

Identity Crisis among the Hindu: Arya Samaj movement in Punjab

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Abstract:- The period of 17th-19th centuries paved way for the over transformation in almost all the fields be it political, social, economics, religious and cultural fields. There was an around attack on the traditional and perspective dogmas which continued to restrict prospective alteration in all walks of life. Impact of the twin movements i.e. Renaissance and Reformation can be seen worldwide. India was no exception to it as many organizations and individuals brought about an atmosphere of overall change in the given situation. Arya Samaj was such movement which was an intellectual expression of socio-cultural transformation in the country. Though this movement came into being in Maharashtra, it became popular in northern India but more especially in the Punjab (including present Haryana) where the Hindu had been struggling with syndrome of identity crisis. Both the Muslims and Sikhs had already started many organization for the presence of their religious and culture ethos but Hinduism which was one of the oldest religion in the world had no any such organization that could dispel the syndrome identity crisis from the Punjabis Hindu. So an attempt has been made in this paper to highlight the over-all activities of the Arya Samaj in Punjab.

Keywords:- Renaissance, reformation, New spirit, Semi-rationalized, Anglo-Vedic, unscrupulous person, seditious Meedting Act, Puranic literature.

The Hindu society of 19th century India had a variety of evils and vices and even its shape was not clearly recognizable. It is true to say that it presented itself into a vast congeries of faiths, ranging all the way from the strict advaita doctrine of *Shankaracharya* to the crudest and grossest superstitions embodied in the tantras, the whole being held together in kind of external unity by the vast hierarchical organization of the caste.¹ Moreover, the old religious outlook, practices and the social structure rendered any task of reform of the society in the given situation.

The 19th century India witnessed a great upheaval in political, social, religious and cultural fields. In the real sense, this period can be termed as a period of renaissance in Indian history when all the Indian regions were under the influence of such forces which laid great stress on the overall transformation in all walks of life. The twin movements of the Western World i.e. Renaissance and Reformation broke the old established order, propounded new concepts, theories, ideas, shook papal dominance and heightened the urge to set-up a national standard of faith in Europe.² It, undoubtedly, gave birth to the 'new theological doctrines' which immensely facilitated the growth of secular state.³

As already stated that the period of late half of the 19th century was the period of socio-cultural-religious awakening and the emergence of 'new spirit' in all walks of life. These movements which emerged were regional in nature but had more or less identical in character as their great stress was on the transformation of the Indian society.. Their cardinal motive was to uplift the society suffering from a long period. It would be quite true to say that these movements created multiple intellectual expression of the socio-cultural transformation. All such movements basically emerged on account of the impact of Western ideas and thought. Gradually emerging the western educated classes realized the imperative need of such reforms.⁵

Religion was the focal point of attack from all the corners. As far as the Haryana regions were concerned, many such movements emerged both in the Hindu and Muslim communities. Their major

aims were to eradicate the social evils and vices, educate the masses and revive the old religious faiths which had disappeared earlier.⁶ The Arya Samaj, Wahabi and Sanatam Dharam movements along with new education, literary and journalistic growth were instrumental in creating awakening in different regions of Haryana in general and Rohtak in particular. An attempt has been made to analyse all such aspects in this chapter.

The factors for the rise of political consciousness differed from region to region. When the Brahma Samaj and Rama Krishna Mission were creating socio – religious fervour in Bengal regions and the Aligarh movement was also contributing in the same sense among Muslim community of North – Western Provinces (Present U.P.) and Balgangadhar Tilak was bringing the people of Maharashtra together through Shivaji cult and Ganesh festival but the Punjab did not have any such organization/platform. It was Arya Samaj that fulfilled the vacuum and greatly influenced the Hindu minds in Haryana and Punjab who were earlier suffering from the identity crisis in the given situation.⁷

Swami Dayanand founded the Arya Samaj at Bombay on 10th April, 1875. When Swamiji came to Haryana in 1880, first branch of the Arya Samaj was founded in 1880 at Rewari. Swamiji toured many parts of Haryana and instilled the spirit of self-reliance and a sense of pride in *Vedic* religion whose influence was fading away as far as the educated elite was concerned. His slogan in the polity was that “good government was no substitute for self government”.⁸ This dictum proposed by Swamiji became quite popular in the regional leadership. Wherever he went, he lectured on the current issues and created a sense of national spirit among the people of Haryana. It greatly impacted the youth who joined hands with the prominent Hindus in founding its branches throughout the regions of Haryana. It was Aryanism that became more firmly rooted and merged with the support of local roots in province.⁹ The English educated elite became its active members as reported by many Deputy Commissioners of the districts that no other society/organization was not so popular in the province as the Arya Samaj which was gradually increasing in almost all the regions.¹⁰

The Arya Samaj was also a revivalist like the Wahabi movement in nature. The official view points out that it was a Hindu reformed church representing the reaction of Hinduism against the Christian religion, Western science and Western domination.¹¹

