



A review on social reform movements in Andhra during pre-independence India (1920-1947)

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Abstract: The 19th century in India was a period of transition. The changes in the field of education, economy and polity, introduced by the British, resulted in structural imbalances in the indigenous society. The outcome of these changes is significant as the reaction from the indigenous society started building up along with them. A study of this transition becomes a significant area for the historian. The changes at all India level had their severe bearing on Andhra too. The social reform endeavours were given a solid organisational shape and firm social footing. The vigorous growth of caste associations and their obsession with intra-caste reform are evidence. All caste associations had women's education at the top of their agenda. The spread of education and establishment of separate educational funds enhanced the rate of activities in this regard. They condemned infant marriages, bride price, nautch system and dowry in unequivocal terms and, extended a cordial support to post-puberty and widow marriages.

Key words: Social Reform, bride price, social reformers

Introduction

A Social Reform refers to any attempt that seeks to correct any injustices in a society. People who are involved in social reforms do so with the aim of improving the quality of life. Social Reform is a kind of social movement that aims to make gradual change, or change in certain aspects of society, rather than rapid or fundamental changes. A reform movement is distinguished from more radical social movements such as revolutionary movements. Social

reform comprises the education, social and cultural changes. Social Reform also means that a group of people with a common ideology who try together to achieve certain general goals. Different types of reformers. Abolitionists or emancipists for example were social reformers who focused on putting an end to slavery. The 19th century in India was a period of transition. The changes in the field of education, economy and polity, introduced by the British, resulted in structural imbalances in the indigenous society. The outcome of these changes is



significant as the reaction from the indigenous society started building up along with them. A study of this transition becomes a significant area for the historian. The changes at all India level had their severe bearing on Andhra too.

The inherent zeal for reform has been reiterated over a period of time in Andhra region of Madras Presidency. Though, the tradition of dissent within Hindu religious traditions dates back to medieval Andhra, the dimensions of reformist efforts displayed many variables during colonial period. The colonial regime symbolising the dawn of modern era in Indian history posed new problems to the Indian identity. It was a powerful historical intervention into indigenous cultural practices which always had an eye on co-opting the same into an orbit of colonial and western ethics. The mutual and equitable influence of Hindu and Islamic traditions of medieval era represented a cultural synthesis in indigenous society which was more harmonious than frictional. The colonial intervention reversed the role and it attempted at a cultural appropriation than a cultural amalgamation. The imperial work culture and the colonial rule consciously assumed the role of civilising mission which necessarily

implies an unequal cultural relationship with indigenous people.

Social reform movements in Andhra region

Rammohan Roy, Veeresalingam, Curajada Appa Rao, Atmuri Lakshminarasimham and a host of others represented this school of thought during the transitional phase of 19th century. The period of our present study (1919-1947) in the post-Veeresalingam era had two significant characteristics. The legacy of Veeresalingam's reform campaign was kept alive as witnessed by an intense intra-caste reform efforts of different castes and their open support to women's issues like post-puberty and widow marriages. In fact, the growth of women's organisations, a few of which were affiliated to respective caste associations consolidated the efforts of Veeresalingam. The other important development was the rise of national movement clamouring for independence to the country. Truly, it, with its immediate strong emotional and patriotic appeals, overshadowed the reform efforts. It could be seen that national movement and social reform went hand in hand and, this combination was a major historical development during our period of study. In Andhra, like elsewhere in many parts of the sub-continent, persons with social reform background were seen in the forefront of freedom struggle.



National movement

National movement was, no doubt, interference. Yet, it was a positive interaction which, unlike the colonial intervention, was reform friendly and, a truly cooperative indulgent element in the process of social reform. Despite the sweeping influence of national movement, the organised strength of social reform efforts could be gleaned through some of the developments in the post-Veerasingam era.

Social awareness among non-Brahmin caste groups

Spread of reform ideas was equally evident in all non-Brahmin castes unlike in 19th century. This was a crucial development during our period of study. The emergence of social awareness among non-Brahmin caste groups was facilitated by three important developments viz., the break-up early Brahminical order under the colonial regime and the growth of agrarian economy in the post-anicut era in Godavari and Krishna delta regions; the spread of English education which, for non-Brahmin peasant castes, meant the end of Brahminical domination over the realm of knowledge and learning; the intense urge for social change in light of new socio-economic and cultural values under the colonial regime and, the emergence of social reform campaign. Non-Brahmins viewed reform from two angles : a) to affect a change of mind in the Brahminical society whose members assumed socially and ritually dominant roles

and became self-proclaimed champions of all religious observances.

