

# M. G. RANADE: A PHILOSOPHER OF SOCIAL REFORM MOVEMENT IN WESTERN INDIA

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## *Abstract*

*Indian society of the Eighteenth century was beset with so many social evils that had crept into the society as part of the socio-religious practices. In a traditional society like India where customs and socio-religious sanctions were dominant, social evils became deep-rooted. The English education and the western liberal ideals transformed many Indians who had access to the same. Mahadev Govind Ranade, a social reformer of Nineteenth century Western India, inspired by the new scientific outlook became aware of the pitfalls of the society in which he lived. Through his thoughts, writings and interactions, he inspired the generation of his times to bring about changes in the socio-cultural outlook of his contemporaries. It was M.G. Ranade who worked as agent of transformation in the society giving a strong philosophical basis for the socio-religious reform movement. This paper is an attempt to bring to light the ideological basis he provided for socio religious reform movement of the time.*

**Key Words:** *Reform, Western Scientific Education, Change and Continuity, Social evils*

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Western liberal education which was a byproduct of British colonialism and accumulation of power in India during the Eighteenth century and after, made drastic changes in the outlook of the young Indian minds. Through western liberal education, the Indian students became acquainted with English language and Western liberal ideas. This gradually led to the intellectual development of the youngsters who had the luck of undergoing such a process. It had its impact on the Indian society during the Nineteenth Century, which witnessed a remarkable outburst of intellectual activities and consequently a radical transformation in her social, religious and cultural ideals. This process was called Indian Reform Movement or Indian Renaissance in a very broad sense.

The traditional Indian society was beset with many social evils which had crept into Indian society as a result of various social, cultural and political forces. A few learned men, realizing this degrading state of affairs, and inspired by the western influences like western scientific education, humanism and other liberal ideals, came forward either individually or collectively with a view to reforming the society as well as religion of the time. The movements that emerged consequent to this development followed more or less three well-defined courses namely, reform, revival and a via media.

One of the main areas which was affected by the western influence was Western India including Bombay, Poona etc. Western India gave birth to several social reformers. Among them one of the most important reformers was Mahadev Govind Ranade, born in the Nasik District of Maharashtra on 18 January 1842. He, a profound thinker and reformer, represented in the fullest measure the men emerging from the newly started universities with an eagerness to transform religious, cultural, social and political aspects of Western India, when it was passing through a social and cultural flux.

Ranade was one of the greatest philosophers of the time who contributed much to the field of social thought. His contemporaries like Gokhale had admitted that he was a profound thinker who based his views on wide reading, observation, mature reflections and convictions<sup>2</sup>. The formation of ideological foundation is inevitable for the success of any movement. Ranade tried to give an ideological basis for the socio-religious reform movement of the time. Without an ideological base, the success and growth of the movement would be rather difficult.

According to the study of Ranade, the Nineteenth century India was a sick society beset with a set of social evils and the root of Indian trouble was in the possession of the people's mind by a set of wrong ideas.<sup>3</sup> These wrong ideas were, according to him, of recent growth, unknown to the Hinduism in its glorious days. "The early celebration of child marriages, the forcible disfigurement of widows and absolute prohibition of remarriage in the higher castes, the occasional and local practices of polygamy, are all admittedly corruptions of recent growth unknown to the best days of our country's history."<sup>4</sup> He proves with the help of *Grahya Sutras*, *Manu*, *Ithihasas*, *Purana* etc. that child marriage, polygamy, denial of widow remarriage are not proclaimed by the authentic Hindu Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> In course of time selfish men added these vices to the society consciously or unconsciously. "It is the beast in us which blinds us to

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<sup>2</sup> G. K. Gokhale, *Speeches and Writings of Gopal Krishna Gokhale*, Vol II, Delhi, p. 608.

<sup>3</sup> Ramabai, ed., *Miscellaneous Writing of the Late Hon'ble Mr. Justice M. G. Ranade*, Bombay, 1915, p.192.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71,72.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.72.

impurity and vice, and makes them even attractive. There must be nautches in our temples, say our priests, because even gods cannot do without these impure fairies."<sup>6</sup> According to Ranade the contact with social evils is poisonous and it will corrupt men. "The best corrective and antidote to this poison" he says is "a healthy sense of the true dignity of our nature."<sup>7</sup> To reinstate the dignity of human beings, this antidote is to be given.

