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200th birth anniversary of Dayanand Saraswati

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Why in News: Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently paid tribute to Dayanand Saraswati on the 200th birth anniversary of the social reformer

A Brief about Dayanand Saraswati

He was one of the most influential figures of 19th-century India. A believer in the supreme authority of the vedas, he established the Arya Samaj in 1875, leading a reform movement within orthodox Hinduism.

Among his various beliefs included a rejection of idolatry and the overly ritualistic traditions of Hinduism, support for women's education, denunciation of child marriage and an opposition to untouchability.

His magnum opus, **Satyarth Prakash (1875)**, emphasised the "return to Vedic principles" that Dayanand Saraswati believed "had been lost" over time.

The book uses the language of religious revivalism hearkening back to a 'better' ancient past in order to fashion a modern religious philosophy and organisation, capable of competing against the increasingly proselytising Christian missionaries.

The need for revivalism

From the 18th century, as the British got ever so entrenched in India, they brought with them missionaries to spread the Christian faith. As part of the West's "civilising mission", missionaries provided an ideological justification for what was an exploitative imperial project.

Furthermore, through their growing influence, they also created a degree of subservience to the Empire, especially in certain sections of the population.

A reason for the success of Christian missionaries in the Indian subcontinent was the nature of native culture and belief systems at the time.

As Dayanand Saraswati himself put it, over the centuries, Hindus had moved away from the teachings and traditions of the Vedas, which were the source of the "ultimate truth" in the world.

This departure from the true Sanatan Dharma (what he referred Vedic religion as) resulted in practices such as idolatry, untouchability, sectarianism, sati, primacy of the priestly class, etc. becoming commonplace

For missionaries, these so-called 'regressive practices' provided not only the reason for their "civilising" mission, but also an audience for their message among populations worst treated within the traditional Hindu fold.

Founding the Arya Samaj and Vedic Schools

By preaching the supremacy of the Vedas, Dayanand Saraswati harkened to a "better time" where true Sanatan Dharma was prevalent.

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While his teachings were very much in tune with the prevailing social conditions of his day, his message was formulated in the language of revivalism rather than progressive reform. This only added to his influence, especially among more conservative sections of society

A major part of his mission was to address the fragmented nature of Hindu society. According to Dayanand Saraswati, the brahmans were primarily to blame for this – they had corrupted the Sanatan Dharma in order to maintain and grow their own status and influence in society.

By depriving the laity of Vedic knowledge, they were successful in warping Hindu religion into something it was not, without the kind of theological backlash that they should have received.

To propagate his message, he toured across India, debating with pandits and religious scholars. He was extremely eloquent and would defeat even the most erudite of Hindu scholars with his sheer oratorical prowess.

During his tours, he began to gather a following. Thus, he founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. This was a monotheistic Hindu order that rejected the ritualistic excesses and social dogmas of orthodox Hinduism and promoted a united Hindu society on the basis of Vedic teachings.

Even before the establishment of the Arya Samaj, Dayanand Saraswati had founded multiple Vedic schools. Modelled on missionary schools that were increasingly popular among Indians, these Gurukuls provided an Indian alternative, based on principles of the Vedas.

For Dayanand Saraswati, this was crucial to break the monopoly of brahmans on Vedic knowledge.

Dayanand's philosophy

Dayanand Saraswati preached respect and reverence for other human beings, supported by the Vedic notion of the divine nature of the individual. Crucial among his “ten founding principles of Arya Samaj” is the idea that all activities must be done for the benefit of humankind as a whole, rather than individuals or even idols and religious symbols.

This universalism was directly antithetical to the caste system. While Dayanand did not fully oppose the institution of caste itself, he advocated for significant reform within it.

Citing the Vedas, he claimed that caste is not supposed to be hereditary but rather on the basis of an individual's talents and disposition.

Furthermore, he was against the practice of untouchability, which he believed was an outcome of centuries of brahmanical domination. Crucially, he advocated Vedic education for all castes.

His views on women were also against the grain of orthodox Hindu thinking at the time. He campaigned for the education of women as well as against ‘regressive practices’ such as child marriage.

Legacy of Dayanand Saraswati

Dayanand Saraswati's legacy has had an enduring influence.

His message was particularly important at a time when nationalist sentiment in India was rising.

He is credited to have first used the term swaraj (self-rule) in 1875, which would later be picked up by the likes of Lokmanya Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi.

His criticism of the British from a religious point of view (chapter 13 of Satyarth Prakash is completely dedicated to his criticism of Christianity) as well as providing an ancient Indian alternative was crucial to the nationalist

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discourse of the time.

His work was also important for the consolidation of Hindus. Through the organisation of Arya Samaj, he was among the first to advocate 'conversion' into the Hindu fold – he supported the idea of *shuddhi*, to bring back Islamic or Christian converts into Hinduism.

This became a very popular movement by the early 20th century, especially aimed at lower caste converts who were given a higher social status and self-esteem under the more egalitarian Arya Samaji philosophy.

Today, Dayanand Saraswati's legacy carries on through the Arya Samaj centres found across India as well as the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic schools and colleges. Providing quality education even in the most remote places, DAV schools have over time become popular.

Death

Dayanand Saraswati died under suspicious circumstances in 1883, after his public criticism of the Maharaja of Jodhpur. Some alleged he was poisoned by the Maharaja's cook.

While this charge was never proven in court, according to a popular story about Dayanand's death, the killer actually confessed to Dayanand Saraswati and was subsequently forgiven.

Conclusion

Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, India's second President and an influential educationist, called Dayanand Saraswati "a maker of modern India". And while his most popular phrase was "go back to the Vedas", his influence on modern India is unquestionable.