For non-Brahmins, this was seen as an equally important reform drive since, they have been subject to unreasonable socially operative mechanisms which were not sanctioned by any plausible material explanation except by a historically precipitated irrational religious and traditional dogma. The consequent reaction to this was highly virulent and, at times, it even appeared as proceeding along the lines of exclusive anti-Brahmin sentiments. The extreme social reaction of non-Brahmin groups seemingly conveyed this idea. But, it was not anti-Brahmin. The moral and material indignation of non-Brahmins was necessitated by historical conditions. The reiteration of non-Brahmin leaders throughout the active existence of non-Brahmin social and political drives that they were not against the interests of Brahmins in general is a clinching evidence. Their reactions and reform drives could be seen at three different but, mutually complementary levels. The denouncement of Brahminical superiority and the deconstruction of Brahminical religious texts. The former was best represented by 19th century and early 20th century non-Brahmin intellectuals like Atmuri Lakshminarasimham, Darisi Chenchiah, Kokku Hanumantha Rao, Gopalakrishna Yachendra, Chilambu Adinarayanappa Naidu, D.Raghavachandriaiah and Suryadevara Raghavaiah Choudari.



In fact, Raghavaiah Choudari, the founder non-Brahmin movement, wanted it to be an exclusive socio-religious concern. The other stream was represented by the rationalist writings of Tripuraneni Ramaswami Choudari. At the social level, their demand for equal share in education and employment was again construed as a reform drive which was supposed to rectify the social errings of Brahminical manoeuvres over a period of time. This demand ultimately led them to more reactionary drives. Political power was considered as a remedy to achieve those ends and, it was believed by non-Brahmins that it would reform the social inequalities perpetuated by Brahminical undoings. The broad spectrum of activities of Justice Party truly reflects this politics of reform in early 20th century before independence. The other angle to non-Brahmin awareness was an intense drive at intra-caste reform.

Intra-caste reform era- caste associations

It is here the influence of Veeresalingam era was explicitly visible and, reveals how the non-Brahmin caste groups were increasingly concerned about those social maladies taken up by Veeresalingam in 19th century. The efforts at intra-caste reform were highly organised and serious in nature. They were successful in spreading the message of reform among caste members, both at urban and mofussil levels.

The social reform endeavours were given a solid organisational shape and firm social footing. The vigorous growth of caste associations and their obsession with intra-caste reform are evidence. All caste associations had women's education at the top of their agenda. The spread of education and establishment of separate educational funds enhanced the rate of activities in this regard. They condemned infant marriages, bride price, nautch system and dowry in unequivocal terms and, extended a cordial support to post-puberty and widow marriages.

Alternate leadership

The growth of second line of alternate leadership in the reform campaign was a significant development in the present period. This democratic decentralisation of leadership vis-a-vis the earlier period when Veeresalingam was the main pivot, helped in further consolidation of reform drives. Leaders from different caste groups emerged on the social scene and shouldered the responsibility of effecting a change in the mental make-up of people belonging to their respective castes. For instance, the activities of people like Atmuri Lakshminarasimham and Darisi Chenchaiyah (Vaisyas), Gopalakrishna Yachendra alias Kumara Yachama Naidu (Velama), Suryadevara Raghavaiah Choudari and Triupurneni Ramaswami Choudari (Kamma), Chinta Raghunatha Reddy and C.R.Reddy (Reddy), Dommeti Venkata Reddy (Setti Balija) and Kondiparthi Veerabhadracharyulu (Viswabrahmins) symbolised the multi-



dimensional aspect of reform leadership. The monolithic nature of reform leadership of Veeresalingam era had a smooth transition into the emergence of plural leadership in early 20th century. This was highly complementary in its role in consolidating the loose strings of reform in society.

Growth of women's movement

The growth of women's movement, exclusive women's organisations and the intense struggle against all social evils confronting women folk is a significant development in our study period. The aspiration of Veeresalingam era viz., emancipation of women from bondage, was more than justified in early 20th century. Some of these associations like Vaisya Mahila Sabha were affiliated to respective caste organisations. There were other women's associations like Kakinada Women Student's Association, Kavitam Mahila Association and, Andhra Women's Association which did not have any such affiliations. Rather they were organically linked to All India Women's Association. These bodies, supported by Women's journals, took up the cause of women and laid emphasis on all issues like child and widow marriages, bride price, nautch, dowry and women's education. Some of the resolutions of these associations even demanded an equal status to women on par with male members. The prophetic reflection of Gurajada Appa Rao that modern woman would rewrite history has been truly symbolised by these activities of early

women conferences. These bodies sowed the seeds for the emergence of feminism in modern Andhra.

