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REVOLUTION IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT: A Condition for Social Change

The challenges of social change are faced by every developing nation. Development implies growth and growth promotes change in a progressive direction. The agents and participants of change are the people themselves. They live and work in a socio-religious context which provides them with systems of belief. One of the most important factors which determine a man's course of action is his system of belief. No social change can take place without touching a man's belief-system. The old socio-religious restrictions on it will have to loosen their grip for ushering in new values of change.

A process of change can only be invigorated by the collective aspect of individual commitment of development through organized and devoted activities, which finds its basic in the individual's system of belief. For example, a man may talk about the urgent need of implementing social justice, but if this does not find an important place in his belief-system, his commitment to action may not even reach the take-off stage. Thus, it becomes necessary for us to accept the implication that a process of social change is incomplete and ineffective unless it revolutionizes the individual's belief-system. In a developing country like India, where the traditional spirit of religiosity is nurtured by the masses, we find that the individual belief-system is mainly moulded by the socio-religious teachings he gathers from various sources; it is in such a context that a revolution in religious thought becomes a condition of social change.

Implication of Concepts of Religion in Social Change:

In the light of this need for social change, religion could be considered as a way of life, an interpretation of life and faith

and hope of life. These are the most important areas of the individual's personal belief-system which controls his actions and, consequently, the process of social change.

Religion is considered as a way of life when religious precepts and practices become a part of living itself. Religion influences every aspect of the individual's life for every aspect of human behaviour—though in many cases nominally—receives a religious tinge. When we encounter religion as a way of life we may come across at the social, individual and transcendental levels. Religion at the social level refers to its various aspects which affect and control group behaviour and an individual's relation to other individuals. Religion penetrates traditions, conventions, customs etc., and controls human social interaction. Man's desire to purify himself and, consequently, to elevate himself to have access to noble thoughts which could guide his behaviour, can be considered as religion at the individual level. The kind of purification he aspires to achieve and the rituals or actions he takes up in its support, cannot escape the purview of social change. At the transcendental level, man finds the expression of his purificatory desire in relating himself to God or any other equivalent concept of ultimate reality. The concept of ultimate reality and the specific ways of relating man to it will again affect social change.

Religion also may be conceived as an interpretation of life. The attempt of religions to explain the mystery of life and the purpose and fulfilment of life are magnified in this view. Usually, the interpretation of life is attempted as two levels, namely, 'Temporal' and 'Transcendental' or 'Eternal life'. In the temporal interpretation, life is regarded in terms of time (here and now), needs (physical and physiological), aspirations (psychological), achievements, and the meaningfulness of the earthly life. From the view-point of 'transcendental' interpretation, life is considered beyond the present and earthly stage and meets the individual's need to reach beyond himself. It is an attempt to exalt himself to an unchanging and timeless state of existence. Both views of life in finding meaning in the present earthly life and the achievement of a permanent existence, will certainly affect the socio-economic progress of his present day life.

Another view of religion emphasizes its contents as something which provides 'inner strength' for man's behaviour mainly in the form of faith and hope, that is, faith in himself, in his fellow-men, in the Universe, in future life and in God or any equivalent idea which fulfils his faith, and Hope for his own life and

for his fellowmen, "here and now" as well as for "eternity". The concept and the mode of operating of the "inner strength" could either delay or hasten the process of social change.

These concepts of religion, viz., a way of life, interpretation of life and faith and hope of life, could broadly apply to any practice of religion or any substitutes of religion in the form of socio-political beliefs or philosophical principles. Man's attitude to life, his concept of life in relation to super-life (God) or equivalent idea, his obligations to his fellowmen, his hopes for now and after the termination of his life on earth, are some of the most essential areas of his belief-system, which directly affect the process of social change. We must admit that in a traditional society, religious thought covering these and other areas of importance to change, has not inspired social change of any noticeable magnitude. On the other hand, an examination of the religious thought of a traditional society will reveal that there are some ideas which do not encourage social change. In the process, we may also discover that there are a few ideas with 'change' potentials, which have been pushed to the background through the ages.

The nature of the revolution should cover four stages: (a) A critical and thorough examination of the religious thought in the context of social change, (b) Identification of ideas which do not encourage social change, (c) Discovery of ideas with potentials for active promotion of social change, (d) Mass-scale eradication of negative ideas and the strengthening of positive ideas in relation to social change. The revolution should guard against the capacity of a traditional society to level off the religious reforms attempted from time to time by various thinkers and reformers by readjusting itself through reinterpretation of the ideas in question and thereby slowing down the process of change.

