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Socio-religious reform movements and dowry practice in colonial Punjab

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse “*Dowry Practice In Colonial Punjab (1849-1947 A.D.): Socio-Economic And Cultural Implications*” with special reference to Singh Sabha and Arya Samaj Movements. In the 19th century, India began discovering its long devoted cultural and ideals and self consciousness. During this period of reformation and renaissance, the country began to evolve vital principle of its glorious existence of the ancient days. K.M. Panikkar state, “Modern India continued to remain essentially Indian certain of her own individuality drawing spiritual inspiration & sustenance from their own past.”^[1]

Keywords: Dowry practice, colonial Punjab, reform movements

Introduction

In the 19th century, women issues were raised by the British historians. They took up the question that how they can be modernized? It became the central question in British India because the foreign rulers have focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. Enamored with their “Civilizing Mission” influential British writers condemned Indian religion, culture & society for their roles and customs regarding women. James Mill in the book “History of British India” argued that women’s position could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement^[2]. The reformers who advocated the emancipation of women aspired to reinstall them on their honoured seat of ancient glory and splendour. These reform groups in all parts of British India focused their attention on *sati*, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, prohibition on female education and others. But the main reason of these evils was dowry.

Dowry originally started as love gifts known as *stridaan*^[3] for the marriage of upper casts individuals, but during the medieval period the demands for dowry became a precursor for marriage. With the passage this system became rigid and expensive. With changing political times, the socio-cultural milieu has also undergone a change. Punjab due to its geographical situation witnessed many forces and counter-forces which left an impact on society. The form of dowry which existed in pre-colonial period was not the same as it existed in colonial period. The British rule in Punjab brought about a radical change. The world of peasant was transformed, landed individual property rights were introduced for men by which they could sell or mortgage their land.

At the time of annexation by the British, Punjab population was comprised of Muslims, Hindus & Sikhs. The British wrested powers from the Sikhs who were numerically the smallest religious community. The British period saw the coming of the Christian missionaries and proselytisation in Punjab. It is argued that conversion to Christianity led to the revitalization of three religious communities^[4]. In response to conversion, the Sikhs started the Singh Sabha movement. The Ahmediya movement among the Punjabi Muslims and the popularization of Arya Samaj Hindus could be viewed as partly a response to the conversions to Christianity. The issues of religious identity and conversion have contributed towards the emergence of various movements^[5].

The British period saw the coming of the Christianity and their economic policies towards the Indian peasant. On the other side they had been started the interference in Indian religions. So people started the religious movement against the Britishers. Indians had started the India struggle for freedom where as Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs had also started their

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reform movements against the Christianity. People wanted to change their socio-religious conditions and promote their own religion.

The primary feature of Raj was imperialist exploitation and objective was to obtain maximum revenue. These areas witnessed that British rule created areas new laws and whose consequences were realized later. The spread of western education awoken the people about their glorious past, printing technology has had radical consequence for Punjab through “The Wood Despatch 1854” and its implications and after. The emergence of vernacular printing created favourable condition for the spread of ideas away the people at large. The uniform system of education all over the country through a single language produced a feeling of like-mindedness among the people. It gave India a common language for socio-political thinking and produced lingual unity in thought, feeling and ideas. It enabled India to share the results of the great movements in other countries of the world.

With the fresh elements of a new philosophy and dynamics of a revolutionary thought, western knowledge became the springboard of India's transformation into a modern country. With a broad and rational outlook, enlightened Indians proceeded to remove the social disabilities of women. Inspired by the ideals of liberalism, humanitarianism, progress and change, liberty and equality, to revive the indigenous cultural values and enunciate useful reforms in order to ameliorate the women's condition.

But the most effective aspect of English education was the awakening of Indian women themselves. They regained their long lost consciousness and began to compare their own restricted and over-burdened life with that of western women who enjoyed freedom. With English education and use of a common language in the background, Indian women from all parts of the country became alive to their age-old sufferings at the hands of orthodox society and were able to launch a crusade against pernicious social evils [6]. They organized themselves into units to fight for their rights and to effectively play their distinctive role in shaping the country's destiny. In a nutshell, English education postulated social harmony which brought about significant change in outlook of women themselves. System of communication and transport was created. It brought people into frequent interaction. As Durkheim says, “Dynamic density increased a dialectical outcome of bringing people together was also the emergence of plausibility structure of people organisations [7].”

