc. Many of them advocated a return to the pristine doctrines of the Prophet and wanted to discard the dross of superstition gathered around it through the course of history.

Take for example the Muslim reformer Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi (1703-1763). In the face of stiff opposition from the orthodox he translated Koran into Persian language which was the official medium in those days. His son Shah Abdul Quadir again translated Koran into Urdu, then the “vernacular” of the ordinary Muslims. The father and son were influenced by an earlier reformer Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi (1564-1624).

Here we have to be wary of some ideological pitfalls. Sirhindi and Wali Ullah were really religious puritans whom in modern parlance we may describe as fanatics or fundamentalists. When Mughal Empire was flourishing especially at its acme during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) the state policy was one of tolerance to and accommodation of different religions. It went on for some time during the reign of his two successors, but took an about turn during Aurangazeb’s (1659-1707). Akbar’s religious policy of tolerance has faced stiff opposition by Muslim Ulema and other conservatives. But it was all in vain till Aurangazeb came to power. But it was not easy even for Aurangazeb’s iron hand to keep faithful flock together and shepherd them to the old paths of fanaticism. Hence the relevance and importance of “puritan religions fanatics”

like Sirhindi, who wanted a strict adherence to Shariat laws and other norms of religious life and practice. The sign of the decline of the Muslim power after Aurangzeb gave these reformers or revivalists an added edge in the community. They declared the deviations from the divine path of Prophet to be the cause of all the decline in order to overcome and regain the past glory Muslims must unite and return to the Quranic purity and practice. Though this revivalist and fanatic rhetoric sounds retrograde to modern ears, in Eighteenth Century this helped to mobilize the peasantry against the exploitative revenue and taxation policies of the rising colonial power of the East India Company.

These movements intertwined with political resistance to colonialists and the landlords threw up leaders like Titu Mir of Wahabis, who were brave in battlefield, stoic in sacrifice and sagacious in military-political manoeuvres. Narahari Kaviraj, who has written a number of books on the subject makes the following assessment of these movements:

Medieval world history is replete with examples of peasant wars being fought under the religious flag. In these risings religion played a positive role: it provided the peasant movement with a rough-hewn ideology to sustain itself. But basically these were class wars, though the interests and demands of the peasants were clothed in a religious garb. It was the only language that the peasants would then comprehend.

At the same time, since these peasant rising were fought under the flag of religion, these remained confined to sects. Peasants being divided into

sects failed to unite for joint action, and stood in each other's way. This led to the fractionalization of the class struggle and the resultant defeat of the revolutionary forces.

In the existing circumstances, when the social forces were still immature, this was but inevitable.

The Wahabi and Farazi risings in Bengal were also peasant movements fought under a religious flag. The interests and demands of the peasantry were concealed behind a religious screen, and this can be explained by the conditions of the time.

Wahabism, in its pure form, with its multi-class setting, was not acceptable to the rebels of Bengal. Under their guidance, Wahabism passed through a phase of social transformation, and a new type of Wahabism, with a peasant appeal, reared its head. The novel theories which they propagated, viz, land belongs to God, the peasants are not to pay any land tax, etc. speak of an egalitarian order based on Koranic ideals. This provided the peasant rebels with some ready-made ideology, sufficient to inspire them in the fight against the oppressors.

One thing must be made clear that neither the Barasat rising nor the Farazi agitation was a case of communal outburst. These were definitely not cases of Muslim fanaticism pitted against Hindu fanaticism. The target of attack was the zamindars, most of whom belonged to the Hindu community. At the same time the Muslim zamindars, who were few, were not spared. European planters, the worst oppressors of the peasants, were indiscriminately attacked. Throughout the course of the movement, its agrarian aspect took precedence over the communal one. From the beginning to the end, it was predominantly agrarian character. (Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal, New Delhi, 1983 pp. 109-111)

In many ways these struggles closely resemble the series of Moplah outbreaks in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Malabar. All these strong points do not cancel out the negative aspects, which ultimately had led these struggles to doom. Kaviraj continues:

Being fought under the banner of religion, this movement remained confined to community (Mohammedan) and a sect (Wahabis or Farazis). As such, it could not free itself completely from a communal, sectarian bias in some respects (killing of cows, defiling Hindu temples etc.). Class issues became sometimes mixed up with communal, casteist, sectarian issues. The movement was such as to preclude the Hindu peasants from joining it, although Hindu peasants were equally the victims of zamindari oppression. Even Muslim peasants who did not belong to the Farazi sect were kept out of it. Such a sectarian, primitive approach did in fact isolate the movement from the broad stream of peasant masses, and this factor alone doomed the movement to an inevitable defeat. (Ibid p.111)

This tragic view of the movement, or any such movements for freedom and social advance for that matter, is quite irrelevant in the long-term perspective. What that indefatigable champion of freedom, Lord Byron declared is even truer in social struggles.

*Freedom's battle once begun
Bequeathed from Sire to son;
Though battled oft is ever won!*

In this deceptively simple verse Byron formulates an abiding faith in progressive social and political struggles. Even if such struggles and conflicts end up in a retreat from the forces of

progress, the accumulated experience of these struggles add to the resurgence of the movement and ultimately lead to victory.

Besides Farazi and Wahabi movements there was growing influences of different orders of Sufis among the Muslims and rebellious Hindu Sanyasins immortalized by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Ananda Math*. The dozens, if not hundreds of Messianic movements and saints, listed in detail in a number of works including Dr. Stephen Fuchs' "*Godmen on Warpath*" (Mumbai, 1992) also had contributed in this pre-colonial ferment spreading through the length and breadth of this vast country. To ignore all these movements and attribute the origins of Renaissance to the sole impact of western colonialism is nothing less than imperial panegyrics.

IV

The historic events listed and explained prove beyond doubt that, just as in the case of other cultures and countries India too had and still has inherent potential for change and revolution. Even from ancient times this inherent capacity for social and cultural changes in India was evident beyond doubt. The legend of an unchanging society in India which for the past many millennia was awaiting the western colonialists to ignite the first lamps of enlightenment and renaissance is a creation of western historians, at pains to prove the beneficial impact of their conquest. The pre-Buddhist Ajivakas, the Jains, Buddhists and the Bhakthi saints and

bards of the Middle Ages were all the harbingers and leaders of contemporary Renaissance and social transformations.

