

Brahmoism and Enlightenment scene in pre-independence India

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There have been various attempts to answer the question “What is Enlightenment?” The philosophers and historians have tried to answer this question posed many a times. In the present scenario the most appreciated and accepted definition of enlightenment is considered to be that of Immanuel Kant’s.

German philosopher Immanuel Kant says that “enlightenment is a man’s release from self-incurred tutelage.” Here, tutelage is the inability of a man to make use of his “reason”. He mentions that a man is needed to have courage to use his own reason and remain unaffected of any external force. But the problem with Kantian version of use of reason appears problematic to some. He divided the realm of reason into two spheres, i.e., public use of reason and private use of reason. Where he mentions that only public use of reason must be free and boundless so that debates and arguments can take place and that according to him must have been the first step towards the Enlightenment of a society.

The problem with Kantian way is that he focuses on the enlightenment of society or of a man as a social being, hence the enlightenment of the individual self is least considered.

So here I would like to make a point that a blend of reason and religion can provide an ideal setting for enlightenment of a society. To understand enlightenment it is necessary to know that enlightenment is not a movement but a gradual process whose ideals and definitions are subjected to change according to time. But there are some core ideals of enlightenment that remain same disregard of time and space. Reason being the locus of all ideals is to be taken into consideration. Kant experimented to bring together rationalism and religious ideologies on the one hand and individual freedom and political authority on the other.

Because ultimate freedom to reason can lead to a state of chaos, the power to reason must be limited. It must be bounded by the limits of social benefit and humanitarian values. The only ‘reason’ beneficial for the individual and society is the one where liberalism and humanism can

prevail. Reason must be based on “conscience” of an individual and conscience must be favorable for humankind. Moral and ethical framework is needed for the working of a man’s rationale. Reason is important in the making of a modern state. A modern state is formed when a civil society is formed which consists of free but civilized individuals. This civil society becomes a Habermasian public sphere where ‘rational debate’ can be conducted.

Now if we talk about the civil society we can place religion as the major source of rational and moral subjects. These subjects can further create a major organizational aspect of public sphere. Secularity being the other important aspect of a civil society is one of the distinguishing feature of Enlightenment process. In order to create secularity in a society the rationality and freedom are needed.

But during the age of European enlightenment ‘secularism’ in India failed to make a place for itself because Indians were unable to privatize their religion. The only reason being for such failure was diversity of religions in India. Indians being Muslim, Hindus, Buddhists or Sikhs unlike protestant Christians failed to cope up with the idea of secularism as in west. As Max Weber rightly says that there was an important link between Protestantism, Individualism and Secularization.

Hence, there was the need of a new Indian version of secularity and rational religion in the nation during eighteenth century which could bring out social change and a national identity. Eighteenth century India was set on the backdrop of colonialism. And being ruled by western masters it remained in the state of ignorance until the socio-religious reformation under Bengal renaissance took place.

Brahmo samaj was the working force that initiated the idea of a rational religion in the nation. It was founded in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy as the byproduct of Bengal Renaissance. Brahmo Samaj turned out to be a small movement which propagated a deist and universalist kind of religion that was based on the Hindu sources. The movement was basically started as an opposition of the ‘superstitious

customs' of 'ignorant people', who were deceived by the Brahman leaders.

This movement was sort of an intellectual awakening just as the renaissance in Europe in sixteenth century. The only difference was India being a colony unlike Europe. This movement was crucial because it questioned the existing orthodoxies with respect to women, caste system and religion. Brahmo samaj initially was unable to conceptualize the idea of a free India. Although it was influenced by the European enlightenment, its intellectual roots were traced back to the 'Upanishads'.

