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Contribution of Rationalist Social Reformer Gopal Ganesh Agarkar in Women Empowerment in Maharashtra

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Abstract:

Agarkar was a serious student of European enlightenment his rational methods to curb social issues altered the social reformation movement, his aimed at reforming inhuman traits of Hindu society, he aired his radical views in his periodical *Sudharak* in which he campaigned against the injustices and problems of women, he had to confront issues like the age of consent controversy, liberation of women, caste system, Sharada Sadan controversy, female feticide, Child marriage, polytheism, illiteracy. He propagated same education imparted to the boys and girls, he always tried to convince the Hindu society people what is just and appropriate for the well being of society.

Keyword: Enlightenment, Empowerment, Persuade, Vicious Web, Polytheism, Female Feticide, Agreeable Age

Introduction

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar is held as one the foremost social reformers who sought for social transformation that entirely separates itself from worn-out customs, traditions as well as religious rituals; and believed to conduct all social dealings on the basis of individual liberty and intellectual assets. In order to promote his social, political, religious thoughts he plunged into social reforms. He strongly advocated the power of human reason and criticized the blind dependence on tradition and false glorification of the past.

Agarkar was a serious student of European Enlightenment and was deeply influenced by the Utilitarian and skeptical writings of 18th and 19th century Western thinkers, especially John

Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, August Comte, Thomas Huxley, John Morley and Edward Gibbon. Indeed, he was not ignorant of Indian classical lore. But it was the Western liberal—rational thought and the secular— scientific world-view that it represented which made intense appeal to his resilient mind. What he recognised was the revolutionary character of the rational principles, which are timeless and universal, as evolved by the Western rationalists.

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar is notable for his judicious approach to ‘speak what is apt and aim at what is attainable’. Hence, an ideological dispute over social issues with his friend and co-activist Bal Gangadhar Tilak wielded great impact on social reformation movement for about century in not only Maharashtra but also all over India. His aspirations for welfare society and rational methods to curb social issues altered the social reformation movement. He aimed at reforming inhuman traits of Hindu society. Thereby he strived to awaken society from social evils such as child-marriage, widow marriage and rigid rituals.

His rational approach constantly re-examined all social ideas and institutions – whether they served the purpose of social utility and comfort or not. He was among the few contemporaries in whose thought and practice there was no dichotomy. Education, contends the author, not just formal but also informal Lokashikshan, holds the key to Agarkar’s ideas of human advancement in life. “Education, not just formal but also Lokshikshan,” Agarkar said, “holds key to advancement in life. He not only preached but followed: “Persuade, argue, cherish virtuous examples; bring up the youth in the habit of right opinion and right motive, shape your social arrangements so as to stimulate the best part of character”.(Altekar, M.D. 87)

The most important part in his life is his Critique of Hindu Society and Conception of Social Change which includes his ideas of social change, the method of reform and social issues. In fact during his brief life he had to confront issues like the age of consent controversy, on liberation of women, caste system, Sharada Sadan controversy etc. In his public life of just about 15 years, Agarkar made enormous contributions to the field of social reforms and education and left an indelible mark on the social life of Maharashtra.

In order to study his contribution in awakening and empowerment of women in Hindu society, it is necessary to study in brief his life and major ideological theories concerning justifiable social reformations. This will not only highlight key aspects of his personality and contemporary social milieu in which he attacked and confronted the unyielding religious-social issues. Thus, we can understand the transformation set in motion by reformers like Gopal Ganesh

Agarkar for social change which became, in the long run, suitable for unprecedented emergence of women reform movement in Hindu society.

Life and Works of Gopal Ganesh Agarkar

Gopal Ganesh Agarkar (14 July 1856 – 17 June 1895) was a Chitpavan Brahmin social reformer, educationist, thinker from Maharashtra during the British rule. He was born in Tembu village which is 4 miles away from Karad town in Satara district of Maharashtra. (Kolhe, Avinash, 15)

His forefathers were known for their sound economic wellbeing. He was the youngest child of Ganesh Agarkar and Saraswati Agarkar, among three daughters and two brothers. After his birth the Agarkar family started experiencing financial crises.