Does this argument mean that external influences and interventions did not have any impact upon Indian life and culture? Not at all. The Aryans in the first instance, and then Greeks and waves upon waves of migrant populations who had made their way to Indian subcontinent mainly through the North western mountain ranges and passes did contribute to the evolution and changes of Indian society. The British were the last of them, though with one point of difference: Except the Greeks after Alexander's conquest and British in recent centuries, all other migrants into India, including the Mughals, came to settle here and make it their home. And they did it well to such an extent that it is now quite difficult to identify their different racial and national identities.

So, all what is claimed here and by scholars like Panikkar is this: Though foreign invasion had its impact in many ways, the origin and the basic character of Indian Renaissance are specifically and authentically Indian. No revolution or Renaissance in any part of the world is confined to a narrow, straight or single rail path, neither do they advance on a linear path. Many early historians of European Renaissance have committed the mistake of tracing the entire movement of gigantic proportions and intricate and multifarious complexity to the single source – the revival of classical learning, art and values. They ignored the impact of Arabian

culture on Europe, the Central Asian migrants, and the great advances in inter continental travel and explorations. But as later historians retrieved European history from such scholars of Indian Renaissance too are embarking on such exercises to save our history from colonialist stereotypes and superficial assessments.

It is here that the relevance of delineating the multiple strands and diverse streams of Indian Renaissance become evident. A detailed classification of the diverse streams is beyond the scope of this paper. But to begin with we may adopt the binary classification offered by Kenneth W Jones in his *“Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India”* which forms a part of the Multi Volume New Cambridge History of India (Cambridge, 1994)

Jones identifies one trend as ‘transitional’ and the other ‘acculturative’. The ‘transitional’ type of movement has its origin entirely in the national milieu, while the ‘acculturative’ type springs from the colonial milieu – i.e. by the impact of the western Civilization on the Indian Civilization. By Indian we mean all the various cultural trends and their mixtures before the arrival of westerners. Jones divides the Indian civilization into two: Indo-Buddhist and Perso-Arabic. Jones writes:

The uneven development of a colonial milieu and the persistence of indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent produced two distinct types of movement within the period of British rule, the one ‘transitional’ and the other ‘acculturative’. Transitional movements had their origins in the pre-colonial world and arose from indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent,

with little or no influence from the colonial milieu, either because it was not yet established or because it had failed to affect the individuals involved in a particular movement. The clearest determinant of a transitional movement was an absence of anglicized individuals among its leaders and a lack of concern with adjusting its concepts and programmes to the colonial world. Transitional movements linked the pre-colonial period with the era of English political domination and, if successful, over time with the colonial milieu. Once in contact with it, transitional movements made limited adjustments to that environment. (Socio-religious reform movements in British India, Cambridge 1994, p.3)

The meaning of transitional is fairly simple – which indicate both continuity and change. The word ‘acculturate’ according to Oxford Dictionary is to ‘adapt to or adopt a different culture’. This different culture of course is western. Jones further elaborates:

The second of the two types of socio-religious movement, termed ‘acculturative’, originated within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals who were products of cultural interaction. The founder of such a movement may or may not have been drawn into the world of British culture, but his followers and those who moved into positions of leadership were largely English-educated South Asians influenced by the specific culture of England. Acculturative movements sought an accommodation to the fact of British supremacy, to the colonial milieu that such supremacy had created, and to the personal position of its members within the colonial world. The basis of such movement and many of their declared aims rested on the indigenous heritage of social and religious protest. In no way were acculturative movements totally new or without roots in the general high cultures of South Asia and the specific

subcultures of a given region. Thus the difference between the transitional and acculturative movements was primarily at their point of origin.

(Ibid. p.p 3-4)

This classification seems to be precise and useful. But when we take up separate movements we come across borderline cases and examples of one movement which begins as transitional but in due course transforms into acculturative. Let us take an example from Kerala. The movement started by Sri Narayana Guru (1856-1928) considered the father of Kerala Renaissance, was true transitional. He did not know English and the source of his knowledge was traditional Sanskrit, Tamil and his mother tongue Malayalam. He belonged to an untouchable backward caste, the Ezhavas or Thiyaas. Sri Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) founded in 1903 was his powerful instrument. Though Guru was the founding president of the Yogam the brain behind was Dr. P. Palpu (1863-1941), a trained allopathic physician well versed in English and educated in the modern University of Madras. The founding secretary of Yogam in its formative years was Mahakavi Kumaran Asan (1873-1924), considered to be the founder of Modern Malayalam poetry. He was educated in Malayalam, Sanskrit and English. He had spent a few years in Kolkota for education and was very much influenced by the Bengal Renaissance and its leaders. Most of the leaders who followed Palpu and Asan also were English educated gentlemen. Many of Narayana Guru's Sanyasi disciples

were of the transitional type, but his anointed successor Dr. Nataraja Guru (1895-1967) (Dr. Palpu's son) was a typical modern scholar and was proficient in many western and eastern languages and wrote books in English.

Though many of his successors were of the acculturative mould Guru remained the be – all and end – all of the movement with his temples, symbols, slogans and aphorisms strictly of the transitional mould.

Besides Narayana Guru, there are other examples also. The movements begin as transitional and then grow into acculturative as the founder passes away and new educated cadre takes over. These examples are taken up not to deny the validity for Jones classification but to make use of it in a circumspect manner and examine each and every movement in totality as a process of growth and change.

V

Now the task is to examine the emergence and progress of some movements and try to test the validity or otherwise of the hypotheses and principles we tried to formulate. Of course, it would be hazardous to attempt a complete survey of the various movements of Renaissance, Revivalism, Dissent and Protest, with temples, symbols, slogans and aphorisms strictly of the transitional mould occurred in our subcontinent from 17th Century. Therefore

we have to concentrate on a select few, which represent the various strands and diverse streams.