Similarly the Sikh middle class began to look for its roots in Sikh tradition which found artesian in the Singh Sabha. The nationalist movement in Punjab emerged from those socio-religious movements which within two decades got routinised and became the basis of Punjab renaissance. The general status of women in society is indeed very important and fundamental as it goes a long way in helping on to have a correct understanding of nature of society, its vision and value. The social structure would remain weak and incomplete without the participation of women in social and other activity [8].

The Singh Sabha was one of the most significant reform movement organized by the Sikhs in Punjab in October 1873, at Amritsar. It aimed at introducing reforms in the Sikh religion as well as society by removing doubts, suspicions, useless rituals and rites, ceremonies and customs that had cropped up in the Sikh society with the passage of

time. Encouragement of Punjabi language, literature and education among the Sikhs was its another important objective.

Singh Sabha was an organization and its leaders raised their voice with determination against these vices which stood in way of women's emancipation in particular and Sikh society in general [9].

The Singh Sabha laid stress on religious, social and literary activities among the Sikhs. It brought in its fold the whole Sikh community recording its customs, acting as a channel for transmitting traditions and representing to Sikh cause before the colonial Raj. The main object of Singh Sabha was to protect the purity of sikh religion. The social programme of the Singh Sabha was a comprehensive one the leaders of Singh Sabha started an agitation against dowry practice, in favour of education and social reforms among sikh women [10].

The social abuses prevalent in Sikh society—such as miserable condition of women, child marriage, polygamy, female infanticide but because of restricted scope they could not achieve much success and the work was further carried on vigorously by the Singh Sabha under the control of Chief Khalsa Diwan. The first important problem, which the Sabha had to face, was dowry practice because this was major cause of other evils. Singh Sabha emphasized complete equality of sexes and advocated the same type of baptism for men and women. Singh Sabha tried to mitigate the evil practice of female infanticide practised among the Sikhs. The female infanticide was a practice of killing girls at their birth. It was prevalent in most parts of northern India, and in the Punjab it prevailed among the *Rajputs* of hills and the *Khatris* in the region of Gujranwala, Multan, Jhang, Shahpur, Jhelum and Lahore. The *Bedis* almost in whole of the Punjab practiced it on a large scale [11]. They never allowed a single female child to survive or live [12]. Though the female infanticide was practiced secretly, it was not considered illegal or criminal either by the state or society.

So it continued unchecked. It was believed that *Doab* area and fifteen hundred populations at Dera Baba Nanak region which did not have a single girl alive [13]. Because girls were considered to be in economic burden, as a lot of money had to spent at time of their marriage. The reformers of Singh Sabha studied the causes which were responsible for the in-human practice. With the earnest efforts of the Sabha, the practice of female infanticide died slowly.

The Sabha took the decision that no girl should be married before 18 years to earliest 16 years. No man to be married till he is at least twenty and in no case till he is able to maintain homely and his family. Child marriage was related to dowry practice which had the reason of widows somewhere. The first widow marriage was performed in Lahore Singh Sabha. Widow re-marriage was one of the principle objects of Chief Khalsa Diwan to provide means for the maintenance of widows. A serious consideration to the idea of starting widow homes and widow remarriage associations thus converting the misery of the thousand of innocent girls into happiness. In 1914 *Istari sahaik vidyalaya* where elementary and vocational education was given to widows was decided to establish. The Singh Sabha leaders condemned the dowry practice due to which the girls were considered to be an economic burden on the family [14]. Parents borrow money for the purpose, which they cannot pay throughout their lives and are verily crushed down once

for all. The Singh Sabha leaders suggested a way to prevent this evil. They were against any *Dikhawa* or show either in the bride or the bridegrooms' house^[15]. They made a strong plea to curtail extravagant expenditure on marriage ceremonies. In the beginning, the Singh Sabha too had to face some difficulties in convincing the people to switch over to Sikh form of marriage as prescribed by their scriptures. But all this was overcome with the passage of time. Anand marriage Act in year 1909 was introduced by Tikka Ripudaman Singh of Nabha^[16]. Lahore was established in 1906, *Khalsa Bhujangun* School at Mastuana in 1906-1907 and Guru Nanak *Kanya Pathshala*, at Quota in 1906.