It became popular in the towns of Punjab and in the rural areas of Haryana. Dayanand, first of all, proceeded towards northern India and visited Delhi to attend the Royal Durbar in January 1877. He was sure that his visit to Delhi would provide a good opportunity of propagating Vedic religion.¹² When he was at Delhi, he was urged by some of the prominent leaders of the Punjab to visit their province. Keeping the situation in view, he accepted the proposal and proceeded for his first visit to Ludhiana and other regions on 31 March, 1877. The first branch of the Samaj in Punjab was founded at Lahore on 24th June 1877. During his tour programme, he delivered many speeches on the child-marriage and extended the support to the re-marriage of widows and the female education. He had great praise for the *Vedas* as a source of eternal knowledge and criticized Christianity and Islam. He also stressed on the *Vedas* which inculcated monotheism and attacked Hinduism based upon the *Puranas*. He held that the *Shastras* were the main tool of proselytization. It became a semi-rationalized form of Hinduism.¹³

His focus was on the elimination of caste system and furtherance of equality and social brotherhood. The condemnation of social and religious weaknesses of the Hindu society was the main thrust of his preaching. This was the reason that peasantry communities such as Jat, Ahir, Gujar etc. became its ardent supporters in Rohtak in particular and general in Haryana. On the invitation of Rao Yudhister, an Ahir leader, he went to Rewari where he delivered multiple lectures on the social evils and also discussed with others who were earlier reluctant to follow its tenets.¹⁵ He denounced the *Sanatanists* who had been propagating its gossips of the *Puranic* literature and theory of reincarnation etc. Protection of cows was deemed necessary not only for agricultural purposes but also as an intimate

part of Hindu culture. Keeping this aspect in view, a *Goshala* was founded here in 1880 perhaps first of its kind in northern India.¹⁶

Lala Lajpat Rai began his political career from Hisar where his father was engaged in teaching profession. Many other Haryanavis such as Lal Chandu Lal, Rao Yudhister, Dr. Ramji Lal, Pt. Basti Ram, Bhagat Phool Singh became ardent supporters of Arya Samaj and its branches were formed at Rohtak, Hisar, Karnal, Rewari, Panipat, Jind, Bhiwani and in many villages also. Not only Hindus but a large numbers of Sikhs also joined the Arya Samaj.¹⁷ Sardar Kala Singh of Ambala popularized the activities of this organization. Many Arya Samaj leaders like Lekh Raj used to visit in the regions of Haryana in order to make it a popular organization in Ambala and its surrounding areas. In the beginning, the meetings of the Arya Samaj were held apparently on the religious and social matters but indirectly they covered the political issues also since it preached nationalism and decried the foreign rule. Its membership continued to increase rapidly and perhaps there was no any town where its followers were not present.¹⁸

Though Swamiji went to Punjab on the request of Punjabi leader who took lead in founding its branches in Lahore and other towns but it became much popular in the villages of Haryana. This view point has been confirmed by several western scholars like L.S.S O' Malley, Hans Kohn, H.N. Brailsford, Valentine Chirol etc. Hinduism was quite rigid in Haryana in comparison to other parts of India. Peasantry communities like Jat and Ahir did not remain under the influence of the Brahmanas but functioned quite independently.¹⁹ Due to absence of big town and cities in the regions of Haryana, rural masses which were in the dominant position had easily been attracted towards the philosophy of the *Samaj*. The lower classes also became its active members who hoped to raise their social status in the then social milieu.²⁰ Many Bhajan mandalis were very active against the prevalent social evils. The contribution of Pt. Basti Ram was praiseworthy as his *Bhajan mandalis* preached the tenets of Swamiji and kept on urging to dispel all evils deep-rooted in the society. They advocated for the equal rights of man and woman in all the matters be it social or education.²¹

Arya Samaj organized a network of schools and colleges equally for the boys and girls on the basis of equality. It got divided into two thinking as far as imparting of the education was concerned. Anglo-Vedic and *Gurukula* which continued simultaneously. It gave great priority to the spread of education among the people, proclaimed the principle of equality without any distinctions of caste, creed, community, race or sex. It tried to dispel the feelings of inferiority complex, the inevitable product of their status as a subject nation. When Swamiji was leaving Punjab for U.P., he stayed at Ambala in July 1878. This was his first visit of Haryana after the formation of the Arya Samaj. He delivered several lectures on many social evils and the prevalent of orthodoxy in the Hinduism.²²

Dayanand in many of his lectures appealed for the protection of cow and adoption of vegetarianism that touched their heart. He disliked the gospel of the Christianity which lacked the features of *Vedic* culture.²³ Later, in the early twentieth century, second generation of leadership emerged in which Swami Brahmananda, Bhagat Phool Singh, Pandit Lakhpat Rai (Hissar), Lala Chuda Mani, pleader (Hissar) etc. were its prominent leaders who made it a popular organization. In the decade of the twentieth century, many other branches were also formed at Radaur, Bamla, Disawar- Kheri, Farmana, Salwan, Thol, Kalka, Gurgaon and Sohna. The Arya Samajists were over the medium of instruction and divided into two sections College Party and Gurukul Party while the centre of the former was Hissar and Karnal Districts but the later dominated in Rohtak district where many *Gurukulas* were established.²⁴