Vital Areas of Revolution in Indian Religious thought:

It is essential to identify some of the vital areas of revolution for making its conceptualization clear and for visualizing its possibilities. The general framework should cover at least four areas of critical importance, including perceptual and attitudinal factors.

(a) Social Perception:

One of the most important parts of the general framework of social change is social perception. The type of perception which the individual has acquired with reference to people and material

resources around him, will decide the speed with which the change can be effected. Therefore, it is necessary for the members of a given society to have the right kind of social perception contributive to social change. For example, we may keep in mind the idea of equality of all men and the ideal of equal opportunities for all men in a developing society as one of the targets of the desired change. But if our traditional thought has already created a framework of perception of classifying and placing our fellowmen into different castes and sub-castes with merits and demerits attached to them, we are able to perceive them only in that context. Though we decide not to be particular about the case of an individual, our own conclusion about his identity at our perceptual level will unconsciously be affected by various clues like his surname, village, his native origin, language, manners, dress, etc. thus colouring our evaluative judgement. Constitutional guarantees, legislation and other such authoritarian ways of implementation will remain only at the surface level. The root of the problem lies at the perceptual level, which needs to be tackled through the process of a revolution in thought about religion. We may talk about the dignity of labour and hard work, and admire the Westerner's for their willingness to do any kind of manual work, but if our perceptual framework is used to visualizing certain kinds of labour as belonging to certain "caste groups" (e.g. cleaning filth and dirt, removing carcasses, tilling the soil etc.), we may assign the work to someone else at the perceptual level but not do so in actual situations. When we witness stark poverty, misery and various other difficult problems of life, most of us are able to think of them unconsciously only in the context of the 'Law of Karma' or explain them away with the help of similar defence mechanisms acquired through traditional religious thought. These and other examples indicate the great importance of the perceptual framework in the process of social change and its connection with religious thought.

(b) Attitudes towards others:

Attitude formation towards one's fellowmen, constitutes another part of the general framework of the process of social change. The mental attitudes formed towards others and their needs, may be either favourable or unfavourable to change. In a traditional society, the ideals and values are rooted in the past, and very often in practice we do not take into consideration the contemporary or future context. The mental or moral attitude to

a social problem is formed against the background of values of the past. Such attitude-formation takes place through the deliberate interference of social groups in which the individual is brought up. One of the most reliable means for keeping such ideas alive in a traditional society is religious thought itself. For example, if we analyse the problem of social distance, its origin and development could be traced to the "ritualistic relation" existing between the individual and others. The ritualistic relation in a socio-religious sense, is reflected in social acts like worship and religious ceremonies, marriage, dining, exercise of charity, etc. Even charity means personal benefit when one takes pride in its good effect. Such attitude-formation is carefully nurtured right from childhood through religious teachings. In our society, an individual cannot escape the use of religious practices in some form or the other during the formative years of his life. The pace and type of changes which take place in our society will again depend on the intensity and extent of the revolution in Indian Thought.

(c) Attitude towards oneself:

Religion also plays an active role in the formation of the individual's concept of man and, consequently, his attitude towards himself. Simple questions like "Who am I? What is my place in the Universe? Where did I come from and Where am I going?" etc. are raised in some form during childhood and are carried over to later life too. The most common answers which an individual receives to such questions are based on religious interpretations. The individual's image of himself is formed on the basis of the answers he finds through the socio-religious mechanisms during his formative years and later it is greatly influenced by these. The type of attitude towards himself will largely determine the direction of social change and the extent of his participation.

(d) Attitude towards the Future:

The concept of the future and our attitude towards it will rightly serve as an essential part of the framework of the process of social change. Do we regard all the days to come just as important as today? How do we conceive those days in relation to the endless life in many forms projected by our religious thought? Do we explain away the miseries of the present by taking refuge in a distant future (another form of life) which

promises a better life? Do I have another chance if I miss the opportunities of this life? The answers to these and other questions given by reference to our religious traditions right from childhood, will greatly affect our attitude towards the future. In a traditional society, we find our feet firmly chained to the past and our heads free to dream of the chances offered in a very distant future. The sense of urgency required for quick social change seem to be missing in our attitude towards the future. We have to cultivate the spirit of "change here and now" if we are serious about social change. The religious thought has to be revolutionized to induce in a practical outlook and thus limit ourselves, first and foremost, to the days in store for us in this life.

