

Research Article

Dayananda Saraswati and the Vedic Canon: Understanding Swami's Programme of Socio-Cultural Change

Praveen Dhanda

Assistant Professor, IPCW, University of Delhi, India.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24321/2349.2872.202302>

I N F O

E-mail Id:

dhandapraveen@gmail.com

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7635-4756>

How to cite this article:

Dhanda P. Dayananda Saraswati and the Vedic Canon: Understanding Swami's Programme of Socio-Cultural Change. *J Adv Res Humani Social Sci* 2023; 10(1): 8-11.

Date of Submission: 2023-05-16

Date of Acceptance: 2023-05-26

A B S T R A C T

This paper seeks to analyse Swami Dayananda Saraswati's sui generis intellectual practice with reference to the Vedic canon and how this engagement created the ground for his influential project of social reform and socio-cultural change. By primarily drawing from the work of J. T. F. Jordens this essay shows that Dayananda advanced at least three iconoclastic moves concerning the Vedic corpus. First, he restricted the Vedas to the Samhitas proper and heralded that only those subsequent texts or aspects thereof were to be accepted as authentic that were in consonance with the Vedas. Second, the Swami devised a hermeneutic framework for the interpretation of Vedic texts based on logical reasoning and morality on the one hand and rules of grammar on the other. Third, Dayananda himself came up with his translation and interpretation of the Vedas in Hindi, abrogating the age old authority structure of the orthodoxy. These heretic moves of Dayananda, it is suggested, propelled the intellectual life force and supplied the doctrinal precepts of one of the most influential socio-political reform movements in modern India.

Keywords: Modern Indian Political Thought, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Arya Samaj, Social Reforms, Vedas

Introduction

By delving into Dayananda Saraswati's intellectual engagement concerning the Vedic corpus, this article seeks to shed some light on three distinct aspects related to his study and interpretation of the Vedas, offering the foundation of his social reform project which shaped the socio-cultural landscape of modern India in many ways. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, originally named Mool Shankar, was born on February 12, 1824, in Tankara, Gujarat, India. Growing up in a devout Brahmin family, he displayed an early inclination towards spiritual thought and philosophical inquiry. Some early experiences ignited a

transformative quest within him, resulting in a remarkable journey that led him to various spiritual masters, scriptural texts and intense introspection, culminating in his realisation that the Vedas held the key to unlocking the regeneration of Indian society (see Yadav 1978).

It is well known that Dayananda considered the Vedas, the ancient scriptures that have had a profound impact on the socio-cultural and spiritual fabric of India for ages, as the final authority, as exhibited by his famous call to 'go back to the Vedas'. However, the nuances of Dayananda's iconoclasm with reference to these ancient texts, as dealt with in this paper, are often missed in this simplification.

Journal of Advanced Research in Humanities and Social Sciences (ISSN: 2349-2872)

Copyright (c) 2023: Author(s). Published by Advanced Research Publications



Here, Dayananda defied the established orthodoxy, which prepared the ground for his project of social reform.

Dayananda's Project: Vedic Oeuvre, Hermeneutic Framework and Interpretation in People's Language Dayananda's iconoclastic journey with reference to the Vedas begins with the sources and the definition of the Vedas. In his extraordinary scholarly work, J. T. F. Jordens, from which this article heavily draws, has mapped Dayananda's 'long pilgrimage which brought the Swami to his final conception of Vedas' (Jordens 1978, 1998). The commonplace assumption that Dayananda received a clear gospel of the Vedas from his guru, Swami Virjananda, is again an oversimplification.

Dayananda primarily studied Sanskrit grammar with his grammarian guru instead of any deep delving into Vedic texts for nearly three years, starting in 1860. However, from Virjananda, Dayananda did learn something fundamental and seminal: the key distinction between *ârsha* texts and *anarsha* texts. The former were written by the rishis or sages of ancient India and the latter were written by others. The *anarsha* works were to be considered spurious as they are of a sectarian nature and have led to the neglect of the real and original sources of Hinduism, i.e., the books of the rishis. Besides this seminal precept, Virjananda had no definite idea about the exact books of the rishis. Though the guru had come to formulate key criteria to weed out *anarsha* works. First, the *arsha* works typically begin with the word OM or ATHA and do not invoke a particular deity. Second, they exhibit a universal character and are not sectarian. Third, commentaries on these works were written by recognised figures such as Shankaracharya and Patanjali. With this torch, the pupil was left in the wilderness to search his own path and the enormous intellectual pursuit of finding out what exactly the works of ancient rishis fell on Dayananda. For seven years he frantically searched for the *arsha* literature and ransacked libraries across north India. The first axe fell on the Puranas and all the Tantras, as these were considered summarily inauthentic. Next came the assertion that parts of the Ramayana, the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads also deviated from the path of truth.

It may be noted that during all these years, Dayananda's study of the Vedas acquired enormous depth and independent and competent witness also considered that he knew the Vedas better than most of the great pandits of Varanasi, the citadel of orthodoxy and that his interpretations of the Vedas were original and free from the burden of traditionalism. By the famous *shastrartha* of 1870 between the Swami and the pandits of Varanasi, Dayananda had drastically narrowed his search and considered that the authentic sources of 'Vedic dharma'/'Hinduism' were to be found in the Samhitas, the four Vedas. But during this time, he included their respective Brahmanas or commentaries

as part of the Vedas. The following year, Dayananda came to the final conclusion that the four Vedas, excluding the respective Brahmanas, are the original divine revelation.

