

Women Issues and Arya Samaj

Indu Bala

Assistant Professor History, Mata Ganga Girls College, Tarn-Taran, Punjab, India

Abstract: *The Arya samaj was a revivalist movement in its character. It took inspiration from the indigenous culture. The major concerns and social ideals of Arya Samaj are based on equality of the sexes, absolute justice and fair play between men and women and equal opportunities for all according to their nature, karma and merit. The leaders of Arya Samaj attacked child marriage, prohibition of widow re marriage, purdah. Dayanand found the solution to all the social abuses in the education of women. But the leaders of Arya samaj found it difficult to perceive the changed position of women outside the domain of domesticity. The Arya Samaj in the process of formation of ideas and their translation into action did not go beyond the prescription of the patriarchal frame work.*

Keywords: social ideals of Arya Samaj, child marriage, widow remarriage, purdha system

1. Introduction

From the thirties of the 19th Century in India and in Punjab, different socio-religious reform societies and samajes in three different communities i.e. Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims, such as *The Brahmo Samaj*, *The Prarthana Samaj*, *The Arya Samaj*, *Dev Samaj*, *Singh Sabha Movement*, and *Aligarh Movement* played a remarkable role in influencing the minds of the people through their reforming activities'. The period of later half of 19th century was an age of definition and redefinition'.² The leaders of all the movements aspired to reorder society in the areas of 'social behaviour, custom and structure or control'. It was in this context that the "women" question assumed significance and many of the reformers sought to improve the condition of this deprived section of society.³ In fact, during 19th century most campaigns for the amelioration of women's conditions were based on the liberal premise that it was both wrong and unfair that certain categories of human kinds should be subjected to any discrimination,⁴ The reformers, thus initiated a process of regeneration and revitalization of the cultural norms and social practices.⁵ The present paper seeks to analyse the programmes of the dominant socio-religious reform movement among Hindus 'The Arya Samaj', in the above context. The Arya Samaj was a revivalist movement in its character. It took inspiration, above all, from the indigenous culture. Formally started in Kathiawar, on 10th of April, 1875, by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), with the motive to bring national progress, the great task before the Arya Samaj was the problem of social reconstruction.⁶

2. The major concerns and social ideals of Arya Samaj

The major concerns of Arya Samaj are based on equality of the sexes, absolute justice and fair play between men and women and equal opportunities for all according to their nature, karma and merit.⁷ Swami Dayanand's admirable work *Satyarth Prakash* was published in 1875, though a revised and expanded edition appeared in 1884 after his death, expounded his unique doctrines. His motto was *'Back to the Vedas'* When Swami Dayanand began his work in the later half of the 19th century, he realized that Hindu society had been on decline. It had become a huge, static, fossilized organism, covered with so many bad customs. With other

major issues such as spread of education among masses to bring awareness, Arya Samaj did efforts for the upliftment of lower classes and women which were of equal status as far as the *shastric* position was concerned.⁸ The position of women in general was pitiable. They had lost their high place in family as well as in society and were dependent on the male members of their family.

3. Swami Dayanand and Manu

Swami Dayanand did his best to eradicate the social evils afflicting the women and incorporated "women emancipation" as an integral, if not crucial, part of his programmes. He assigned supreme authority to women in domestic matters and advocated equal right to men and women in all respects, in education, in marriage and in matter of property. He cited Manu in support of his view: "Where the women are honored, there the deities are pleased, but where dishonored, there all religious rites become useless. On the happiness or misery of women depends the happiness or misery of the whole family⁹?"

4. Prohibition of Child Marriage

As regards the age of marriage, Swami Dayanand says, the most suitable age for marriage is from 16 to 24th, in case of females, and from 24th to 48th in case of males. The Arya Samaj insists on strict observance of *brahmcharya* by the young of both sexes, viz. the attainment of a proper degree of maturity of body and mind before marriage. He says that a country is sunk in misery in which *brahmcharya* is neglected.¹⁰ To prevent child marriage, Swami Dayanand also suggested that the marriage should be celebrated with the consent of the contracting parties. Marriage with mutual consent was susceptible to the least disruption and conducive to the birth of excellent progeny. Therefore, the age long Indian tradition of *Svayamvara* (self choice) is the best form of marriage.¹¹ In respect of child marriage, the act of 1860 was revised in 1925 which raised the age of consent to thirteen for married girls and fourteen for unmarried ones.¹² In 1929, the Child Marriage Restraint act, known as the Sharda Bill after its mover, Rai Sahib Harbilas Sharda was passed. It penalized parties to a marriage where the girl was below fourteen or the boy below eighteen years of age.¹³