This was a decisive victory of the Chief Khalsa Diwan. Very soon it began to be universally practised by Sikhs, all over the world. Singh Sabha did awaken female through education, until these evils could remove in society. For these purpose, Singh Sabha realized that importance of education is a powerful medium of carrying out social and religious reforms. The Singh Sabha leaders aimed at providing such education to the Sikhs as would not only make them better fitted for life struggle but also by infusing the religious spirit of the khalsa was to make them better Sikh. They started *widiah* Punjab, a periodical in 1880 to preach education. It was this movement among the Sikhs which advocated the cause of female education at the time-*Sikh Kanya Pathshala*, In 1907 Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia, Secretary of Chief Khalsa Diwan opened the Khalsa Anglo Gurumukh Girls School at Sialkot.

According to the Punjab Education Commission Reports of 1917-1918 no less than 43,455, of Sikhs of girls receiving education were in primary stage in Punjab. Bhai Khem Singh Bedi, Bhai Thakar Singh, Bhai Gurmukh Singh, Bhai Teja Singh were the prominent leaders who took up the measures for female education. They started educational conference in 1908. Singh Sabha did commendable work in saving the women work in saving the women from shackles of slavery.

Arya Samaj was also a social reform movement in Punjab. It did not only carry on social reform but also generated religious controversies of conflicts. Its founder, Swami Dayanand Saraswati-who originated from *kathawar* in Gujarat, established first formal organization of Arya Samaj at Bombay in the year 1875. He reinterpreted The Vedas and provided the people with a modern view of Hinduism. He tried to nullify the aforesaid practices and talked about the equal rights for men and women in every sphere and area of life and society. Within just a span of two years by 1877 it had captured the imaginations of section of Punjabi's and starting from Lahore it spread to entire Punjab. Its development signified collective efforts directed essentially at solution of common problem of material and psychological adjustment within the Raj^[17].

Arya Samaj as social and religious reform movement arose out of the existing subjective and objective conditions in the nineteenth century competing religious communities came into existence owing to various change brought about by the British rule, one of which was the conversions to Christianity.

Religious and social reforms among the Hindus could be viewed as defence against external threats^[18]. For this purpose, Swami Dayanand Saraswati had travelled the many places in Punjab. During his journey he visited Amritsar, Gurdaspur and stayed at Lahore for the last three months.

He also established three new branches and many people started joining it. Thus outside of Lahore, the major area of Arya samajist support was the Jullundur Doab, particularly the cities of Jullunder, Ludhiana, Hoshiarpur and Hissar^[19]. He realised that many social evils were present in Hindu society like female infanticide, child marriage, and widow's problem etc. He took these evils roots in dowry practice somewhere. Swami analysed that child marriage had become almost prevalent in Hindu society.

Census reports of 1921 has recorded 612 child brides of below one year:2024 less than five years: 97857 brides under 10 years and 3,32,024 under fifteen years, the result was that thousands of young girls become widows before they have ever seen their husbands arrive at physical maturity^[20].

The widows were not allowed to remarry, thus their lives were miserable. Arya Samaj strongly opposed child marriage. It conducted a fiery crusade, against this evil. Swami Dayanand had told that the best time for girl's marriage was between 16 and 24 years. Lala Lajpat Rai stated in his book 'Arya Samaj', we have denounced early marriage from thousand of platforms and even though we got practically no help from the legislature. We have made sustain progress in the marriageable age of boys and girls. Personally, I consider it is a social crime to marry a girl under the age of 16 years, even though Indian girls reach puberty at about the age of 12. Some of Arya samajists like Lala Lajpat Rai, Bhai Parma Nand, Harbilas Sarda & Chaudhary Mukhtiar Singh were the members of central assembly. This supported government measure against some of the social evils.

The question of marriage reform was linked to two problems; first, the role of women in Hindu society and second, -- the degree to which the Arya Samaj would separate itself from existing social groups.

The reformation of marriage rituals, the remarriage of widows, the campaign against child marriage and the question of educating women formed a cluster of causes at the heart of Arya relations with the Hindu community.

Like any other social reform organization, Aryas worked to change the role of the Hindu woman. "...these days are the days of progress and reform the time is advancing with rapid strides. Every obstacle in the way will be sooner or later cleared up when women will have equal rights with men" though seldom expressed in such absolute terms, Aryas, if successful, would create a modernized women markedly different from the traditional Hindu wife^[21].