Discussing the Farazi and Wahabi movements we have already noted the religious guru usually adorned by the social reform movements in India and abroad. Along with these there were also frankly materialistic, atheistic and agnostic movements in Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, to mention but a few. But such radical movements were very limited in popular impact though they had considerable support among intellectuals. The Derozians of Bengal, Manav Dharma Sabha of Gujarat, Parama Hamsa Mandali of Maharashtra, Dravida Kazhakam of Tamil Nadu and Yukthivadi Sangham in Kerala were all radically rationalist, agnostic and even atheistic. Of these only E.V. Ramaswamy Naiker's (1879-1973) Dravida Kazhakam had succeeded in attracting a mass base. Unfortunately the successors of the movement like Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK), All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (AIDMK) are all backtracking and going back to religion and its routine customs. Dravida Kazhakam was able to attract a very high mass base because of its intervention in social and political issues, especially the advocacy of the rights of the depressed classes as against the dominance of Brahmins in political and social sphere. Kerala's Yukthivadi Sanghom remained an elitist movement but its leader Sahodaran Ayyappan (1889-1968) associated himself actively with Sree

Narayana Guru's movement against the upper caste hierarchy and untouchability. There were others too who built up their base on the basis of their participation in national and popular struggles. On the whole these intellectual movements of radical rationalism may be legitimately classed as broadly acculturative though atheism and rationalism were not unknown in Indian tradition.

Another important point to be noted in this connection is the class and caste character of these two types of movement. Generally the acculturative movements were associated with upper class and higher caste reformers, though they all were against class and caste distinctions, which had plagued the Indian society. Transitional movements are generally associated with the tribal, scheduled caste and backward communities. This is only a very general distinction and exceptions and borderline cases are not few. As mentioned already Kerala's predominant movement for social reform had begun among the backward, and untouchable ezhava caste with explicit transitional character and transformed into an acculturative movement in due course. In Maharashtra the backward caste leader Jyothibha Phule's movement for reform was acculturative in character from the beginning itself because Phule was well versed in English and western social and political mores.

VI

Among the acculturative movements in the Indian Renaissance, the first and foremost is considered to be the Brahmo

Samaj and allied reform activities initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) in Bengal of the early Nineteenth Century. A number of outstanding personalities who were great in thought and bold in action like David Hare (1775-1842), Dwarkanath Tagore (1794-1846) Radhakanth Deb (1784-1867) Henry Vivian Derozio (1809-1831) Akshay Kumar Dutt (1820-1886), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) Madhusudhan Dutta(1824-1873) Dinabandhu Mitra (1828-1873) Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894) Kesab Chandra Sen (1838-1884) Swami Vivekananda (1862-1906) followed and took up Ram Mohan's work in both akin to and different from the founder's. Though most of its leaders and their cadres were educated in English and acquainted with western values and ideas, they all belonged to very diverse and even contradictory paths. Here also the question of the acculturative origins of Ram Mohan's movement is challenged by scholars like K.N. Panikkar. By a meticulous examination of Ram Mohan's educational development and career Panikkar comes to the conclusion that Ram Mohan's basic ideas were formed before he began to learn English at a later stage in his life. Even before starting his English education Ram Mohan wrote his first book in Persian – *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin* (1803) which was really a preview of his later Renaissance ideas on caste, monotheism, opposition to idol worship, woman's equality and education, secular education etc. Though these ideas also had a western veneer, it would be factually incorrect to interpret the

Renaissance movement as an ideological adjunct or project of colonialism. The point is there were atheists and theists, agnostics and rationalists, constitutionalists and anarchists, Hindu revivalists and reformers among the leaders of the Renaissance as we have listed above. Most of them had converged on a number of reform issues. An important convergence was in relation to modern secular education open both to men and women, which was almost directly opposed to the colonial education policy. Panikkar says:

In their struggle against the ideological influences of the colonial system of education, the Indian intellectuals strove to formulate and implement an alternative based on science and mass education through the medium of the 'vernacular' languages. One of their basic assumptions was the inadequacy of the traditional and literary education to meet the needs of the time, Ram Mohan's objection to loading 'the mind of youth with grammatical niceties and metaphysical distinctions of little or no practical use to the possessors or to society was widely shared. Akshaya Kumar Dutt, the first Indian to propose a national scheme of education, totally rejected the traditional system. Vidyasagar ridiculed those who believed that the shastras contained all scientific truth. To Sayyid Ahmed Khan, the traditional system of Muslim education was a great stumbling block in the way of progress.

The alternative proposed by them was 'a liberal and enlightened system of instruction, embracing Mathematics, Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, and Anatomy with other useful Sciences'. In Akshay Kumar's scheme of education the students were to be introduced to the rudiments of scientific knowledge at a very early age. He considered science education to be the

most urgent need of the times and, therefore, advocated the establishment of schools of technology, agriculture and shipbuilding. The importance of a scientific outlook and the acquisition of scientific knowledge was equally emphasized by Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Sayyid Ahmed Khan and Veeresalingam. (Op.cit. p.p 10-11)

Next to Brahma Samaj the most important acculturative Renaissance movement was the Arya Samaj founded by a great Punjabi Vedic scholar – Mul Shanker – who adopted later the Sanyasi nomenclature Swami Dayananda Saraswathi (1824-1883). Dayananda Saraswathi's career and Arya Samaj's history put forth interesting problems of historiography, which defines formulas of simple classification. Dayananda was educated only in the traditional schools of Sanskrit and ancient lore – he never went to any English school or try to learn it later. The quintessence of his teaching was a return to Vedas in their purified form. Being so, how could one describe his movement as acculturative rather than transitional? The movement as it progressed, and especially the founders demise promoted modern education with English and science components with a heavy emphasis on Sanskrit lore. Anglo-Vedic and Anglo-Dayananda colleges and schools sprung up in many parts of Punjab and western India. So it is very difficult to cut out the acculturative character and keep Arya Samaj purely as a transitional or worse a revivalist phenomenon.

This Vedic revivalist exterior of Arya Samaj should not blind us to its radical anti caste and reformist character. Dayananda

argued that all the superstitious, discriminatory and idolatrous dress which covered Hinduism was a later addition unknown to the original Vedic tradition. He rejected the Fourteenth century text of Vedas edited and interpreted by Sayana for Vijayanagara and advanced his own critical text with interpretations. He also rejected the puranic tradition of the post epic era as a sacrilege to the pure and pristine Vedas. All his ideas were put into a famous book called “*Sathyartha Prakash*” which was even banned by the British Government because of its rebellious spirit and intent.

