

## The Renaissance

The great cultural movement that began in Italy during the early 1300s and spread all over Europe is known as the **Renaissance**. The changes that were brought about by the Renaissance were gradual and hardly affected the people. However, it influenced future generations in many areas such as art, literature, education and history.

The word 'Renaissance' is derived from the Latin word '*rinascere*' which means the act of being reborn. It is an appropriate name for the movement since many European scholars and artists of that period turned to ancient Greek and Roman cultures. By studying the cultures of Greece and Rome, which are known as 'classical antiquity', they wished to revive them in their own times. The Renaissance represented a rebirth of these cultures.

The Renaissance is an important landmark in the history of the world since it marked the end of the Middle Ages. Many of the concepts and ideas of the Middle Ages were abandoned by the leaders of the Renaissance. For example, medieval thinkers believed that the most important responsibility of the people was to pray to God and to aim at saving their souls. Society was believed to be full of evil temptations. Renaissance thinkers, on the contrary, believed sincerely that the people owed a responsibility to the society in which they lived. Society was not seen as an evil temptation but as a civilising agency.

The study of theology, which was an important subject in the Middle Ages, was replaced by the study of humanity. The Renaissance thinkers spent their time studying the achievements of different cultures. They were particularly interested in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome.

There was a revolution in the field of art also. Medieval artists painted human figures that looked stiff and artificial. Renaissance artists focused upon the beauty of the human body. Their paintings and sculptures were lifelike.

The Renaissance began in Italy. **Petrarch** and **Boccaccio** were the first Renaissance humanists. These two scholars recovered

many ancient manuscripts during the 1300s. They studied and imitated the ancient writings. Much importance was given to style. Petrarch, through his poetry, and Boccaccio, through his stories, tried to describe human feelings. They felt that understanding and dealing with human problems was more important than trying to understand the mysteries of God's will.

In the field of art also, Italy was the pioneer. During the early 1300s, the Florentine painter Giotto became the first artist to portray nature realistically. Art during the late 1400s and early 1500s was dominated by three men—**Michelangelo**, **Raphael** and **Leonardo da Vinci**. The focus of Renaissance art was on realism. They tried to make their work as lifelike as possible. Michelangelo's statue of Moses, his paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Raphael's portrait of the Madonna, and Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper* and *Mona Lisa* rank among the greatest achievements of Renaissance art.

During the 1400s, the Renaissance spread from Italy to the rest of Europe. Politically, some of the countries of Europe were undergoing changes. By the late 1400s, England was being united into a nation under the monarchs of the House of Tudors. The Tudors who ruled from 1485 to 1603 were the most important patrons of the Renaissance. Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch invited many Italian humanists to his court. These men influenced English scholars. The study of ancient Greek and Roman literature became fashionable in England during this period. The writings of Greek and Latin philosophers and scientists were translated by English scholars. As a result, the Englishman of that age was familiar with the works of Aristotle and other classical authors.

The new learning promoted the growth of universities. The first universities were merely groups of teachers and students without any particular university building. The students stayed in lodgings and their lecturers lived in rented halls. Exams were conducted in the form of open discussions. There were a number of distinguished scholars in England during the 1400s. During Henry VII's reign, **Grocyn** and **Linacre** taught Greek at Oxford and **Colet** lectured on the Greek Testament. Colet founded St Paul's Grammar School, the first school in England that was completely devoted to the study of classical literature. William Lily was its first headmaster and his

book on Latin grammar continued to be the standard textbook for the next two hundred years. Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, was herself a patroness of the New Learning. She founded two Cambridge colleges—Christ's and St John's. **Erasmus** was another great scholar who taught at Cambridge and inspired Latimer and Fisher with his ideas. **Thomas More**, in his book *Utopia*, described the ideal land. More was far ahead of his time in his ideas and principles.

Two other notable men, the **Earl of Surrey** and **Thomas Wyatt**, had travelled to Italy and brought back the sonnet form of poetry which had flourished since Petrarch's time. After Chaucer, poetry had languished in England. But with Surrey and Wyatt, the tradition was renewed again, such that during Elizabeth's reign, England became 'a nest of singing birds'. The sonnet became very fashionable and great masters like **Spenser**, **Sidney** and **Shakespeare** wrote several poems in this form.