Man should be educated to apply this medicine properly and this education is imparted to men through social reform. For Ranade, this reform is the work of emancipating the society from the restraints that were wrongfully imposed upon it at various stages of history. It is not an imitation of the foreign models but the restoration of the ancient freedom and dignity in place of subsequent corruption. "...Reform is really the work of liberation, the liberation from the restraints imposed upon an essentially superior religion, law and polity, institution and customs by our surrender to the pressure of mere brute force for self-advancement... Our inclination and aspirations have to be shifted from one quarter to its opposite, from the more immediate past of our degradation to the most remote past of our glory."<sup>8</sup> Thus reform naturally results in social evolution, both of individual and the country. This evolution is a "change from constraint to freedom, from credulity to faith, from status to contract, from authority to reason, from unorganized to organized life, from bigotry to toleration, from blind fatalism to a sense of human dignity."<sup>9</sup> According to him we should not be guided by the letter of the law and scripture but by reason. "Cancel a law by a law more reasonable, at least more amenable to reason, utilize the force of the state sanction as a final support."<sup>10</sup> Thus he taught to give up everything which is not based on reason.

Ranade placed individual and his dignity above religion, caste and other sectarian concepts. He was for the equal dignity of all men. Gopalkrishna Gokhale pointed out "Indeed one of the dearest dreams of his life was to have a common platform in which members of the different communities must stand together for national purposes and regard themselves as Indians first and Hindu, Mohamadean, Parsee, Christian & c. afterwards."<sup>11</sup>

Reform should pervade into all aspects of human life as it is the act of showing the human dignity and individuality. It is through reform that value of human being maintained. His vision of social reform was sweeping as to cover all walks of human life. We cannot compartmentalize the different aspects of human life, instead he is for the integral dignity of human beings. For, unless such a wide sense was brought about no progress in political and economic fields would be possible.<sup>12</sup>

He asserts that reform should be a conscious process. Men should not be guided by others' will on social issues. People should be independent in social affairs without clinging extremely to the authority. When we depend too much to the authorities, individual's interest may not be safeguarded. "With too many of us, a thing is true or false, righteous or sinful, simply because

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.195.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.196.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.208.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

<sup>10</sup> M. G. Ranade, *A Collection Containing the Procedure which Led to the Passing of Act XV of 1856, an Act to Remove All Legal Obstacles to the Marriage of Hindu Widows*, Poona, 1915, p. xviii.

<sup>11</sup> G. K. Gokhale, *op. cit.*, p.597.

<sup>12</sup> D. G. Karve, D.G, *The Prophet of Liberated India*, Poona, 1942, p.19.

somebody in the past had said that it is so... When we abandon ourselves entirely to this helpless dependence on the other's wills, it is no wonder that we become helpless as children in all department of life."<sup>13</sup> He considers the Conscience or Divine command in us as more important than human authority.<sup>14</sup>

The change in this regard should not be merely an outward one in our customs and manners but it should be mainly an inward one. "It is not the outward form but the inward form, the thought and the idea which determines the outward form that had to be changed if real reformation is desired."<sup>15</sup> In addition to that, reform is a process which transforms values and institutions slowly and gradually. As social evils emerged slowly and gradually, social change too is a gradual process. The reform, which was to broaden the sphere of free thought and action of the individual as to enable him to think, to feel and act for himself<sup>16</sup> will take a longer time.

Reform cannot be considered as a total break with the past. If we completely break with the past, we will feel a kind of identity crisis. Because a total break with the past will take away our identity. It is a 'change and continuity' process by which irrelevant and undesirable things are completely discarded or adjusted according to the needs of the time while other things are retained as fundamental and necessary and therefore relevant. "We cannot break with past altogether; with our past we should not break altogether, for it is a rich inheritance and we have no reason to be ashamed of it.....While respecting the past we must ever seek to correct the parasitical growths that have encrusted it and sought the life out of it."<sup>17</sup> There should be a balanced approach.