On the basis of interpretation he opposed child marriage, ban on widow remarriage, other inequities against women, casteist discriminations and untouchability and advocated universal education and equality. An erudite scholar, a powerful speaker and an indefatigable campaigner, Dayananda Saraswathi was able to stir up a massive movement for reform in Hindu society spread from Punjab in the north and the entire western India down to the borders of Karnataka. Organizationally he set up a unit of Arya Samaj on April 10, 1875 in Mumbai and a number of groups and clubs in other parts of India. Actual organizational work of Arya Samaj on national scale was taken up by his successors who also established schools and colleges after his name. In the meanwhile movement was split into moderate and extremist wings. Extremist wing led by Guru Dutta shunned all intrusions of western influence while the moderates tried to accommodate modern educational

practices also in their scheme. The great national leader Lala Lajpat Rai who was an extremist in Congress politics along with Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bipin Chandra Pal, was a moderate in Arya Samaj. His famous book on national education in India presents a judicious amalgam of western and eastern traditions as a course for future India.

Arya Samajists at a later stage also tried to reconvert those who had converted from Hinduism to Islam Christianity or Sikhism. Their units and activities were very conspicuous until the twenties and thirties of the Twentieth Century from Punjab to Kerala and Bengal to Tamil Nadu. Though they were militantly against the discrimination and oppression of the backward and dalit castes their following and cadre came mainly from the educated elite of the upper caste.

Still more inscrutable from an analytical view is the character of the Swami Narayan movement of Gujarat founded by an Uttar Pradesh Brahmin saint who was originally Ghana Shyam Pandey (1782-1830). Juvenile wander lust and adolescent religious urges brought him finally to Gujarat which became his main field of activity though he kept in tact his relation to his ancestral home in Chhappai near Ayodhia. In the course of his experiments with asceticism and gradual transition to a Sanyasin, he changed his name first to Neelakanta Brahmachari and finally to Swami Narayan. Though he began his mission as a moral preacher and

wandering mendicant, finally he claimed himself to be an incarnation of Vishnu himself and organized a network of prosperous temples and Mutts. There are evidences that he was not in favour of total and uncompromising abolition of the caste system, unlike Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayananda Saraswathi. At a later stage he organized women as nuns and propagandists but did not seem to have accorded them status completely equal to men. But he advocated widow remarriage and opposed child marriage.

Because of these limitations there are scholars who refused him the honour of being a Renaissance personality, but considering the political fragmentation, the moral degradation and the religious obscenity propagated by Vallabhacharya's (1479-1531) anarchic '*RadhaKrishna*' Cult and widespread drunken orgies prevailing in Gujarat of those days. Swami Narayan campaign helped to infuse a sense of purposeful and moral life among the Hindus. Muslims and Parsis were also attracted by his personality and the British power which was spreading its tentacles deep into the marshes and fields of Gujarat found in him a friend who could be trusted to restore order and normalcy in the newly conquered areas. Swami Narayan's agenda which included opposition to 'Sathi', child marriage and ban on widow remarriage appealed to the British rulers. There were constant liason between the English and Swami Narayan. All these together had contributed greatly to a cultural and political

unification of Gujarat and even Mahatma Gandhi in later times acknowledged this role of Swami Narayan cult and movement.

Kenneth W Jones includes Swami Narayan in the group of the transitional types presumably because Swami and his immediate disciples were not products of English education. Though this is true, can we state categorically that his movement was not influenced by the English administrators, educationalists and Christian Missionaries? Some English Missionaries including the Bishop of Kolkota tried in vein to convert him into Christianity. Though he resisted their blandishments it is likely that some of their ideas must have influenced him. Had it not been for this apparent affinity, the Bishop of Kolkota would not have cared to take pains to meet and pursue Swami Narayan.

Taking all these together with the fact that Swami Narayan movement was mainly confined or at least led by the upper caste leaders are tends to doubt the transitional character ascribed to it by Kenneth W Jones. One of the final acts of Swami Narayan was to establish the succession in the leadership hierarchy firmly to the members of his family though Swami was not married: He had brought his brothers all the way from Uttar Pradesh to succeed him in the throne. All these limitations differentiate Swami Narayana movement from Brahmo Samaj or Arya Samaj. But still it would be historically incorrect to deny it a role in the wide spectrum of Indian Renaissance.

VII

Another significant development which is also undoubtedly acculturative in character had begun to unfold in the last decades of the Nineteenth Century. It was the new awakening among the Muslims, which moved in a path quite different from the transitional movements like Farazi and Wahabi of the late Eighteenth Century and early Nineteenth Century. Politically as opposed to these transitional movements, the new movement gravitated towards the British rule. It was modernist under the inspiration and leadership of those who had benefited from the colonial education and western values. They noted the head-start the Hindus had gained in Anglo-Indian education and the consequent positions of power they attained. They realized the folly of turning against English and modern education and confining themselves to traditional Madrasa and Perso-Arab tradition in education.

The most articulate and important leader of this acculturative movement was Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) the founder of 'Aligarh Muslim University'. He had belonged to a well-known wealthy family in Delhi which was very loyal to the British rulers. Sayyid Ahmed had a distinguished education career and occupied many responsible positions in the British Government. Even in the stirring days of the first war of independence (1857-1858) in which the Muslims were at the helm, Sayyid Ahmed and his family did not deviate from their loyalty to the British. It would be very unjust to

him to ascribe his loyalty to the alien rulers to selfish or ulterior motives of position and power. As his surviving writings show he was completely convinced of the beneficial impact of British rule and of the harm India and his community might suffer if they stuck to dogmatic faith and outdated customs.

In spite of these views he had held and propagated as an officer in government and public figure, it took a long time for the rulers to accept his *bono fides*. One of his important books is called '*Asbab-I-Baghavati-I-Hind*' (Causes of the Indian Revolt). In this he ascribed the reason for the revolt on sectarian and provocative propaganda of Christian missionaries and tried to absolve the Muslims of their responsibility for the revolt to the extent possible. In another book, '*Loyal Muhammedans of India*', Ahmed narrates the stories of Muslim princes and chieftains who were allied to the British. In his '*History of the Revolt in Bijnor*' Ahmed wrote on his own experience during the 1857 revolt which he pictured not in flattering terms. Such writings and the regular personal contact he had maintained with the powers-that-be had gradually convinced the authorities of the Ahmed's 'honesty of purpose'.