The fall of Constantinople in 1453 had far-reaching effects. There was a regular exodus of Greek scholars who were welcomed all over Europe. They infused an interest in the ancient classics. Enthusiasm for learning was therefore characteristic of the Renaissance.

The Renaissance period, filled with its love for education, gave rise to an interest in science. In the Middle Ages, people meekly accepted the scientific theories of the ancients. For centuries, hardly any scientific discoveries were made. Modern science began its history with the Renaissance. Some of the important inventions which contributed to the spread of the Renaissance were the printing press, invented by **John Gutenberg**, the mariner's compass and the telescope. While the printing press made books freely available, the mariner's compass encouraged sea travel. The first printing press was set up in England by **William Caxton**. It was established at Westminster in 1476. The greatest shock to medieval notions of the universe was given by **Nicolaus Copernicus**. For two thousand years, mankind had believed that the earth was the centre of the universe. Copernicus proved that the sun was the centre around which the earth and other planets revolved. This new idea and the invention of the telescope encouraged the study of astronomy.

In the field of geographical discovery, no other age in the history of the world had made so much progress. **Christopher Columbus**

discovered America: **Vasco da Gama** found the sea route to India via the Cape of Good Hope; and **Ferdinand Magellan** was the first to sail around the world. Some of the well-known British mariners were **Sir John Hawkins**, **Sir Francis Drake** and **Sir Walter Raleigh**.

The spirit of enquiry that resulted due to the New Learning of the Renaissance inspired people to question old values. This acted as a disturbing force in the realm of religion. People of the medieval age unquestioningly accepted the authority of the Catholic Church. This submissive attitude was replaced by that of an enquiring generation that was shocked by the moral decay of the Church and of the pope. Scholars like Colet and Erasmus tried to apply humanistic methods to the study of Christianity. Others like Luther rejected the authority of the Church of Rome. This resulted in the religious revolution in Europe known as the **Reformation**.

The economic conditions of England experienced tremendous change. The population increased, causing old villages to expand. Many new villages sprang up, and boroughs and towns expanded. Industry received a boost due to the large quantities of coal, tin and iron which were mined. The discovery of new sea routes brought countries closer. As a result, sea traffic developed, and with it, trade and commerce.

Society during the Renaissance was sharply distinguished into two classes—the very wealthy and the very poor. Farmers were very wealthy and the nobles and barons possessed huge estates. They lived in a lavish style in huge palaces. The feudal system was in practice. According to this, the king was at the top and below him were the barons and nobles. On the next rung were the tenants. The barons could raise an army whenever the king ordered it. The poor had no rights of their own. They were protected by the lord for whom they worked.

The men of the Renaissance lived life to the full. They enjoyed several outdoor activities and sports. The favourite hobbies of the men were hunting, snaring and trapping. The poaching of deer was very common. They also loved horses and dogs and spent much time with them. **Theatre-going** was another fashion of the age.

The impact of the Renaissance has been remarkable. For hundreds of years, artists, sculptors and writers have tried to

reach the heights achieved by the men of the Renaissance, but in vain. Renaissance figures like Petrarch, Boccaccio, da Vinci and Michelangelo have set such high standards that they remain celebrated to this day. In almost every sphere of life—intellectual, scientific and artistic—the Renaissance is a period of tremendous achievement. To ‘drink Life to the lees’ seemed to be the motto of the Renaissance men.

## CHAPTER I

### THE RENAISSANCE

*Synopsis* : Introduction – what is meant by the term “the Renaissance” – the term suggests different things to different people – inventions and discoveries which helped the Renaissance movement – Renaissance in Italy, France and Spain – the Oxford scholars and the beginning of Renaissance in England – Renaissance period also a period of translations – Renaissance writers of England – influence of Renaissance on education – on science – religion – art and architecture.

Renaissance literally mean rebirth. The word is usually used with reference to the revival of learning of classical literature between the fourteenth and the sixteenth century. But it was more than just that. During this period there developed a spirit of inquiry, a spirit of freedom of thought and action. Men were no longer willing to accept without question the teachings, superstitions and customs of the past. There was a tendency to develop a critical attitude towards medieval institutions. Social, political and religious ideas were all revolutionized. In short, a great change was taking place in men’s attitude towards themselves and the world. It was as though a new life had begun. In the words of Prof. Jebb, “The Renaissance in the largest sense of the term is the process of transition in Europe from the medieval to modern order”.