At the time when Brahmo Samaj was established the nation was under effect of gross superstitions that took hold of the national mind. As a result of which the practices like Sati or throwing of children into the ganga by their mothers and coming suicides under the wheels of the chariot of lord Jagannath became fashionable and were considered as the great acts of virtue. In light of all these social evils Ram Mohan Roy started a massive mission of social reform. The first action he took was to get rid of the society from the act of sati. Due to his efforts lord William Bentinck abolished the act of Sati on 4th December 1829. He even started the concept of pension fund in India in the favor of widows. After this the major step he took in favor of widows was their remarriage. This was the sign of welcoming western thoughts in India.

Brahmo samaj had its own ideals and ethos. Rammohan roy started this reform movement on the enlightenment model of west. He went to Europe in his early age and got his educations from west and was influenced by the western ideals of Christianity and enlightenment. He alongwith other intellectual bourgeoisie Bengalis set up Brahmo samaj.

The main ideal of this organization was to establish a universal religion, which was unaffected from superstition and prejudices. The doctrine of Brahmo samaj, which was outlined by Ram Mohan Roy himself, became a basic ideology for many other socio-religious movements that took place in all over India during 19th and 20th century.

The basic ideals of Brahmo Samaj were located in the realms of religion and liberal humanism in Indian society. It promoted monotheism, i.e, worshipping one universal god. They were against idolatry, and insisted on the formlessness of god. The mission was to establish one such rational religion which was devoid of superstition and irrational practices. Brahmo samaj tried to bring about an egalitarian society in India. Ram Mohan Roy was a supporter of Christian liberal doctrines and possessed knowledge of other various religions of India. Hence his ideal kind of religion

was a blend of all religions which turned out to be one in his concept of "universal religion"

So here I would like to make an observation that the framework of Brahmo samaj initially as constructed by Ram Mohan Roy and his fellow intellectual elite Bengalis, turned out to be India's version of Enlightenment. Modern hindu philosophy that traced back its roots to Upanishads, Bhagwad Geeta and Vedas, was a re-interpretation of scriptures. The contribution of this small movement towards socio-religious enlightenment cannot be neglected. It can be marked as the foremost step towards modernity of colonial India.

'Modern subject' and modern public are produced together, and religion makes an important contribution in shaping the conscience of an individual, civilized conduct and creates a public sphere as well. The religious institution create a modern public sphere on which nation-state could be built.

The process of enlightenment in every human civilization demands the equality, empathy and happiness of fellow human being. And Brahmo Samaj can be seen as a perfect model for an ideal kind of society.

The movement worked under two levels, first for the enlightenment of society, i.e, the Kantian aspect, and secondly for the enlightenment of individual self which Foucault and Baudelaire were concerned about.

So I would like to conclude this paper by trying to explain the idea of relationship between religion and enlightenment for any society by using the model of Brahmo Samaj.

Initially in this paper I discussed about the core ideal of enlightenment being 'reason', and I further elaborated the use and limits of reason that is the humanitarian values. Then I further mentioned how religion works as the locus of social structure, and the ideal kind of religion that humankind was in dire need of.

We already know that enlightenment requires unconstrained use of human reason that can be beneficial for the humankind. This reason must be applied in religion too so that mankind can get rid of cowardice and superstition.

Religion is about a belief system and this belief system is based on philosophical grounds, but the dominant forces of a social structure, for example, Brahman varna in India, kept the people ignorant of the correct interpretation of those philosophies. As Kant mentioned in his essay 'What is enlightenment?' that it is more convenient when an external force does the task of interpreting and preaching for an individual.

Brahmo samaj can serve as an example, Roy despite of belonging to a typical orthodox family "dared to know" the hypocrisy of Hindu culture, and re-interpreted the

Upanishads, moreover he publicized this new interpretation which was revolutionary and more humanistic approach to the masses.

Hence we can see that it is possible to interpret the ancient religion and modernize it in favor of humankind. Thus the enlightenment of society, or 'man as citizen' is possible through a rational religion, which is universal in nature and rational essence. A social aura like Brahmo samaj is ideal for creating of a habermasian public sphere, where rational debate can take place, and as kant says for enlightenment it is necessary to debate and argue in a public sphere where reason is free.

