
UNIT 22 WESTERN KNOWLEDGE AND THE INDIAN MIND

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22.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit you will get to know about:

- the main concerns of the Indian mind in the colonial milieu,
- the main trends of impact of western knowledge, and
- some problems of the impact.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

In previous Units you have broadly seen how India moved from the disintegration of the Mughal empire to the establishment of a colonial milieu. That, this process forced the Indian mind to think about its culture and society and frame a response to the newcomers, is the subject of this Unit.

22.2 AFTER THE CRISIS

The need to respond to the changed situation in the wake of the crisis of the Mughal empire created an urge to define and defend identities all over India. A new political situation brought problems of adjustment and definition for the Indian mind. These problems had to be dealt in the initial phases from within the resources offered by religion and tradition. This was to throw up a number of competing sects and their leaders, whose public debates strengthened an awareness of religion and cultural identity.

Here we have the example of Bengal where the movements of Faraizis, Muhammadiyas advocated a return to past 'purity' of Islam in different ways. Given the social position of peasant and artisan classes who were attracted to such movements, these movements inevitably strayed into areas of economic conflict. Hence peasant-landlord conflicts acquired a religious colour. An important figure in this context was Titu-Mir whose rebellion was crushed when it turned anti-government.

However, apart from the politico-economic aspects, the debates and differences between these various groups were equally important. These debates raised and clarified the issues of religion in returning to past 'purity'. A similar role was played by disputations and discussions between the Namdhari and Nirankari followers of

Orientalists : The company officials who advocated for the promotion of Indian culture, tradition and languages were called Orientalists.

Utilitarians : See Unit 13, Block 3.

21.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Your answer should focus on the major features of the indigenous system of education, its merits and demerits, see Sec. 21.3.
- 2) There was a mixed reaction, some favoured western education, some were very critical of it. See Sec. 21.4.
- 3) i) × ii) ✓ iii) ✓ iv) ×

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Your answer should include Bentinck's resolution policy of Auckland, Wood's Despatch, etc. See Sec. 21.5.
- 2) Here you have to make assessment of the positive contribution of English education and the limitations of the English education, See. Sec. 21.6.

Sikhism in Punjab. In Orissa and Madhya Pradesh the Satya Mahima Dharma and the Satnamis focused on the issue of purity of religion amongst the lower castes and tribals. A section of Nadars in the south opted for an alternate religion i.e. Christianity for understanding and establishing their identity.

With the exception of the Nadar Christians all other movements raised issues specific to the core of their religion. In doing so a process of community mobilization was attempted which included methods as diverse as community kitchens (as amongst the Nirankaris) to mass prayers (as amongst Bengal & Bihar Muslims). Issues such as the place of women in the society, caste or modes of worship were debated and settled with reference to the past and a concept of 'purity'. Thus, apart from the educated urban middle class reformers and thinkers (discussed below) at the level of the common people basic issues of cultural identity were stirring into life issues often framed in the religious idiom.

22.3 A NEW MENTALITY

It is widely recognised that the impact of Western education and intellectual interchange was a critical long-term force in the making of the new, modern Indian culture and mentality as it emerged in the nineteenth century. The new or renaissance mentality was conspicuously different from that of the Mughal twilight. In contrast, was the nineteenth century mentality, the components of which were both secular and religious and which aimed at a synthesis of tradition and modernity. The result was a new point of view, a new set of values that underscored both religious experience and reform as well as secular literary expression. Hence a greater and more abiding faith in a Dharma that was monotheistic, in God rather than ritual, in love and devotion rather than religious practice. The new mood was reflected in literature as well which tended to record keener emotional experiences, exploits and adventures of the human spirit and a more sympathetic perception of the relationship between man and woman. The notions of justice and reason received wider currency as contemporary intellectuals and ideologues advocated a more just, rational and critical reordering of the universe. The gamut of experiences which is often collectively described as the awakening or renaissance started in Bengal at the beginning of the nineteenth century but later elsewhere. The chronology of the awakening differed from region to region but beneath the diversity, lay one common emotional content perceptible most of all in the outcrop of regional literature.

The interrelation between western impact and the Indian Renaissance has formed the subject matter of much debate. One line of argument is that an inert and degraded Indian society was modernised by the civilising mission of the west. J.N. Farquhar, a Christian missionary observed, "The stimulating force are almost exclusively Western viz., the British Government, English education and literature, Christianity, Oriental research, European science and philosophy, and the material elements of Western civilization." A second line of thought is that Western ideas and administrative practices could not make any great headway against hard and complex Indian realities. The processes of change were thus partial and inconclusive. A third view is that Western ideas and practices were the instruments of the colonisation of Indian society with which could achieve only a false and superficial modernity.