The word “Renaissance” suggests different things to different people. To a student of social history the word suggests the breaking up of the regime of feudalism and chivalry and the birth of new social conditions. To a student of religious evolution it suggests the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. To the lover of art and literature Renaissance means the recovery of the masterpieces of the ancient world and the revived knowledge of Greek and Latin. To a scientist the word implies maritime exploration and the founding of astronomy, anatomy, physiology and modern medicine. Hence, Walter Pater is right in calling the Renaissance “a complex and many-sided movement”.

There were certain *inventions and discoveries*, which contributed to the general movement of the Renaissance. Of

these the most important was the invention of the printing press. The art of printing was introduced into Europe by John Gutenberg of Germany in 1454 and in a few years presses were established in every important town of Western and Central Europe. The first Latin Bible was printed in 1455, at Mainz in Germany. The art of printing reached Italy in 1465, Switzerland in 1467, France in 1470, Austria and the Netherlands in 1473 and Spain in 1474. The first printing press in England was established in 1476 by William Caxton at Westminster. The next few years saw the establishment of presses in many towns in England. Thus the press at Oxford was set up in 1478 and the one at St. Albans in 1479. The first printing press in London itself, as distinct from Westminster, was set up in 1480. All these presses printed mostly Latin books, but books in English were printed for the first time only in 1483. The immediate effect was that books became cheaper and more plentiful. In the Middle Ages the production of books was a slow process because they had to be produced by a copyists of the monasteries, and naturally enough knowledge was confined to the four walls of monasteries. With the advent of printing press, knowledge could spread far and wide, which in turn fostered a questioning attitude.

Another invention of great importance was the "mariner's compass", which enabled sailors to undertake longer voyages than had hitherto been possible. Before this invention navigators could not venture far out of sight of land ; after the compass came into use, the exploration of distant seas became possible and till then accepted ideas of the world's shape and size were found to be false. Along with this came also the invention of the telescope, a century later. Observers could now scan the sky. The invention of the telescope actually marks the beginning of the science of astronomy. The true position of the earth in the solar system was realized and the former teachings on this matter were discredited. After the capture of Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, by the Turks in 1453 there was a regular exodus of Greek scholars into Europe. They were welcomed and their presence stimulated a new enthusiasm for classical learning and culture among Italians, French and English.

Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio prepared the ground for the Renaissance in Italy. By 1396 the Greek language was taught

in Italy by a Greek, Chrysoloras from Constantinople. After the fall of the eastern capital on May 29, 1453, most of the Greek scholars fled from there and following the existing trade routes, came to Italy. Italian States were ruled by despots who competed with one another in the splendour of their courts. They welcomed the Greek exiles to their capitals and posed as patrons of literature and art. From that time onwards the study of the language and literature and philosophy of Greece became the fashion of the cultured classes in Italy. Another great Italian writer of the period was Machiavelli. In France the effect of the Renaissance was seen in the lyric poetry of Ronsard, the vigorous prose of Francois Rabelais, and the scholarly essays of Montaigne. In Spain the literary glory of the Renaissance was the glory of Cervantes. His "Don Quixote", a burlesque of the romances of Chivalry is the most beautiful and wonderful gift of the Renaissance to the literature of the world.

In England, the Renaissance was heralded by Geoffrey Chaucer and Selling who had contacts with Italy. But it was only some years later that classical scholarship had an earnest beginning in England. A good start was given by three Oxford friends, Thomas Linacre, William Grocyn and Hugh Latimer. All of them studied in Italy and later lectured on Greek at Oxford University. After them John Colet founded St. Paul's Grammar School, the first school in England completely devoted to the study of classical literature. The Latin Grammar prepared by William Lily, the first headmaster of the school, remained the standard text-book for two centuries. Other schools like Christ's Hospital and the Charterhouse were started in London. Outside London there was similar activity. In all sixty-three new schools were founded in the reign of Henry VIII, fifty in that of Edward VI, nineteen in that of Mary and one hundred and thirty-eight in that of Elizabeth, while older schools were everywhere remodelled upon the new lines.

