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Reassessing Swami Dayananda Saraswati's Role in Shaping Colonial Indian Society

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Abstract: Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) played a crucial role in shaping colonial Indian society through his advocacy for social reform, education, and women's empowerment. Emerging against the backdrop of British colonial rule, Dayananda responded to societal challenges such as caste discrimination and gender inequality by promoting a return to Vedic teachings. He founded the Arya Samaj in 1875, aiming to revitalize Hinduism and foster national consciousness. His reformist agenda included condemning untouchability and the caste system, asserting that social status should be determined by character rather than birth. Dayananda's educational initiatives emphasized moral principles, establishing institutions that provided education for both boys and girls, thereby challenging societal norms around women's roles. He opposed practices like child marriage and enforced widowhood, advocating for widow remarriage and increased rights for women. His teachings have left a lasting legacy in modern India, influencing social justice movements and promoting gender equity. Despite his focus on Hindu nationalism, Dayananda's vision contributed to a broader Indian identity that united various communities against colonial rule. Contemporary studies reveal the enduring impact of his educational and social reforms, highlighting their significance in current discussions on equality and justice. Dayananda's life and work exemplify a commitment to rational inquiry, social reform, and the empowerment of marginalized groups, establishing him as a pivotal figure in the socio-religious landscape of India.

Keywords: Arya Samaj, caste discrimination, education, social reform, untouchability, women's empowerment

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1. Introduction

Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883) emerged as a pivotal figure in the socio-religious landscape of colonial India. The British colonial era brought about profound transformations in

Indian society, challenging existing social structures and sparking various reform movements. The early 19th century was marked by a growing dissatisfaction with orthodoxy and social injustices, including caste discrimination and gender inequality. Figures like Dayananda Saraswati emerged in response to these challenges, advocating for a return to the original teachings of the Vedas, which he believed could address contemporary societal issues (Rai, L., 1967). His efforts to challenge traditional norms and promote education significantly influenced Indian society. This article examines the societal impact of Dayanand's work, particularly in the realms of education, social reform, women's empowerment, and Hindu revivalism, within the context of the British colonial period.

Dayananda was deeply troubled by the social and religious ills plaguing India. He embarked on a journey to revitalize Hinduism and promote social reform, leading to the establishment of the Arya Samaj in 1875. Dayanand's vision aimed to restore Hinduism's pristine form through vigorous socio-religious reform, fostering national consciousness and pride. Promoting rationalism and moral conduct which is drawn from Vedic principles. His movement wanted to get rid of perceived corruption in Hinduism and demanded social equality. By situating his contributions within this broader reform movement, it becomes evident that Dayanand's work was instrumental in shaping a new socio-religious consciousness in colonial India, one that rejected blind tradition and embraced rational inquiry and social justice.

2. Social Reform Initiatives

Dayananda's approach to social reform extended beyond the conventional mindset; he actively challenged the caste system and practices like untouchability. He believed in the inherent equality of all individuals, regardless of caste. Through public speeches and writings, Dayananda condemned the injustices associated with caste discrimination, urging society to reject these oppressive practices. Dayananda's vision for social change was rooted in reforming the Indian social system, which was deeply entrenched in the caste hierarchy. To bring about meaningful change, he believed the caste system needed transformation. Dayananda tackled the caste issue with caution, seeking to eliminate its harmful aspects while preserving its beneficial elements (Saraswati, S., D., 1875). Historically, the caste system was based on division of labour, with each group - Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra - contributing their unique skills. Initially, the

Vedas recognized occupations and qualifications, not birth, as the basis for caste. However, over time, the system deteriorated, prioritizing birth alone. This created artificial divisions, allowing the privileged to maintain their power. He viewed caste as a useful social organisation and suggested that the caste of a person was to be determined by his character, action and nature- not by his birth(Gupta, R., 2015).

