

## Dayanand Saraswati's Sojourn at Calcutta - Impact and Importance

### Abstract

One of the most important and extensive social reform movement was initiated by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), who was one of the few great men of the world, who sacrificed everything for emancipation of mankind. He was a great scholar, a Yogi, a social reformer, a philosopher and a political thinker. Swami Dayanand was one of the most powerful figures of modern India, who spread the Vedic religion and through the Arya Samaj, played an important part in the Indian renaissance. Dayanand was a staunch supporter of the belief that education was indispensable for the betterment of the mental, social and psychological development of all individuals irrespective of their caste, creed or sex. Knowledge was a panacea for him, which, he believed, could efface many social and individuals problems and which could change the face of society. He recommended various multifarious activities for the betterment of women in Indian society. He not only emphasized upon the abolition of abhorrent practices and customs pertaining to them, but also, advocated women's upliftment through provision of education to them and by motivating them to come out of their purdah or veil and fight for their own cause. He revolted against the abuses from which they suffered, recalling that in the heroic age they occupied in the home and in society a position at least equal to men. They ought to have equal education, according to him, and supreme control in marriage, over household matters including the finances.

**Keywords:** Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Social Reformer, Arya Samaj, 'Satyartha Prakash' (The Light of Truth), Calcutta, Brahmo Samaj, Keshav Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dwarka Nath Tagore, Dr. Mahendra Lal Sircar, Views on Social Reforms.

### Sambodh Goswami

Lecturer,  
Deptt. of History,  
PNKS Govt. PG College,  
Dausa, Rajasthan

### Introduction

When he visited Calcutta in December 1872, it was reverberating with the views in favor of social reforms. The voices in favor of women's rights and freedom, women's equality etc. were being raised from many quarters and voices against certain social vices like Sati, child and unequal marriage, polygamy, sad plight of widows etc. were being echoed from various sections of the society. The reformers, through their speeches, writings, plays, tracts, articles in the newspapers etc. had become successful in creating a new consciousness in the public against these age old social mal practices.

### Aim of the Study

This research paper explores the impact and importance of Dayanand Saraswati's sojourn at Calcutta from December 1872 to 1st of April, 1873 and the role that it played in shaping up of his thoughts on issues relating to social reforms.

One of the most important and extensive social reform movement was initiated by Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), who was one of the few great men of the world, who sacrificed everything for emancipation of mankind. He was a great scholar, a Yogi, a social reformer, a philosopher and a political thinker. Swami Dayanand was one of the most powerful figures of modern India, who spread the Vedic religion and through the Arya Samaj, played an important part in the Indian renaissance. "He had taken a long and deep draught," observed The Hindu Patriot of 17th January 1870,<sup>1</sup> "at the perennial spring-head which had quenched his thirst and filled his soul with indescribable peace. He had wandered long and far in the gloom before he received the light- the light of true and pure Dharma, the religion of the Vedas. With insight born of this light, he saw clearly through the vast and enveloping mist of error, delusion and superstition which was bedimming the vision of the inhabitants of India

and of other parts of the globe. He did not hug this new-found treasure to his bosom like a miser lest others might come to know of it and snatch it away from him; but, like a generous prince he made a free gift of it to his people”.

During his travels in various parts of India, he found the condition of his country and that of the Indian society deplorable and depressing. He noticed that meaningless superstitions, dead traditions, fossilised customs and irrational bigotry had choked the life stream of the nation. Many superstitions, dogmas and undesirable rituals were prevalent, in the then Indian society, in the name of religion, social customs or behavior in various castes. They included extreme caste-ism, ‘touch me not-ism’ or untouchability, prohibition on education of girls and women and re-marriage of women (even if widowed in infancy or childhood), sati (self immolation by a wife upon the death of her husband) and child and unequal or unmatched marriage. He felt that Indian women were being subjected to various oppressions in the name of religion and unjustified and cruel social laws put them in chain. He also saw how Brahmin priests earned their position and livelihood by making popular expositions of Hindu mythology and by installing false ideas about religion. Unlettered priests who held dignified social status by virtue of heredity became uncrowned monarchs of Hindu society. Swami Dayanand resolved to awaken India and the Hindu society. In his famous book, ‘Satyarth Prakash’ (The Light of Truth), He he sought to dispel rituals, dogmas and superstitions among all Indians.