Weakening financial condition could not stop Gopal Ganesh Agarkar from attaining education. Tembu village had no school. So Gopalrao Agarkar was enrolled in primary school at Karad. At the age of 13 he completed education at Karad. By the time he had developed interest in school. In order to meet the school expenses he started working in office. He came to know that his distant relative-Vamanrao Agarkar worked as Deputy Educational Inspector at Ratnagiri. He decided to ask for his support. Hence, in a hope to receive educational backing Gopalrao reached Ratnagiri just walking around 150 miles distance to meet his uncle. But to his dismay, the uncle refused to extend warm support to Gopalrao. Every now and then the Vamanrao's family used to reproach him. So, he left the family and tried other means to support his education.

According to Alatekar, bitter experiences in pursuance of education at Ratnagiri and Akole completely altered Gopalrao Agarkar's personality. He says, "Since his stay at Ratnagiri, Gopalrao started experiencing internal nature of conservative Hindu family. Perhaps, the harsh experiences can be felt in his sever and acute criticism of injustice and laxity in society" (Altekar, M.D.,30). On returning Karad, he was given the responsibility to escort his maternal Uncle Sadashivrao Bhagwat's wife to Akole. At Akole Gopalrao completed his high school education. He somehow completed junior college and enrolled for degree in Deccan College with the financial assistance from his teachers, friends as well as scholarship he persuaded higher education. In order to meet expenses, he also wrote articles in 'Varhad Samachar'(Kolhe,

Avinash,15). He was excellent speaker; he contested elocution competitions, took part in essay writing competition to meet his daily expenses.

In Deccan College under the guidance of Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, Gopalrao Agarkar realized that life is not meant for merry making, but one must stand for social cause. It was crucial time of his career. He was not interested in merely earning money to live life; instead, in an article shown to Vishnushastri Chiplunkar in 1876 expressed desire to serve country. By the end of B.A. his thoughts about social service became firm that the best ways to serve the society is spread of education among its fellow beings.

Enrollment for M. A. degree completely changed the course of his life. Gopalrao Agarkar happened to meet Lokmanya Tilak in the first year. Both of them had same concern for betterment of country and wanted somehow to contribute for social cause. In this noble work they were influenced by Vishnushastri Chiplunkar's patriotic aspirations; and assisted him in the establishment of 'New English School' in Pune (Kolhe, Avinash,20). For Gopal Agarkar it was golden opportunity. After conscious and deep thinking he entered social service by spreading education. On the other hand to their dismay his parents were disappointed to know the decision of Gopalrao Agarkar. His parents wanted him to join a job, earn handsome salary and thereby contribute in alleviating poverty of family. Instead, Gopalrao in a letter written to mother said, "You might be dreaming of your son who after achieving excellence in higher education shall join prestigious job and assist in family by earning big salary, but please hold on, at this moment itself I am confirm that I shall not run after the greed for higher income, and luxurious life; instead I am content on meager income and would spend my entire life for social wellbeing (Phadake, Y.D.,5). On 01 January 1880, Chiplunkar, Tialk and Agarkar opened 'New English School'. Gopalrao Agarkar joined the teaching staff in the year 1881. His dream job of social service was a reality now. Thus, he entered public life with great opportunity to inculcate patriotic zeal among new generation and thereby contribute social cause.