5. Emphasis on Widow Remarriage

Arya Samajists gave strong support to the widow remarriage movement. Swami Dayanand was in favour of the marriage of such a widow whose husband died without having any sexual intercourse with her.¹⁴ Swami Dayanand also advocated *Niyoga*. According to this tradition, a widow could cohabit with other person for the purpose of producing offsprings.¹⁵ According to *Satyarth Prakash* marriage and *Niyoga* had the same purpose that is, to have male progeny. The Arya Samajists published and distributed tracts and pamphlets and created greater awareness and approval of remarriage of widows arguing that widow remarriage particularly of the virgin widows was not in contravention of vedic tradition.¹⁶ The Arya Samajies of Lahore, Amritsar and Kohat sponsored these tracts like Mushi Jivan Dass's "Sada-i haqq" (the voice of truth) and Pandit Lekh Ram's "Risala-i-Nawid-i-begwan" (A treatise containing glad news for widows) which strengthened the public opinion. By 1882, the Arya Samaj leaders arranged for widow remarriages. "*The Arya*", a monthly Journal carried a report of a widow remarriage of the same (Chutree) caste in Gurdaspur district of Punjab.¹⁷ Moreover three monthly papers *Vidhwa Bandhu*, *Vidhwa Sahayak* and *Widow Cause* in Hindi, Urdu and English respectively were published. Besides this, *widow Ashrams* were opened at Lahore, Mathura and Haridwar where they were lodged and remarried. One of these *ashrams Vidhwa Vivah Sahayak Sabha* (1915), was opened by Sir Ganga Ram.¹⁸ Mahatma Hans Raj contributed towards bringing a legislation permitting widow remarriages among the higher castes in the Nabha State" Mahatma Munshi Ram (Swami Shradhanand) also supported widow remarriage in his pamphlet entitled *Kshatra Dharm Palan Ka Gair Mamuli Mauka* published in 1895.¹⁹ The orthodox section of the society did not accept these efforts of Arya Samaj and there were several cases when persons and families were excommunicated for arranging the marriages of their daughters.

6. Condemnation of Purdha System

Purdah was another striking feature of social life among Hindus and Muslims. It had become a symbol of social prestige and also a means of personal security.²⁰ A woman who stayed at home had always the preference "*Ander baithi lakh di; Bahar gayi Khak di*". The courtyard was the stage where the women played her daily part.²¹ In this respect Arya samaj broke the *purdah* first and allowed full freedom to its women folk. Any lady could be a member of the Arya Samaj and vote and represent in the higher bodies; The organisations i.e. *Arya Samaj Pratinidhi Sabha*, *Arya Shiromani sabha* Arya Dharm Sabha were greatly concerned and wanted to fight the evils of the restrictions imposed on women by *purdah*.²²

7. Arya samaj's and Women Education

For Arya Samaj, whose doctrines were based on scientific principles, the spread of education was an article of faith, embodied in its ten principles.²³ Dayanand envisioned an open social system with education and not birth as the

determinant of status.²⁴ He found the solution to all the social abuse in the education of women²⁵ and underlined the necessity for the spreading of education among them.²⁶ The necessity for development of female education was meant for the betterment of progeny as swami Dayanand says in *Satyarth Prakash*:gave equal rights to women of education as the males.²⁷ But the duration schooling for girls was supposed to be much shorter than the boys, the minimum eight years in school as against the seventeenth years for boys.²⁸

8. Nature of Women Education

However, the nature of women education is caste specific. Women belonging to all castes were not to receive all types of education²⁹ Besides this, the elementary knowledge of grammar, religious, literature, medicines, arithmetic and crafts is the minimum, a woman is expected to have. Satyarth Prakash says:The objective of this kind of minimum knowledge are specific further in the following: The ultimate objective was to equip women to be ideal wives and mothers.³⁰ Their role was not perceived outside the four walls of the household except under exceptional circumstances. In order to fulfill this objective, in the initial stage *Gurukuls* were established for the education of girls.³¹ But Swami Dayanand was against co-education of boys and girls. About the man-woman relationship in the educational centres, Swami Ji was totally against.³² The concern for women education was inspired also by the fear of the proselytizing activities and expanding impact of Christian missionaries. During the early 1880's the Arya Samajists had begun to found girls' schools in different parts of the Punjab. During 1885-88, the Amritsar Arya Samaj provided continual leadership while the Lahore Samaj concentrated on the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic schools and Jalandhar Samaj provided new patterns of motivation and leadership.³³ This Samaj opened a girls' school in 1886.³⁴ In September (1888), Munshi Ram started a girls' school at Talwan, but he had to close it soon on account of the unworthiness of the lady teachers. However, he did not give up. For in October, when he heard from his daughter how her teacher at the missionary school tended to indulge in Christian propaganda among the pupils he withdrew her and decided to open a girls school in Jalandhar. In 1880, the Arya Kanya Pathshala was opened in Jalandhar.³⁵ Lala Dev Raj (Manager of Arya Kanya Pathshaia) perceived education of girls on the basis of principles laid down by Swami Dayanand. So the curriculum of the Kanya Pathshala in addition to basic included sewing, embroidery, drawing, cooking, music, poetry, games, arithmetic and the religious literature. By 1889, the Ferozpur Arya Samaj, the Samajes of Gujrat and Bagwanpura organised a successful girls' school.³⁶ Lala Dev Raj intended to establish a Kanya Mahavidhalaya. The question of higher education for women divided one reformer against another. In 1894, in a series of letters appeared in *The Tribune*, Lala Lajpat Rai began the debate by questioning the advisability of female education. He did not reject female education, but instead wanted only primary education for girls.³⁷