Swami Dayanand reached Calcutta in December 1872 and stayed there for four months till 1st of April, 1873.<sup>2</sup> There he met many enlightened individuals and social reformers like Gyanindra Lal Roy (editor of a Bengali newspaper), Keshav Chandra Sen ( Keshub or Keshob Chunder Sen in Bangla language ) , Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Maharishi Devendra Nath Tagore, Guru Charan Dutta, Pandit Mahesh Chandra Nyayaratna, Prassano Kumar Tagore, Rajnarayan Basu, Navgopal Mitra, Akshya Chandra Sarkar, Rajnikant Gupta, Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya etc. who were known for their untiring struggle in the social cause and reformative zeal. Some of these were also the members and leaders of the Brahma Samaj. Dayanand was also invited in the homes of many eminent leaders of Brahma Samaj including Keshav Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dwarka Nath Tagore etc.<sup>3</sup>

Calcutta at that time was reverberating with the views in favor of social reforms. The voices in favor of women’s rights and freedom, women’s equality etc. were being raised from many quarters and voices against certain social vices like Sati, child and unequal marriage, polygamy, sad plight of widows etc. were being echoed from various sections of the society. The reformers, through their speeches, writings, plays, tracts, articles in the newspapers etc. had become successful in creating a new consciousness in the public against these age old social mal practices. Urgent reforms, in the social sector had thus become the cry of the day.

“The 19th century,” observes S.K.Mitra<sup>4</sup> “has been a crucial period of Indian history that witnessed the transition from medievalism to modernism. The impact of western civilization was particularly felt in Bengal which became the focal point of this culture contact...Momentous changes took place in the different facets of Bengali life and society which gradually radiated to cover the whole of India.”

The movement against child and unequal or mismatched marriages and against the unequal treatment meted out to women, therefore started first of all in Bengal, from the second half of the 19th century, though individual voices against it could be heard much before . The educated and the liberal section of Bengali society started the crusade against it and tried to awaken the masses by pointing out the abuses, caused by the child marriages. In 1850, ‘The Sarva- Shubhakari Patrika’<sup>5</sup> published first of all an article, in which the sad plight of child widows and child-mothers were dealt in detail and it asked its readers to ponder over their pitiable condition and plead for its abolition. In January, 1856, when the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Bill was on the anvil, more than four hundred enlightened citizens of Bengal, presented a petition to the Government praying for ‘a General Marriage Law for the Natives’ of comprehensive nature.<sup>6</sup> But no Act for a general reform of the system of marriage was then passed except the Hindu Widow’s Remarriage Act and the government passed the matter in total silence.

This cause was again taken by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91),<sup>7</sup> who strongly protested against consummation of child marriages. Vidyasagar, who believed not merely in the preaching of reforms but in putting them into practice, formulated a pledge to which he committed himself and which he expected his supporters and admirers to implement. One of the aspects of the pledge was that he would not allow his son to marry before he was eighteen or his daughter before she was eleven. He also proposed that it should be an offence for a man, to consummate marriage before his wife had her first menses and as the majority of the girls did not exhibit that symptom before they were thirteen, fourteen or fifteen years of age, the measure as suggested by him, would give larger, more real and more extensive protection than the Bill. At the same time, he believed such a measure could not be objected to on the ground of interfering with a religious observance.

