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Impact of Arya Samaj on Gandhian thoughts on Women's Issues

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ABSTRACT: Swami Dayanand Saraswati was an equalitarian and a rational thinker in his approach and was deadly against certain social vices prevalent in Indian society at that time. He advocated education for everybody, favoured widow remarriages and was against infant, child and unequal marriage, polygamy, marriage of the old people, vehemently opposed the practice of the performance of useless ceremonies and incurring heavy expenditure at the time of marriages and deaths, singing of vulgar and indecent songs etc. To oppose these prevalent mal practices and to teach people the meaning of the Vedas and other religious Shastras, he established the Arya Samaj in 1875. After the death of Dayanand, the Arya Samaj carried on the works of their Master and tried to do away with these social vices and enlightened the Indian society.

KEYWORDS: Arya Samaj, Society, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Religious, Shastras

I. INTRODUCTION

The works of the Arya Samaj and its vehement arguments for the emancipation of women, the struggle and the sufferings of its leaders and volunteers, the personal examples (in the promotion of social reforms) created by the Samajists, all these created a dent in the minds of the people, including Mahatma Gandhi, which led to counter reformation in the people. The Arya Samaj showed them the path and provided them the light of reason and logic and thereby motivated them to take the Herculean task of cleaning their own stables.[1,2,3]

He denounced child marriages on biological, emotional, educational and religious grounds. Dayanand Saraswati denounced the practice of child-marriage on biological, religious and educational grounds. He believed that marriage before puberty ruins the constitution of women more than that of men. He recommended 25 and 16 years as the minimum age for marriage for men and women. The girl should be at least 16 years, he believed, on the occasion of her marriage and three years should have passed since she had her first menses.

Dayanand also held a rational approach towards the settlement of marriages as he recommended that wedding arrangements should be preceded by enquiries about the candidates and not by means of deceitful and meaningless horoscopes (or sorrow-scopes as he called them), but by proper investigations. In fact, Dayanand was the only reformer in the whole of the 19th century, who prescribed such higher limits for the marriages of boys and girls. As a social reformer, Dayanand in his early life, denounced polygamy in harsh words and allowed it under no circumstance, but later on, after thinking over the deplorable condition of widows and especially child widows, allowed it.

Dayanand also wished that the students, whether male or female, should take an oath, to marry only after completing their studies. He was also aware of the frequent quarrels and other unhappy situations encountered by the uneducated wives and educated husbands in their day today lives and the incongruities that crept in such marriages.

The members of the Arya Samaj composed many songs against certain social vices like extreme feeling of untouchability and casteism, unequal treatment meted out to girls (as regards to their food, education, health etc.), child marriages, unequal marriages and also composed songs in favour of education and which motivated people to accept social reforms.

Dayanand believed in the universality of education and as such considered that it was the duty of the State to see that no children are left behind in getting school education. He believed in having separate schools or gurukuls for girls, which were to be run exclusively by women staff only. Their marriage should not be allowed to take place until the time they return from their academy on the termination of their educational training. The Arya Samaj played a commendable role in the upliftment of women. The Samaj opened a large number of schools, colleges and public libraries in various Indian States. The need and the importance[4,5,6] of education as a tool for personality



development and also as a mode of social change was understood and emphasized by the Arya Samaj, 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.

II. DISCUSSION

Understanding fully the role and importance of education as a tool of social change, Dayanand propagated the benefits of education and believed that the chief duty of the parents, preceptors, and relatives is to adorn children with good education, nobility of character, refinement of manners, and amiability of temper. He believed in the universality of education and as such considered that it was the duty of the State to see that no children are left behind in getting school education.

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 individual 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 [7,8,9] matters including the finances.

