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Arya Samaj: Upliftment of untouchables in Solan district

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Abstract

Arya Samaj founded by Maharishi Dayanand was a revivalist movement in nature, inspired physical, spiritual and social awakening and aimed to the removal of meaningless superstitions, dogmas and customs from Indian socio-religious-cultural fabric. The ancient traditional Varna system evolved into caste hierarchies and consequent social segregation - tragic for the lower strata of Indian society. The most pernicious aspect of this caste system in the hills of Colonial Punjab was the caste segregation related with untouchability and the inhuman behavior of the upper castes - dangerously disastrous for the lower castes. Arya Samaj came like a beacon light in the hills for the downtrodden, especially to untouchables and in all the erstwhile princely states in the hills of Colonial Punjab. Arya Samaj opened its branches every nook and corner in and the present day Himachal Pradesh. Arya Samaj also had much impact in Solan District and this organisation particularly did tremendous work for the upliftment of the untouchables. Its concept of the *Shuddhi* elevated the socio-religious status of lower castes and stemmed the tide of conversion. Arya Samaj promoted education amidst the untouchables, provided them equality and equity in all sphere of life, which heralded the transformation for the victimized sections of Solan District.

Keywords: Untouchables, Arya Samaj, conversion, casteism, segregation, upliftment, downtrodden, Shuddhi, empowerment

Introduction

Arya Samaj is a brainchild of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, who founded this socio-religious organization on April 10, 1875 at Bombay. The objectives of Arya Samaj are oriented to goodness of all by promoting physical, spiritual, and social well being of everyone and move the Hindu religion away from the fictitious beliefs right from the beginning. As the motto of Arya Samaj signifies '*Krinvanto Vishvam Aryam*'; which means - 'make the world noble', shows the real spirit of the organization. Arya Samaj was a revivalist movement in its character and took inspiration from the indigenous culture, and, awakened the true form of the Vedic dharma with the aim of removing superstitions and meaningless customs from Indian socio-religious-cultural fabric. Therefore, Dayanand raised the slogan: '*Back to the Vedas*' and began an era of social, cultural, religious and educational revolution and special attention was given for the betterment of downtrodden.

During the last quarter of 19th century and early 20th centuries, the caste factor was very rife in Indian mindset especially in the hills of Colonial Punjab. More precisely the rules of casteism and untouchability were more rigid in the hills as compared to the plains of Punjab. The social stratification of the population was defined by caste in the entire hill region. Each caste ranked higher or lower on the basis of the birth and ritual purity. The ancient Varna system which classified the society mainly into four divisions, namely: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and the *Shudras*; was based on the occupational choice without a vertical social hierarchy, which was actually socialistic in spirit. But with the passage of time, it underwent various changes and Varna system turned into the form of caste system, which was compartmentalized on the basis of the birth of a person, which finally gave the first three castes the status of *dvija* (twice born), since the men from these castes were entitled to use the sacred thread (*Janeu*), and the fourth caste (*Shudras*) was left out of this fold. As a result the *Shudras* were considered inferior to the other three castes and were assigned the duties of facilitating the superior castes ^[1].

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In the hill region of Punjab, the *Shudras* or the low castes with almost no status were socially ostracized by privileged castes and were deprived of higher training of mind. The most pernicious aspect of their life was the casteism bounded with untouchability. The lowest of the low in the hierarchical order of caste were graded as untouchables and they were particularly associated with unhygienic, degraded, polluted and socially looked down hereditary vocations. With strong bearing of caste in the hills, Hindu society strongly insisted on the segregation of untouchables and not allowed them to live inside their own areas, and also debarred them from places of worship and institutions of learning. They were considered as polluted persons and had to go with this stigma in the prevailing reality and had to accept for themselves the status of untouchables'. During the Colonial times, casteism was prevalent and much rigid in its form in the Shimla hills. The Christian missionaries were also very active, especially in the cantonment areas like; Shimla, Jatog, Kasauli, Dagshai and Subathu. These situations paved the way for the rudiment of philosophy of Dayanand in this region.

The district Solan in its present form comprises of the erstwhile princely states of Bhagal, Bhagal, Hindur, Mangal, Kunihar, Beja, Mehlog and some parts of Keonthal state. The district came into existence on 1st September, 1972. But Arya Samaj carried out its various social and religious activities in the neck of woods since the beginning of the 20th century. Arya Samaj branches were formed at Kasauli, Dagshai, Subathu, Nalagarh, Solan Kandaghat, Salogra and Top-ki-Ber to make a lot easier to disseminate the ideology of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. Arya Samaj began a drive of equality, fraternity and liberty for the upliftment of these socially ostracized castes consequently working for the economic betterment of the downtrodden. The biggest challenge came in the form of conversions of the lower castes to other denominations such as Islam and Christianity. The lower caste people did adopt other religions merely for the purpose of social equality and dignity. Arya Samaj found this religious scamper really challenging. The aggressive setup of the Islam and Christianity did pose great threat to the existence for the Hindu community as such. The farsighted humanitarian approach of the Arya Samaj did give the lower caste people great confidence, as a result of which the conversions did stop and the people who had embraced other religions got back to the Hindu fold especially by way of *Shuddhikaran*. Arya Samaj has achieved a significant gauge of success in reclaiming Hindus converted to other faiths, and in raising the social status of the depressed classes among Hindus and preventing them from forsaking Hinduism for other religious denominations.