Lessons from the Brahma Samaj Movement:

Socio-religious reforms are not new to India and we can draw upon the successes and failures of such reforms. One such notable example is the Brahma Samaj Movement. The era of modern Indian Thought begins with the socio-religious awakening, initiated by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, through the founding of the Brahma Samaj Movement. He challenged some of the existing religious beliefs and social practices of his time and laid the foundation for the process of social change. At the same time he did not hesitate to rediscover religious principles conducive to social progress in Hindu Religious Thought and to assimilate relevant ideas taken from other world religions. The religious thought reforms attempted by him and other Brahma leaders covered mainly the idea of God, Morality and Service.

Idea of God:

The essential features of Ram Mohan's idea of God were (i) denunciation of idolatry, (ii) monotheism, (iii) Unity of God and Catholicism, and (iv) Spirituality of the true worship of God. In these concepts, we find a purificatory aspect and constructive aspect. On the purificatory side, he denounces idolatry, polytheism and sectarianism. On the constructive side, he develops a strong attachment to monotheism and catholicity, which considered all human beings as equal in the eye of God. He felt that a radical religious reform was necessary for the welfare of the spiritual and earthly life of his countrymen.

In the area of morality, he assimilated the 'Golden Rule' of Jesus, which he refers to as "that law which teaches that man should

do unto others as he would wish to be done by others".¹ According to him, the practice of this principle would lead to (a) reconciliation of man to human nature; (b) rendering human existence agreeable to human beings, and (c) making human existence profitable to the rest of mankind.² His idea of service sprang from the religious principle, "The service of man is the service of God."³ In practising this idea, he worked for (i) emancipation of women, (ii) removal of caste system, (iii) spread of education and (iv) attainment of freedom.

Keshub Chandra Sen, another dynamic leader of the Brahmo Samaj, developed the idea of God into "the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man."² He included in it the whole of humanity without distinctions of caste, colour or creed and treated them as one family. In his concept of the Fatherhood of God, he presented the idea of God being the Father of all human beings and everyone has the right and privilege to approach him as a child and a member of the holy family of God. He emphasized also the need for a "face to face" relationship with God. The ethical principles covered Love of God and man, Service, and Self-Sacrifice. The love of God and man unites the family of God, treating the love-force as the basic of morality. According to him, service is "the labour of love", and is the natural outcome of love. The principle of self-sacrifice helps to bring about the union of the divine and the human. Self-Sacrifice is the result of great moral courage and requires complete surrender of all selfishness to the highest ideal one stands for.

The revolution in Indian religious thought initiated by the Brahmo Samaj, in a period of search for an awakening of rational thinking and social change, continues to show the way for major areas of revolution in religious thought in India today. What the Brahmo Samaj started with the intellectuals of Calcutta, has no practical relevance unless it encircles the beliefs and practices of the masses everywhere in India.

Focus on Specific Areas:

Nineteenth century India was awakened by the fiery young men of Bengal and these were followed by many men of vision in different parts of the country. The socio-religious reforms were attempted by the Brahmo Samaj and followed by the Arya Samaj, Rama Krishna Mission and various other institutions though these had a different emphasis. It is well-known that

the Christian missions also contributed to the process of social awakening through educational programmes, medical care, women's emancipation, emergency relief services, etc. for many years. However, we find that the tendency has been largely for the conservation of religious thought rather than a revolution in religious thought. We find that the masses are still fettered by false religious beliefs, social taboos based on religious ideas and an irrational attitude in facing the modern problems of life. The average man's life in India is still dominated and controlled by such fetters of non-progressive ideas. They can only be freed by a radical change in religious thought which, I feel, should act in three specific areas, namely, theological, ethical and social.

Theological Ideas:

Indian Religious Thought has one of the richest and most varied ideas of God and his relation to mankind. There is an urgent need for identifying, consolidating and popularizing some of these ideas which could facilitate social change. The Brahmos identified the monotheistic concept of God and the idea of considering the whole of humanity as the family of God and every one a member without distinction of caste, colour or creed, as most conducive to the socio-religious progress of India. Such ideas could be rejuvenated developed and strengthened not only for the benefit of the intellectuals but also for the common man.

The approach to revolution in this area should be purificatory and constructive. Intensive efforts have to be made to purify one's ideas of God to free them from the superstitious and the irrational. A rational and spiritual awakening of the masses as regards theological concepts has to be carefully initiated. The purified and redeemed concepts should be given a positive direction in the minds of the masses. The following practical steps are suggested:

(1) Identify the concepts of God and relevant beliefs and practices in relation to God which differentiates man on the basis of his birth and social position. Take revolutionary steps to eradicate these forms from the minds of the people.

