

Gujarat Vernacular Society

Dr. Vijay Kumar C. Patel

Assistant Professor – History

Gujarat Arts and Commerce College, Ellis Bridge, Ahmedabad – 380 006

Email- vijaypatel127@gmail.com

Abstract :-

The 19th century was special in Gujarat because of its results. This century marked the end of Maratha rule and the rise of the British Sun. the Gujarat Vernacular Society was established due to the newly educated class, liberal bureaucracy. The main objective of the G.V.S was to develop Gujarati language, to create public awareness against the burning issues of the society. Forbes was its Foundation and the Society's Propagandist was Dalpatram. Dalpatram had the support of the newly educated class, merchants and mahajans of Ahmedabad.

The 19th century is very significant in terms of social reforms in Gujarat it is because the British rule established in 1818 AD had a great influence on Gujarat especially ideological and materialistic trends. Several individuals contributed to the social reform under that influence in the late 19th century. Many social reformers like Durgaram Mehtaji, Mahipatram Rupram, Narmad, Dalpatram, Karshandas Moolji, Navalram Pandya, and Hargovind Das Kantawala Rao Bahadur Bechardas Laskari emerged on the larger societal platform of Gujarat and waged a battle against a range of social ills. As a response to the movement, a class of Pundits also emerged including Manilal Nabhubhai Dwivedi and Ichharam Suryaram Desai who advised people on how to bring about reforms with respect to the unique culture and rituals of Gujarat. Any society can embrace change by taking into consideration its traditions and history. Thus, we have so many social reformers in Gujarat who founded their reforms on these two strands of social change.

There are institutes that played an equally important role in the social reforms as individuals. Many attempts have been made in Gujarat to instigate reforms through such organizations. For example, various organizations and groups arose such as Manavdharma Sabha in 1844 (Surat), Gujarat Vernacular Society in 1848, Bal Lagna Nishedhak Mandal (Society for

Stopping Child Marriages) and Punarvivah Uttejak Mandal (Society for Promoting Widow Remarriages), etc.

The article aims at studying how various activities of such institutes made social reforms possible. Hence, we are looking at Gujarat Vernacular Society as a case study.

Key Words: Social reform, Gujarat Vernacular society, Buddhi Prakash - Magazine

The Origin of Gujarat Vernacular Society:

The Gujarat Vernacular Society was established on December 26, 1848.¹ The whole experiment of the Society was the result of an unrelenting enthusiasm and attempt of Alexander Kinloch Forbes. All the members of the committee were Europeans.² We must mention some of the active members such as Montague Seward, T. B. Curtis, M.H. Scott, etc. Thus, the organization was started under Western influence mainly utilitarian, intellectual, and rational attitudes. In a sense, the experiment turned out to be shaping the very nature of an organization in Gujarat. Breaking away from the ordinary styles, fresh methods have been introduced to run an organization. This was very indicative during the dawn of the institutionalization of social reforms in Gujarat.

Based on the history and study of the work carried out by the Gujarat Vernacular Society, it becomes evident that there was great collaboration and understanding among the British officials, elite class of the society, and the businesspersons. The trio geared up the speed of social reforms in Gujarat through Gujarat Vernacular Society. It can be said that the business class of the time was conservative. Generally, that class was not open to reform activities like stopping child marriages and widow remarriages. Despite that, Jain and Vaishnav businesspersons were the frontiers in donating for education in general and schools for girls in particular along with setting up the libraries.

It was a time when there was a change in attitude between the older generation of the businesspersons and the newer ones. Briggs gave an excellent example of how the new

¹ પારેખ હિરાલાલ ત્રિ, ગુજરાત વર્નાક્યુલર સોસાયટીનો ઇતિહાસ , ગુજરાત વિધ્યાસભા, અમદાવાદ, 1933 પૂ. 02

² એજન પૂ 3

generation was receiving the intellectual influence of the West in 1849.³ In 1847, Briggs met a family of a businessman called Himabhai and had a conversation with him.” An agreeable conversation ensued on various topics upon allusion to the proposed application to Government for a Sanskrit class being formed in the Elphinstone branch schools. Hemabai’s son remarked that “ he could produce beggars profoundly versed in this dead language, and that such a Foundation would prove a waste of labor and expense without any essential good being derived” the parent entertained a different view, and expressed a determination of supporting the object of the petition, since their religious works would thus be at the perusal of every student this subject occasioned the appearance of a small wooden case about a foot in depth and length , and five inches in breadth from which were revealed several manuscripts in the pail bhudist character they were said to be up wards of three hundred years old” According to Himabhai, the paths to learning Sanskrit and Pail along with the overall study of the Indian knowledge systems should have been explored for the reforms in Gujarat. However, Premabhai, his son was more in favor of promoting new education. He clearly told Briggs, “We will end up maintaining the status quo with the old education system and won’t be able to add anything productive. Only those institutes that imbibe new education systems can bring about reforms in the society.” Himabhai had made Rs. 50 lakhs in his business of opium. The Gujarat Vernacular Society was successful in involving this family as the flywheel of social reforms in Gujarat.