The honours including knighthood and other distinctions followed. Considering the new patriotic resurgence among the Hindus and the steady advance of constitutional nationalism and militant nationalism which tended towards adopting violent means the British rulers strenuously attempted to woo the alienated

Muslim public opinion in their favour. The traditional policy of all imperial powers of 'divide et impera' found fertile soil in the new transformation of Muslim public opinion.

After his retirement from public service in 1877 Sir Sayyid Ahmed plunged headlong into translating his ideas into practice. Aligarh was chosen as one of his centres of activity and he founded there the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College, which in due course developed into the present University. He participated in government deliberations to formulate educational policies for Muslims and prepared the curriculum and textbooks. By the turn of the century, this movement had produced a number of Muslim graduates and political activists. On the whole, this awakening had led to far reaching developments in the Muslim community in many parts of north India. Sir Sayyid's ideals and projects were not accepted by the community readily. Conservatives strongly opposed Ahmed's reform and his interpretations of the sacred texts, which suited his purpose and times. Among a large number of powerful Muslim divines who resisted Ahmed's ideas and activities was Ahmed Riza Khan (1856-1921) of Bareilly. A number of ulemas and moulavis rallied round the Khan. They charged him with blasphemy and distortion of the sacred text and interference in the traditional customs. Moreover time was on Sir Sayyid Ahmed's side and in due course his ideas gained upper hand in the community and even spread to other parts of India.

Towards the last quarter of the Nineteenth Century another trend different from that of Ram Mohan Roy and his followers began to appear among the educated Hindus of Bengal at first which gradually made its impact in other parts of India too. These movements in their origin was in the form of a reaction against the intense secularism of the Brahmo Samaj and the rationalist thinking which appeared in some sections. Another reason for the reaction was the tendency among the top echelons of the Brahmo Samaj to identify themselves with upper class and elite of society.

These new groups included the young Brahmins and Sadharan Brahmo Samaj (Common people Brahmo Samaj). There were also some individuals and sections who had renounced the Brahmo ideals in favour of revivalist and traditional Hinduism. To cite an example, Bijoy Krishna Goswami (1841-1897) who began as an activist of the Brahmo Samaj, drifted step by step towards the Chaithanya's Bhakthi cult.

Towards the west of Bengal, in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and other Hindi speaking areas no Ram Mohans, Akshay Kumar Dutts or Vidyasagars had appeared to challenge the social *statusquo*. The reasons for this absence must be sought in the slow pace of modernization in society as well as spread of education and media. The movements which actually sprung up in this Gangetic belt were more of a revivalist character than radical. Movements like 'Radha Saomi Satsang' founded by Swami Shiv Dayal (1818 – 1878) later

known as Soamiji Majaraj and Bharath Dharma Maha Mandala founded by Pandit Din Dayalu Sharma (b 1863) were all of a conservative response to the Renaissance values.

But among the revivalist movements too were present a few which sought the truth of ancient Hinduism and pose it as a counter to the modernizing verve of the new generation. One was not only unique in character but also broke from the trammels of revivalism, too hold aloft the banner for political radicalism and social reform. This was the outcome of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa's (1836-1886) and his famous disciple Swami Vivekananda's (1863 – 1902) whirlwind pronouncement and activities. The Guru and the disciple were a very unlikely combination if we go by their exterior style and characteristics.

Even a Marxist historian like Susobhan Sarkar has this tribute to offer Sri Ramakrishna:

In Hindu revivalism, however, there was one element of great charm, sweetness and grace. This emanated from the saint of Dakshineswar, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, who cast a spell over a myriad of coteries. He was an illiterate Brahmin who by sheer character, personal magnetism and homely wisdom stormed the hearts of thousands and earned the respect of even those who could not agree with his preachings. By teaching the sanctity of all faith, he undermined protestant militancy and reassured the shaken spirit of the traditionalists. A great organisation of social service later on drew its inspiration from him and countless Hindus

gave him homage for years to come. (Bengal Renaissance and Other Essays, People's Publishing House, 1970, p 46)

From this soft moon-light emerged a revolutionary with the power and energy of a hundred suns: Swami Vivekananda. Narendranath Dutt, who later adopted the ascetic nomenclature, Vivekananda was born to a moderately prosperous *Bengali Bhadrak* family and had a fairly satisfactory University education. The restless youth was first attracted to Sadharan Brahma Samaj but left it when he met the dynamic saint of Dakshineswar in 1882 just four years before his death. Though fascinated by the saint and his unusual ways of trance and soft home conversation pregnant with meaning Vivekananda decided to devote his life to his cause only after the demise of the Guru.

The trauma of the bloody defeat of the First War of Independence was fading and a new nationalist awakening was taking place with the formation of Bharatha Mahajana Sabhas and Indian Association. The great famine of 1880's blew up the bubble of exaggerated claims of the benefits of the colonial conquest and administration along with constitutional and moderate organisations for the political reform isolated but violent resistance to the alien rule was also spreading from Maharashtra and Punjab to Bengal. Though Vivekananda did not choose a direct political career his sympathies were more with the extremists than moderates. But his contact with Ramakrishana Paramahansa was to

give a new direction to his life. Sushobhan Sarkar summarizes this transformation in the following words:

The national resurgence was, of course, not limited to political consciousness and agitation. National strength, self-confidence, energy and pride seemed embodied in the figure of Swami Vivekananda, a young Bengali disciple for Ramakrishna Paramahansa.

Vivekananda had turned away from the beaten track of ordinary life and was fired with a burning idealism. He dramatically leaped into fame by his participation in the World Religions Conference at Chicago, 1893 and this was followed by a triumphant mission tour of the west for four years. On his return home in 1897, he was acclaimed as a national hero. At home and abroad, he produced a deep impression.

Like Ram Mohan Roy and Keshab Chandra Sen he had added to the stature of his country in the estimation of foreigners; but unlike them, he was no protestant but an orthodox Hindu and thus stimulated the Hindu revivalist sentiment. Indian self-respect felt reassured when Vivekananda was hailed abroad as the cultural ambassador of an ancient land. To his own countrymen, his message was the cult of self-help; he told them that they themselves were largely responsible for their own evil plight and the remedy was in their own hands.

