

Role of Martin Luther in Reformation

Luther was born on November 10, 1483 in a poor peasant family of Germany. After graduating from Erfurt University, Luther read for the Bar at his father's wish. But he switched over theology in place of Law. He felt perturbed. He was beset with various doubts. On becoming Professor at University of Wittenberg, Luther studied more and more in order to remove his doubts. In 1511 he visited Rome. Pope's Immoral conduct put Luther in dejection.

In the beginning Luther did not oppose the Pope. But an incident that occurred in 1517 changed Luther's mind. Pope ordered Tetzel to amass wealth by selling the 'letters of Indulgence' to the public in order to build the St. Peter's Cathedral. Luther stood against the Church at this. Tetzel used to say, "The moment the coins offered for the 'Letters of Pardon' jingle, the soul of the person who offered money directly enters the Heaven. But gradually people lost faith in such notions. Everyone was disgusted with all this. But Martin Luther was only courageous person who vehemently opposed the funny act and exploitation of public. He declared that the Sale of the Letter of 'pardon' was a violation of the basic principles of religion. Luther held that a person is purged of sins by way of repentance which is subject of mind and does not relate to sacraments. Against this practice, Luther hung his letter of protest entitled "The Ninety five Thesis" on the entrance gate of Wittenberg Castle Cathedral on 31 October, 1517. In these 95 statements, Luther criticized all the ways of church adopted for the collection of money. These statements were first drawn in Latin but soon they were translated into German.

He sent the copies of his 95 statements to his friend abroad. Luther still avoided an open challenge to the church but Pope underestimated importance of opposition.

In an open debate in 1519, Luther branded Pope's intervention between man and God as useless. He urged upon following the ideas of John Huss. It was an allegation against the autocracy of the church which might have resulted grave consequences. In the meantime, he published three pamphlets which were later on designated 'Protestantism'. In 'an address to the Nobility of the German Nation' he gave an account of immense property of the church and inspired the German rulers to get rid of foreign influence. He derided the Pope and his organization in "the Babylonian captivity of the church". In 'The Freedom of Christian Man', he explained the principle of salvation and established an unflinching faith in God's grace. The doctrines promulgated in these pamphlets became the fundamental tenets of 'Protestantism'.

Luther's work annoyed the Pope. In 1520 the Pope ordered Luther to recant his ideas, otherwise he would be declared a heretic. But he did not care for Pope's orders. Consequently, Luther was expelled from religion. In this period, Luther's friend- the ruler of Saxony became his patron. Many of German rulers opposed the church. So, Luther did not sustain any loss even though he was expelled from religion. Although Charles V- the head of the Holy Roman Empire supported the Pope, he was so much occupied with wars that he failed to suppress the increasing religious discontent. On the other hand, Martin Luther preserved in his course of action and stirred an awareness in every section of society by means of his lectures, articles and pamphlets. The causes of awareness in people comprise not only the church and its organizational faults but the greed for the possession of church property. In 1521, the German Imperial Assembly (Reichstag) passed a vote of censure against Martin Luther, but the awareness among people was widespread to be affected by this censure.

The German Diet of Worms Condemned Martin Luther in 1521 for heresy and asked him to recant his ideas. He contended that he would revoke his thoughts if his statements were refuted on the strength of logic and proof. The Diet of Worms declared his works illegal and deprived him of legal protection. In the meanwhile, Luther translated the Bible into German which became very popular and has importance even today.

Luther's Ideas and Their Dissemination:

1. He asserted the acceptance of Christ and the Bible and rejected the Pope's divinity and autocracy of the Church.
2. He declared faith in God to be the source of Salvation in place of adherence to the Sacraments.
3. Out of seven Sacraments he embraced only three: Confirmation, Penance and the Holy-Eucharist.
4. He disbelieved the miracle of Church.
5. He considered nobody was above Law.
6. He laid emphasis upon the consolidation of national Church after wiping out the Sovereignty of the Roman Catholic Church.
7. The Scripts are for all and everyone can have their knowledge
8. He concluded that the priests should be allowed to marry and live like the priests should be allowed to marry and live like civilized citizens in order to prevent corruption in the church.