On the one hand, Western Government and Administrative officers were successful in getting the support of the elite class of the society, and on the other hand, both of them succeeded in actively involving the business class in the process. As a result, a comprehensive and holistic understanding of social reform developed. Gradually, the combination of the Eastern and the Western modes of social reforms helped in developing implementation strategies, competencies, and skills.

Education of the Masses:

The Gujarat Vernacular Society has immensely contributed to social reforms through education. They got great help in developing intellectual capacity by building educational reforms. It can be said based on the research that the organization started ‘Vartman’ and ‘Buddhiprakash’ along with libraries to educate the masses of the time. The contribution of

³ Briggs H G, ‘The Cities of Gujarashtra’ Their Topography and History , Illustrated London 1849) p 234/235

‘Buddhiprakash’ is not any less in making public opinion⁴ for social reforms or change. Besides, organizations of various competitions like essay writing, debates, and a series of lectures also added more spirit to the mission. For example, various prize-based essay-writing competitions were organized like *Jnati Nibandh* in 1852, *Holi Nibandh* in 1853, ‘*Baal Lagna Ane Stree-Shikshan Kya Jashe?*’, ‘*Kadava Kanabiona Rit Rivajo*.’⁵ We should also mention various activities pertaining to the publication of books. In a commendable way, the organization has contributed to bringing about intellectual reform.

Gujarat Vernacular Society’s activities of starting schools were very significant. It was not easy to start schools in Gujarat of that time because there were hardly a few schools in the entire state, educating children without any discrimination, educating girls in the era of child marriages! The organization became the torchbearer in educating girls.⁶ In this context, Harkor Shethani, wife of Shri Hathising Kesarisinh made a remarkable contribution. She funded the schools for the girls. Interestingly, one should note here that directly or indirectly a woman became a vehicle to social reform. The ‘Female Training College’ started in 1880 in Ahmedabad was rooted in the activities of the Gujarat Vernacular Society.

The Library Movement:

The Library Movement also played a pivotal role in cultivating people’s minds. The decision to start the native library was taken on January 5, 1849. On September 5, 1855, Dalpatram called a public meeting for starting a library and raised funds for the same. Mr. Haddon, the Collector of the time had sanctioned the required land for the same. Himabhai, the businessman had donated Rs 3000/-. Kahandas Mancharam, the engineer had prepared the whole plan of the building. Mr. Elphinstone, the Governor of Mumbai laid the foundation stone on December 24 of the same years. The library building was officially inaugurated⁷ on November 14, 1857.

Thus, based on the facts, it becomes evident how these activities were boosted by the collaboration of the different sections of the society. The following numbers of the library members reveal how gradually people developed taste for reading and intellectual activities:

⁴ પારેખ ઉપરોક્ત , વિભાગ 1 , પ્રસ્તાવના

⁵ બુદ્ધિપ્રકાશ, પુસ્તક 1, માર્ચ 7, 1854. પૂ 13

⁶ બુદ્ધિપ્રકાશ, પુસ્તક 1 ઓગસ્ટ 1854. પૂ 77,72

⁷ પારેખ ઉપરોક્ત પૂ 22-23

Year	Number of Members
1849	56
1854	33
1855	110
1857	175

The library used to purchase different kinds of books and people used to donate books to the library as well. For example, the library got 412 books as gifts in 1853. Most of the books were from Government of Mumbai, Mumbai Education Board, the Nawab of Radhanpur and Manthraj Sorabji, a Parasi gentleman.⁸

Contribution of Dalpatram, the Great Poet:

Dalpatram was so deeply involved with the initial activities of the Gujarat Vernacular Society that his contribution needs to be mentioned here. T.B. Curtis played an important role in bringing this great talent with a reformative mindset to the position of the secretary of the institute. The institute remained successful in using the talent of such a personality in an optimum manner for various activities and in ensuring that he stays with the institute. It is significant that a person with poetic ability could not only join the institute but also worked for the reform activities in such a manner that they reached to the common people of the society. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Gujarat Vernacular Society could connect with the masses through a poet.

All the secretaries and honorary secretaries of the institute had the reform-mindset by one or the other way but Dalpatram had more opportunities because of *Buddhiprakash*. The institute became instrumental in voicing Dalpatram's reform ideas through *Buddhiprakash*. This is an excellent example of how a person can contribute in a meaningful manner if one is provided with support and a conducive atmosphere by the organization. As Dalpatram wrote⁹ that while performing his duties, he enjoyed working for the necessary reforms. He accepted his job as the most designated post. Dalpatram had a clear understanding of his writing and *Buddhiprakash*. He was interested in discussing with the readers through their queries and suggestions through letters. Thus, he encouraged more and more public participation. As he explains clearly,

⁸ બુદ્ધિપ્રકાશ, પુસ્તક 1 માર્ચ 7 1854, પૃ 10

⁹ બુદ્ધિપ્રકાશ, પુસ્તક 2 જુલાઈ 1855 પૃ 97-98

“It would be very useful if you can write to us about how to reform the education system in India by increasing it.”