Swami Dayananda strongly condemned the practice of untouchability, considering it cruel and unjust. He argued that it contradicted the principles of the Vedic religion and was not ordained by God. Dayananda believed that untouchability arose from Poor living conditions, Negative influences, Lack of proper training and Weak moral character. This harmful practice began as a way to exclude individuals who broke societal norms and moral codes. Dayananda saw it as an issue of personal hygiene, character development, and environmental improvement. He advocated that any Sudra who maintained physical and mental purity had the right to be considered "twice-born" – a status typically reserved for higher castes. Dayananda's pioneering work preceded that of social reformers like Mahatma Gandhi, who dedicated his life to uplifting the Untouchables. Gandhi acknowledged Dayananda's contributions in the following words: “Among the many rich legacies that Swami Dayananda has left to us, his unequivocal pronouncement against untouchability is undoubtedly one.” (Sarda, H. B., 1944).

Dayananda's followers rendered their social services in different ways. As early as 1877 they opened the first Arya Samaj orphanage in Ferozepore. Soon few more orphanages were established throughout Punjab. To some extent, this initiative countered the conversion programme of the Christian missionaries in the region (Rai, L., 1967). His advocacy for social reform fostered a sense of unity among various communities, encouraging individuals to come together in the pursuit of social justice. The principles of the Arya Samaj emphasized brotherhood and mutual respect, contributing to a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards caste and class distinctions. This collective movement towards social equality had lasting implications for Indian society and inspired subsequent reform movements throughout the country (Dhananjay, K., 2010).

3. Contributions to Education

Education was central to Dayanand’s vision for societal reform. He believed that knowledge was a

powerful tool for empowerment and liberation. The third chapter of the *Satyartha Prakash* outlines a detailed educational framework. Dayananda strongly believed in education as a vital tool for shaping individual character. He argued that the primary goal of a robust educational system should be the development of individuals within society, emphasizing that it should not produce neglected or directionless individuals. He asserted that education must be grounded in moral and religious principles. Following Plato's ideas, he advocated for state-mandated education for children, insisting that it was the king's responsibility to ensure both boys and girls practised celibacy and received an education. Parents who resisted this mandate should face penalties. Under state regulations, no child should remain at home after the age of eight (Saraswati, S., D., 1875). Education, in his view, was essential for dispelling ignorance, fostering enlightenment, and driving social reform and renewal—serving as the key to India's awakening.

Dayananda framed a comprehensive curriculum that included grammar, philosophy, the Vedas, and the sciences, later expanding to include medicine, music, and art. He promoted education for all four social classes, believing it essential for the prosperity of Aryavarta. When each class received appropriate education, they could fulfil their social roles, leading to the resurgence of prosperity and happiness in Aryavarta, benefiting the entire world (Saraswati, S., D., 1875). To achieve these educational ideals, institutions like the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic (DAV) colleges and Gurukuls were established across the country by the Arya Samajists., promoting both modern and Vedic education. Dayanand's focus on rational thought and scientific inquiry paved the way for a curriculum that encouraged critical thinking and engagement with contemporary issues.

Moreover, Dayananda championed women's education at a time when such ideas were radical. He argued that women should have equal access to education and opportunities, emphasizing their role in the family and society. His initiatives led to the establishment of schools specifically for girls, challenging societal norms that relegated women to subservient roles. Arya Samajists established the Arya Kanya Pathshala, a girls' school designed to offer education free from missionary influence. They also founded the Kanya Ashram, a women's hostel. Both institutions faced controversy within the broader Hindu community, whether among orthodox or moderate Aryans. The success of the Kanya Pathshala sparked discussions about expanding to higher

education, leading to the founding of Kanya Mahavidyalaya on June 14, 1896. Initially an extension of the original school, it gradually evolved into a fully developed high school and eventually a women's college. By 1906, the Mahavidyalaya had 203 enrolled students across all grades, while the Ashram housed 105 women, including unmarried, married, and widowed individuals. The school became central to an educational movement, inspiring its alumnae to open their own girls' schools. Additionally, Kanya Mahavidyalaya published materials promoting women's education and launched the Hindi monthly, *Panchal Pandita*, in 1898 to advocate for female education. For the militant Aryas, this educational initiative aimed to cultivate a new ideal of Hindu womanhood. As a result, many women began to seek education and assert their rights, laying the foundation for future movements advocating for gender equality in India (Sharma, A., 2021)