Social reform endeavours in modern Andhra: positive and negative atheism:

An off-shoot of the awakening emanated from the social reform endeavours was the emergence of atheism in modern Andhra. The early social reform movements accorded a prime place to human element and questioned all the perverted religious observances. A few of social reformers like Tripuraneni Ramaswami Choudari introduced elements of rationalism into society. The Brahmo Samaj movement disapproved of idol worship and believed in congregational prayers. The critique of reason was not always limited to matters of religion. It embraced the secular domain as well. Social issues too were evaluated in light of reason and, not by religious sanctions. Though the twin principles of rationalism and humanism were products of reform awareness, social reform movements (either in 19th century or 20th century) did not question the validity of the existence of organised religion. This task was completed by atheism in Andhra. The founder of atheism, Cora (Goparaju Ramachandra Rao), was instrumental in the spread of atheist ideas. The progress of atheist tendencies in Andhra was more noteworthy for its positive probings into society and religion without being blind opponents of religion.



The progress of the atheist endeavours was more implicit in society and represented a silent revolution. The efforts of Gora in trying to introduce secular thinking in society were a landmark in the history of social reform endeavours in modern Andhra. He believed that organised religion does not always provide answers to all social problems and hence, one should look to secular alternatives in finding solutions for the same. For instance, untouchability and casteism are two such social maladies for which religion does not provide any remedy since they have been its own historical constructs. Gora's increased emphasis on these aspects and his endeavours in performing inter-caste and inter-religious marriages bring out this element. He was given to a belief that the status of women too would not undergo radical changes unless a secular social temper is equally imbibed by men as well as women.

Material truths, social and secular outlook and, freedom of individual formed the main postulates of Gora's positive atheism. Though his movement was initiated just before the end of our study period, it was indeed an integral part of social reform drives of its immediate past and left a thorough-going influence on many liberal minds. Plagued by a thin social base and popular misconceptions about its supposed iconoclastic tendencies and anti-religious nature, the movement registered a very slow progress in the contemporary society. Confined to periodic seminars, indoor

intellectual discourses and a low paced public activity, atheism is still alive in society and, more so, among its adherents.

Post-Veeresalingam period

No doubt, the reform endeavours in post-Veeresalingam period in early 20th century suffered from a few shortcomings. The social base of reform movement, though exhibited a relative enlargement vis-a-vis earlier period, was still confined to educated members within the respective castes. The opposition of ignorant masses in juxtaposition with traditional elements hampered its speedy progress. This limited base invariably resulted in promotion of sectarian interests of a few sections while ignoring genuine social problems of other sections. For example, untouchability issue was rarely found on the agenda of social reform conferences during this period. Excepting in a few cases like Setti Balija social gatherings which freely allowed dalits to preside over them, the resilience and flexibility were generally absent on the agenda of others. The continuation of the present trend was to mar the vision of Justice Party too. The problem was aggravated by a weak rural base. Contemporary critics regretted that reform efforts of various organisations failed in reaching out to innumerable rural people and, in particular, women. The problem remained unattended during the active reform campaign in post-Veeresalingam era. Political parties like Communist Party and Indian



National Congress had to shoulder this responsibility, but with a different aim.

The activities of caste associations had certain adverse effects. Nevertheless, they provided a much larger scope for intra-caste reform activity and succeeded in generating a lot of awareness among their members. But, they never tried to build a common platform to project issues of general social concern. Instead, they remained narrow social outfits propagating reform ideas within an exclusive orbit. The watertight compartmentation between these caste associations marred their vision in identifying caste as an issue for reform. Instead, the activities of different caste associations sowed the seeds of narrow casteist tendencies in the contemporary society, the remnants of which are seen even today. Unfortunately, these narrow tendencies influenced women's organisations too, some of which shut the doors of admission to female members belonging to Mala and Madiga castes (Panchamas). When the institution of caste had been a major social impediment from the ancient past, the reiteration of the same during active reform period and, deadly obsession with claims over equal status with Brahmins, again in caste terms, were responsible for undoing the enlightenment resulted from social reform efforts. Even the more radical, rational and secular atheist movement failed in arresting the growth of casteist tendencies. Atheism, as such,

represented the fructification of rationalist thought. Yet, it failed in making a dent into society on various accounts.

