



The Arya Samaj: Emergence of Caste Consciousness in Punjab

KEYWORDS

Sube Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Govt. PG College, Bhiwani, Haryana - 127021

ABSTRACT *This Research Paper is an attempt to examine "The Arya Samaj: Emergence of Caste Consciousness in Punjab". The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayanand Saraswati who though originally from Gujarat found his strongest and largest number of adherents in Punjab. This is not surprising considering the strong anti-Brahmanical streak in Dayanand's preaching in which he held the current degeneration of Hinduism to be the fault mainly of the priestly class. By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, British rule had covered the whole Punjab. The ensuing decades saw the establishment of British administration, institutions and education in these areas. The introduction of new institutions and new ideas did not fail to elicit a response within the society. One area where the impact of colonial rule can be analysed is the emergence of caste consciousness in Punjab.*

Historical Background

Till the end of the first half of the nineteenth century the whole of the Punjab had been brought under British colonial administration. In Punjab, the creative response to colonial rule first emerged among Hindus from the Vaishya community. There were historical reasons for the dominance of this community. Long centuries of Muslim rule in the Punjab had led to the loss of political power among the Kshatriya community and the loss of privileges and patronage to the Brahmin community and consequently to the marginalization of these two communities which in other parts of the country continued to maintain their dominance. Economic power was vested mainly among the Vaishya community. The emergence of the British did not change the economic power vested with the Vaishya communities both in rural and urban areas and this contributed to the latter's continued importance as well as dominance within society. Increasing contact with British administration and institutions saw a growing tendency among this new (anglicized) class to question existing societal values and the status quo. There was a felt need for change for reform as well as defending what they believed to be the true Hindu religion. The need for a new ideology "which satisfied personal need in an era of social and intellectual revolt" (Heimsath, C.H., Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform) saw conditions in Punjab ripe for the founding of a creed like the Arya Samaj. In Punjab due to the dominance of the Vaishya caste his teachings found less opposition than in other parts of the country where the Brahmins retained their dominance.

Arya Samaj and Consciousness

Dayanand Saraswati founded The Arya Samaj in 1875, which loomed large on the intellectual and social scene of the late nineteenth century North India. (Saraswati Dayanand, Autobiography). The Punjab Arya Samaj was founded in 1877. The Arya Samaj quickly spread roots in Punjab. The principles of the Arya Samaj, ten in number, were written down and this ten point credo became the doctrinal basis for the Arya Samaj Movement. While the Arya Samaj established in Lahore which had emerged as the urban intellectual centre in the Punjab provided the leadership and served as the model, the organizational network of Arya Samajes had a great deal of autonomy. Arya Samaj continued to gain in strength even after the death of its founder and no personality cult around Dayananda developed to hinder the activities of the organization. Newspapers, Periodicals, pamphlets constituted the main forms of communication resorted to by the Arya Samaj. Street preaching was also resorted to. The Arya Samaj held out hope of revitalization and regeneration of society and country. It held out prospects for upward economic and so-

cial mobility for the locally dominant groups. Dayanand Saraswati gave the clarion call of "Back to the Vedas" in which he held out the vision of a glorious past of Hinduism which had degenerated through the ages due to priestly exploitation and the introduction of various rituals and corruptions. These had weakened the moral and spiritual fibre of society leaving them susceptible to succeeding invasions culminating in the then prevailing British colonial rule. Dayanand's ideas and beliefs were written down in his book Satyarth Prakash (Light of truth) brought out in 1875. Among his major ideas was that of the infallibility of the Vedas which he held to be divinely revealed. From his interpretation of the Vedas he derived the idea of monotheism and the unity of God, rationalistic monotheism and the rejection of popular rituals and superstitions which he held to be corruptions which had crept into Hinduism. He argued that social and religious reforms were needed to rid Hindu society of the stagnation which it found itself in and to regain its golden past. He also argued for reform of customary law which he said should be based on reason and for a complete reform of Hindu society.

Dayanand attacked Brahmin exclusivities and prerogatives, a Brahmin he said was one who possessed true knowledge. True knowledge could be got from the correct interpretation of the Vedas. Neither birth nor caste was a bar to one who sought true knowledge. His attacks on Brahmanical privileges and his active espousal of the cause of education appealed to the upwardly mobile Vaishya community in Punjab and he found in them a major source of support.