The process was, however, more complex than what any of the above interpretations suggest. It needs to be stressed that the Indian critical awakening was not merely a secular cultural phenomenon but was also a religious reformation in more ways than one. Socio-religious forms and literary-artistic movements formed one organic whole. Secondly, the culture of the renaissance was deeply indigenous, and modernity in India was not a weak and distorted caricature of models from the West. It was as Tagore saw it, synthesis in which the eternal, everchanging Indian civilization successfully absorbed new elements. In the light of modern knowledge, India looked back critically on her past and recreated herself by synthesising the elements which she selected from that past and her selective borrowings from the great outside world. The process itself was not without precedent—such introspective readaptations like the medieval Bhakti movement had occurred in the past. Yet the movement accommodated elements that were novel and readily identifiable as Western.

Western impact on the Indian mind was a propelling force that drove dominant currents within Indian society to the surface, starting a critical spirit of self-enquiry. A chronological sequence of the evolution of the new mentality has thus to be attempted in the context of the new political and social environment that accompanied the establishment of the Company's political rule. Western impact or what M.G. Ranade referred to as foreign manure was largely channelled through agencies such as the educational system, educational and cultural societies, law courts, missionary enterprise and the press. These agencies had the direct consequence of disseminating western ideas and fostering the emergence of a new social category i.e. the Indian middle class—in a new milieu. Besides these formal agencies, there was the 'atmospheric influence' referred to by Syed Abdul Latif, produced by British administration. Besides formal agencies of change, Western ideas had been penetrating the minds of the people through byways and Western channels. The most important of these unseen channels was Western literature which enjoyed popularity among the urban middle classes in the mid-nineteenth century.

This is, however, not to suggest that it was Western impact alone that changed Indian society. It was primarily an element that accelerated changes that were affecting both Hindus and Muslims of India. As M.G. Ranade pointed out, "No mere foreign graftings can ever thrive and flourish unless the tender plant on which the grafting is to be made first germinates and sends its roots deep into its own indigenous soil. When the living tree is thus nourished and watered, the foreign manure may add flavour and beauty to it."

22.4 EARLY ORIGINS OF THE NEW MENTALITY

The Indian mind did not have deep and genuine contact with Western thought until the 1820s and 1830s when two rival social circles in Calcutta had come into existence—the 'progressive' circle headed by Dwarkanath Tagore and Raja Rammohan Roy and the 'conservative' circle headed by Radhakanta Deb. This phase in the social and intellectual history of Calcutta where the 'rebirth' may be said to have taken place, began when Rammohan finally took up residence in Calcutta in 1816. Even earlier, around 1805 the Raja had published from Murshidabad his Persian work, *Tuhfatul Muwahhiddin* which elicited a great deal of debate. While the details of the debate need not detain us, it is important to keep in mind that the disputants appealed to logic and reason, and Rammohan in particular to inductive reason; "there are many things for instance, many wonderful inventions of the people of Europe and the dexterity of jugglers, the causes of which are obviously not known, and seem to be beyond the comprehension of human power, but after a keen insight or instructions of others, those causes can be known satisfactorily." This inductive reason only may be a sufficient safeguard for intelligent people against being deceived by such supernatural workings. Thus Rammohan on the way to comprehending the importance of scientific observation. He questioned all revelation that was not provable. The remarkable thing about these debates was that the Raja had not yet read and accepted either Locke or Newton.

The second and related point to note is that all disputants in the debate accused one another of violating the good of society thereby implicitly adhering to the notion of utility. Rammohan condemned all religious rites that were detrimental to social life and did not lead to the amelioration of the condition of society. In his view, the value of religion lay in the fear of punishment in the next world.

Rationalism in Bengal thus in a sense predated the formal Western impact which was primarily a catalyst accelerating the pace of change.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) How did religion help in overcoming a crisis of identity in the wake of decline of Mughal empire.

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2) How did rationalism in Bengal help in accelerating the pace of change?

22.5 WESTERN KNOWLEDGE AND ITS IMPACT

The emerging ethos of enlightened rationalism assumed in Bengal an institutional shape for the first time in the Hindu College of Calcutta (1817). Well to do Bengalis, some orthodox, joined with some non-official Europeans to establish the college. Rammohan, regarded as a founding father of the college, kept himself deliberately aloof for fear of antagonising more orthodox Hindus like Radha Kanta Deb who became the patron of the college. But the inherent and incipient radicalism of the liberal Bengali youth could hardly be restrained as they rallied round the college teacher Henry Louis Vivien Derozio. The subsequent expulsion of Derozio did not restrain the rising tide of rationalism which continued to prevail with increasing strength.