Women were allowed a greater access to education and social life. All these things had the support of all sections of society by the end of our study period. Having assimilated the reform awareness, Hindu religious observances retained their hold on the society. There was no psychological explanation for members belonging to Hindu religious fold why they should detest it in its present reformed form. Even radical thinkers and rationalists like Tripuraneni did not question the validity of the existence of religion. Given the present context, atheism with its areligious profundities failed in carving out a larger social space for its operations and activities. Added to this, the rise of communist party had a severe bearing on the growth of atheism.

In principle, Marxian theory believes that religion is the opium of the people and never tried to encourage it. But, Marxian theoretical postulates have been mistaken by general public as atheist in nature. Though indifferent to organised religion, Communist Party was misconceived as more atheist in nature than Gora's atheist movement. The Communist Party thus, proved one of the hurdles to the free growth of atheist movement in Andhra.



The reform endeavours and atheist movement could not succeed in affecting a radical change in the minds of people with regard to issues like caste, dowry problem and untouchability. As already stated they failed in recognising caste as an issue for reform.

Instead, caste associations and, to some extent, a few women's organisations were responsible for the growth of narrow casteist tendencies. The Justice Party and its activities drew their major strength from caste affiliation. Foundations for a harmonious relation between caste and vote were fairly laid even before independence and the nexus is to continue still. Though problem of dowry was recognised as a major social impediment, it was not addressed at individual and family levels. The proclamations of caste associations, women's organisations and social conferences on the problem of dowry were proved to be only a lip service and hollow protestations. Even the Communist Party cut a miserable face and its adherents too were given to the habit of free exchange of dowry at domestic fronts. Left historians like Kambhampati Satyanarayana were much peeved over these anti-Left tendencies within the Communist Party and warned them against the problem of dowry. These exhortations to members of Communist Party had not positive reciprocation and the problem still persists in the entire society. The monetary aspects, rather than reform aspects of dowry have

been more attractive to people and the problem has been evergreen.

While caste is imposed from above as a political plank in view of its elective potential, the problem of dowry has been supported from below without exception of any caste in society. Social reform drives were not complete in their role in affecting a change. Caste in political terms and, dowry in social and monetary terms, became increasingly acceptable to people in general. Without a support from society, caste and dowry have become superficially attractive slogans for all social agitations during and after the present study period (1920-1947).

They have become elusive ideals and conceptual realities. The problem of untouchability increasingly became a concern of political parties and, social reformers of this period joined hands with political wings in addressing the problem. Social reform endeavours as such cut a sorry figure in registering an Impressive result on this front. The contributory role of reform endeavours in the post-Veeresalingam period is noteworthy on a few accounts. The consistent efforts of reformers and various associations like caste and women's associations were responsible for the spread of reform ideas and rational thinking in society. Despite the fact that the growth of education in our study period was not encouraging the spread of these ideas was satisfactory. Thanks to the national freedom struggle which, in fact, prepared people to welcome positive ideas. People slowly became



receptive to the ideas of reform, both social and political. Unlike in 19th century reform drives, the efforts of reformers with a plural leadership and relatively large outreach during the present study period collectively represented the first intellectual break in modern Andhra. The transition was facilitated by a free and mutually beneficial interplay between social reform and national movement. The liberation of individual from innumerable social and traditional bonds is a far reaching legacy of these efforts.

At the material level many of the social evils vanished from the society and the credit goes to reform activities. Bride price was forgotten. Child marriages became a rarity. Almost all social groups shed their narrow sentiments regarding widow marriages.

While widow marriage was an individual concern in Veeresalingam era, it received organisational support during our study period. Various caste and women's associations favoured widow marriages. Institutional orientation to social reform was a new dimension during the period of our study. The problem of Devadasis (nautch girls) was effectively tackled and many Devadasi families joined the mainstream of social life. Liberation of women from domestic and social impositions was fairly visible in the society. The reform efforts were truly complementary in their role and completed the process that was

initiated by Veeresalingam in late 19th century. The slow but significant growth of women's education and proliferation of exclusive women's journals and women's associations are our supportive evidences in this regard.

Conclusion

The reform endeavours in our study period left an unmistakable impression that the zeal for reform was not lost. The national movement overshadowed it, but did not devour the same. The reform activities and the awareness generated from it were, in fact, instrumental in creating the necessary political consciousness in contemporary society. The significance and importance of social reform endeavours never vanished. Rather, they amalgamated themselves with the mainstream of political manifestations where, they remained strong undercurrents of freedom struggle. That the mental make-up of modern Andhra, growth of social movements like feminism and rationalist thought heavily depended and drew their sustenance from the awareness and enlightenment created by these reform endeavours is a true legacy of their influence.

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