It is due to influence of Arya Samaj and other similar reform societies that the ideas above mentioned have permitted the Hindu society at large with the exception of more orthodox^[22]. Dowry practice was a major social evil. It was very difficult for poor peasants to marry their daughters because more spent the money on *milini*, *tikka* and other. Another point to be noted is that the cost of the wedding of daughter during the colonial period went up because of British policies—chief among these was the policy to reduce the allowance to nearly 10% which the villages had received earlier for the social expenses of the community^[23]. These included the maintenance of the village *chaupal* or guest house where the marriage ceremonies were held as well as lamps, water temple, decoration and fees for the *bhadsn* and *mirasi*^[24]. Between 1886 and 1890, Aryas began to adopt the marriage rituals in the *Sanskar Vidhi* instead of more elaborate and expensive forms of popular Hinduism. Arya

Samaj views that one man who was sufficiently strong – minded, marriage required the agreement of the contracting families, who in turn needed to face the wrath of their respective lineages. More often than not the decision lay with the groom's family while the bride's relatives acquiesced. The Arya press reported Samaj marriages in the Punjab and beyond. Each incident provided both a model for others and encouragement to those contemplating such a step ^[25].

Arya rituals had their practical as well as ideological aspects. They could be performed with much less expense. Aryas emphasized the 'pure and simple Vedic rites,' without fireworks, dancing girls, or the elaborate rituals of orthodox Hinduism.

For those wished to marry their children with Arya rites to other Samaj families, or within the expanding educated community, the location of suitable mates became a serious problem. Separated from their families either by distance or ideology, Aryas developed a new marriage institution—the newspaper advertisement. Beginning in 1883, the samaj press carried requests for van "Arya gentleman, who should be sound in health, good character and gives the pledge to never enter into bigamy or polygamy"; a bride, "desirous of getting married in strict accordance with the Vedic rites;" and for "an able and educated kshatri belonging to the Chohan and Ratur families."

The traditional arrangers of marriage, the barbers and priests, could no longer be depended on and so the marriage advertisement provided an alternative. By 1884, the "matrimonial notice" was a standard item in many samaj publications. In addition to the traditional values of family, wealth, and colour, these notice stressed new qualifications: English education for the child, or a family dedicated to samaj ideals. Proficiency in the anglicized world did not replace older criteria of status, but added new personal or familial dimensions to that status.

Dowry also responsible for hyper gamy and female infanticide. Arya Samaj condemned this evil. Swami Dayanand gives the example of Vedas and emphasized on simple and less expensive marriage at home. For this purpose, he advocated the study of Vedas by women ^[26]. Swami Dayanand wrote, "Blessed are the men and women whose mind is engaged in pursuit of education." However Swami Dayanand was against co-education. According to him "when boys are eight years of age, they should be sent to respective schools". He favoured the idea that educated women should take to the teaching profession and make positive contribution to the growth and development of education on ancient pattern.

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' school in different parts of 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. This Samaj opened a girl's school in 1886. In September (1888), Munishi Ram started a girl's school at Talwan. Lala Dev Raj (manager of Arya Kanya Pathshala) perceived education of girls on the basis of principles laid down by Swami Dayanand. So the curriculum of the *Kanya pathshala* in addition to basis included sewing, embroidery,

drawing cooking, music, poetry, games and religious literature.

Lala Munshi Ram and Lala Dev Raj opened the *kanya mahavidhalaya* at Jalandhar in 1890. 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 monthly designed to preach and propagate the relevance of education of girls. The magazine was successfulness the attainment of its objective. In this way the Singh Sabha and Arya Samaj movements worked to uplift the status of women in the society. At that time the society was engulfed in the evil social practises like female infanticide, child marriage, dowry practice and other. They journeyed to different places and tried to make women aware through journals, newspapers and other way. They considered dowry practice the root of all the evils and raised their voice against it. The Arya samajists preached for Vedic marriage and Singh Sabha preached in favour of simple and less expensive marriage.

Thus these reformers in country devoted their full attention to problems facing Indian women. Though they often differed in their views regarding the nature and scope of work, yet they were always unanimous that women's life needed to be improved. Some reformers felt satisfied only in eulogizing women. They aspired to paint them in the same magnificent colours they were once in the hoary past. But many chalked out positive and constructive programmes for eradicating the evils affecting women and established variety of institutions for women's socio-economic upliftment. They opened schools, colleges, widow asylums and vocational training centres which gave women a new hope.

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