

# RAJENDRA SURI : A REFORMER AND REVIVALIST

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Seven hundred years of foreign rule in medieval period had sapped the political vitality of the Hindus, and uprooted whatever national consciousness they ever possessed. Their civil and religious rights were constantly trampled down, their property often plundered, and their blood was wantly shed. They were reduced to the position of hewers of wood and drawers of water. All this led to a general deterioration in Hindu society and religion. The society was honey-combed with caste, sub-caste and rigid distinctions. The characteristic of the society were a rigid caste-system with its attendant restrictions about touch, food, and marriage, and the strict prohibition of the re-marriage of the widows, *Sati*-system, rigid untouchability and the old inequitous attitude towards the lower castes. Dishonesty and corruption were rampant and the people were selfish and devoid of conscience. The purity of domestic life was threatened by luxury and debauchery, fashionable in the court, aristocracy and well-to-do families, and the sensual literature that grew up under such patrons.

So far as the Hindu masses were concerned, religion meant only an unending series of rituals and ceremonies, performed in strict accordance with scriptural rules. Many abnoxious rites were practised by the common people and immoral customs, with belief in witchcraft and sorcery, were in vogue. These were partly legacies of *tantric* beliefs and practices which had a strong hold in the country. Religion, as a source of moral purity and spiritual force, exercised little influence over a large section of the common people. In fact, religion had become the handmaid of voice and folly.

The British rule in India introduced English education and western culture. English education opened the floodgates of the western ideas which almost overwhelmed the Indians at the beginning of the nineteenth century. It brought in a spirit of rationalism which seeks to inquire and argue before accepting any thing. It made the Indian mind revolt against the tyranny of dogmas and traditional authorities, beliefs and customs. The impact of western culture and English education affected many aspects of Indian life and society, and the *Brahma Samaj* was its early outcome. Its founder Raja Ram Mohan Ray challenged the current religious beliefs and social practices of the Hindus as not being in consonance with their own scriptures. He openly protested against the blind acceptance of whatever passed current on the authority of priesthood or its interpretation of scriptures. He set in motion that liberalism in thought and action which has enabled Indians to shake off the fetters of ages. His *Brahma Samaj* effectively helped the progress of the Hindu society and religion by holding a living example of society, based on progressive and liberal views, and religion based, on rationalistic principles. Two main planks of the *Samaj* were theistic worship and social reform—such as abandonment of caste-system, introduction of widow remarriage, encouragement of female education, and the abolition of *Purdah* and child-marriage.

Like *Brahma Samaj* in Bengal, *Prarthana Samaj* was established in Bombay and it had its branches in Bombay and Madras Presidencies. The *Prarthana Samaj* did not regard the *Vedas* as divine or infallible,

nor believe in the doctrine of transmigration and incarnation of God. It drew its nourishment from the Hindu scriptures and used the hymns of the old Maratha poet-saints in the prayers.

But more important than the *Brahma Samaj* and the *Prarthana Samaj* was the *Arya Samaj*, socio-religious movement of the second half of the nineteenth century. It was founded by Dayanand Saraswati. The *Arya Samaj* condemned polytheism and monotheism as preached by Christianity and Islam. If the *Brahma Samaj* appealed to the English educated classes, the *Arya Samaj* appealed to the emotion of the masses. The *Arya Samaj* laid down that the *Vedas* are the books of True Knowledge which every one should study. It tried to inculcate virtue and morality to which no religion can possibly take any exception. It aimed at the reform of religion and society by reviving *Vedic* rituals and institutions, rejecting the hereditary caste-system, and not recognising the authority and superiority of the Brahmins merely on the ground of birth. The *Samaj* denounced the worship of gods and goddesses and preached that only the Supreme Being should be worshipped; it proclaimed the right of every body to study the *Vedas* and Hindu scriptures, it encouraged inter-caste marriage and adopted a brisk programme of education, especially female education.