Apart from the study of the classics in their original, the period of the Renaissance was also an age of translation. Virgil, Ovid, Cicero, Demosthenes and Plutarch were all translated into English. The first part of Chapman's "Homer" appeared in 1598. These translations enabled even those who did not know Greek and Latin to share the knowledge of classical literature.



Thus people like Shakespeare who knew little Latin and less Greek became familiar with classical mythology.

The Renaissance in literature may be said to have begun in England with Sir Thomas More. His most famous work, "Utopia", which is a Greek word meaning "nowhere" was written in Latin and first published in 1516. The English translation was published in 1551. The contemporary and friend of More was Erasmus, a Dutchman by birth, but settled in England. He was one of the last European writers who wrote in Latin. His most famous work was "The Praise of Folly". He also published an edition of the New Testament which contained in parallel columns the original Greek text and a new Latin rendering of his own. But Spenser, the author of the first great English epic "Faerie Queene", is the representative poet of the English Renaissance. However, the genius of Renaissance in England found its fullest expression in the romantic drama, a good bulk of which was written by Shakespeare. Other memorable names of the Renaissance period are Ben Jonson, Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe, who was also known as the father of English Tragedy.

During this period of Renaissance educational ideals underwent great changes. In the Middle Ages there were two schemes of education; one devised for the clergy and the other to make a "perfect and gentle knight". This system was not adequate enough to meet the demands of the modern age. So a new educational system had to be devised. Chief among those who conducted educational experiments were Comenius, Rabelais and Montaigne. The purpose of education as conceived by them was "to fashion, not the scholar, but the man; to bring out all the faculties in harmonious and well-balanced development; to prepare for life in the widest sense of the term".

With the capture of Constantinople by the Turks, it became necessary for the European nations to find new trade routes to the East. The invention of the mariner's compass gave them courage to undertake maritime explorations. Thus, Columbus discovered the continent of America in 1492. Vasco da Gama reached Calicut on the west coast of India through the Cape of Good Hope in 1498. Magellan set out on his exploration of the Pacific Ocean in 1519. In 1521 he reached the Philippines where

unfortunately he was killed. His lieutenant Sebastian del Cano returned to Spain in 1522, having completed one of the great tests of history, the first circumnavigation of the world.

All through the Middle Ages the world at large had accepted the cosmology taught by Ptolemy of Egypt, according to which the earth was the centre of the universe. Towards the middle of the sixteenth century Copernicus of Holland discovered that the sun was the centre of the universe. Kepler and Galileo, following in his steps, revealed the solar system in its main features as we know it today.

The Renaissance in religion consists of two movements, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The Reformation started in Germany. Martin Luther, the leader of the movement, translated the Old and New Testaments into German. William Tindale gave an English rendering of the translation made by Erasmus. These translations of the Bible helped people to read and interpret the text for themselves. On the whole the new Reformation movement had a disintegrating influence on the till then united Church of Europe. As an antidote to this, there started a Counter-Reformation and the founding of the Society of Jesus by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540. As an outcome of this Renaissance in religion there was a split in the Church and those who protested against the supremacy of the Pope came to be known as Protestants.

The names closely associated with the Renaissance in Art and literature are those of Michael Angelo, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci. They were all-rounder's, poets, painters and sculptors. Their works are the glory of the picture galleries in Europe. As sculptor, Michael Angelo's most famous works are the statues of David and Moses and the Pieta, i.e., the sculpture of the Virgin Mary holding the dead body of Christ on her lap. As a painter, he painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the great fresco of the "Last Judgment" on the walls of the same Chapel. As a poet, Michael Angelo wrote many sonnets and love poems. In his short life Raphael painted a number of magnificent pictures, the majority of them being the Madonnas. Leonardo da Vinci is famous for the fresco of the "Last Supper" in the refectory of Maria delle Grazie in Milan.

Architecture like other branches of learning underwent a classical revival which spread over the whole of Europe. Roman and Greek styles with columns and round arches and domes replaced the medieval Gothic style with its pointed arches, soaring pinnacles and spires. St. Peter's basilica in Rome is the greatest example of the new style. This style reached England in the seventeenth century through the works of Inigo Jones and Christopher Wren, whose greatest work was the reconstruction of St. Paul's Cathedral in London after the Great Fire of 1666. Wren also built fifty-two other churches in the city.