Other aspect I would like to discuss is the enlightenment of 'man as man' or the aesthetic self of an individual. Mendelssohn stated that enlightenment of man as citizen and man as man can collide and result in unhappiness and may threaten the fabric of society.

But here within the framework of Brahmo samaj, we find that an individual can enlighten his aesthetic self. Brahmo samaj idealized the religion in terms of universal god that is formless. It emphasized on the concept of 'god in conscience', hence conscience being the major concern for the individual self. The conscience of a man must be purely rational and must be free from prejudices. Here I am trying to paint the picture of an ideal kind of society irrespective of caste, creed, race, religion, where only humanity is the only belief and religion can be used for the upheaval of social system rather than exploitation of fellow beings in the name of superstition and evil practices.

The conscience of an individual can be purified through the ideal brahmoism, and the belief in the cosmic god. When this conscious is purified, moral corruption will be ultimately abolished.

Hence we can place Brahmo samaj as one of the crucial movement in the history of India. It brought India into consideration with west and helped in the nation-building process. It can be marked as the event of bringing up of European idea of enlightenment in India.

The Brahmo Samaj developed after Ram Mohan Roy's death, and became a huge organization not only in Bengal but several other parts of country. It was similar to European Renaissance, where the Graeco-Roman learning was revived in order to re-establish humanity. Similarly, Bengal renaissance revived the ancient Hindu philosophy of Vedic school. It also inspired the Muslim Society to start a freedom of Intellect movement whose purpose was to challenge religious and social dogmas in Bengali Muslim Society. Brahmo Samaj not only contributed in promoting an ideal

kind of religion for all but also science, art, music and literature too. It promoted western education to enlighten people.

Enlightenment in west insisted on the fact that God is knowable through Reason and Nature both and not by some superstitious divine revelation. It blurred the lines between religion and science. The purpose of enlightenment thinkers was to reject Blind faith. Individualism was another important theme of this philosophical movement. Equality and Human dignity was the central issue. The enlightenment thinkers in west and in Brahmo Samaj in India too were usually the members belonging to upper-class who were sympathetic towards the lower-classes and they supported their rights.

Brahmo samaj and even the whole movement of Bengal Renaissance can be fitted into the western model of enlightenment purpose. They turned the written philosophy of enlightenment thinkers and Philosophers into action. It started as a religious reform developed into a social movement and furthered into a national movement.

My purpose is to make an observation that the contemporary society needs a revival of such movements like Brahmo samaj. The model of samaj worked successfully in a colonial India so why not now in the present times can it be taken into force when the nation has attained independence? I would like to paint the picture on a larger canvas, and talk on a universal level, the contemporary society is infected with degraded humankind, terrorism, discrimination in all levels of society, alienation of man in modern world all of it has led to the decline in morality and ethical conscious of man as an individual irrespective of national and cultural boundaries. Human beings are still not 'living in an ENLIGHTENED society' as Kant mentioned with respect to sixteenth Century European society.

Enlightenment is a necessary process for human civilization and it must be re-invented, re-formed, re-started as it used to be in some centuries ago. The Hindu concept of "Vasudev Kutumbakam" that means world is my family, is what that's needed to be popularized as the part of Enlightenment process. The ideals Which Brahmo Samaj constructed, if revived, in the contemporary world scenario will lead the enlightenment of man's aesthetic self, and when an individual is enlightened spiritually, morally and rationally, it will ultimately lead to the formation of a society that is enlightened, socially, politically and religiously. Thus, we can get an enlightened nation and further an enlightened world. The idea may sound platonic but is not impossible to achieve, maybe it's a long run but that is only purpose of

Human existence because “why do I exist?” is still a dilemma of every individual being.

Therefore it I concluded that a rational religion where the concept of one universal formless god prevails, can lead to the enlightenment of individual aesthetic self and society as well.

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