

The British Period (1800 AD– 1947AD)

Philosophy and Religion

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British Period Highlights

Period Highlights:

- Philosophical discourse and the spiritual bent got replaced by religious defensiveness
- Myriads of caste communities formed to claim small economic privileges
- Sectarian rivalries erupted, fomented by the British and feudal administrations
- Two types of thinkers emerged during this period – social and religious reformers; and active leaders in the Freedom Movement

Defensiveness in Religious Discourse

- Before British came to India the religious strife was not very common
- The religious bent was confined to observance of ritualistic practices
- Massive food export from India created hunger and poverty leading the masses to seek refuge in religion
- Sectarian conflicts can mostly be attributed to a mix of economic, strategic and re-interpretation of religious texts
- British rulers and other feudal lords aided and abetted communal and caste based discord by a strategic selection of entities to support
- Religious sects and middlemen also acted in a way to gain economic and political influence by supporting the feudal masters

Decline of Spiritual Bent in Philosophical Discourse

- Philosophical discourse got limited to an apologetic attitude towards theological practices
- Many new thinkers during this period were influenced by the Western thoughts and Christian ideology in their interpretation of the Indian philosophical literature
- Freedom movement got engineered with the support of the new thinking motivated through Indian spirituality
- Indian society as a whole showed resilience in face of adversity and divisions.

Different Sects in British India

- Multitude of sects during the colonial rule had local influence and gave the British an environment in inciting strife
- The main Hindu sects were still *Shākta*, *Vaishnava* and *Shaiva*
- There were several sub-sects that had some differences in rituals and had localized areas of influence
- For example, *Shāktas* had large following in Bengal, among the royals in Rajasthan and Maharashtra whereas *Shaivism* more pronounced in Karnataka and parts of central India
- Among the Muslims, the main sects were Shiites and Sunnis with Shias being influential in pockets of Awadh, Hyderabad, Baluchistan and Bengal while Sunnis were spread all over the Indian subcontinent

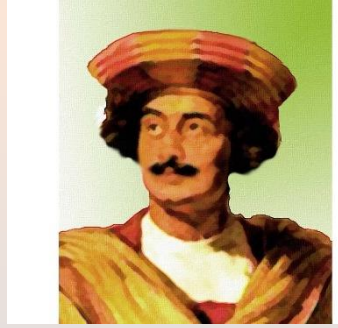
Religious Strife during British Rule

- The British had no resources or desire to use their own armies to control India
- One way to accomplish this was to recruit native forces and teach them western military discipline
- Other method was to incite communal strife to keep local populace engaged
- The British used both methods by experimenting with the divide and rule policy on the native military by reorganizing armies in Bengal, Madras and Bombay along ethnic and religious lines
- The failure of *Khilafat* movement pushed Hindus and Muslims apart giving rise of two nation theory advocated by the Indian Muslim League
- This also started an era of new leaders who impacted the country through their social and political philosophy

Religious and Social Movements

- Some of the movements that came up during this period were – Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Young Bengal Movement, Ramakrishna Mission, Prarthana Samaj, Aligarh Movement Muhammadan Literary Society, Akali Movement, Satyashodhak Samaj, Parsi Religious Reform Association and Theosophical Society.
- The common theme among many of these movements was to bring a rational interpretation of the scriptures, create emphasis on education and oppose superstitions in social and religious practices within a denomination.
- Some of these movements later on acquired sectarian undertones by criticizing other religions and claiming supremacy of their own denominations

Brahmo Samaj



- Bhrahmo Samaj started in 1828 as a congregational style of worship with readings from *Vedas*, *Upanishads* and singing Hindu religious hymns at Raja Rammohan Roy's house
- Brahmo Samaj believed in one Reality i.e. *Brahman* and universal worship
- After Rammohan Roy's death in 1833, Brahmo Samaj morphed into a progressive outfit that was against Hindu socio-religious practices like *Sati*, caste and religious discrimination, subjugation of women, idolatry, child marriage etc. with Devendranath Tagore as its second leader

Arya Samaj



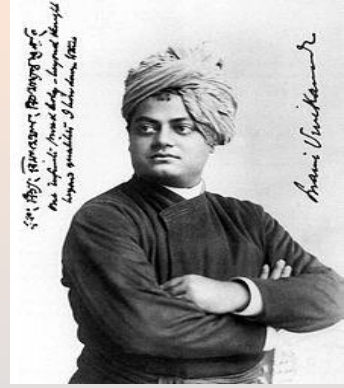
- Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 as a reform movement in Hinduism bringing back the authority of Vedas.
- Arya Samaj believed in one God and rejected idol worship
- It was the first Hindu organization that advocated proselytization into Hinduism
- Dayanand emphasized on female education and started schools based on Vedic system. He translated the Vedas in Hindi
- He published his views on religion and society in *Satyārth Prākash*
- Dayanand studied scriptures from other religions and was very critical of practices in other religions. He thought all religions besides the Vedas were untruthful.