It is also remarkable to note that when Dayanand came in contact with Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, he was already actively engaged in the spread of education in the then Bengali society and had established by then nearly 35 schools for girls and 20 other schools for disseminating knowledge.<sup>8</sup> He was also a prolific writer and had edited several Sanskrit books and had written nearly 20 books on various issues including social reforms.<sup>9</sup> He had his own printing press, where every care was taken to avoid grammatical mistakes in the publication of Sanskrit manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> It is worthy to be mentioned that Vidyasagar was the pioneer of widow remarriage movement in Bengal in 1850s and was also deadly against polygamy.<sup>11</sup>

The efforts of these reformers bore fruits and in 1846, a Law Commission was persuaded to make intercourse between husband and wife, below a given age, an offence. Accordingly, the Indian Penal Code of 1860, declared consummation, when the wife was below ten years of age, as rape and prescribed punishment extending to transportation for life.<sup>12</sup> The law as it ultimately came to be enacted, sought to prevent the sexual abuse of both married and unmarried women below a legally determined age. By raising the minimum age of consent (i.e. the legal age at which sexual relationships were deemed to have been consummated with the concurrence of the female), the act marginally increased the scope of criminal law to punish the male sexual offender and at least theoretically sounded a warning to the protagonists of early marriage.

But this could not improve the lot of child-wives since they were trained from their childhood, by solemn precepts and overt examples to revere their husbands, to obey them meekly and to stand by them always and with such conditioned mindsets, they could not have thought of availing themselves of this law, despite whatever cruelty was perpetrated on them. In a society where female literacy rates were quite low and where the traditional social structure had become too ossified to permit a reordering of gender relations, such amendments in law alone could not be expected to produce very satisfactory results. Thus, the above mentioned legislation was ineffectual, but it paved the way for fixing the age of marriage at a later stage.

To sensitize the public towards the various social issues including the benefits of education, Keshav Chandra Sen (1838-1884), another eminent social reformer of Bengal, had founded the British India Society, an Association for the cultivation of Western science and culture in 1855.<sup>13</sup> It was his ardent desire "to see that the light of education is extended to the cottage and the mechanic's shop, for every child of God is by birth right entitled to its benefits."<sup>14</sup> To accomplish this aim, he in 1855, started the Colutolla Evening School, which was a private school imparting instructions in the general branches of knowledge to the young men of neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> He had also started the Brahma Vidyalaya, Brahma Normal School (which later on started the Bama Hitaishini Sabha i.e. women's welfare society) in 1859, Industrial school and Working Men's Institution (night school) in 1871 and Albert College in 1872.<sup>16</sup> In 1863, he took bold steps towards emancipation of women and started Antahpur Upasana (Prayer in the Home), for the spiritual emancipation of women and Antahpur Stree Shiksha, where female teachers Indian and European, were sent to individual families for teaching ladies. To educate the ladies, he started The Bama Bodhini Patrika in 1863. In the same year, he founded another organization Brahma Bandhu Sabha, for the propagation of imparting education to women at home.<sup>17</sup> On 5 February, 1872, he founded the Bharat Ashram, where caste distinction, polygamy, irreligiousness, intemperance, idolatry, sectarianism, superstitious practices etc. were shunned.<sup>18</sup>

He was also a champion of women's cause and under his direction and guidance a drama Bidhaba Bibaha Natak (Widow Marriage Play) was enacted twice on 23 April and 7 May 1859. It is interesting to note that this is the first use of the stage for social reform.<sup>19</sup> He also solemnized an inter caste widow remarriage on August 2, 1864 and organized activities in collaboration with Vidyasagar in aid of widow remarriage and education. It is remarkable that he had also published 34 books in English and Bengali, on various social subjects prior to his meeting with Dayanand Saraswati.<sup>20</sup> On 11 November, 1870, he founded the Indian Reform Association for the social and moral reformation of Indians with the following sections -

1. Female Improvement
2. Education of the working classes and Technical education,
3. Literature at a cheap price,
4. Temperance
5. Charity.