Eminent Arya Samajists belonging to the high castes used to visit the houses of untouchables and outcastes in the remote areas of the hills ate food cooked by them and drank water brought by them. Arya Samajists opened schools for the children of lower castes. This was the time when a Hindu considered it a sin to be touched by 'untouchables' and for this they were ostracized from Hinduism. The remarkable consequence of *Shuddhi* resulted in persuading Hindu society to assimilate the low caste untouchables at par with the high castes and raising them to a respectable position in the social scale. The orthodox *Sanatanis* were furious with this action of Arya Samaj because they admitted the lower

caste untouchables into Hindu society and elevated the acts of *Shuddhikran* in spite of all socio-religious odds.

The entire region of the hills of Colonial Punjab are replete with sagas of great achievements of the Arya Samaj as Arya Samaj did take the British and Indian orthodox minded *brahminical* mindset head on say it in erstwhile states of Solan district. In Solan Arya Samaj did achieve the objectives of the upliftment of the downtrodden and the lower castes in almost all its branches. The stigma of social segregation and untouchability was not new to the people of this neck of the woods, and as such Arya Samaj came forward like a beacon light for the lower strata of present day Solan district. The most noticeable task for the untouchables were done by Arya Samaj in Top-ki-Ber, and Baunch villages in Solan district, where most of the inhabitants were schedule caste *Koli* community. In the 20th century untouchability, caste rigidity and social discrimination were very rife, which saw the roots for the formation of Arya Samaj in this locale. Tara Chand, Ghasi Ram, Janaki Ram, Badri Dutt, Bija Ram, and Gorkhiya Ram of Top-ki Ber village was first to come under the influence of Arya Samaj. Most of them had faced caste discrimination, since their school days, when they were the students of Devathi School located in their vicinity. The behavior of teachers and fellow students was quite indifferent and discriminatory towards them. These low caste born students were prevented to listen to the 'Holy Mantras' of Sanskrit and even in the class upper caste students tantalized them scathingly and were not even allowed to sit together with them and drink water from the same tap. This kind of discrimination made deep impact upon the tender minds of the children of Top Ki Ber, but they had to bear for the sake of education. Once they came into contact with the preacher of Arya Samaj Dagshai, and he convinced them to get enrolled in the Arya Samaj Gurukul at Dagshai, where all of them learnt Sanskrit and studied Vedas for five years and returned back as a *Vedic* scholars and staunch Arya Samajists^[2].

This was the revolutionary incident, which stupendously changed the life and thinking of the people in the region. Ghasi Ram, Tara Chand, Janaki Ram, Badri Dutt, and Bija Ram totally abandoned the Santani rituals and followed the true Vedic Dharam as advocated by Swami Dayanand Saraswati. They preached the philosophy of Arya Samaj in the area, so gradually the whole village came in to the fold of Arya Samaj. They all were performing weekly *hevans* and *sandhyas* twice a day, left idol worship and other *Puranic* rituals. In another description, Dr. Vijay Mohan Singha narrated that when Kalu Ram, an active worker of Arya Samaj Solan, started preaching in the vicinity of Solan, he was heartbroken to see the social discrimination in this area. Then Kalu Ram gathered the *Koli* community of Baunch and Top-Ki-Ber villages and consecrated them and made these untouchables the members of Arya Samaj through the process of *Shuddhi* and performed their *yagyopavit sanskar*, i.e. wearing of sacred thread *janeu*^[3]. This change helped them to get the authority to read Sanskrit, to perform *Vedic* rituals and feel equal to the people of upper castes in social status.

In the princely state of Hindur, Kishori Lal Gautam, established the Arya Samaj at Nalagarh and he donated his land around 200 sq. m., to this Samaj, which was registered in the name of Arya Pratinidhi Sabha Panjab. Soon with his

strenuous efforts Arya Samaj temple of single storey was built there and many people including low castes attracted towards the philosophy of Swami Dayanand. But in general, the condition of the lower castes, especially untouchables were very measurable and they were banned to take water from the well in front of Hanuman temple in the Nalagarh town and other parts of the princely state. In 1945, Kishori Lal Vaidya, the *Pradhan* of the Arya Samaj Nalagarh, went on an indefinite fast in front of the Hanuman temple well and declared that 'he would not end the fast unless the lower caste people were allowed to fill water from this well.' After the intervention of Raja Joginder Singh, the ruler of the state, the right to fill water was given to lower castes and then Kishori Lal Gautam ended his fast^[4]. This is how the Arya Samaj worked in the region to raise the social status of the lower castes.