Philosophy of Ramakrishna



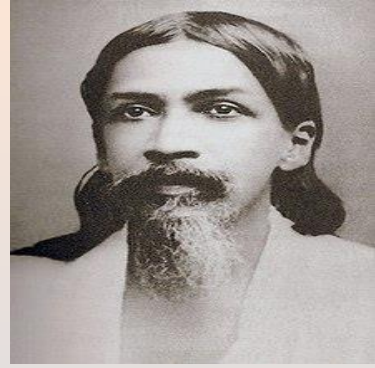
- Ramakrishna Paramhansa started his religious life as a *Shākta*- devotee of Kali and practicing *Tantra*
- After going through several religious transformations through observance of practices in Islam, Christianity and Vaishnavism, Ramakrishna is said to have become an *Advaita Vedāntin*
- Brahman according to him is both personal and impersonal with *Purusha* being observer in its personal aspect and *Prakriti* being the personal
- Like the attribute and the possessor of the attribute, these personal and impersonal aspects of *Brahman* cannot be separated
- His continued worship of mother Goddess was considered to be remnant of his earlier training in *Tantra*

Vivekananda



- Narendranath Datta (Swami Vivekananda) was one of the foremost disciples of Ramakrishna
- Earlier in his life Vivekananda was influenced by Brahmo Samaj but later on, in the face of grave difficulties in life, he was attracted to Ramakrishna
- He followed Shankara's *Advaita* philosophy with Ramakrishna's interpretation that reconciled personal and impersonal aspects of *Brahman*
- In many of his teachings and writings there was a strong indication of patriotism that he propagated through his interpretation of Hinduism to the Western world

Aurobindo Ghosh – Revolution to Spirituality



- Aurobindo was a nationalist who joined India's freedom movement when he was very young
- He had spiritual visions during his imprisonment by the British for revolting against their rule
- Aurobindo left politics and moved to Puducheri embracing spirituality
- He enunciated the concept of Integral *Yoga* where a right practice of *Yoga* can bring about an evolution of the human being into attaining divinity
- *Supermind* is an entity that connects phenomenal world and unmanifest *Brahman* and realization of which can lead to the divine state

Dr. Annie Besant and Theosophy



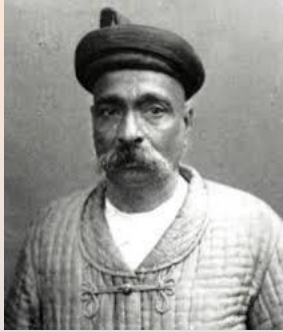
- Annie Besant was a British socialist who later became a theosophist leaving secular ideals under Helena Blavitsky's influence
- Theosophists believe that all human beings are from the same origin - spiritually and physically
- There is a universal principle that is boundless, eternal and omnipotent
- Universe is boundless and is an outward reflection from the Absolute
- There is a fundamental identity of all souls with the universal soul that has an unknown root

Mahatma Gandhi's Philosophy and Non-violence



- Gandhiji developed his socio-religious ideas during his struggle in South Africa
- The main aspects of Gandhian thought are *satya* and *ahimsa*
- Truth is God with moral laws and code of conduct are its basis
- Since all life has one divine origin, violence towards others is violence on one's own self
- While conflict is inevitable, human beings can resolve conflicts without resorting to violence
- Gandhi brought these principles into practice during the freedom struggle

Bal Gangadhar Tilak



- Tilak was a revolutionary and was in favor of an armed revolt against the British occupation of India
- *Vedanta* philosophy influenced his political views as all humans being part of the supreme reality, they should have natural rights of freedom
- Freedom is a divine attribute and is eternal without which there can be no moral and spiritual life
- Western ideas of self-determination influenced his concept of *Swarājya*
- He used *Ganesh utsava* as a medium to encourage nationalism

Jyotiba Phule



- Jyotiba Phule was a social reformer and he worked for emancipation of women and eradication of caste system
- He was of the view that the *Āryan* invaders subjugated the indigenous people of India and gave us the caste system
- He recast *Vedānta* philosophy of *māyā* in context of social relations where illusion of caste and superstition causes *avidyā* about equality of human beings
- Just like in *Buddhism*, ignorance being root cause of suffering, Jyotiba believed that the ignorance created by the social structure led to *dukha*

Subramania Bharathi



- Subramania Bharati or Bharathiyar was Tamil freedom fighter who was also a writer, journalist, poet and a social reformer
- He was conversant with several languages and his writings were revolutionary in nature
- Bharathiyar was influenced by Sister Nivedita and worked towards emancipation of women whom he considered as reflection of Shakti
- He was very passionate about India's natural right to freedom
- His Advaitic bent and his poetry favored non-violent struggle to achieve freedom

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan



- Syed Ahmed Khan was a Muslim reformer and religious author
- He emphasized on education among Muslims of India and opposed religious orthodoxy
- According to Syed Ahmed Islam encouraged scientific inquiry and reason
- He was of the view that if religion is not adaptable with the time, the followers will be left behind
- To propagate science and western education among Muslim youth, he founded Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 which later became Aligarh Muslim University

Kazi Nazrul Islam



- Nazrul Islam was a revolutionary Bengali author and poet who was in the British army before joining the independence movement
- He was against religious fanaticism and advocated respect for women
- He said that Hindus and Muslims are flowers from the same stem, Muslim being its pupil and Hindu being the soul
- Nazrul Islam was of the view that all human kind is one regardless of caste, creed, color or gender
- His writings reflect a craving for a world that takes joy in eternal beauty of formlessness without being bound by communal bent

Christianity During the British Period



- Before the British arrived in India, Christianity was confined to pockets of southern India
- The colonial rule helped in a rapid spread of the religion through the establishment of churches, missionary work, hospitals and English education system
- There was also a large scale conversion that was in part aided by the Christian priests highlighting discriminatory nature of Hindu caste system
- Some found economic and political value in conversion to Christianity

Summary

- In spite of the British excesses and sectarian divide during colonial rule, the Indian society was resilient
- This resiliency was aided by the thought leaders at that time who championed various guiding principles
- The religious and social movements during the period had different views on British rule - from outright rejection to passive to supportive
- Although the British have left, India continues to have religious and caste based divisions that the colonial rulers aided and abetted