

Magadh Mahila College

Patna University, Patna

HISTORY

B.A. – I

PAPER – II

The Reformation

Unit – 5

Topic: - Nature of the Reformation

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NATURE

Basically a Religious Reform Movement

The cardinal fact about the European Reformation is that it was fundamentally a religious reform movement. Its reformist character was reflected in its concern with the degeneration in religious life and negligence of spiritual duties on the part of the clergy, particularly the upper clergy and the ways to remove them. Its reformist character was again reflected in its effort to bring some ecclesiastical changes - the changes in church organisations, so that it could serve the spiritual and religious needs of the people in a better way. It put emphasis on faith, love, purity of thoughts and good deeds rather than on long ceremonies and cumbrous rituals. The Church must not be the sole guardian of man's spiritual and religious life and the individual must be given the freedom to pursue a religious life that would bring him close to God. That is exactly what the followers of Martin Luther thought.

Protestant and Anti-Papal in Character

The Reformation was again a 'protesting' movement. It protested against the irreligious, irregular and outright corrupt practices that had crept into the Church. The Church is basically the holiest of places where the worship of God should be performed with utmost solemnity. But degradation came in the practices of the Church. Solemnity and holiness gave way to urge for worldly possessions and luxurious living. The Christendom turned into a domain of the Pope and he ruled it like an emperor. The sanctity of the Papal office greatly eroded. Through protest the Reformation indicated its determination to change the system. So, it is also called the PROTESTANT REFORMATION.

The Reformation affected all classes and sections in the society and so, the people rich or poor, clergy or laity, ruler or subject, merchant or trader, all got involved with it some way or the other, directly or indirectly. Some supported it, while some opposed. Here it is interesting to note that the Reformation differed with 'the Renaissance on this point. The Renaissance was an urban elitist movement, being confined only to towns and cities, and that too among the small educated and intellectual section of the society. Of course, It also derived support

from some of the wealthy merchants in cities. So, the Renaissance had its limitation so far as the support-base is concerned. But the Reformation was widespread among the ordinary folks too - both in urban and rural areas.

Continuance of the Renaissance

The chief source of inspiration for the Reformation was the Renaissance. The humanist and rationalist trends generated by the Renaissance motivated the Reformation. The Renaissance rediscovered the knowledge and wisdom of the ancient Greek scholars and philosophers, inculcated the spirit of enquiry in understanding the laws of the universe and nature, opened the way for rationality and humanism, put men on the path of freedom and ascendancy and above all questioned the religious beliefs and superstitions cultivated by the Church. It was the Renaissance scholars who inspired the people to read the Bible in original and derive inspiration from the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. Erasmus's book on the New Testament, written in simple Latin prose, proved to be a path-finder for Martin Luther. The latter was so inspired by Erasmus' work, particularly his humanist and rationalist approach, that he translated it into German to spread the message of Jesus among the large German populace. We must add that it was during the Renaissance that printing was invented and a large number of printing presses came into existence. The large scale printing of the Bible and the works of the Renaissance scholars motivated independent thinking among the people. They began to question the religious practices and orthodoxy of the time.

Moreover, the Reformation came at a time when people, inspired by the Renaissance, were struggling to replace the old values and institutions with new ones. People, depressed by the prevalent situation in the Church, were searching for spiritual peace and salvation. This peace would come to them not through difficult rituals, rigid sacraments and long ceremonies, but through simple presentation of the high ideals and strong moral force of Christianity. So, Luther's emphasis on faith appealed deeply to the people.

The above-mentioned facts lead us to believe that in several respects the Reformation was a continuation of the Renaissance. Even if some historians raise objection to this interpretation on the ground that the Renaissance was a secular and intellectual awakening, while the Reformation was a religious reform movement.

But none will have doubts on the fact that for more than one reason the Renaissance prepared the ground of the Reformation.

Democratic and Nationalist Trends

The Reformation, during its fairly long course, demonstrated democratic and nationalist trends. This is indeed a remarkable feature, so much so as to be unbelievable. In modern European history, the nineteenth century is supposed to have brought forth the ideas and institutions of democracy and nationalism. To be more precise, they are traced to the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century. How did the Reformation foster these trends? The very basis of the Protestant Reformation was democratic. It regarded the 'papal system as authoritarian, in which the Pope was the supreme authority, and the cardinals and bishops too enjoyed overwhelming power and privilege in their own national churches. The Protestants introduced the system of CONGREGATION, by which all positions in the Church were filled through election. This was in contrast to the system of nomination that persisted in the Catholic Church. As regards the nationalist trend, it was very much boosted by the Reformation. The kings and ruling authorities of several nation-states disliked the papal authority which created various problems for them (to be discussed later). The Reformation provided them an opportunity to fight against the papal excesses and to free themselves from the papal authority. This, in turn, instilled among the subjects of those nation-states a sense of nationality, the feeling of belonging to a particular national entity marked by one language, one culture and one religion. In other words, a king's acceptance of Protestant faith meant freedom from papal control" a free national church and a nation freed from the control of formidable Catholic powers.

On the basis of the above discussion on the nature of the Reformation, we come to a very interesting truth. The Reformation was a movement in the real sense of the term. The Renaissance, on the other hand, was not a movement. It was just an intellectual awakening - a state of mind, born out of peculiar forces and factors that inspired us to think anew and search for truth with a rationalist and humanist attitude. The Reformation was a full-fledged movement, with a large number of followers, a set of principles and objectives a leadership and above all possessed of the zeal to struggle for attaining those objectives.

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