He strongly recommended women's education and their participation in all religious ceremonies including the performance of yajnas. He was also against the age old prejudices, which were prevalent in his times, about the education of women and shudras (L=h'kwzks uk/kh;krkfejr Jqrs%) i.e. never should women and the Shudras study and as such, he declared in unambiguous terms that all human beings, whether men or women have a right to study. It was a memorable day, in the history of northern India in the modern times, when a Brahmin saint or Swami of the Saraswati monastic order, declared openly in unflinching manner that everybody has the right to study the sacred religious scriptures, a thing that was denied to them for centuries and also that the reading of them was not a privilege of a selected few.

The initiation of the Arya Samaj, regarding opening of girl's schools and girl's college as well as the starting of the women's wing or Stree Samaj for spreading education and socio-political awareness amongst them influenced various enlightened individuals and caste organizations. It is important as well as interesting to note that this same method of collecting money (by selling raddi, by collecting aata and by begging in the streets) was later on followed by many followers and admirers of Gandhiji for social cause. They went from home to home and collected aata or wheat flour from the houses of their community members, which was later on sold in the market and the money thus collected was used for opening and maintaining schools set up by them.

III. RESULTS

Inspired by the Arya Samaj, many people not only took upon themselves the responsibility of educating the women but also helped in instilling in them a love for their own country. Many Samajist women took an active part in the struggle against their feudal lords and also in the freedom struggle of India against the policies of the then British government. They braved the lathis, insults and humiliations, rough treatment of the police and even went to prisons for several months with their few months old children. It is very significant that there are many examples, which show that the Samajist women went to prisons along with their husbands, their mother in laws, sister in laws, and even with their entire family. [10,11,12]

The Arya Samaj made the common men its target group and focused all of its attention to have their involvement in the social reform process. It is worthy to be mentioned here that the use of the technique of Satyagraha, by the Arya Samajists, as an instrument to mark their protest, shows the impact of Mahatma Gandhi on the freedom struggle in the States of Rajputana. It is also remarkable that Gandhiji was using the techniques of Satyagraha, non cooperation, and civil disobedience from a long time at the national level, against the then atrocious British rule. It also shows that many leaders and members of Arya Samaj were deeply influenced with the charismatic personality of Gandhiji and were having firm belief in Gandhian ways of peaceful protest in the freedom struggle of India.



Many Samajists, by way of dharnas and anshans tried to persuade people not to marry their sons and daughters in their childhood and were successful in stopping many child, un equal marriages and performed widow remarriages. This use of dharnas and anshans was inspired by the dynamic leadership of Gandhi ji , who successfully used these techniques in the freedom struggle of India.

It is remarkable that in the late 19th century various social reformers and reform associations, including the Arya Samaj, were highlighting the pitiable condition of the women in the society and became successful in bringing to the forefront what is now known as the women's questions. But it is also worthy to be mentioned here that the impact of Arya Samaj was much more felt in western and northern India than any other such reform association. The impact of most of the reform associations was confined to a particular region like Bengal or Maharashtra, while the works of the Arya Samaj influenced a major part of western and northern India (including those portions that are now a part of Pakistan).

The above account makes it very clear that had Arya Samaj not worked for the upliftment of the status of women, had it not worked to educate them and pulled them out of the shadows of men, had it not changed the mentality of men towards the so called "weaker section" of the society [19,20], Mahatma Gandhi would not have been successful in motivating them to join the independence movement in large numbers. It was Arya Samaj which instilled and imbued in the hearts and minds of women that they were not 'abla' or weak and that they were strong enough to contribute their part in the freedom struggle. Unfortunately, historiography has not given much emphasis on this contribution of Arya Samaj in the freedom struggle of India. The Arya Samaj levelled the field, cleared all the thorns and provided Gandhi ji a smooth ground to lay the foundation of his mass movements against the British [13,14,15].