The Kasauli Arya Samaj, which was established in 1912 also worked hard to propagate the philosophy of Swami Dayanand, particularly for the elevation of lower castes and more devotedly for the upliftment of untouchables, which resulted in crippling down of missionary activities of the Christians, who were wooing this section of society on the pretext of social and religious equality. An orphanage was established here for the children of poor and needy, where many orphans of low castes took shelter. Members of Kasauli Arya Samaj regularly visited into the villages and inspired the people of lower caste to send their children to school and for this sake a Gurukul was started near Kasauli town^[5].

A branch of Arya Samaj was established in Solan, a town of princely state Bhagat, in the year 1924, by Indra Vidya Vajasapati, who was the son of Swami Shraddha Nand, the doyen of Arya Samaj. In 1928, a staunch Arya Samajist Rai Sahab Roshan Lal, a resident of Jullandhar, purchased land in the heart of Solan town and donated this to the Arya Samaj. A year later construction work of building began on this land, for which donations were collected from general public, while main donors were Rai Sahab Jawala Prasad, Rai Sahab Sunder Lal Sahgal and Dr. Nanak Chand Verma. Raja Durga Singh of princely State also made a handsome donation for the construction of the building of Arya Samaj Solan. Solan was a mid halt to all *Pracharks*, *Updeshaks*, *Bhajneeks*, who used to come from various part of Punjab to propagate *Vedic Dharma* in the hills and Arya Samaj Solan always acted promptly to host them.^[6] Solan was the center of promulgation of Vedic philosophy as propounded by Swami Dayananda. This branch did tremendous efforts to uplift the lower caste people by way of *Suddhikaran* and by providing to them education. Another Arya Samaj near Solan is at Dharampur, which is located in the Simla hills on Kalka Simla railway line around 25 km from Kalka. Arya Samaj was established at Dharampur in 1925. Kesho Ram purchased land near railway station and soon constructed a beautiful two storey building, in which there was a temple with one hall for *havans* and *satsangs*. This Samaj did commendable work for the equality of *Harijans* in the region and also performed *Shuddhi* of the untouchables for the sake of providing them equal social status^[7].

The members of Arya Samaj Dagshai did preaching among the lower castes and encouraged them to adopt the concept of *Sanskritisation* for the elevation of their social status. Many of the people of the low caste community became the flag bearers of the mission of Arya Samaj in the region^[8]. Kandaghat was the summer capital of princely state of

Patiala, located about 15 kms from Solan town on the Shimla Chandigarh road. In 1935, Lala Jai Lal Sud established the Arya Samaj in this town and always motivated the all sections of the society to give equal status to lower castes untouchables with his efforts a few people of lower caste by birth, very enthusiastically and actively participated in the activities of Arya Samaj^[9]. Mahashay Kaku Ram and his wife Shanti Devi of Mahi village, who were born in Koli community, worked vigorously for the removal of social evils, and superstitions in the Shimla hills, particularly in Bhagat state. Both are especially remembered for their efforts put in the elevation of lower caste Hindus^[10].

Subathu Arya Samaj was established in response to British missionary activities in this area during Colonial times, which were particularly targeting the lower castes. Many missionary schools and tuberculosis sanatoriums were opened in the hills of Subthau, Dharampur and Kasauli^[11]. To counter these Colonial activities, Arya Samaj established its branch at Subathu in the early 20th century. This Samaj awakened the people against the hidden agenda of missionaries and educated the low caste untouchables not to get into the trap of missionaries^[12]. Thus, this Samaj initiated various socio-religious activities for the betterment of downtrodden.

This Arya Samaj Salogra was started by Babu Bishan Dass of Village Gunthah and Lala Nathu Ram of Salogra and they became founder *Pradhan* and *Mantri* respectively. This Samaj also worked towards the upliftment of the low caste untouchables, especially to Koli and Barad community of Salogra. The local habitants treated these castes harshly and disapproved the social interaction with them. Barad was the lowest in the social ladder of hierarchy. Members of Arya Samaj defied the orthodox orders of socio-religious conducts and worked for the elevation and upliftment of such communities of the area.

Arya Samaj's efforts were selfless, and established some special schools for the education of the children of untouchable castes. Thus, it is clear that the caste eradication campaigns launched by the Arya Samaj reduced the caste bonds in this neck of woods. The low caste untouchables got the right to get education and to take water from common wells, which were earlier only the privilege of the *dwija*- the upper castes. The social status of untouchables was raised to the rank of touchable and they mustered the courage to adopt the practices of upper caste people, which ultimately stemmed the tide of their conversion to other religions. Arya Samajists helped the propagation of the *Vedic Dharma* by going from door to door; simultaneously did work for the obliteration of social evils, women empowerment, and upliftment of downtrodden, and to bring back all those untouchables, who had renounced their religion. The Arya Samajists seek not only the transformation of the nation but also the freedom of untouchables, the oppressed and victimised sections of the society. All of them were iconic in their own way and they took traditions, dogmas, blind adherence to obsolete norms and male chauvinism head on and gave people of the weaker section of the society a new ray of hope of living gracefully.

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