4. Women's Empowerment

Swami Dayananda strongly opposed child marriage and enforced widowhood, citing their lack of Vedic sanction. To combat child marriage, he proposed a higher marriage age limit for girls. His eugenics plan aimed to create a healthy society and eradicate child marriage. Dayananda highlighted the plight of child widows, prohibited from remarrying due to scriptural interpretations. To address this, he recommended the Niyoga System. If Niyoga wasn't possible, widow remarriage should be practised for the benefit of society. In a lecture at Poona, Dayananda argued that widow remarriage offers a better solution than adhering to false traditions. He firmly believed that the state should provide support for widows (Jordens, J., T., F., 1978). Dayanand advocated for women's rights and education, challenging patriarchal practices like sati and social isolation of women through Purdah. Arya Samaj's women's education initiatives and social welfare programs enhanced women's social and economic status. Dayanand's vision for women's empowerment remains influential in modern India.

5. Legacy and Impact

Swami Dayananda Saraswati's socio-religious contributions have left a profound legacy in modern India. His emphasis on rationality, education, and social reform continues to resonate in contemporary discussions around social justice and equality. The Arya Samaj remains active,

advocating for the values Dayananda espoused, including religious tolerance and gender equity. It is true that he did not represent an all-India nationalism as we define it today. His stance was rooted in Hindu scriptures, and his influence was primarily among Hindu communities. There are clear examples of hostility from Muslims towards him. However, the Hindu nationalism inspired by Dayananda has played a significant role in shaping Indian nationalism. Nationalism aims to strengthen the social and political bonds within a society, requiring the overcoming of local and individual loyalties. Thus, even though Dayananda advocated for Hindu unity, he contributed to Indian nationalism, as an organized Hindu majority could effectively resist British colonial rule (Rolland, R., 1944).

Recent empirical studies have highlighted the long-term impact of Dayanand's teachings on societal attitudes. Research indicates that the educational initiatives he championed led to increased literacy rates and empowerment among marginalized groups. Additionally, the principles of the Arya Samaj have inspired various social justice movements, promoting the idea of a more inclusive and equitable society. This ongoing relevance of his work underscores the transformative nature of Dayanand's contributions to colonial and post-colonial India.

6. Conclusion

Swami Dayananda Saraswati's contributions to colonial Indian society were marked by a commitment to reform, education, and social equality. Indeed, he was a key figure in shaping modern India. His writings, speeches, and actions reflect his deep commitment to social and religious reform. He championed ideals such as social justice, integration, religious revival, women's empowerment and national unity. By reforming Hinduism, he challenged the divisive customs and practices within the religion. Dayananda advocated for a national education system rooted in moral values, vehemently opposed caste divisions, and sought to reintegrate the 'out-castes' and Untouchables into Hindu society. He promoted equal treatment and enlightenment for women and celebrated the Vedic values of the Golden Age. His work marked him as a radical reformer and a passionate advocate for social change, laying the groundwork for a constructive political consciousness in nineteenth-century India. He emphasized that both the religion and sovereignty of India should belong to its people. A notable aspect of Dayananda's philosophy is his humanism, focused on the reformation of individuals and a deep concern for fostering a rich moral

and material life for all. As we revisit his work, it is essential to recognize the enduring impact of his teachings on contemporary Indian society and their relevance in ongoing discussions about social justice and equality. Dayanand's legacy continues to inspire future generations in their pursuit of a more equitable and enlightened society.

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