On the issue of child marriage, in November 1870, Keshav, as the President of the Indian Reform Association, decided to refer the question of marriageable age to the eminent medical-men of the country, for their opinion.<sup>21</sup>

The medical authorities in Calcutta unanimously declared that 16 should be the minimum marriageable age of girls in India.<sup>22</sup> Keshav Chandra Sen summed up the conclusion of the committee in these words, "the medical authorities in Calcutta almost unanimously declared that 16 is the minimum marriageable age of girls in India.... but for the present at least it would be expedient to follow the provision in the Bill which makes 14 the minimum marriageable age of girls in this country; leaving it in the hands of time to develop this reform shortly and gradually into maturity and fullness."<sup>23</sup>

In July 1871, Dr. Mahendra Lal Sircar<sup>24</sup> noted physician and founder of the Indian Science Association, published a paper on the earliest marriageable age of Indian girls in the Calcutta Journal of Medicine and strongly denounced child marriages 'on true physiological grounds'. He emphasized that at least on the basis of medical science it was possible to say that early signs of puberty in the females did not necessarily demand prompt marriage. On the contrary, he argued, it was the premature marriage which in many cases, might hasten to produce an unnaturally early puberty and perhaps to moral laxness. The works of Brahma-Samajis under Keshav Chandra Sen, brought good results and in the Bill introduced by Sir James Stephen in the Legislative Council on 16 January 1872, 14 was laid down as the minimum marriageable age for girls. The Bill became an Act as Act III of 1872 or the Native Marriage Act (popularly known as the Civil Marriage Act) and forbade the marriage of girls below the age of 14 and boys below the age of 18.<sup>25</sup> This Act "abolished early marriage, made polygamy penal, sanctioned widow marriages and inter caste marriages for parties not coming under any of the existing marriage laws and not professing any of the current faiths.." However, this Act was not applicable on the Hindus, the Muslims and other

recognized faiths and as such had very limited impact on the Indian Society.<sup>26</sup>

The discussions that Swami Dayanand had with such eminent personalities of Brahmo Samaj and the consequent developments that were taking place, because of their struggle, in the society of Calcutta, must have definitely influenced him. A man like him, with a sharp intellect and reformative zeal and an indomitable will for social reforms could not have remained unmoved by all these developments. His sojourn at Calcutta went a long way in shaping up of his thoughts and in viewing the social scenario from a larger perspective. It was at Calcutta that Swami Dayanand realized the necessity of discontinuing lecturing in Sanskrit language for the future.<sup>27</sup>

He felt here ( and was even told by the audience ) that in the discourses on religion and social matters, he was not always being interpreted faithfully as he spoke in Sanskrit. And also that by speaking in Sanskrit language he could reach only those who were conversant in Sanskrit, which were a very minor group.<sup>28</sup> On the insistence of Keshav Chandra Sen, he resolved that henceforward he would deliver his public lectures invariably in Arya Bhasha (Hindi).<sup>29</sup> Keshav also requested him to wear proper clothes, in order to avoid any kind of awkwardness, as females flocked in large numbers to attend his lectures. It is remarkable that earlier he used to wear a kaupin or langot ( a piece of cloth worn by the ascetics and hermits to cover their private parts) only.<sup>30</sup> It is worth mentionable here that the importance and use of Hindi as a tool for reaching the masses was first felt and understood by the leaders of Brahmo Samaj like Keshav Chandra Sen, Bhudev Mukhopadhyaya, Rajendra Lal Mitra etc. Swamiji accepted their advice and started giving his lectures in Hindi from this time. At Kashi (Benaras), in the middle of June 1874, he preached for the first time in Hindi.<sup>31</sup> But it must be written in all fairness, that Swami Dayanand Saraswati had already started thinking about the social issues much before his Calcutta visit, though this visit presented before him new dimensions. We have documentary evidences that as early as Samvat 1925 i.e. 1868 AD, he, as the result of prolonged reflection, had already come to the conclusion that schools and seminaries of a superior type were badly wanted in the country, and that preaching and shastrarth-holding, though extremely valuable in their way and indispensable for the success of his propaganda, could not alone achieve all and everything.<sup>32</sup> In this connection, Sangeeta Sharma<sup>33</sup> has very aptly remarked that, "Dayanand's visit to Calcutta in 1872, has been often treated as his earliest exposure to the women's question. However, many instances cited by other biographers reveal his prior awareness of women's issues and also his commitment to women's equality in numerous spheres." His giving of gayatri mantra, she further writes, to Hansa Thakurani in 1868 at Karnawas; his advocacy of widow remarriage in Kanpur and Arrah; his denouncement of child marriage in 1869 at Kanpur, suggests that he was

very much aware and concerned about the women issues much before his Calcutta visit.<sup>34</sup>