Gopalrao Agakar, Chiplunkar and Tilak with others were passionate about spreading nationalistic ideas. Very early they realized that such a wide and hug task required much more than mere opening a school. So, Gopalrao Agarkar and Vmanrao Apate felt a need for news paper. Soon the group decided to launch a weekly and newspaper. So, with, Tilak, Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, Vaman Apate, Dr. Ganesh Krishna Garde and Madhavrao Namjoshi, Agarkar started 'Marathi' weekly on 2nd January and in next two days, published news daily named

‘Kesari’ on 4th January 1891. The paper assured in its agenda that, as noted by Phadake, “the paper will strictly strive for secular analysis of native culture, books in vernacular language and foreign political scenario. (Phadake, Y.D.,13)”

‘Kesari’ and ‘Maratha’ publications had great impact on public opinion in Maharashtra which created favorable environment for social, political, economic improvement. He was the first editor of *Kesari*, a prominent Marathi weekly in those days which was started by Lokmanya Tilak in 1880-81. He subsequently left *Kesari* out of ideological differences with Tilak concerning the primacy of political reform versus social reform; with Agarkar believing that the need for social reform was more immediate.

Agarkar headed the reformist and Gangadhar Tilak took the side of conservative Hindus. Agarkar’s reformist group held the notion that child marriage is serious crime, in fact severe than female foeticide. They remarked that huge number of widows in society increasing due to the ill-famous practice of child-marriage; and hence it must be banned by law. On the contrary the conservatives led by Tilak believed that the government must not interfere in religious matters of Hindu society. Thus, two thinkers got separated on account of radical views regarding reformation in society; and both the newspapers reflected the contrast between their views.

Indian society in the nineteenth century was caught in a vicious web created by religious superstitions and social obscurantism. Hinduism had become a compound of magic, animism and superstition. The priests exercised an overwhelming and, indeed, unhealthy influence on the minds of the people. Idolatry and polytheism helped to reinforce their position, and their monopoly of scriptural knowledge imparted a deceptive character to all religious systems. Social conditions were equally depressing. The most distressing was the position of women. The birth of a girl was unwelcome, her marriage, a burden and her widowhood inauspicious. Attempts to kill female infants at birth were not unusual. Several women hardly had a married life worth the name, yet when their husbands died they were expected to commit sati which Raja Ram mohan Roy described as a ‘murder according to every shastra. Another debilitating factor was caste. At the bottom of the ladder came the untouchables or scheduled castes, which formed about twenty per cent of the Hindu population. The untouchables suffered from numerous and severe disabilities and restrictions.

In those days the famous issue of Rakhamabai further extended reformist attitude of Gopal Ganesh Agarkar. The Dadaji Vs. Rakhamabai case was popular for its extreme decision

on child-marriage. Rakhmabai married Dadaji Bhikaji at early age at eleven. For next ten years she remained at her own home instead of with her husband. When her husband Dadaji after ten years asked her to accompany to in-law's house she refused. As a result Dadoji lodged a complaint against Rakhmabai. The Bombay High court gave verdict in favour of Rakhmabai saying that it would be unethical to marry a woman against her will and wish. According to Agarkar, "marriage system was very dreadful and immoral; so it must be curbed as soon as possible. He observed that unfortunately our society bows in front of laws made by the government. The way Lord Betting banned *Sati* practice by enforcing legal action, similarly people in society will accept verdict by government against inhuman practices of child-marriage, widow-marriage and divorce (Phadake, Y.D.,85).

One more issue regarding fundamental rights of women led to widen notional differences between Agarkar and Tilak. Ranade, Bhandarkar, Shankar Pandurang Pandit opened 'Female High school' in Hujurpag. This school started co-education i.e. the boys and girls were imparted same education. Tilak resented the practice. In September 1888 he started article series entitled 'Educational Initiatives in Female School'. According to Tilak, women should be able to read and writer to a certain limit that they can improve their household works. Their primary role in life is to get married and engage in housework, hence, no use of imparting similar education to girls. On the contrary, Agarkar believed that the girl and boys must receive same education as well as they must study altogether instead of separate education pattern for either. The increasing difference of opinion expanded to its extreme limit. Both of them could not tolerate the widening gap between opinions. Through an article in month of October, 1887 the owners of newspapers namely Tilak and Kelkar declared that Agarkar is relieved from the responsibility of editor of Kesari. Till then, Agarkar too realized that in order to air his own views needed own newspaper/weekly journal. Thus, after getting separated from Kesari, Agarkar started a new daily titled 'Sudhakar'.

