

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

HISTORY

B.A. – I

PAPER – II

The Reformation

Unit – 3

Topic: - The Causes of Reformation

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The Causes of Reformation

Several factors were responsible for the renaissance. But we have to proceed very methodically. We have to search for the core causes first and then look into the subsidiary causes. As stated earlier, the Renaissance can be traced to the mid 14th century northern and central Italian cities, when some scholars and writers dared to challenge the Scholastic system of learning dominated by the Church. They found humanist, rationalist and secular thinking in the writing of ancient Greek and Roman scholars and philosophers, that opened the gates of the treasure-house of knowledge to them. So the questioning of Scholasticism and Church authority in the domain of thought continued. But the two momentous happenings in the mid-15th century provided tremendous momentum to the Renaissance, namely, the FALL of CONSTANTINOPLE in 1453 and the INVENTION of PRINTING in 1454 and these two factors were the core causes of the Renaissance.

Fall of Constantinople and Exodus to Italian Cities:

The Turks invaded the Byzantine Empire and annexed its capital city, Constantinople, in Constantinople was an important centre of trade and commerce, the seat of the Greek Orthodox church and a famous intellectual and cultural meeting-point. Because of its geographical situation, it turned out to be the ideal confluence of Greek and Arab cultures. The peace-loving and prosperous citizens of the city got scared by Turkish aggression and annexation. They rightly feared that the Turkish invaders would wipe out their highly esteemed Greek culture and impose the Islamic culture upon them. They fled in large numbers to various parts of Europe, but the majority of them went to the Italian cities. Among the migrants, there was a good number of scholars, clergymen and merchants. For scholars, these cities offered good institutions for study and research, for clergymen the attraction of Rome was irresistible, and for merchants there could not be a better place for trade and commerce than the Italian cities. Thus, Florence, Rome, Venice, Milan, Genoa and Padua saw large volume of Byzantine influx. The remarkable point is that they brought with them the priceless treasure of Byzantine scholarship which bore the stamp of wisdom of the ancient Greek

philosophers and writers. This prepared the ground for a confrontation between two systems of philosophy and knowledge, the traditional Latin Scholastic system and the Greek Byzantine system. Thus it proved to be one of the core causes of the Renaissance.

Invention of Printing :

Within a year of the fall of Constantinople, another, immensely remarkable happening of world history was recorded - the invention of printing machine by Johannes Guttenburg at Mainz (Germany) in 1454. This has been called the first Information Revolution in history. Before the coming of printing, knowledge was confined to a very small section of the society. Manuscripts or the hand-written books were very few in number, because calligraphers (those who copied the original works by handwriting) were few in number. Even the number of copies for the most popular work could not be more than 1000. With the coming of printing machine thousands of copies of famous works began to be printed within weeks. This meant that knowledge spread fast and its horizon was widening with every passing year. This became another core cause of the Renaissance because the humanist, rationalist and secular ideas got a means for being carried to every nook and corner of Europe.

As soon as printing machines were installed and began to bring out books in large numbers, demand for great works in print grew rapidly. Within a generation printing presses were set up in Italy, France, England, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark. Before the end of the century Portugal and Sweden and even Montenegro, the Balkan outpost, possessed it. By 1500, almost all the cities of Europe possessed printing press. How fast and wide knowledge was spreading can be known from the fact that in 1460 Venice possessed only 10 printing presses, but the number swelled to 200 in 1500.

This very much helped the spread of the message of the New Learning. Printed books were available in plenty. For example, the Bible was printed 20 times by 1500. The Greek and Latin classics were printed too in good number. The writings of the Renaissance scholars, ERASMUS's New Testament (both Latin and Greek editions), were sold in thousands in various parts of Europe. As he enjoyed reputation

throughout Europe, any of his works was known from one end of the continent to the other as soon as it was printed and published. And we must note he was the brightest star of the Renaissance.

The invention of printing helped the spread of the Renaissance in three ways. Firstly, it provided the general readers with a large quantum of printed materials in place of the limited number of manuscripts which had remained inaccessible to most of the readers so far. Secondly, these printed books, tracts and pamphlets were sent to the other parts of Europe. A well-organised European book-trade grew up in the 16th century which particularly benefited western Europe. This helped the spread of new and challenging ideas. Lastly, it developed a spirit of free thought and discussion and promoted an attitude of freeing oneself from the traditional bondage imposed by the Church, State and Society. This was an essential aspect of the Renaissance.

Confrontation of Latin and Byzantine Scholars:

The gradual arrival of the scholars, clergymen and merchants from the Byzantine Empire coincided with the invention of printing and the fast spread of knowledge. As a result, a sizeable section of the educated people began to doubt and question the traditional Latin Scholastic system of learning, controlled by the Church. They found that in spite of many qualities, Scholasticism was narrow and limited in scope, and it hardly offered any scope for free thinking. They argued that the Scholastic men believed in the ways and means directed by St Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas as the supreme and universal one. They did not consider anything beyond this as worth knowing. Thus, the association of Italian scholars and educated men with the Byzantine scholars and clergy was not a pleasant one in the beginning. Both groups claimed self-superiority. But as time passed, the Italians began to understand the great value of the Byzantine scholarship, based on the humanist, rationalist and secular thinking of ancient Greek philosophers and writers. The intellectual interaction between the Italian and Byzantine scholars led to the process of assimilation and dissemination of knowledge. This became a potential cause of the Renaissance.

