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THE RENAISSANCE, THE REFORMATION AND THE BRITISH RĀJ IN GUJARĀT: SOME POSITIVE AS WELL AS THE NEGATIVE FINDINGS: A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the Renaissance and the Reformation along with the British Rāj in Gujarāt influenced the society of Gujarāt. It attempts as well to examine the positive as well as the negative findings of the British Rāj and its impact as outcome on the people of Gujarāt in various ways through culture, traditions and superstitions. Gujarāt not only reaped the benefits from the stay of the British in Gujarāt but also suffered miseries and mishaps. The complete stay of the British towards the end of the 19th century in Gujarāt allowed the people of Gujarāt to witness many shocking and heart-rending conditions. New challenges and promises, dilemmas and diversities, hopes and aspirations turned Gujarāt into a burning cauldron for power struggle and robbery bringing the lives of the Gujarātīs at low ebb with the inferior status of the women. In order to face and fight out such destructive forces, the society has to, through education, find out its own way. The British insistence on English education really uplifted the lives of people, uprooting many of their superstitions and striving to get reformed. However, the purpose of the British behind imparting education in English medium was not to promote education but to produce more clerks, who would work as a class of interpreters between the British and the Gujarātīs, a class of persons Gujarātī in blood and colour but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect. The Renaissance and the Reformation in Gujarāt turned the entire scenario of Gujarāt not only socially but literarily as well allowing Gujarāt to take rebirth as afresh by the attempts of reformist writers like Dalpatrām, Vīr Narmad, Navalrām Pandya, Kavi Nānālāl Dalpatram, Govardhanrām Tripāthi, K. M. Munshi and many others.

Key Words: Renaissance, Reformation, rāj, Gujarāt, British, education, society

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This article examines how the Renaissance and the Reformation along with the British Rāj in Gujarāt influenced the society of Gujarāt. It attempts as well to examine the positive as well as the negative findings of the British Rāj and its impact as outcome on the people of Gujarāt in various ways through culture, traditions and superstitions. Gujarāt not only reaped the benefits from the stay of the British in Gujarāt but also suffered miseries

and mishaps. By the end of the 19th century, towards the complete establishment of the British authority in India, people faced very “shocking, and to an extent, heart-rending” conditions (Broker 1977: 1). The same scenario spread all over India including Gujarāt, of course slowly and gradually but surely. Ignorant people with less education and feudal outlook not only invited the life of drudgery but also lived it practically. The society of Gujarāt

was identifiably “full of challenges and promises, dilemmas and diversities, hopes and aspirations” (George 1992: 122). The social life was at its low ebb with the inferior status of the women. During this time, Gujarāt turned to be a burning cauldron for power struggle and robbery. It was never easy to stir out of the house after the night befell. An I. C. S. officer, Mr. Vināyak Nandshankar Mehtā notes that the atmosphere had “ghosts and goblins everywhere” and most of the people lived under the spell of superstitions (Cited by Broker 1977: 2). Thus, it won’t be wrong to mention that the 19th century Gujarātī society suffered from the “wretchedness, disorder and misery” (Munshi 1935: 207).

The entry of the British in India has very seriously and severely influenced many states of India with Gujarāt having no exception to it. In order to spread their roots on the soil of Gujarāt, the first trade centre of the East India Company by the British was opened in Surat in A. D. 1618. Later on, the British, reaping benefits out of the internal turmoil among the Gujarātīs, were successful to get the complete hold of Surat, a city on the banks of the Tāpi, in 1759 and Bharuch (Broach), a city on the banks of the Narmadā, in 1772. It is believed that ultimately the complete British rule was stabilized in Gujarāt due to the victory of Company at the battle of Kirkee (also known as Khadki) in 1818, however the end of the First World War in 1918 resulted into the birth of India as a complete British India. Being benefitted by their roots in Surat, the British succeeded enough to direct the famous trade and the shipping industry of Surat to their new capital, Bombay. Bombay got richly flourished due to the migrations of the adventurous souls like shippers, bankers, commission agents and merchants from all parts of Gujarāt. Even Bombay was pleased to receive the *diwāns* of Kāthiāvād and Kachha to settle there permanently. Thus, Bombay proved to be the place of amalgamation of Indians as well as the British. In the words of K. M. Munshi, “the West met the East” in Bombay (Munshi 1935: 235).

The arrival and the long stay of the British influenced the politics, habits, manners, culture, languages, region, religion, society and above all, the literary activities in Gujarāt. This stay benefitted Gujarāt as the Marāthā rule, the Mughal rule and

the Muslim rule were full of chaos, tyranny, miseries and many mishaps. The presence of the British in Gujarāt created an atmosphere of liberty and stability missing during the earlier times. The British continued “to quell disorder, destroy hostile powers, and lay the foundations of the settled government” that was unstable earlier (Munshi 1935: 208). The Muslim *subās* of Delhi Sultanate and the Marāthā *subās* from Pune were all equally strangers to Gujarāt like the British rulers to India. Gujarāt plucked the fruits of some reforms in the educational as well as the social fields that the British government tried to implement successfully. Obviously, this enriched the confidence and the trust of the poor Gujarātīs towards the British and the administration of the British government. Many Gujarātī writers have appreciated the presence of the British in India. Mansukhlāl Jhaveri as one of them in appreciation of the British notes:

Blind faith in conventional beliefs and customs started to be challenged by rationalism and we became intolerant of many of our social evils like ‘kanya-vikray’ (Bride-price), ‘var-vikray’ (Groom-price), physical or mental incompatibility in marriages, child marriages, child widowhood etc. which sapped up the vitality and energy of our nation. On account of our first and happy contact with the Western civilization through the British, a sense of this worldliness also started to dawn up upon us. And the centre of the thought of our idealist young men and dispassionate thinker shifted naturally to the field of social reform.