Reform is different from revival. Revival is return to the old ways and appeal to the old authorities and the old sanctions. Ranade was deadly against the return to the old ways and appeal to the old authorities. For no one knows what is to be revived and which period is old and to be revived. He asks:

"What shall we revive? shall we revive the old habits of our people when the most sacred of our caste indulged in all the abominations as we now understood them of animal food and drink which exhausted every section of our country's Zoology and Botany? The men and Gods of those old days ate and drank forbidden things in excess in a way no revivalist will now venture to recommend. Shall we revive the twelve forms of sons, or eight forms of marriage?... Shall we revive suttee and infanticide customs?"<sup>18</sup>

He holds that revival is impossible and the only sensible way is reform. "Besides it seems to be forgotten that in a living organism as a society is, no revival is possible. The dead and the buried or burnt are dead, buried and burnt once for all, and the dead past cannot therefore be revived except by a reformation of the old materials into new organized beings. If revival is impossible, reformation is the only alternative open to sensible people."<sup>19</sup> The revivalists are not aware of the problems and challenges facing the present age. This reverse looking policy is not fitting for the time. There was a great tension between the orthodox and the liberals. Both

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<sup>13</sup> James Kellock, *Mahadev Govind Ranade: Patriot and Social Servant*, p.94.

<sup>14</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p.194.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

<sup>16</sup> D. G. Karve, *op. cit.*, p.30.

<sup>17</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p.118.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.190-191

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

stood for reforms but the point of difference was in the method and speed of reforms. Tilak was the representative of the former group and Ranade of the latter. According to Ranade, the methods of reform should be different according to space, time and the nature of the evil prevalent in each society.<sup>20</sup> Ranade gives four methods of reforms. a) The Traditional method; it is a method which shows that reforms are not innovations but carrying out of the spirit and even letter of the ancient scriptures, b) Conscience Method: It is an appeal to the sense of right and wrong - listening to the voice of God. c) Legislation Method: It is enforcement of reform through caste organization or the agency of the state d) Rebellion Method: It is the method of dividing from the rest, and forming a new camp.<sup>21</sup> Ranade made use of all the methods except the last, for the socio-cultural upliftment of the society in which he lived.

Reformers were quite aware of the deplorable condition of the Indian society which was beset with many social evils. All of them, whether they are orthodox or liberals, admitted the existence of social evils and the need for reform. The dispute was over the method. One of the main disputes between the two groups was in the application of the third method viz. legislation. Tilak and his group were deadly against a foreign Government legislating on social matters. But Ranade objected to this view very strongly. According to him individual liberty is a great force. But no one's liberty should encroach upon the liberty of those who surround him. When a large section suffers from evil, just as state take sanitation measures, the state has to regulate or minimize them, for "State in its collective capacity represents the power, the wisdom, the mercy and charity of its best citizens."<sup>22</sup> "Wherever there is undeserved misery endowed in a large number of cases, there is a ground for state interference, always supposing that the interference will lead to the redress of the wrong better than any individual effort can accomplish."<sup>23</sup>

For Ranade, foreign rule is something providential, we should not hesitate to receive help from a foreign Government "as it is likely that foreign rule will last over us for an indefinite length of time, we reduce ourselves by accepting this policy to the extreme absurdity of shutting out a very useful help for many centuries to come."<sup>24</sup> In addition to that, legislation through the state does not matter as long as the initiative for reform comes from the leaders of the community.<sup>25</sup>

Yet another point of difference between Tilak and Ranade was the distinction between social and political. For Tilak political freedom is the immediate goal. According to Ranade, there cannot be a dichotomy between political and social reform. Both are two sides of the same coin. "You cannot have a good social system, when you find yourself low in the scale of political right nor can you be fit to exercise political rights and privileges unless your social system is based on reason and justice."<sup>26</sup> For Ranade, even political power was meant for promoting social justice and welfare and Ranade would be the last to sacrifice the end to the

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112f.

<sup>22</sup> M. G. Ranade, *op. cit.*, pp. xii, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

<sup>25</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 80.