(2) Emphasize the unity of Godhead, and this will make all men equals before Him.

(3) Develop a "temporal" relation with God which would give more importance to our present earthly life. Consequently,

an urgent need for immediate action on the basis of 'here and now' should also become part of our life's aspirations.

(4) Man to man relationship has to be given a divine basis which would demand fraternity, equality and social justice for every human being.

Ethical Principles:

In the area of morality, our religious thought presents a threefold scheme of spiritual development covering objective, subjective, and transcendental ethics. And yet, we seem to believe that the present day morality should have a different set of values. We need to identify the conflicts in present day morality practised in our society and resolve its ambiguous nature while giving a positive direction to it. Response to this challenge could assume the following forms initially:

(1) Identify the conditions under which the gap between principles and practice widens and examine the cause for the dual nature of morality today and the 'double standard' value system we follow in general. For example, truth is considered as the highest standard of morality, but cheating and falsehood are closely associated with success in our everyday life. In every day life one begins to feel that corruption is the accepted way of successful life in our society. We find that a man who spends regular hours in the puja room and who makes liberal donations to various 'causes', actively engages himself in the adulteration of food, to make himself "successful". Cheating, smuggling, and hoodwinking the guardians of the law, are considered as marks of smartness. The cause for this duality in morality should be thoroughly investigated and necessary remedial steps must be taken if social change is to be ushered in quickly.

(2) Purify and integrate moral principles with daily living.

(3) Morality should be given a **social dimension**. A concern for others (e.g. the oppressed) will bring in the practice of social justice. The "I" centred morality should be sufficiently expanded to include the "others" for the promotion of social change.

(4) Within the frame work of morality there should be a sensible order of priorities defining one's relations with others.

(5) The negative expression of moral action should find a positive direction. For example, the practice of Ahimsa (non-

violence) should also assume a positive and constructive form in an expression of love and concern for others.

(6) A concern for social reconstruction and a personal commitment to achieve it, should form the backbone of morality in a society in transition.

Social Action:

Today social service is considered as an honourable 'profession' in India. Very often it is used as a stepping stone to political power. We find both professional and voluntary social workers acting with diverse motives. The idea of service has to be integrated with the changed concept of man, including the extension of equality and fraternity to include all men. As long as equality and fraternity is limited to one's own relatives or "community", the social section arising out of it will only perpetuate traditionalism. Therefore, a revolution has to take place in the area of social action itself. The urgency of this problem demands immediate action.

(1) Integration of the idea of social action: The concept of social action should be integrated with the theological system which regards all men as equals, i.e., as members of the family of God. Here the approach of Raja Ram Mohan Roy might prove to be very useful even today. "Beradar (brother), Beradar, the service of man is the service of God"... "If you cannot love and serve man, whom you see, how can you love and serve God whom you do not see?"⁴ The theological system should be given a social dimension in order to include the idea of social action.

(2) The idea of social justice must extend beyond economic inequalities. Social and cultural inequalities which have arisen as a result of traditionalism should disappear when economic opportunities are given as part of social-action programmes. Action-oriented programmes should cover the removal of both economic and cultural inequalities.

(3) Social-action programmes should be result-oriented with specific short term and long term goals.

(4) A value system which considers "social concern" as the primary responsibility of the individual, should replace the value system which considers social concern as the "other man's responsibility." Nobody need wait for a philanthropist (Indian or Foreign) to come and remove the social evils from our society.

This should become each individual's responsibility and form an important part of his value system.

An outsider may consider India as a "fragmented society" but we find that one of its major unifying forces lies in our socio-religious system. And yet, the same system, in its moments of weakness, has promoted traditionalism, factionalism, economic and socio-cultural inequality. Social change can hardly take place without disturbing one's system of beliefs. Therefore, a radical awakening and a rationally based revolution in religious thought should become an important part of the process of social change. Such a revolution is the need of the day rather than just readjustment, reinterpretation and rationalization of traditional values.

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1. *The English Works of Raja Mammohun Roy*, Part II, edited by Kalidas Nag and Debajyoti Burman, (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahma Samaj, 1947), p. 52.
 2. *Ibid.* Condensed from the introduction to *The Precepts of Jesus*, p. 2.
 3. Satish Chandra Chakravarti and Sarojendranath Ray (Compiled by), *Brahma Samaj, the Depressed Classes and Untouchability*, (Calcutta: Sadharan Brahma Samaj, 1933) pp. 1, 2.
 4. *Ibid.*