A new religious movement called neo-Hinduism also came in the lime light in the second half of the nineteenth century. Its common characteristic was the glorification of Hindu religion and society in their current forms and a spirited defence of these against hostile criticism both by Indian reformers and European missionaries. It sought to reconcile ancient Hindu ritualism and medieval Hindu faith with modern science, and it made people feel a new pride in their culture and religion. Pundit Sasadhar Tarka-Chudamani, Krishan Prasanna Sen, and Bankim Chandra Chatterji were great advocates of neo-Hinduism.

Another important religious movement of the last century was the Ramkrishna Math and Mission. Ramkrishna, a priest and saint of Dakshineswar Temple near Calcutta realised divinity in humanity and emphasized the service of mankind as a means to salvation. He expressed the highest wisdom or greatest truth in simple sentences and parables. The theme of all his discourses was the realisation of God as the highest human ideal, attainable only by development of high spiritual life. This was only possible by discarding desire for material prosperity (vishaya-

vasana) and lure for gold and women and turning all thoughts and actions towards God. He believed in the harmony of all religions. He demonstrated by precept and example that all the different religions are true in their essence and may lead to salvation if properly pursued. He said that the different creeds are but different paths to reach the same God. He put on a high pedestal the virtue of toleration and reverence for all religions. The catholicity of view is great contribution of Ramkrishna to the modern world which religion has divided into so many watertight compartments. He said, "In whatsoever form or name you desire to call God, in that very form or name you will see Him." The teaching of Ramkrishna gave the Hindu Revivalism a moral sanction, a philosophical basis, and a new spiritual significance of immense value. Swami Vivekanand, the worthy and noble disciple of Ramkrishna, stressing unflinching faith in Hindu religion, carried the divine message of Ramkrishna far and wide all over the world. He aimed at the elevation of masses by means of education based on religion and for this purpose he established new organisation Ramkrishna Math and Mission the greatest spiritual force and centre of social service in Modern India. Vivekanand and Ramkrishna Mission saved Hinduism from destruction by the reactionary elements. It placed Hinduism on high pedestal and resisted onslaughts of Christianity and Islam.

The religious movements in the nineteenth century led to similar movements in other sects of Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc. Various existing religious sects reacted in the same way to the new spirit of the age. The Madhavas of South India, the Shrivaisnavas of Mysore, the followers of Chaitanya cult in Bengal, the Shaivas, the Lingayats, the Smartas, the Radhaswami Satsang in Uttar Pradesh etc. launched their reformation and revival movements, to preach the principles of their sects and to strengthen and defend their position.

Jainism did not lag behind in this age of religious reform and revival. It also breathed the new spirit of the age. Jainism in the last century was divided and sub-divided into narrow sects. Superstition and dogmas rather than true rational principles of religion dominated them. The holy scriptures of Jainism including *Agamas* were stored in dark dingy cells in temples and Upashrayas, and they were forgotten. The study of holy books was callously neglected. To masses Jainism was an unending series of rituals and ceremonies, a rigid observance of certain beliefs,

practices and fasts. Religious knowledge was based upon blind faith impervious to reason. Religion as a source of ethical values, moral parity and spiritual forces exercised little influence over a large section of Jain community. The Jains were expected to observe non-possession (*aparigraha*) and non-violence (*ahimsa*) in their daily life. They were to follow certain ethical code and moral values, but they set them at naught. Greed of possession and lust of gold were rampant in the Jain society. The Jain temples, which once were resounded with the recitation of prayers to Tirthankaras, songs of devotion and sayings from the holy saints and verses from scriptures, were now in dilapidated conditions, and were neglected. Some of them were in the custody of non-Jains and were used as armoury. Various types of arms were stored in them. There was a general deterioration amongst the Jain *yatis*, monks and they were divided into different narrow sects. The life of a Jain monk was overburdened with the observance of rigid beliefs and practices. They neglected the study of holy books. The institution of Jain *yati* had degenerated considerably. The *yatis* were expected to be pious in life, observe celibacy, and be custodian of Jain scriptures. They were to be earnestly devoted to the cause of preaching and propagation of the principles of Jainism. But in the last century, the *yatis* were callously indifferent to the noble ethical code of Jainism. They neglected teaching and preaching. They lived in palatial mansions, surrounded by bond of admirers. They indulged in princely luxurious life and enjoyed all the privileges and pastimes of wealthy persons. The life of *yati* Dharnendrasuri bears testimony to all this. Jainism, therefore, needed reformers and revivalists like other religious sects in the nineteenth century and Providence provided one in Ratna Raj, better known as Rajendrasuri. Reformation of Jainism was one of the main currents of the religious movements of the century.