Vivekananda was a fiery patriot, though politics was not his line. He turned humanitarian monasticism and proceeded to organize the famous Ramakrishna Mission with its center at Belur, near Calcutta. Countless young men forsook the world and began to flock into the mission, which emphasized the role of social service and recalled the self-sacrificing ardour of the medieval friars. (Ibid. p.p 58-59)

Towards the close of his tumultuous life which came to an abrupt end in 1902 at the age of 39 Vivekananda was progressing at a feverish pace to more radical and revolutionary positions. He identified his patriotic fervor with the millions of India's poor, destitute and dispossessed. He even rejected the emphasis on spiritual and religious revival of early period and vigorously promoted the material advance of the people, without which all talk about spiritual uplift, was sham and hypocrisy. Finally this metamorphosis in his outlook led him to declare himself a 'socialist', perhaps the first Indian to confess to such faith. Of course his 'socialism' at that stage was far from the modern concept of scientific socialism, (which later his brother Bhupendranath Dutta was to adopt) but still it would be a folly to term this as just passing fancy of dynamic but a wayward mind. Any perceptive person who cares to follow Vivekananda's intellectual and missionary career closely will not fail to discern that this declaration of his credo was not just a casual remark or passing fancy. It was logical and inevitable culmination of a man born in Nineteenth Century, but destined to see far into the Twentieth and Twenty first century.

VIII

As we have already stated the transitional type of Renaissance movements were mostly confined to the tribals, dalits and others at the lowest rungs of social hierarchy. We have also noted that the chain of transitional movements started well before the colonial

conquest and in some cases their origins may be traced further back to Bhakthi and such other revivalist movements since a continuous treatment of all such movements in a chronological and comprehensive manner, which is not practical within the confines of this essay, we have to be satisfied with an unconnected account of some movements with transitional character.

NAMDHARIS

Among the major living religions in India the youngest is perhaps Sikhism, founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539). Though he was also the last link in the chain of Bhakthi saints who began to teach their cults from the latter part of the first millennium itself, his teachings had much more affinity to modern Renaissance than those of the earlier stalwarts. He was bold enough to string up passages and verses from Bhagavat Gita, Bible and Koran to compose his sacred text Guru Granth Sahib. But because of chronological reasons and the fact that Sikhism began to show signs of decay by the Seventeenth Century itself and called for urgent reforms we cannot allot it to the Renaissance we are exploring.

The earliest reform movement with explicitly transitional character among the Sikhs was the Namdhari's. This sect grew around a reformer Ram Singh (1816-1885) who in turn was the disciple of Balak Singh a saintly Sikh who preached the value of simple and prayerful life. He advised his followers to reject all rituals and customs, which in course of time, became part and

parcel of Sikh life. Nanak never advocated rituals or priesthood. Balak Singh advocated NamJapa (chanting of God's name) as the most effective and flawless form of worship and prayer. It is from this practice of NamJapa that the sect came to be known later as Namdharis (The bearers of God's name). The sect grew into a movement and spread to other parts of north-west India under the leadership of Baba Ram Singh (1816-1885) who met Balak Singh in 1841 and fell under his spell.

Ram Singh did not have the benefit of formal education and started his career as a soldier in the army of the famous Sikh monarch Ranjit Singh. He married at the age of seven and later when he adorned the aura of a Guru she was hailed as "Matha" (Mother) by his followers. His leadership of the sect began after the death of Balak Singh who designated Ram Singh as his anointed successor. As his fame and influence spread, Ram Singh realized the need for a formal organisation to keep his flock together. Thus in 1857 the Namdhari movement was formally inaugurated with great acclaim, chanting of God's name and singing of verses from Guru Granth Sahib.

Though the Namdharis claimed to go back to the original and pure Sikhism of Nanak, they actually were more fascinated by the ascetic and militant tradition of the tenth and last Guru, Gobind Singh (1666-1708), who really was responsible in welding the Sikh community into an armed martial type of community. Ram Singh's

army background suited this type and he tried to impart it to his followers. Vegetarianism, strict avoidance of drinking, hard work, and simple white dress, carrying of kripans etc were enforced. Hailing from a village carpenter's family with a tint of subaltern positions in the army Ram Singh's culture, aptitudes and affinities suited him very well to be a hero figure of village poor. He was looked down upon by urban elite and view with suspicion and some times hostility by the British Indian Government. They had apprehensions about the subversive potential of a disciplined and dedicated community, sporting uniform like dress and kripans. When carrying kripans were banned by government the Namdharis carried bamboo lathees instead.

With the growth and spread of nationalist movement on one side and communal consolidation on the other among the Sikhs the relevance of puritan reform movements like Namdharis has been marginalized but still its tradition is alive among Sikhs.

NIRANKARIS

The puritan movement of Nirankaris among the Sikhs is different from the Namdharis, but there are many points in common. This too was a transitional movement of reform, purification, rejection of elaborate rituals and customs, protest and dissent against traditional vested interests and money power in the name of religion. The founder of the movement was Baba Dayal Das (1783-1855) of Peshawar. He was a deeply religious boy and received

education in traditional schools. For a living he took up the job of a physician after some training. As he grew up, a keen observer and sensitive young man as he was, Dayal Das was getting impatient with what he considered corruption, decay, power hunting and moral degradation in the Sikh community. He decided to do whatever he could do to ameliorate the situation by leading the community to the pure principles of Guru Nanak's example and teaching.

In spite of the fact that Nanak founded the movement as a dissenting group in opposition to Hindu rituals and Brahmin priesthood both became part of the ordinary Sikh's life by the Eighteenth Century. In his drive to go back to Nanak's pure Sikhism and its Renaissance values Dayal Das Brahmin priestly intrusion into Sikh lives, horoscope, astrology, polytheism, idol worship etc. The word "Niriankar" means "with out form" that is, God to be worshipped is "with out form". It is another version of Vedantists "Nirguna" as against "SagunaBhrama" concept. He also opposed the practice of ritual pollution attributed to women during monthly periods and childbirth and generally tried to abolish many forms of discrimination against them. He disapproved the practice of dowry and especially the display of dowry articles at marriage ceremonies.