9. Opening of Kanya Mahavidhalaya

In spite of various hindrances, Lala Dev Raj and Lala Munshi Ram opened the Kanya Mahavidhalaya on June 14, 1886.³⁸ The staff of the Kanya Mahavidhalaya urged their graduates to open schools in their own homes. In 1898, the Kanya Mahavidhalaya founded the '*Panchal pandita*', a Hindi monthly designed to preach and propagate the relevance of education of girls. The magazine was successful in the attainment of its objective.³⁹ Another monthly magazine in Hindi was '*Bharti*' and "*ty-fcn-l[kk*". started in 1920-22. About the moral duties of women, Lala Dev Raj says: to help their parents in house work, this is your's duty.⁴⁰ In 1934, in *ty-fcn-l[kk* about the beginning of Kanya Mahavidhalaya and Lala Dev Raj's role in its foundation⁴¹

10. School and Colleges for Women

Besides Kenya Mahavidhalaya, the other schools and college for girls established by Arya Samaj between 1886-1947 in different parts of Punjab were, *Arya Putri Pathshala*, Abohar (1903-04), Arya Girls Middle School, Moga (1921), G.M. Arya Girls Primary School, Patti, Amritsar (1933), Sain Dass A.S. Girls High School, Jalandhar city (1942), Shri Banwari Lal Vedic Middle Kanya Pathshala, Abohar (1944), Hans Raj Mahila Mahavidhalaya, Lahore, (1927), Hindu Mahavidhalaya, Lahore (1927), D.A.V. College, Jalandhar, D.A.V. College, Batala and D.A.V. College, Amritsar.⁴² In 1906, Lala Dev Raj and Lala Munshi Ram opened a boarding house for girls, the *Kanya Ashram*, which by 1913-14 had 105 residents from the Punjab, the North Western provinces and Poona. In 1906, a *Vidhya Bhawan* was opened.⁴³ Besides this, scholarships for girls in Mianwali district were founded by Lala Sukh Dayal. Bhagat Govind Ram bequeathed his property for the construction of a building for Girls school at Multan. In 1911, Mrs Ram Bhajji formed a new society the *Istri Maha Mandal* to give elementary education to married illiterate women.⁴⁴ Mahatma Hans Raj, an ardent Arya Samajist, decided that no one should be allowed to live in the Dayanand High School Hostel who was married. He also refused to admit married boys to his school and thus he made an unceasing war on the pernicious custom of child marriage.⁴⁵ Thus, the Arya Samajists emphasised that education of a woman which was a sort of preparation for the duties of life through lessons in practical wisdom. The leaders of Arya Samaj, in fact, found it difficult to perceive the changed position of women outside the domain of domesticity. They considered the home to be the proper place for women.⁴⁶ the discussion of women's problem in general terms and even in relation to specific societies in contemporary Punjab, centers around the genesis of the subordination of women, the basis of their continued inferiority.⁴⁷ The Arya Samaj in the process of formation of ideas and their translation into action did not go beyond the prescription of the patriarchal framework. They sought only limited and controlled emancipation of the womenfolk. Women, themselves were not partners in the schemes created for their regeneration. Modernity, for them meant the education of women to run family efficiently as 'good' daughters, self-sacrificing wives and responsible mothers without putting extra burden on the males, the essence of

patriarchal value system. However, it can be said that Arya Samaj provided some initiatives for the upliftment of women.

11. Conclusion

The period of later half of 19th century was an age of 'definition and redefinition'. The leaders of all the socio religious movements aspired to reorder society in the areas of social behavior, custom and structure or control. They initiated a process of regeneration and revitalization of the cultural norms and social practices. Arya Samaj's motive was to bring national progress and the great task before it was the problem of social reconstruction. Arya samaj did efforts for the upliftment of lower classes and women. Swami Dayanand did his best to eradicate the social evils afflicting the women. He assigned supreme authority to women in domestic matters and advocated equal right to men and women in all respects. For this Arya Samajists published and distributed tracts and pamphlets and created greater awareness among masses. Dayanand envisioned an open social system with education and not birth as the determinant of status, but the Arya Samaj in the process of formation of ideas and their translation into action did not go beyond the prescription of the patriarchal frame work. They sought only limited and controlled emancipation of the women folk. However Arya Samaj provided some initiative for the upliftment of women.

12. Future Scope

There is a change in the attitude of the people toward women, young Punjabi Hindu's seized the personal vision of swami Dayanand, adapted it to their own particular needs and transformed it into an ideology. The education of women by Arya Samaj will be contribution largely toward inculcating cultural value and strong character building in the women. It is going a long way in the contribution to the making of modern India

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