<sup>26</sup> Chintamani, C.Y., *Indian Social Reform*, Part. II, pp., 127-128 as referred by James Kellock, *op. cit.*, pp. 91.

means or substance to the shadow.<sup>27</sup> Besides, no national unification would be possible in an unequal society.<sup>28</sup> We should first believe in the brotherhood of man. All human beings are children of God. Here lies the need for the uplift of the depressed classes and women.<sup>29</sup> Being children of God, "it is only God's voice which we are bound to listen."<sup>30</sup>

Ranade believed in Divine Providence in this endeavour. Devotion to the will and guidance of the superior influence of the Supreme Being is the very essence of Ranade's Philosophy.<sup>31</sup> For the fulfilment of the voice of God we should engage in patient and long sustained work by bearing crosses. "We must bear our cross, not because it is sweet to suffer, but because the pain and sufferings are as nothing compared with the greatness of the issue involved."<sup>32</sup> Therefore we should not sit idle believing in fatalism, for fatalism is another form of atheism which is not befitting us.

The reformers have their specific role in this noble task. The work of reformer is to place himself under the discipline of better ideas and forms. "The reformer has to infuse in himself the light and warmth of nature and he can only do it by purifying and improving himself and his surroundings."<sup>33</sup> The reformer should make use of the methods of legislation, executive action, method of strengthening caste organization, appealing to the conscience of men by pledges, method of interpretation, public preaching and popular enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> For this kind of a noble and tedious task an organized effort is a must. Whatever troubles come across the way of the reformer he must bear them, for it is for the attainment of a noble goal. "We have above all to learn what it is to bear and to forbear to bear ridicule, insults and even personal injuries at times and forbear from returning abuse for abuse."<sup>35</sup> Reformers have to overcome all barriers for the execution of this noble venture. Ranade is optimistic also about the result of the action of reformers. "The harvest is ready to the hand of everyone who is prepared to give his honest labour for the day, to earn his rest for the night in life and after life."<sup>36</sup> Ranade wound up his last address to the Social Conference by a sentence of hope. "I... am confident that the time will be hastened when we may be vouchsafed a sight of the Promised Land."<sup>37</sup> He also pointed his attention to the specific issues of the society like education, child marriage, widow re-marriage, the fate of the depressed classes and polygamy.

He identified education as a panacea for the social problems of the time. Therefore, Ranade stood for imparting good and speedy education. He believed that mere physical strength will not lead us to progress instead we should cultivate intellectual and moral talents along with it. He was fully conscious of the vital need to educate the new generation in the spirit as also, the method of the new life of freedom and creativeness which he wanted to see

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<sup>27</sup> D. G. Karve, *op. cit.* p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.,29.

<sup>29</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.* p.124-125

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.194.

<sup>31</sup> D. G. Karve, *op. cit.* p.6.

<sup>32</sup> G. K. Gokhale, *op. cit.* p. 598.

<sup>33</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p.196.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.170.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p.210.

<sup>37</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 247.

realized in India.<sup>38</sup> He was also against the indigenous system of education which imparted only some sectional and unscientific views.

According to him any education that would give a lopsided or narrow view of the heritage of human race was not an education for progress.<sup>39</sup> He was very much in favour of English education, for it had given him the key of entry into a new world of ideas. He wrote on the advantage of English education:

"The English language is to be regarded not as simply an English affair, but rather an affair of all the advanced nations of the West.... European knowledge has advanced to a mature stage... This is the knowledge we ought to seek after... the modern knowledge will remove the cloud that has enveloped this country for thousands of years."<sup>40</sup>

However, he was against heavy dose of learning. He has depicted this idea in his essay "Why Graduates Die Young?"<sup>41</sup> As he was aware of the value of education, when the state withdrew the support for higher education to concentrate more on primary education, Ranade opposed it vehemently on the basis that it would retard the progress of the country. He held that it was the duty of the state to help the middle class and the lower class by extending education to them.<sup>42</sup> He was fully in support of the education of women which was neglected or quite meagre during this period.