All these invited the wrath of the orthodox guardians of tradition and Brahmin hood. The opposition often reached the level

of communal clashes and persuasion and Nirankaris were forced to go secret and underground. This situation changed and they got a measure of freedom of activity with spread of British dominance in north-west India, especially the Punjab. Therefore for a time they were considered hand-in-glove with the alien rulers. Unlike the other Sikh puritan sect Namdharis the Nirankaris do not consider Guru Gobind Singh's militant reforms and Khalsa as great advance and remain steadfast to simple and saintly pursuits of Nanak.

After the death of the founder Dayal Das the leadership of the sect passed on to his son Darbara Singh (1814-1870) and after him to his younger brother Ratan Chand till he died in 1909. So with some breaks and twists occasionally the leadership passed from generation to generation almost on hereditary family line.

Dayal Das's sons expanded the activities and put the movement on a firm organizational basis with resources, offices, charitable institutions and Gurudwaras. Though its steady expansion in the early years seem to have very much slowed down, the sect is still a vibrant force to reckon with and occasionally controversies break out with the orthodox.

AMBIVALENT GUJARAT

Earlier we had occasion to consider some transitional movements in the north-east, viz., the Farazi and Wahabi sects and their revivalist and puritan proclivities and explicit political agendas. Then we moved on to the north-west to examine two Sikh

movements which clearly fit in with our definition of transitional types. Now we must move south and examine some transitional movements of Central India stretching from east to west.

We had examined the ambivalent character of the Swami Narayan Sampradaya of Gujarat, which some scholars consider transitional. We have expressed some reservations on this characterization though it could not be classified thoroughly as acculturative. Two other movements in Gujarat which certainly was acculturative in character was Manav Dharma Sabha with its centre at Surat and its allied movement Parama Hams Mandali. Though both these organisations did make an impact among the educated elite, their influence was short-lived.

SATNAMIS

The Satnami renaissance among the low dalit caste Chamars of Madhya Pradesh and neighboring states is an authentic transitional movement of great significance. Its origins are traced to Ghasi Das (d 1850) an untouchable leather worker of Bilaspur. Some legends connect him to Rohit Das a Chamar disciple of the well-known Vaishnavite saint Ramananda who was associated with many Bhakthi type movements in various parts of north India. This Rohit Das connection led some Satnamis to adopt Rohit Das too as an honorific. Though spread out in Central India the storm centre of the movement was Chattisgarh area, now a new state.

The untouchable engaged in an 'unclean' lowly job inherited through caste tradition Ghasi Das from childhood itself showed signs of religious devotion and an aptitude for clean and moral life. The Vaishnavite atmosphere then widely prevalent in Central and western India from times of Ramananda and Chaithanya led Ghasi Das to seek his salvation in devotion to Vishnu and his avatars. But caste restrictions prevented him in entering the temples like Puri and others. Still the urge was so strong that Ghasi Das with his brother went on pilgrimage with the aim of ultimately reaching the feet of Lord Jagannatha at Puri. But perhaps realizing the imponderable obstacles in store for the project Ghasi Das cut short his pilgrimage in the outskirts of Puri and returned to Chattisgarh. On the way back from Orissa, partly as a protest against the unjust restriction to temple entry and partly as a call for simpler form of worship and rituals Ghasi Das and brother were shouting 'Satnam,Satnam'. Satnam may mean 'the name of the essence of all phenomena' or ' the blessed name of the lord'. In due course this became the cry of the devout, the inscription on their banner and the name of the sect itself.

The great weaver saint and poet of the Bhakthi movement, Kabir who ascribed the truth to all religions including Hindus and Muslims was also a great influence on Ghasi Das and Satnamis.

In methods of worship and group singing Bhajan Melas, Satnamis resembled the vaishnavites, though vaishnavite faith and

practice were confined to the upper castes notwithstanding the fact that the great vaishnavite saint Chaitanya had disciples and followers from lower castes and even Muslims. One of the cardinal reforms Ghasi Das proposed for the improvement people (in this case Chamars) was in dietary habits. He opposed liquor, chewing of beetles and tobacco and advocated vegetarianism. It is interesting to note that at a later stage the opposition to tobacco resulted in – vertical split – among Satnamis, those for tobacco and those against. Even tomatoes, chilies and lentils were banned because of their colour which resembles flesh of animals.

Ghasi Das openly opposed the caste system and associated vices, but it was his son Balak Das who took to this line of action militantly. Balak Das ascended the leadership of Satnamis when his father Ghasi died in 1850. He infuriated the Brahmins and upper castes by adorning the sacred thread, as a challenge to their pretensions. Round about 1860 Balak Das was murdered by group of Rajput Kshatrias. This led to a rebellion among chamars in general and Satnamis in particular. The chamars even refused to pay taxes and for weeks roamed about defiantly chanting ‘satnam’ ‘satnam’. After the murder of Balak Das he was elevated to the position of a martyr and saint and his son Sahib Das inherited the throne. Murders and bloody clashes continued for quite some time and it was with extreme difficulty law and order was restored by the government. After the premature death of Sahib Das the inheritance

passed on to sons of Ajar Das, the brother of the founder Ghasi Das. Then some more split took place among Satnamis.

In due course the militancy of Balak Das gave way to a sort of peaceful pietism and institutions sprung up to keep the movement intact and guarantee its continuance. Satnamis, like all other rebellious reform movements, became a part of establishment, giving rise to an elite class with vested interests keeping down the lowly sections in subjection. In central and north India the impact of Satnami movement is still conspicuous.

SATYA MAHIMA

Even more powerful and militant transitional movement among the dalits and tribals was the Satya Mahima Dharma of Orissa. Its founder was Mukand Das later known as Mahima Gosain whose active years were the 1840's to 1870's. He began his career as a vaishnavite achari attached to the Puri Jagannath Temple. During these days of apprenticeship he suddenly disappeared one day to reappear as a Sadhu 12 years later in 1862. These 12 years were spent in pilgrimage and meditation, meeting yogis and sanyasis to discuss with the problems of religious reform and social change which were disturbing him. He learned a lot from these pilgrimages and meetings and by the time he returned to Puri, he had a fair idea of what he wanted to do and how to do them. During his pilgrimages he met one person who impressed him so much that both of them built up a life long friendship and

collaboration. He was Govind Baba, a dynamic and talented organizer who was mainly responsible for the wide-spread network of institutions built around Mahima Gosain.