The establishment of the Hindu College was followed by the founding of the School Book Society and the School Society which played a key role in improving school education in Calcutta. They printed new text books, opened new types of schools which held annual examinations, laying the foundations of a new educational system. The choice of subjects of study and their emphasis was new—English, Mathematics, Geography and Natural sciences. The establishment of other higher institutions of learning like the Bishop's College, Oriental Seminary, the Calcutta Medical College and the Indian newspapers contributed considerably to the creation of a new, rational and more critical public opinion.

In Bombay, a similar function was performed by the Elphinstone College which in many respects was the counterpart of Calcutta's Presidency College. It originated in the desire of the rich native citizens of Bombay to erect an apposite memorial to their departing Governor, Elphinstone. A fund was collected in 1821 for the purpose of instituting a number of professorships. Two English Professors, one of natural philosophy and the other of general literature arrived in 1835 and launched the Elphinstone High School, it assumed the name Elphinstone College. The college was instrumental in creating an "intelligentsia" in Bombay which sustained modern social and political movements in Western India. Among the professionals who graduated from the college were Dadabhai Naoroji, Mahadev Govind Ranade. K.T. Telang,

Phiroze Shah Mehta, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and D.K. Karve. Thus it was no accident that the early crop of Bombay nationalists came from the portals of Elphinstone College. In Madras city, the Presidency College became an important centre. The Muslims of North India after having lagged behind for more than half a century, in the 1870s led by Sayyid Ahmed Khan joined forces to design and establish at Aligarh the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College, a private British style educational institution that would not simply be a transplant of an English model but would remain an indigenous creation. The implications of the new educational system were far reaching. While on the one hand, the new institutions subsequently contributed to an articulation of political sentiment, there was more immediately the creation of a new intellectual milieu best represented in contemporary literature as well as in contemporary treatises on socio-religious matters and public pronouncements. Popularisation of western literature influenced indigenous literary and intellectual effort that tended increasingly to lay stress on new currents of rationality and romanticism.

22.6 NEW RATIONALISM

In Bengal and Maharashtra, in the 19th century rational assessment of current needs and received traditions both indigenous and alien, became the hallmark of intellectual enterprise. Rammohan's modernity is well known to be repeated here in detail. All his initiatives were inspired by a liberal ideology informed with a belief in man's right to freedom. His classic statements against the practice of sati did cite references from the Scriptures, but the clinching arguments were grounded firmly on rational principles. A similar concern for rational thought informed by human value marked the Raja's pronouncements on socio-cultural as well as religious issues. His famous plea for state support to western instead of oriental education seeking an enlightened system of instruction 'embracing mathematics, natural philosophy, chemistry and anatomy with other useful sciences', letters defending the freedom of the press in India were all singularly inspired by a faith in reason and rational argument. This abiding concern for reason and rationality was shared by many others. Derozio in particular encouraged his students to think for themselves as a result of which, the young western educated Bengali questioned not any particular religion or religious tradition, but the tradition of belief without rational argument itself. Akshay Kumar Dutta, editor of the *Tatva Bodhini Patrika* wrote several didactic works where, without denying the existence of God, Dutta sought arguments in its favour in the grand book of Nature itself. His subsequent work on Indian religions was a critical sociological examination of religious sects in a spirit of rational and enlightened enquiry. In all these deliberations, Comte's positivism and utilitarian doctrines constituted important influences. Tom Paine's *Age of Reason and Rights of Man* and Macaulay's *Essays* were widely read and assimilated as was Mill's *Subjection of Women*. From these were derived new notions of reason, justice and utilitarian concerns of welfare. Admittedly, reasoned justice were not foreign to Indian philosophy: reason, for instance, was integral to both Vedantic and Islamic philosophy. But reason as imported from the West was wider than logic. Educated Indians came to appreciate that Europe had conquered the world of knowledge because of the 'purity of its strenuous exercise of reason'. Europe thus infected India with the curiosity to discover the inner workings of all phenomena by observations and experiment. Reason had therefore to be empirical and scientific for it was reason alone that showed the way to progress. Reason was allied to progress and progress implied an activist philosophy of life. Thus Tagore extolled a world "where the mind is without fear," and where "knowledge is free".

The notion of justice which was allied with that of reason was a new characteristic of modern Indian culture. The individual with his conscience emerged. Man owed it to himself and to God that he abide by the voice of individual conscience. Conscience extended from the religious sphere to social protest. The development of social protest was evident in the proliferation of plays after the Mutiny—*Nil Darpan*, *Jamindar Darpan*, etc. The sphere of protest extended as intellectuals guided by conscience re-examined the entire foundation of traditional society and sought to redress the abuses that had crept in. Conscientious protest evolved eventually into

political nationalism. Bankim too graduated from rational enquiry to a profoundly emotional patriotism, note the passion for the motherland in *Anandamath*.