Dayanand's sojourn at Calcutta and his meeting with the leaders of Brahmo Samaj like Keshav Chandra Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar etc. and other intellectuals went a long way in influencing his thoughts to a significant extent and inspired him to work for social upliftment in a systematic and well planned manner. Here at Calcutta, he witnessed the socio-religious reformative zeal of the intellectuals and the reformers, the debates that were going on in the Bengali society regarding social reforms, the courage of the reformers to oppose age old social vices etc. He with his sharp eyes also noticed the functioning of the various social organizations and their ways of highlighting the social issues, especially the issues related with women, through plays, drama, tracts, newspapers, debates etc and here he also noticed the role, efficacy and the necessity of establishing printing presses, of opening schools for boys and girls etc. for the spread of his socio-religious philosophy.

### Conclusion

Thus we see that his Calcutta sojourn has a special bearing on the history of social reforms in India.

### References

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6. Sen, Prosanto Kumar, Biography of a New Faith, Vol.II, pp.60-61.
7. Datta, Kali Kinkar, A Social History of Modern India, MacMillan, N.Delhi, 1975, p.313.
8. Cf.Vidyalankar Satyaketu,Vedalankar, Haridutt, op.cit., Vol.I , p.227 .
9. ibid.
10. ibid.
11. Cf.Vidyalankar, Satyaketu and Vedalankar, Haridutt, op.cit. Vol. I, p.227.
12. Kapadia, K.M., Marriage and family in India, Oxford University Press, Bombay,1958, p.146.
13. Mukherjee, Arun Kumar, op.cit. p.3.
14. Keshav expressed these views in his 'Resolution on Education', passed on October 3 ,1861.Cf,ibid.pp.12-13.
15. ibid.p.5.
16. ibid.p.11 and p.26.
17. ibid.p.15.
18. ibid.p.26.
19. ibid. p.11.
20. ibid.pp.57-59.
21. Shastri, Sivanath, History of the Brahmo Samaj, Vol.I, 1911, p.249. And also, Chintamani, C.V., Indian Social Reform, Part IV, pp.260-291.
22. Ibid.
23. Shastri, Sivanath, op.cit., Vol.I, 1911, p.250.
24. Cf. Y. S. Chintamani (ed.) Indian Social Reform, Part IV, Madras, 1901, pp. 255-56. And also, Datta, Kali Kinkar,op.cit.p.317..
25. "We would deem it a misfortune to the country," he observed, "if the agitation inaugurated by Babu Keshab Chunder Sen, be allowed to subside without it's producing the desired effect upon the mind of the community, if the note of warning unanimously given by leading medical gentlemen of Calcutta be unheeded. We know the disastrous effect the custom has produced in the shape of deterioration of race and it will be culpable perversity on our part, if informed on the remedy we fail to apply it, through prejudice or pride". Cf. ibid.
26. Sivanath Shastri,op.cit.pp.246-248.
27. Grover, B.L. and Grover, S., A New Look at Modern Indian History, S.Chand and Company Ltd.,N. Delhi, 1992, pp.380-381.
28. Cf.Vidyalankar,Satyaketu and Vedalankar, Haridutt, op.cit. Vol.I, p.226 and also Bawa Chhajju Singh, op.cit. Vol.I, pp.86-91.
29. ibid.
30. ibid.
31. Cf. Bawa Chhajju Singh, op.cit. Vol.I, p.96.
32. He through his influence motivated his admirers to open schools at Farrukhabad in 1868 AD, at Kasganj in 1870,at Mirzapur in 1870,at Chhalesar and at Benaras in 1873. For more details please refer to Bawa Chhajju Singh, Vol.I,op.cit.p.51.
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