He aired his radical views in his periodical *Sudharak* in which he campaigned against the injustices and problems of women. Agarkar abhorred blind adherence to and glorification of tradition and the past. Agarkar expressed radical views whereas Tilak was more conservative in his approach. Their counter views clashed on the issue of Agreeable Age Act proposed by the British Government in 1884. As per the 375 section of the Act, if a married man had intercourse with his wife who is below ten years, it is crime. Agarkar reformist group wanted the age limit

extended up to twelve years and called for a meeting in 1890. In order to block their demands, the conservative group put forth equal demands but asked to get it first approved by at least 200 Brahmins. As a result the radical group was insulted. Through an article entitled '*Hi Sabha Ki Thatta?* (Is this an assembly or kidding?)' Sudhakar, Agarkar asked the public to notice the difference between his notions and Tilak's conservative thinking. He said that Tilak wanted reformation in society but don't want interference of British laws; whereas the reformists with Agarkar wanted support of British government in implementation of reformative ideas in society.

In order to clarify his views on radical methods of reformation Agarkar wrote an article entitled '*Maharashtriyans Anavurta Patra*' (an anonymous letter to Maharashtra people) in '*Sudhakar*' on 23rd February 1893. His open thinking became clear as he says, "in an ideological debate, the number of people increase who don't understand intellectual part of an issue. They just see two intellectuals debating...in fact ideological debate is a sign of active society. On the other hand a society cannot progress without exchange of thoughts...friends! Why are you afraid of discussion? Banning immoral behavior, promotion of moral conduct, knowledge generation; search of ultimate truth and eradication of superstitious practices cannot be achieved unless we openly discuss it (Phadake, Y.D.,162)."

Regardless of strong protest from conservative Hindus, the Age of Consent Act was passed on 19th March 1891. The conservatives staged protest against the Act as the leaders like Tilak opposed widow marriage supported by this Act. The '*Sudhakar*' group was applauded for its activities. They started one or the other way to malign the character of Agarkar. But Agarkar calmed their reproaches through modest reply in local daily '*Dnyanprakash*' and '*Sudhakar*'. Agarkar believed that "to achieve reformation in society first of all the public must be made ready to accept it; similarly, any such reformative act must be backed by legal provisions only then the ill-famous practices can be removed from society.

For entire life Agarkar fought for reformation. He proclaimed that the reformation activities must be mandatory by law. In this regard interference by government would ultimately encourage the eradication process. He asked the orthodox groups that if they demand ban on prostitution, alcoholism from British government then on what basis these people resent the demand for religious and social reforms in society. He was confirmed that as the British government is foreign, and hence its initiatives are limited; even though with legal provisions the

reformation movement would become strong and sharp. Hence, he strongly believed that the social attitude should change with enforcement of laws.

Conclusion

Women from all strata of Hindu society were living in worst affected situation, especially the widows. It attracted the attention of educated Indians like Agarkar. Touching this issue meant touching the fundamental notions of marriage system in Hindu society. Women suffered in Hindu society as widows, child-marriage and illiteracy. Hindu family system inflicted mistreatments on women like: polygamy, infant marriage, ban on widow remarriage, unequal marriage (great disparity between the age of the bridegroom and that of the bride), heavy dowry, other disastrous marriage expenses and restriction of marriage within the constricted sub-castes.

Agarkar had personally observed the suffering of women in society. Children were usually engaged at an early age, and some child brides whose intended husbands died even before the wedding ceremonies were considered widows.

He always tried to convince the Hindu society people what is just and appropriate for the well being of society. He felt zeal for social reformation, despite being Brahmin he had to struggle hard to acquire education. His voluntary efforts for social reforms suggest his inner desire to establish the true order in society. For that purpose, his articles, essays and teaching in school and college played major role. Lastly, his seeking out an intermediate, modest way of reforming Hindu society with the help of British government and intellectual awakening among orthodox people can be observed in the way that the leaders sought for eradication of misery, vulnerabilities of women.

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