In the mid of twentieth century, the Arya Samaj emerged as a vital force and denounced the religious activities, advocated for the eradication of social evils and help rendered the poorer and propagated the cultural and educational activities in a big way. It attacked all the social evils such as

caste rigidity and advocated the professional mobility based on *Gun* (character) *Karam* (action) and *Swabhava* (nature). It continued to work for raising the status of the untouchables, the lower and oppressed sections of the society.²⁵

Later on, it started a *Shudhi* movement to forbade the low caste *Hindus* from embracing Christianity or Islam and to purify them for their inclusion in Hinduism. It led the crusade against child-marriage, sati, infanticide etc. and advocated widow-marriage, and women's education etc. Referring the tenets of Hinduism, Deputy Commissioner of Gurgaon wrote : "This is the only religious movement which has spread during the last ten years.... One great result of its spread has been the diminution in expenditure of marriages and other occasion which is a move in the right direction."²⁶ The Arya Samaj made all efforts to organize orphanage and widow homes. A significant work in this regard was done in Hisar and Bhiwani where Lala Chandu Lal, Lala Chudamani and others were quite active in spreading such pro-social activities.

After the religious and social activities education was the next aspect which attracted the attention of Arya Samajists. The '*Gurukul System*' of the Arya Samaj became popular in Haryana where many *Gurukulas* were established. The first Gurukul in Haryana was founded at Kurukshetra in 1911 where people collected handsome amount with the help of Lala Jyoti Prasad and he donated the land and a cash amount of Rs. 10,000.²⁷ For laying the foundation stone, Swami Shradhananda came to inaugurate the *Gurukula*. Many others Gurukuls were also established at Matindu (1915), Bhanswal (1918), Khanpur Jhajjar (1924) in Rohtak district. For female education, Arya Samaj of Hisar district provided lead in this regard. A number of girls schools were started in many villages of the district. It was, indeed, a great work in the field of education.²⁸

The Indian National Congress did not hold its any session in the Punjab till 1900 while the leaders of both Haryana and Punjab had been urging its executive committee for the same. In the session of 1899, the Congress leaders ultimately succumbed to their request and declared that its next session would be held at Lahore in 1900. It was a joyous moment for the Arya Samajists and for their popularity and strength kept on increasing throughout the Punjab (including present Haryana). The Annual Report of the congress of its Lahore session explicitly shows that more than hundred workers of the Samaj witnessed their presence and also delivered patriotic speeches.²⁹ The provincial government became suspicious of Arya Samaj's activities which were going on secretly in Haryana regions. The provincial officials of the Criminal Intelligence Bureau watched their activities quite closely and marked that it was the '*greatest enemy*' of the government and there was so far no other movement in the province "most dangerous" and anti colonial government.³⁰ The seditious activities which were going on in the province, Arya Samaj was held solely responsible for them. Not only this, but the District Magistrates of many districts also apprised the provincial authorities of the situation created by the Arya Samajists whose activities continued to increase rapidly as Sir Michael O' Dwyer, Lt. Governor, noted in his Diary.³¹

Since the Lahore session, almost all the leaders and followers were followed by the Intelligence official whenever and wherever they witnessed their presence. The basic contention of the British officials working in the provincial administration was that this organization did work as '*a political movement*' not only in the Punjab but also in the United Provinces.³² It is worthy to mention here that Swami Dayanand was designated as '*a rebel*' even before the foundation of the Arya Samaj by Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy of India during the years, 1873-76. He even directed his subordinate staff to closely watch his activities wherever he went. Many other officials also expressed the same view and adopted measures for the continuance of the raj all possible.³³

All the Arya Samajists of Haryana were closely shadowed by the officials of the Intelligence department who supplied all informations about their activities to the district authorities. Those youth

who were eager to join Indian Army during the World War I were thoroughly probed whether they had any linkage with this organization. The Deputy Commissioner of Rohtak was unhappy to see their increasing activities in the district and designated them as 'wicked' and 'unscrupulous persons'.³⁴ Some *zaildars* showed sympathy towards the Arya Samaj secretly and such persons were closely watched by the police. Efforts were made to launch fictitious cases against them. The Seditious Meetings Act passed during the Vicoroyalty of Lord Lytton was applied in order to curb their political activities in the district. It shows that the local officials such as *zaildars* of the government contributed indirectly a lot to the freedom struggle in the region.³⁵

In the last, it can fairly be said that it was both social and national movement as well. It not only decried the social evils but also paid attention towards the imparting of education especially to the girls. Both the press and platform were greatly used in order to create an atmosphere of healthy public opinion. Its chief cry was to 'go back to the *Vedas*' and opposed the reading of *Puranic* literature and proscriptive traditions in the given situation.³⁶

Though police raided their offices, confiscated the literature and material therein. Despite, that they did not loose their patience and continued to work with the same vigour. Their increasing activities were greatly instrumental in creating the feelings of self-reliance, confidence, courage and patriotism among the *Haryanavi*. So there is no denying the fact that it had an immense impact on all the people living in the district and hence prepared the way for instilling the feelings of nationalism in the regions of Haryana needed during the freedom struggle.³⁷

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