Search for Manuscripts:

Directly related to preceding factor was the enthusiastic and unending search for manuscripts. The inquisitive scholars, the curious bishops and priests began this search in the libraries and repositories of various churches in Europe, especially those of Italy. This process of searching classical Latin manuscripts, which were gathering dust and left almost in ruinous state in unknown corners of the churches, proved stimulant to the cause of the Renaissance. Some of these manuscripts conveyed humanist ideas and revealed a rationalist approach to life. More surprisingly, some of these manuscripts presented anti-Scholastic viewpoints. The manuscripts showed that even in the medieval period when Scholasticism a liberal humanist stream of thought had also been present. This revelation was immensely significant. It influenced the scholars and theologians during the Renaissance period who became more objective, free and analytical in their study and discussion of religion, church and society. This New Awakening began to create an atmosphere in which the Renaissance ideas and ideals found a happy ground for germination.

Role of Universities :

One interesting factor of the Renaissance was the existence and growing influence of a number of universities in Europe. Though the Renaissance virtually implied a struggle against the Scholastic tradition, but, interestingly enough, one of the pillars of this tradition, the universities, helped to strengthen the forces of the Renaissance. Right in the medieval period, some universities were set up in Europe. Notable among these were the Universities of BOLOGNE, PADUA, PARIS, OXFORD and CAMBRIDGE. They were not only academic centres, but also places where scholars and theologians gathered and exchanged ideas. The Scholastic traditions might have had its limitations, but it facilitated the visits and lecture tours of eminent scholars at different universities. This tradition of lecture tours continued in the late 15th and early 16th century. This very much helped the spread of the message of the Renaissance, Famous scholars like Erasmus, Montaigne, Rabelais often went on lecture tours to various universities. Erasmus was the most esteemed and sought-after among

these scholars, Halls were packed with large gathering of teachers, students and intellectuals, who listened to these learned men with rapt attention. The scholars acquainted the listeners with new ideas and changing values. Thus, the universities played a vital role in spreading the messages of the New learning and New Awakening.

Business Oligarchy and Church as Patrons of Art and Culture :

The rise of a mercantile community in the second half of the 15th and the early 16th centuries as a consequence of the tremendous growth of trade and commerce provided impetus to the Renaissance. But how did this 'nouveau riche' or the new rich give impetus to the Renaissance? In fact, the newly rising commercial bourgeoisie possessed great wealth, but they did not possess the social status or social prestige as enjoyed by the members of the aristocracy or royalty or upper clergy. The members of the business community were regarded as 'upstart, money-crazy and lacking in culture and etiquette' by the men of the upper strata. The rich merchants, obviously, went all out to remove this stigma of 'ordinary men' and tried to do something that would raise their status higher and make them extraordinary men. They began to patronise art, literature and culture. They spent lavishly by extending patronage to writers, scholars, painters, sculptor, and architects. The richest business magnet of the time, LORENZO DE MEDICI, the godfather of the famous Medici family and the real king of Florence, generously patronised art and letters. Another illustrious member of the family, CASIMO DE MEDICI, also donated liberally to patronise art and literature. Other leading business families also spent their fortunes on art and culture in order to have a prestigious standing in the society. Another remarkable point to note is that during the High Renaissance, the centre of artistic activities shifted from Florence to Rome and Venice. Wealthy merchants lived in Rome and Venice and so the artists found greater opportunities in these cities.

Interestingly enough, the Church under the Popes, LEO X, SIXTUS IV, JULIUS II and ALEXANDER VI, extended patronage to artists, sculptors and architects in a big way. As it often happens in history, the places of religion often take to grandeur and decoration to become popular. The amazing wealth of the Church was spent lavishly,

in competition with the business barons, to build attractive church buildings, beautiful cathedrals and chapels, and to decorate them with exquisite pieces of paintings and sculptures. The Popes were so much generous in their patronage that most of the leading artists of the day worked in the Vatican at one time or other to turn it into a wonderful place of art and artists. All these caused an artistic and cultural resurgence, which was an essential part of the Renaissance.

The Impact of Geographical Discoveries:

The Renaissance and geographical discoveries went hand in hand and thus proved complimentary to each other. Both signified a struggle against medieval system. The Renaissance against the medieval Scholastic system of knowledge, and the geographical discoveries against the narrow, feudalistic, commercial system of the medieval period. Again, both believed in search and exploration. Geographical discoveries searched universe by discovering new trade routes. This influenced the Renaissance, which searched for man and universe. While geographical discoveries found the New World, the Renaissance found the New learning and New Awakening.

Suggested Readings:-

1. Meenakshi Phukan : Rise of Modern West
2. G. Clark : Early Modern Europe
3. Raghubir Dayal : Modern European History
4. Jain and Mathur : World History (1500 – 1950)
5. G.M. Trevelyan : Social History of England
6. Parthsarathi Gupta (ed.) : आधुनिक पश्चिम का उदय
7. लाल बहादुर वर्मा : आधुनिक यूरोप का इतिहास