As a Socio-Religious Reform Movement

The Arya Samaj began as a body to propagate the teachings of Dayanand and to carry out reforms both in the religious as well as social sphere. As part of their efforts at reform they advocated doing away with useless ceremonies and rituals, simplifying the necessary rituals omitting the traditional need for priests, promoted the cause of female emancipation and running of orphanages. They attempted to change or adapt local customs, festivals to Arya Samaj precepts. New ceremonies were introduced ostensibly in the Vedic pattern. After initial opposition from Hindu orthodoxy, these were gradually accepted without much protest. They pioneered the cause of education, especially that in English, setting up many schools, their efforts finally culminating in the establishment of the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College at Lahore which became the breeding ground of Punjabi Hindu intellectuals in the coming years. In their encouragement to the cause of education they rivaled the efforts of the Christian missionaries. Indeed they saw education not only as a means to social and economic mobility but also ideologically as neces-

sary to counter missionary propaganda.

Hindus as a minority community in Punjab

The situation of the Hindu community in Punjab was unique in many ways. The Hindus were a minority in Punjab but belonged to the majority community in relation to the country as a whole. They were continuously assailed by the threat of conversion from within the ranks both by individuals and by whole sub-castes. Before British rule Islam and Sikhism and during colonial rule Christian missionaries, encouraged and financed by colonial administration, competed for converts. Conversions to Christianity though many a number were numerically insignificant relative to the larger population but gained wide publicity and fueled fears that the mass of the Hindu community was in danger of being lost. The British administration contributed to these fears by institutionalizing all social divisions through censuses, public commissions etc. The drive to gain and retain converts to prevent erosion from their ranks became part of a number's game played equally by all the communities.

Among the most important reasons for mass conversions from Hinduism was the rigidity of the caste system and the desire for upward social mobility. The Arya Samaj had following Dayanand's example had accepted the caste system in principle and though sharply critical of its obvious evils was ultimately forced to accept it in practice as well. For instance Aryans themselves rarely married outside their caste and at least outwardly maintained caste rules scrupulously. Having accepted the principle of reform from within Hindu society and being highly suspicious of outside interference in such matters, the question of caste posed the greatest challenge to the Arya Samaj which despite their best efforts could never be settled satisfactorily.

Shuddhi Movement

One way in which the Arya Samaj tried to get around the constraints of caste was through their campaign of Shuddhi. The Shuddhi movement was first used by Dayanand Saraswati as a purification ceremony in which Hindu converts lost to other faiths could be received back into the Hindu fold. From 1900 onwards there were conscious moves within the Arya Samaj to induct lower castes as well. Towards this end, purification ceremonies (mass Shuddhi) were conducted where lower castes like Rahtias, Odes, Meghs, and Jats were raised to higher caste status and inter dining and inter marriage with higher castes were technically allowed. This rarely took place in practice. While individual conversions or mass conversions could be dealt with in a paternalistic manner, the conversion of non Hindus and of out-casts posed far more serious prob-

lems. Immediate social equality for the lower castes was an impossibility. "More often than not attempts to move up the social scale ran directly into the existing power structure, producing in response social boycotts and occasional violence". (Jones, K.W., Arya Dharm) The objectives of the Arya Samaj in bringing to the Aryan fold the lower castes and those of the latter differed. More often it was a means of social mobility. Differing perceptions about the role of caste and the constraints imposed by having to work within the parameters of mainstream Hindu community means that the Arya Samaj's campaign for caste reform proved less successful than their other programmes.

Conclusion

The Arya Samaj was most successful as a reform body. It propagated its ideas with greater success than other contemporary social and religious movements. Partly its success was due to the relatively weaker strength of Brahmins in the Punjab but mostly it depended on its success in positioning itself and gaining recognition as a body for reform within the mainstream Hindu community. The Arya Samaj tried to establish its authenticity as an Indian movement in inspiration, one that developed from within Indian society. This movement sharply criticized the other reform movements for their refusal to accept the infallibility of the Vedas and deriving the perceived influence of Western and Christian sources of inspiration in their teachings. It could be said that in the fierce competition to gain new converts they actually weakened other reform movements in the Punjab. On the other hand they made a distance from Hindu orthodoxy by actively advocating and encouraging reforms within Hinduism. They effectively carried the propaganda to the missionary camp and through their social work reduced the flow of converts to other religions. Reforms were seen not only as an end in themselves but as a most effective means for counter propaganda. By positioning themselves in the middle ground they gained credibility as reformers among those desirous of change and the grudging respect of the orthodoxy as defenders of Hinduism.

Objectives

This work will contribute in the Historiography of the social and religious reform movements of the nineteenth century in India.

Methodology

In writing of this Research Paper, I have used Comprehensive Qualitative Analysis method.

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