Martin Luther stressed the formation of a free Church in the ensuing years. He rejected the hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church. He adopted German for the ecclesiastical work. Sectarianism and the special offices of the priests as representatives of God on the earth was eliminated. the doctrine of theism and the authority of the Scriptures were accorded top priority.

There was tremendous diffusion of Luther's ideas and teachings in all the northern and central German counties. Availing himself fully of the contemporary social and political unrest. Luther condemned both Pope and Emperor. His principles were recognized and accepted very soon. As a matter of fact, Luther's reformation movement was a proper national movement. The Lutheran doctrine influenced the German patriots so much so that they wanted to root out the policy of exploitation carried out by foreign priests. The Pope's political religious and economic supremacy was rejected. The diffusion and general acceptance of the Lutheran doctrine in the whole of Germany seemed inevitable in 1524.

The rapid growth of Luther's thoughts yielded an unexpected result and the peasants revolt started in Germany. The Lutheranism became aggressive under the leadership of Caterstedante and Tomas Muntzer. Against this Backdrop, Peasant-wars were waged in 1525 in the central and south-west Germany. They launched the movement against serfdom, feudal taxes, religious taxes and restriction upon the utilization of forest wealth. They also demanded the election of priests. The peasant believed that Luther was also a support of social and economic freedom in addition to religious freedom. Therefore, they relied too much upon Luther to support their movement. On the contrary, Luther joined the rulers and feudal lords in suppression the peasant revolt. Luther condemned the peasants like mad dogs. It is presumed that 50000 peasants were massacred in connection with the suppression of their revolt.

Birth of Protestant Church:

The Diet of Holy Roman Empire Which assembled at speyer in 1526 saw that German princes divided into Lutheran and Roman Catholic party, but left the legal status of new faith in doubt, contending itself with vague declaration that "each prince should so conduct himself as he could answer for his behaviour to God and to the Emperor". The next council at Speyer in 1529 did not recognized Reformation movement and passed several sanctions against. The Lutheran princes drafted a legal protest, in

which they declare that they meant to abide by law of 1526. From the protest came the name Protestant.

Augsburg Pact: The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V was involved in several problems. After v1530 he tried to suppress Luther. He called a Council at Augsburg and allowed the Protestant to put forward their principles in the form of a document. This document is called “The Augsburg approval”. Charles V rejected this document. But looking to the Lutheran Influence and adverse external circumstances he settled a peace -pact in 1532 which lasted till 1546. After getting rid of external adversities and internal problems Charles v determine to suppress the Protestant thoroughly. Because of this decision, Germany passed through a civil war from 1546to 1555. Frustrated by the adverse consequences of the prolong civil war, Prince Ferdinand Settled the “Augsburg Pact” with the Protestants in 1555. The terms of the pact were as follows:

1. Every ruler was free to choose the religion for himself and his subjects.
2. The Church property confiscated by the Protestants prior to 1552 was restored to them.
3. Nobody was given recognition except Martin Luther.
4. The Lutherans who dwelt in the Catholic Zones were not constrained to change their religion.
5. According to the Reservation of Religion, any Catholic who changed his religion would be divested of all the privileges of his earlier office.

The terms of the Pact solved the religious problem but in a wrong manner. The Pact accorded religious freedom to a ruler but not to the people. So, this did not hold water for long. Only the Lutheranism was given recognition by this Pact and other protestant sects (like Calvinism, Zwinglism) were ignored. The idea of utilization of church property for the public welfare was dismissed. The religious dispute intensified in South Germany and Bohemia; the Calvinist urged for the grant of equal legal rights. It led to the Thirty years War. Actually, this pact failed to solve the religious contention. The religious dispute was solved by means of the Westphalia Pact after a century. This in 1555 the Augsburg Pact was Made with the expectation that it would solve the religious problem but in vain.