(Jhaveri 1978: 67- 68)

More than the benefits, Gujarāt received various losses as findings as well due to the mere presence of the British. The religion as a pivotal factor influenced every walk of the social life of the 19th century Gujarāt. The physical control of the Gujarātīs by the British has been of less danger than the psychological one. The British Missionary in India also tried to control the people of Gujarāt spiritually. The moral exploitation of the people resulted into their conversion into Christians as these Missionaries converted many Hindus and thus they

spread Christianity. The Missionaries misinterpreted the Hindu religion which was subjected to hypocrisy, superstitions, heterodoxy and other religious evils. However, the introduction of the English education rendered not only the new thoughts but also an awareness among the Gujarātīs about religion. Thus, the newly educated mass of Gujarāt decided to ascertain the basic ideas of Hinduism from the *Vedās* and *Upanishads* to discover the truth about the religion and bring it forward to the innocent and unknowing people as a cultivated and purified source by establishing the fact that the supreme welfare lies only in the Hindu religion.

Especially in the later part of the 18th century and in the beginning of the 19th century, the education system got deteriorated due to social upheavals and unrest. Perhaps, the common people belonging to the lower caste and labour class did not consider education very significant and therefore it stayed almost stagnant. Further, due to the financial condition and many more reasons, many parents were unable to send their children to schools. Though the people of the upper class possessed the general knowledge of business, ethics, mythology and hygiene, they did not have the knowledge of education. For them, education might not be as significant as the degree and so some of them sent their children to village schools only to get the basic education. Since Gujarāt had very few schools offering elementary education along with the teaching of grammar, the children of the well-to-do families were generally taught at home. Of course, it was easy for the Brahmin children to learn *Vedās* and other rituals at home from someone from their community as the Brahmins used to play the significant roles socially and traditionally. Even these Brahmins were not interested in receiving knowledge but interested to learn only that which would be enough to run their business of Brahmin hood to earn their bread and butter.

Interestingly, it can be observed that though the Gujarātī poetry of those days was rich with linguistic features, it was never taught at schools. Thus, the primary education was limited to learning of a few moral stories, accounting and simple methods of book keeping. On the limited

scope of education in Gujarāt, Mansukhlāl M. Jhaveri comments:

The system of education which this society supplanted was of a primitive kind where students were taught the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic. The children learnt the letters of the alphabet and numerical figures by drawing them on sand strewn on the floor or on a small oblong piece of board... Reading books in the sense of modern class books did not exist . . . Spelling and reading were not much cultivated and subjects such as History and Geography were never thought of. (Jhaveri 1978: 3)

True that though the British initiated the process of educating the Indians through the English schools, Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) and Sir Malcolm (1769-1833) advocated imparting education to Indians, especially to Gujarātīs, through their mother tongue only. But Sir Arskin Peary, the newly appointed British chairperson of "Board of Education" in 1834, decided to educate the Gujarātīs through the English medium only. The British purpose behind imparting education in English medium was not to promote education but to produce more clerks, who would work as a class of interpreters between the British and the Gujarātīs, a class of persons Gujarātī in blood and colour but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect. Ramesh Shukla observes that the decision taken by the British to impart English education to the Indians "was not completely propitious and selfless" (Shukla 2005: 15). Gujarāt reaped benefits out of this English way of receiving education as it brought about a new vision among the natives. This modern education, new ways of life and thought stirred the stagnant water of the Gujarātī society. The new epoch of social reformation was heralded. The students of "The Elphinstone Institution of Bombay" established in 1827 by Mountstuart Elphinstone pioneered the progressive movement in the country. The students of this institution established *Gujarātī Jñāna Prasāra Mandali* and started a monthly magazine *Ganeana Parasāraka*, the Disseminator of Knowledge in 1849. Under the presidency of Ranchhodbhāi, another association

known as *Buddhivardhaka Sabhā* was established by another group of students in 1851 with the members like Dave Durgārām Manchhārām, chiefly known as Mahetāji Durgārām Manchhārām (1809-1876), Mahipatrām Ruprām (?), Karsondās Mulaji (1832-1871) and others.

The entry and the long stay of the British also affected the literary activities in Gujarāt. One must focus on the literary history along with the literary works of the creative writers of Gujarāt in order to examine the total impact of the Renaissance and the Reformation on not only Gujarāt and its society but also on the literary activities. Needless to say that the British presence in Gujarāt has influenced even the activity of translation from English into Gujarātī and vice versa. The history of the Gujarātī literature owes to the British presence in India, especially in Gujarāt, for beginning the *The Arvāchin Yuga* (The Modern Age) very early in 1818 registering the modern writers cum the enthusiastic reformists like Dalpatrām (1820-1898), Vīr Narmad (1833-1886), Navalrām Pandyā (1836-1888), Kavi Nhānālāl Dalpatram (1877-1946), Govardhanrām Tripāthi (1855-1907), K.M. Munshi (1887-1971) and many others. Thus, it can be concluded that the Renaissance in Gujarāt turned the entire scenario of Gujarāt not only socially but literarily as well allowing Gujarāt to take rebirth as afresh. This Renaissance has also helped Gujarāt along with the whole of India at the larger pocket to prepare the background for the coming freedom struggle awaiting for the Mahātmā Gāndhi to be born.

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