The new rationality in Maharashtra was represented in the writings of several intellectuals; but it is the *Nibandhamala* of Chiplonkar that deserves first mention. The influence of the new education was rapid and profound as the careers of the early Bombay intellectuals illustrate. Sardar Gopal Hari Deshmukh (1823-83) passionately advocated the necessity of purging Indian society of outdated ritual, glaring inequalities and grievous disabilities imposed on women. K.T. Telang also took a militant line on social reform. He wrote extensively on political and social issues drawing inspiration from western ideologues like Spencer and Mill. M.G. Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale also personified the new spirit that was animating the mind of Maharashtra in the 1880s under the impact of British rule.

22.7 THE NEW ROMANTICISM

Romanticism like rationality was the second distinguishing current that flowed into the modern Indian Renaissance. The popularity, appeal and accessibility of Western literature influenced indigenous literary enterprise. The works of Walter Scott, George Elliot etc. made a powerful impact. This was evident in both the form and content of vernacular literature in India. Rise of prose forms—fiction, drama, biography and history, essays and literary criticism were perhaps the most important consequences. New matter was put into these new forms: An altered nature of the perception of man and woman, of their relationship, emphasis on the human spirit were the distinguishing hallmarks of the new fiction that stemmed in the vernacular particularly Bengali. Thus Bankim's first novel *Durgeshbandini* (1865) had striking similarities to Scott's *Ivanhoe*. However, romanticism did not remain Western in a limited sense, as novelists began to tap indigenous sources of romance. Western concepts merely initiated change that were eventually carried on in derived from changing perceptions of the new relationship of man and woman. An example is Bankim's *Kapalkundala*. The great historical novels of R.C. Dutta—*Maharashtra Jivan Prabhat* (1878) and *Rajput Jivana Sandhya* (1879) also testified to the new spirit of the age.

From 1903 onwards, a new wave commenced with Tagore's *Chokher bali* that established social and psychological realism, the dominant trend. His heroines were special women who spoke for themselves and had an abiding sense of honour and self sacrifice for higher ideas, the new wave gained in strength in the 20th century. Similar trends were represented in other regional literature as well. In Tamil, the break came with the writings of Subramanya Bharati whose *Kuyilpattu* were unique expressions of love and compassion. Bharati also dedicated much of his verse to the service of the mother land. Compassion was also the essence of the Gujarati poetry of Narsinhrao Divatia's masterpiece, *Smarahana Samhita* (1915), which was written on the occasion of his son's compound of compassion, self surrender and sense of union—which had inspired the bhakti movement of an earlier age. Kumaran Asan, the Malayali poet too in his *Outcast Nun* expressed the same sentiment:

It is in love that the world takes birth
Love nurses it to growth; his fulfilled bliss
Man finds in the bonds of love; love itself is love
The moment of death is when compassion dies.

Outcast Nun (1922)

The love inspired protest which Kumaran Asan put in the mouth of the Buddha was restated in a message of Swami Vivekananda in his famous saying:

“Where are you looking for God when he is present in every Human being before your eyes? One who loves others serve God.”

In conclusion, one must emphasise that the development of critical consciousness in India was as much a reformation as it was a renaissance. It was a process that absorbed new elements adapted itself to new needs and restated itself in new terms.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How did the Western educational institutions help us in the shaping of the Indian rule?

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22.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit you got to know about :

- how in the wake of the crisis of Mughal empire the Indian mind drew upon the traditional resources of religion to come to grips with its identity,
- how certain new directions were provided to the Indian mind with the Western impact,
- how diverse trends of thinking changed under the Western impact.

22.9 KEY WORDS

Sociological Study : A study linking up a problem to the context of a society.

Revelation : Knowledge made known to human by a divine act.

22.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sec. 22.2 2) See Sec. 22.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sec. 22.5

SOME USEFUL BOOKS FOR THIS BLOCK

Kenneth W. Jones. *The New Cambridge History of India, III.1 Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India*

Hetukar Jhai. *Colonial Context of Higher Education for India*

Aparna Basu. *Essays in the History of Indian Education*

K.K. Dutta, V.A. Narain (ed.) *A Comprehensive History of India Vol. XI*

Sisir Das (ed.) *Indian Literature in the Eighteenth Century*

V.C. Joshi (ed.) *Rammohan Roy and the Process of Modernization*

The Indian Mind and
Western Knowledge : Growth
of Critical Consciousness