IV. CONCLUSION

This research paper is an attempt to highlight the impact of the Arya Samaj on Gandhi ji, on the various issues related with women and on what is now popularly known as 'women's questions'. [16,17,18]

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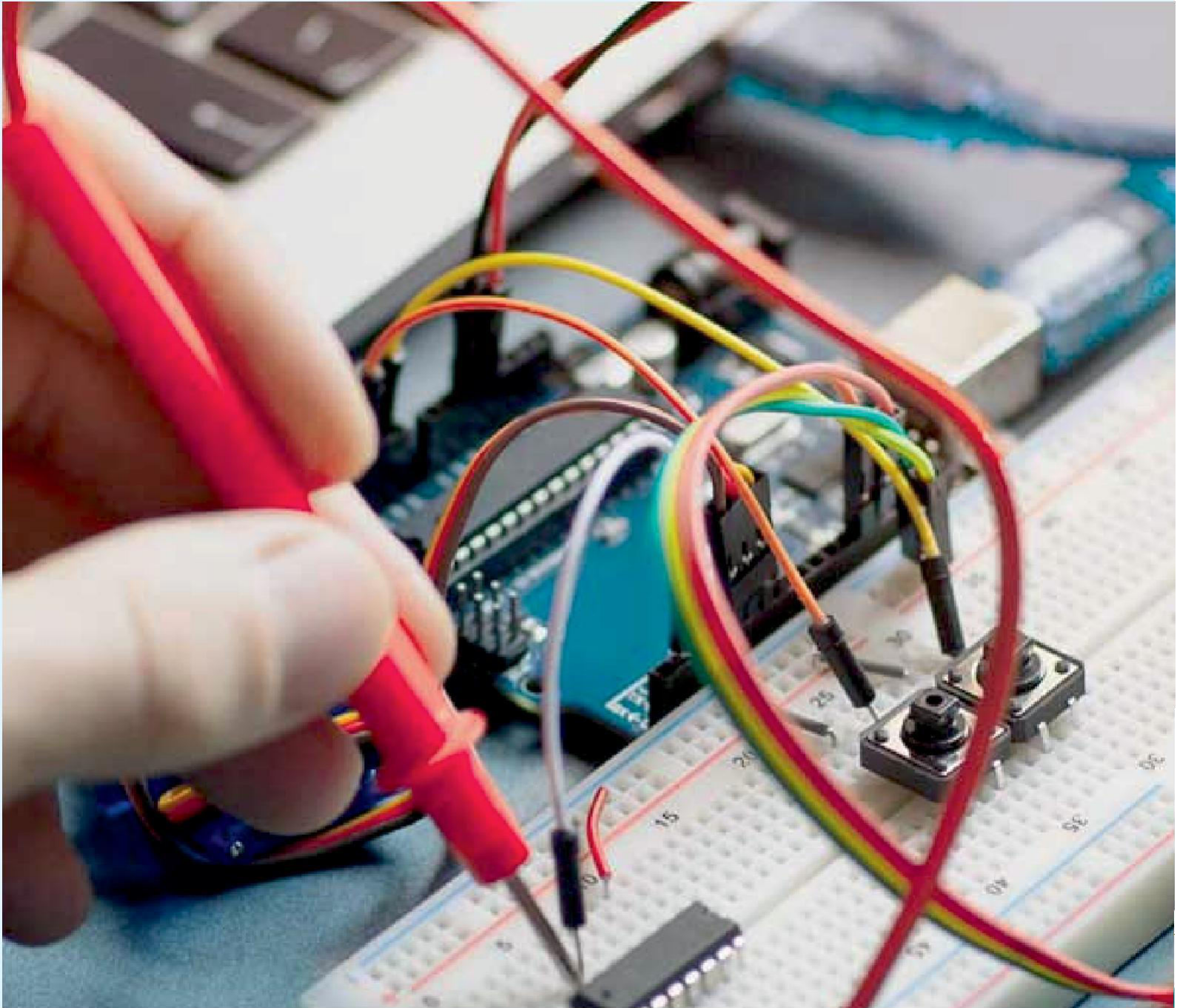
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