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Q8(a)

Highlight the major contributions of the reform movements in pre-independent India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2024 · Sociology GS 2 · 20 marks · Social Movements in Modern India

Social Movements in Modern India: Peasants and farmers movements; Women's movement; Backward classes and Dalit movement; Environmental movements; Ethnicity and Identity movements.

Core demand of the question

- Highlight major contributions of pre-independence reform movements
- Cover social (sati, widow, education, caste), religious (Brahmo, Arya, Aligarh, Singh Sabha, **Narayana Guru**), and nationalist links
- Keep contributions, not a full narrative of the freedom struggle
- Note limits of elite reform

Revision summary

Reform movements made custom criticisable and legislable before Independence.

Sati abolition, widow remarriage and girls' schooling are core gender contributions.

Brahmo, Arya, Aligarh and Singh Sabha recast religious communities.

Phule, **Narayana Guru** and **Ambedkar** pushed reform beyond elite salons.

Limits include caste-class narrowness; the institutional legacy remains large.

Introduction

Reform movements in pre-independent India were organised efforts to change **religion, caste, gender and education** under colonial rule. They did not begin the nationalist movement, but they created a public in which the nation could later speak. Their major contributions are institutional and moral, not only famous names.

Body

Social and gender contributions

The campaign against **sati** (Rammohan Roy, 1829 abolition) and **Vidyasagar's** widow remarriage work made women's bodily fate a public legislative question. Age of consent debates, however contested, put child marriage on the table. **Savitribai and Jotirao Phule** contributed schools for girls and for those excluded by caste, which is a deeper contribution than bhadralok petitioning. These moves built the later ground for Hindu Code and for constitutional equality.

Religious and caste contributions

Brahmo Samaj and later Prarthana currents contributed a critique of idolatry and caste rigidity among elites. **Arya Samaj** contributed shuddhi, vernacular education, and a militant reform of Hindu practice that also fed majoritarian politics. **Aligarh** and related Muslim

modernism contributed English-modern education for a Muslim elite (and a contested political legacy). **Singh Sabha** reform recast Sikh institutions. **Narayana Guru** in Kerala contributed a temple-opening, 'one caste, one religion, one god' attack on pollution that massified reform beyond the salon. **Ambedkar**'s pre-1947 work is both Dalit movement and reform: Mahad, temple, and a programme to annihilate caste.

Missionary and anti-missionary contests contributed print, schools and a new competitive public. Temperance, anti-naught and sanitising campaigns contributed a middle-class moral code with both emancipatory and controlling sides for women.

National and institutional contributions

Reform produced **associations, colleges, presses and laws** that nationalism later used. It contributed the idea that custom is criticisable. **M. N. Srinivas**'s sanskritization and westernization both run through these movements: some copied Sanskrit respectability; some copied missionary education.

- **Reform also contributed** new subjectivities: the widow as a person who may remarry, the lower-caste student as a person who may read, the community as something that can be purified or annihilated. Those subjectivities later filled legislatures. The nationalist movement borrowed this moral energy and sometimes asked women and Dalits to wait. Highlighting contributions therefore includes that tension: reform made the social question public; it did not finish it.

Limits are part of the highlight. Many movements were **upper-caste, male and urban**. They often sought a purified community, not annihilation of caste. Peasants and Adivasis had parallel risings that textbooks under-name as reform. Contribution is still large: without this pre-independence work, independent India's women's law, Dalit constitutionalism and public education would have had a thinner soil.

Flow diagram

Brahmo Arya Aligarh -> Public of print and law
 Phule Narayana Guru Ambedkar -> Mass anti-caste education
 Public of print and law -> Contributions to modern India
 Mass anti-caste education -> Contributions to modern India

Conclusion

Pre-independence reform movements contributed public critique of sati, widowhood, child marriage and caste exclusion, new schools and sects, and the habit of legislating custom. **Phule**, **Narayana Guru** and **Ambedkar** massified what bhadralok reform began. The contribution is foundational and socially uneven.

Facts & figures

Sati Regulation 1829

Bengal regulation after public campaign; a template of reform-plus-colonial law.

Widow Remarriage Act 1856

Legal opening associated with Vidyasagar's campaign.

Narayana Guru

Kerala anti-caste religious reform that combined temples, slogans and social opening.

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