Another, but quite a different type of person joined the team. He was a blind folk singer, who earned his poor living by cattle herding for the rich upper caste owners. He was a talented folk singer and composer of exquisite poetry and songs in the folk style. This blind and illiterate shepherd was to become immensely popular preacher and singer of the Satya Mahima Dharma.

Like other millennial and socio-religious movements Mahima Gosain also opposed priestly privileges, costly rituals and the orthodox vaishnavism of the Brahmins, who transformed it into an exclusively lucrative profession. He also vigorously combated casteist inequality and hierarchy. He also advocated equal and respectful status to women and his entourage often included women devotees.

All these were more than enough to infuriate the Brahmins and custodians of orthodox law and order. They petitioned the government against the Gosain sect, alleging sedition and luring of respectable women from their homes to be nuns and propagandists of Satya Mahima Dharma.

The police commissioner ignored the complaint as exaggerated and flimsy. But then the Brahmins and their supporters took law into their own hands and mounted violent attacks against Gosain's

followers. Now the police woke up to action, but not to restrain the perpetrators of crime but to persecute the victims. An arrest warrant was issued against Gosain, but he evaded arrest and took refuge in a small native state. He fell ill and died in 1876 with the arrest warrant swinging above his head like a Damocles sword.

This persecution and heroics did not dampen the movement. Though like other such movements this too could not escape the fate of internal squabbles and even splits the Satya Mahima Dharma spread among dalits and tribals than others. Many of their ashrams, temples and sacred spots are situated in hilly ranges and forests to serve the tribals who live there. Orissa has a very large tribal population, which served as fertile ground for the growth of Mahima Dharma.

Gosain and his colleagues stiffly opposed caste system and advocated a limited sort of monotheism, though vaishnavite overtones are evident in their faith and worship. Though by Twentieth Century Satya Mahima Dharma got itself institutionalized and top heavy, it still remains a beacon light for the tribals and low castes of Orissa and neighboring states.

AYYA VAIKUNTER

Though there are many dozens if not hundreds of such transitional movements all over India, affiliated to and dissenting with all the major religions of India, we may conclude with one more example from the southern most extremity of Indian sub-

continent viz., the Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli and other districts. This movement does not have a separate name and is always referred to with the name and is always referred to with the name of its founder, Ayya Vaikunter (1809-1851). Nadars in Tamil Nadu are a numerous caste, below the Brahmins, Vellalas and Mudaliars they are backward and untouchable. They are also associated with Channar caste, which in some areas are a separate poorer caste, but in some other places almost identical with Nadars.

Ayya Vaikunter was born in a poor Channar family near Nagarcoil. His original name was Mudichoodum Perumal (the crowned king) but the upper caste men objected to this name as an affront to them and the parents changed it to Muthukutty. Later when he became popular reformer and leader, he claimed to be an 'avatar' of Vishnu and adopted the sacred equivalent Vaikunter.

Besides opposing caste and inferior position of women in society Vaikunter also argued for the better wages and service condition of agricultural labourers, estate workers and toddy tappers. He instructed his followers not to move away from public roads to give way to higher castes to avoid polluting them, but walk with head held high with a turban – or a towel tied around the head. The usual practice was to remove the headdress or the towel on the shoulder when one confronts a superior caste man. Vaikunter wanted to reverse the practice and wanted his followers to wear ahead wear demonstratively when you see a superior. Now

headdress is a must even when entering or worshipping at a temple, including the one where Vaikunter's idol is the object of worship. In some temples consecrated by Vaikunter a mirror is installed instead of an idol. The purpose to persuade the devotee to worship himself looking at the mirror so that he develops his self-respect.

Vaikunter was beginning his mission in the second quarter of the Nineteenth Century when British have almost completed the conquest of the south India, the native state of Travancore with present Kanyakumari District accepted the suzerainty of the British overlords. Under the patronage of the British Christian Missionaries work (especially that London Mission Society- LMS) was beginning their feverish activity to convert the Hindus, especially the lower castes like Nadars and Channars to Christianity. Many fell into the missionary trap fondly hoping to free themselves from caste Hindu oppression. Though some humanitarian and charitable activities made the missionaries look benefactor of the poor, soon their ulterior cultural and political motives became evident. Vaikunter contradicted the tall claims and blandishments of missionaries and they considered him a dangerous obstacle to their designs.

Local Hindu upper caste Brahmins and Nairs too had their own grudges against Vaikunter. They were the main land owners and Nadar and Channars were either their rack-rented tenants or labourers. The Vaikunter awakening challenged the overload ship and exploitation by upper caste Hindus.

In this situation the missionaries through their influence with the Governor of Madras and caste Hindus with their clout with the Maharaja of Travancore conspired to get Vaikunter arrested and he was incarcerated in Thiruvananthapuram for many months. Of course such persecution was not able to dissuade Vaikunter from his chosen path of social and religious reforms. His ideas, ideals and instructions are contained in a number of books which are available now in print.

When Vaikunter set out on his reform odyssey Channars were not allowed to have tiled roof. They had to use grass, hey or palm leaves for the purpose. Their women were not allowed to cover their breasts. They were not even allowed to wear gold ornaments even if they could afford. Along with these economic exploitation of labourers and tenants, denial of right to education and untouchability were all rampant. There were even riots to win the rights of women to cover the breasts. Vaikuntar's movement gave a strong impetus to this ferment and his position among the galaxy of renaissance personalities though not widely known, is quite high. Now too his movement is alive but due to institutionalization and relapse into old Hindu methods of worship has become almost part of the establishment. The movement is led by his sons and grandsons – and now the fifth generation inheritor is on the leadership pedestal.



This analysis and narrative of the Diverse Streams in India Renaissance are far from complete or comprehensive. A number of details and movements are left out of our narration. Still, it is hoped that this will suffice give a birds eye-view of the glorious and many splendoured phenomenon called Indian renaissance. Now from the last decade of the Twentieth Century India has entered the threshold of a dark age of communalism, violence, intolerance and general decay of renaissance culture. If India is to survive these dark passage of religions obscurantism, communal violence, and imperial intrusion we have to go back to the foundations of Indian Renaissance and restore its fading values, so that we may realize our dream of a freer, prosperous and nobler future.