Ratna Raj was born on the 3rd of December, 1827 at Bharatpur (Rajasthan) in a family of business man named Rishabhadas Parakh. Having religious bent of mind he renounced the worldly life and was initiated as Jain *yati* by Hemvijayaji at Udaipur in 1846 and he was now known as Rajendrasuri. He had studied diligently the Jain scriptures, philosophy, literature, grammar, rhetoric, lexicography, etc. under Pramodsuri and Sagarchandji, the well-known *yatis* of the age and soon he acquired proficiency. Shri Dharnendrasuri *yati* was so much impressed by the profound scholarship of Rajendrasuri that he appointed him his *daftari* and entrusted the task of teaching the groups of *yati* disciples. But soon Rajendrasuri was disgusted with the princely and luxurious life of Dharnendrasuri, it was an utter disregard and

contradiction to the Jain principles of non-possession and non-violence. Consequently Rajendrasuri left Dharnendrasuri in 1864 and this was a turning point in the life of Rajendrasuri.

Now he raised his voice against the corrupt and luxurious life of the *yatis* and condemned their abundance of possession and insisted on a pious ideal life in accordance with the principles laid down by Jain Tirthankaras and Jain holy scriptures. After prolonged deliberations, he issued nine-point manifestos for the purpose and explained to the Jain world the significance of his nine principles of reform that the *yatis* had to follow. It was a vigorous attempt to reform the institution of *yati* and place it on sound, simple and rational principles and get rid of its age old traditions and superstitions. Though opposed in the initial stages, the attempts of Rajendrasuri were ultimately crowned with success. His nine-point manifesto was accepted and recognised by the leading *yatis* of the age and even Shri Dharnendrasuri also signed it. As a result of this the *yatis* had given up their worldly life and surrendered their princely symbols like silver rods, *chanwar*, *palkhi*, arms, etc. to the Jain temples, and took solemn oath to lead a life of purity, simplicity, celibacy, non-possession, non-violence, teaching and preaching. Thus Rajendrasuri reformed and simplified the *yati* institution, *tin thui* sect of Jainism, and a new life of revivalism was infused in them.

Rajendrasuri did not end at the reformation of the *yati* institution, it was his first task of revival movement. His other achievements were restoration and reconstruction of Jain temples and installation of Jain images and establishment of different socio-religious organisations for the uplift of the Jains and propagation of Jainism. Like a pious, true, diligent monk, devoted to the cause of Jainism, he walked from place to place in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Malwa, etc. teaching, preaching and infusing new spirit of the age among the people. He appealed to the masses by delivering his discourses in simple dialects of the people, the common spoken languages of the masses—Malwi, Gujarati, Marwari, etc. He inspired the Jain monks to study profoundly the Jain scriptures. He himself devoted to the deep study of Jain works. He was bitterly opposed to the storage of Jain works in isolated places; he eagerly desired to bring them to light for the propagation of Jainism. He himself wrote collected and edited certain important Jain works. He compiled the famous Jain encyclopaedia—*Abhidan-Rajendra*. It is a monumental work in seven volumes. This work itself places Rajendrasuri on a high pedestal of Jain scholars and pioneers of religious movements of the nineteenth century. □