One of his write-ups on the benefits of reading *Buddhiprakash* tells us his clarity on the reform ideas:

“The reform in the country will take place by publishing such magazines. The reform means, our kings and people also add to their respect, prosperity, and education in the same way as the people abroad have developed their education and skills; and they work together.”

With that, he had also shared a couplet on reform.

Alongside this, he also explained how political reforms support other kinds of reforms. Almost everyone related to the Gujarat Vernacular Society had great faith in the British Raj. Dalpatram echoed this attitude of the reformers in his poetry. He admired the British Raj in many of his poems. Many people who saw the transition from the Maratha regime to the British could compare the two modes of administration. For the Marathi administration, it was said,

હાલતા દંડે , ચાલતા દંડે , દંડે સારા દીન

છાતીઉપર પથ્થર મૂકી, પૈસા લેતા છીન.”¹⁰

One of Dalpatram’s poems” હરખ હવે તું હિંદુસ્તાન દેખ બિચારી બકરીનો પણ કોઈ ન રસ્તે જાતીં પકડે કાન “ (*Be pleased Hindustan, Look, now nobody teases even a goat on the road*)...has

been very famous. Dalpatram was immensely impressed by the administrative skills of the British officers, which become evident in his works too. Due to such an attitude of leaning towards the British Government, the institute received all kinds of support from the same.

Many princely states ruled over different parts of Gujarat, which is why Dalpatram used his pen to shape the minds of those kings. Dalpatram delivered a lecture on the benefits of education for kings in the Vidyabhyasak Mandali of an English school in Ahmedabad. The lecture was printed as a booklet too.

There is another lecture wherein he talks about a couplet in the context of the illiterate kings. He has also written an article advising native people wherein he talked about how teachers, doctors (vaid), and artisans can develop their skills and reform their respective fields. Categorically, he emphasized how they should not be disappointed by the change but rather learn from it for the sake of progress.

¹⁰ શેઠ મગનલાલ , અમદાવાદનો ઇતિહાસ , ગુજરાત વિદ્યાસભા, અમદાવાદ , 1977.પૃ 53

In the context of the kings of the princely states, he explained that they should read about how other bigger kings expand their kingdoms and execute their administration; and they should keep such articles in their offices. The documentation would also help their successive generations. It was urged here to learn, think, and understand something new for the reform. It is because of the illiteracy and addictions that the administration of the princely states have collapsed. Their mutual disconnect and laziness caused their decline. He shared that fact and mentioned it.

“It is better that you take precaution to the dirt in the house before someone else tells you to do so.”

While studying Dalpatram understands of the reform, we realize that he worked at two levels; at the primary level, he talked about reforms in the family, community and village society whereas, at the secondary level, he discussed reforms in the larger groups and institutes dealing with the state, religion, economics and overall development of the society at large.

Narmadshankar the great poet has described the time between 1842 and 1860 as the age of reforms in the history of Gujarat because these years were full of articles and lectures on reforms all over the places.¹¹ the institute that used to shape and materialize all these reform ideas was the Gujarat Vernacular Society. Dalpatram can be considered as an excellent example of that spirit. A humble attempt to understand Dalpatram’s ideas of social reforms would be considered appropriate here. There was a custom of female infanticide by one of the other means in society at that time. There was a social ill of Sati as well. The condition of the widows in the society was pathetic and discussions on widow-remarriages were going on. There were unnecessary expenditures in the groom’s party. Also, there was a shameful tradition of singing *fatana* during the wedding. Many social problems were caused by mismatch couples due to child marriages. The tradition of polygamy was also rampant in society. The articles of *Buddhiprakash* focused on women education.

The Aim and Activities of the Institute:

The aim of the Gujarat Vernacular Society’s provided a significant opportunity for the spread of reform attitude. It included “developing Gujarati language-literature, useful knowledge, and largely promoting education.” In a way, the management of the institute understood the fact that the atmosphere was conducive for the social reforms, which was very useful for the fulfillment of the aim of spreading knowledge. The major activities include publications of the

¹¹ ત્રિવેદી નવલરામ, સંસાર સુધારાનું રેખાદર્શન, ગુજરાત વિદ્યાસભા, અમદાવાદ , પૂ 27

newspaper (daily), *Buddhiprakash*, (the monthly magazine), preparing dictionaries, collecting the manuscripts, building libraries, education, and publishing books. Both the aim and activities of the institute contributed in a big way to endorse the attitude of reform and in this manner, it succeeded in the direction of social change by cultivating the public mindset.

The clarity of social reform played a key role in developing the institute. The Gujarat Vernacular Society voiced the spirit of contemporary society. The social change was a social need. The institute took the onus of fulfilling that need of the society. Therefore, human resources, physical and financial resources, and means for various activities came handy for the institute.

Based on the historical facts, it can be said that Gujarat Vernacular Society was a significant vehicle of social reform because of the founders of the institute, its aim and activities, talented people like Dalpatram, intellectual and businesspersons, and common masses.

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