Another social evil where Ranade intervened was child marriage. He was totally against the custom of child marriages. He was aware of the dark side of child marriage and wrote against this practice. "It is also not denied that early marriage leads to early consummation and thence to the physical deterioration of the race, that it sits as a heavy weight on our rising generation, enchains their aspiration, denies them the romance and freedom of youth, cools their love of study, checks enterprise, and generally dwarfs their growth, and fills the country with pauperism, bred of overpopulation by weaklings and sickly people and lastly that it leads in many cases to all the horrors of early widowhood."<sup>43</sup> He suggested certain practical measures to raise the age of marriage, a) Local bodies should be empowered to certify the ages of parties, and this certificate should be made compulsory, b) Law should fix 16 - 18 for boys and 10 - for girls as marriageable age. c) Universities should put forward to the students a condition of remaining single during the college or school course, d) Penal Code should be amended to declare that intercourse with a girl under 14 is rape.<sup>44</sup> He raised the issue of child marriage in almost all of his address to the Social Conference he made and drew the attention of the reformers of the period.

Another focus of Ranade's social thought was the remarriage of widows. Denial of widow remarriage was a trend of the time. His first mature view of Hinduism appeared in the widow marriage controversy which arose in 1860's.<sup>45</sup> He proved the lawfulness of widow remarriage

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<sup>38</sup> D. G. Karve, *op. cit.*, pp.177-178.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>40</sup> The lecture which was Marathi as given in Phatak's 'Nyayamurthi Ranade', pp., 302- 5 as quoted in James Kellock, *op. cit.*, pp. 12,13

<sup>41</sup> D.G. Karve, *op. cit.*, p.179.

<sup>42</sup> James Kellock, *op. cit.*, p.53.

<sup>43</sup> Dayaram Gidumal, *The Status of Women in India*, pp. 13- 14 as quoted in James Kellock, *op. cit.*, p.83.

<sup>44</sup> James Kellock, *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85

<sup>45</sup> R. P. Tucker, *Ranade and the Roots of Indian Nationalism*, Bombay, 1997 p. 63.

with the help of the sastras that if she liked she might be married more than once at the death of her betrothed husband with Vedic marital rite, provided she is was a virgin, but without them if she was not a virgin.<sup>46</sup> He was for the legislation of widow remarriage as it happened in the case of *Sati* and infanticide. "Marriage unless consummated by actual cohabitation should not be recognized as a perfect union before the limits laid down.... are reached."<sup>47</sup> He said that the problem of child widows deserved state's attention as well us that of the society. Anyhow he was very clear about his own stand in this regard. "We would on no account permit disfigurement except after Twenty-Five years, when the female is really alive to the circumstances of her position and can choose deliberately the celibate course of life."<sup>48</sup> Thus he was for the right of the widows.

The uplift of the depressed classes yet another concern of Ranade. When he came to know the oppression and injustice faced by the Indians in South Africa, he described to those Indian sympathizers the manner in which the members of the lower castes in different parts of India were treated by our own community.<sup>49</sup> He instructed the depressed classes to understand their degrading status and situation and to agitate for their own betterment. He requested the fortunate section to join hands together in the noble efforts of enlightening the society and the depressed classes.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

M.G. Ranade was great a reformer, visionary and philosopher of Western India who engaged in philosophical discussions on various issues the Indian society faced during the Nineteenth century. Indian society of the time was beset with social evils like the lack of scientific education, denial of widow remarriage, sati, female infanticide, child marriage, untouchability and so on. Inspired by the Western scientific education, the lofty ideals of humanism and universal brotherhood of human beings, Ranade stood for a reform of the society. He was an original social thinker who threw light on the various problems of the society with philosophical wisdom and outlook. He diagnosed the root cause of the illness suffered by the Indian society using the stethoscope of reason and found a panacea for the same, that is, reform of the society and religion. He was a social thinker who threw light on the various problems of the society with a philosophical mind. He formulated a philosophy of his own to tackle the social evils of the time and popularized the same among the general public through his speeches, writings and interactions. He also suggested practical remedies to tackle various issues faced by his contemporary society. It was M.G. Ranade who gave a new direction and vigour to the socio-religious reform movements of Western India of the time through his reasoning and practical suggestions. This in its turn ultimately resulted in the conscientization of the public and transformation of the society which was beset with so many social sicknesses.

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<sup>46</sup> M. G. Ranade, *op.cit.*, p. xxviii.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxii.

<sup>49</sup> G. K. Gokhale, *op. cit.*, p. 743

<sup>50</sup> Ramabai, ed., *op. cit.*, p.79.



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