Over time, this intellectual pilgrimage to authentic sources evolved both in terms of key questions and the three criteria mentioned above to identify the canon. Instead of the original search for books composed by the rishis, Dayananda, in due course of time, went on to introduce the pivotal distinction between the four Vedas and other works composed by the rishis. The former were held as the original revelation of God through the passive agencies of rishis (not composed by Rishis, only transmitted through them) and the latter were accorded only subordinate authority. Other works composed by Rishis were to be accepted as authoritative to the point of their conformity with the four Vedas. It may be mentioned that in this long and arduous intellectual journey, Dayananda marks a departure from the then dominant understanding of what should be the textual foundation of the long tradition of 'Hindu' texts. This can be made clear by noting, in passing, Swami Vivekananda's take on this subject. Vivekananda says, 'the idea that the Samhitas are the only Vedas ... has been started by the late Swami Dayananda' and for him the Vedas include 'the three parts, the Samhitas, the Brâhmanas and the Upanishads' and of these, he asserts, 'the first two portions, as being the ceremonial parts, have been nearly put out of sight; the Upanishads have alone been taken up by all our philosophers and founders of sects' (Vivekananda 2021: 122-123).

Further, another point which may be noted here is that it would not be entirely correct to say that Dayananda's search for the gangotri, the authentic sources, of 'Vedic dharma'/'Hinduism' was rooted in his attempt to mould 'Vedic dharma'/'Hinduism' in the image of Semitic religions. Chronology becomes important to understand this point. Jordens notes that 'it was in Calcutta (December 1872 to April 1873) that, through the influences of his hosts, his outlook widened so that he started to think of Hinduism in relation to other religions and more precisely, to think of the Vedas in comparison with the Bible and the Koran' and before his Calcutta visit 'he never thought about Hinduism in comparative terms' (1998: 17). Dayananda had squarely arrived at his doctrinal foundation of accepting the Vedas (the Samhitas) as the original revelation and of supreme importance before his visit to Calcutta in December 1872.

Resuming the main argument, Dayananda restricted the absolute authority of the shruti texts to four Samhitas. By doing so, Dayananda sets the stage for the invalidation of the 'dead wood' rites and practises. Dayananda argued that idol worship, which pervaded Hindu flesh, blood and bones, did not find any place in the Vedas. He boldly challenged the Pauranic orthodoxy to enter into a debate

with him on this subject. In his magnum opus Satyarth Prakash (Dayananda 1884/2023), the Swami discussed his objection to idol worship and argued that this is a departure from the Vedic teachings. Instead, he said that the Vedas emphasised the worship of the formless, attributeless Supreme Being who transcends any physical representation and mustered numerous verses from the Vedas in support. Similarly, pilgrimages, shraddh, a host of taboos and practises in matters of diet, marriage and ritual purity were summarily rejected as these did not form part of the Vedas. Such practises, even when they were justified by later holy texts, were considered Veda viruddh (in contradiction to the Vedas). This departure, inter alia, allowed Dayananda to develop a critique of 'pure monism' or Adwaita-vada, which, according to his understanding, was a result of mistakenly considering the Upanishads as the Vedas. Such aspects became the precepts of his social reform programme.

With his unique take on what should be the foundational text, Dayananda also devised a distinctive hermeneutic framework to interpret the Vedas. In terms of the criteria for what is to be accepted as authentic text, Dayananda went on to advance a novel fundamental hermeneutic framework. To him, the two methodological touchstones to understand the meaning of the Vedic canon are logic/reasoning and morality on the one hand and the tools of grammar and linguistics (a science pioneered by Panini) on the other. This was an advancement over his guru, Virajanand. Eventually, for Swami the 'internal criterion' (logic, reason, consistency, morality) of a text became decisive and cardinal, besides the three criteria of opening words etc. suggested by Virajanand. According to this internal criterion, any work that offends logic/reason or morality could not be the word of God. This unique interpretive framework allowed Dayananda, among other things, to reject religious texts (or portions thereof) like the Puranas.

It may be noted that Swami's stress on reason and logic was derived from and also built upon the rationalistic stream of Hindu philosophy (Samkhya and Nyaya in particular). Nonetheless, Dayananda's engagement with the Vedas became the basis of his worthwhile project of social reform. This radical postulate had gigantic implications for religious traditions. This allowed Dayananda to demythologize the Hindu tradition completely. Miracles and myths were stripped of any sacred legitimacy as their physical possibility contradicts reason and logic. Similarly any immorality in the myths and legends led to their dismissal. Idolatry, superstition and polytheism, naturally, met the same fate: they were invalidated lock, stock and barrel. Dayananda developed a rebuttal of Sakara-vada (incarnations of God) as it contradicts the formless and omnipresent God of the Vedas.

Similarly, Dayananda's teachings of the Vedas emphasised not only the spiritual values and universality of Vedic principles, but they also germinated a social reform project advocating for the eradication of social inequalities based on birth. Though his conception of the Varna system uses the traditional nomenclatures and exhibits a hierarchy between the four Varnas, Dayananda emphasised the importance of guna, karma and swabhava or the qualities and merit of an individual, rather than birth and heredity, as the basis of one's varna. Dayananda defended this view with all the emphasis at his command. Similarly, Dayananda supported widow remarriage, emphasised the importance of education for women and believed in their intellectual capabilities. He argued that women should be actively involved in intellectual pursuits.

Dayananda's take on the Vedas was, naturally, considered inauthentic by the orthodoxy. Dayananda defended his ideas not only in his written work but also in a range of shastrarthas or public debates. This is not the place to delve into Dayananda's robust arguments on this issue; one can do no more than to produce a quote from Sri Aurobindo on this matter: "In the matter of Vedic interpretation I am convinced that whatever may be the final complete interpretation, Dayananda will be honoured as the first discoverer of the right clues. Amidst the chaos and obscurity of old ignorance and age-long misunderstanding his was the eye of direct vision that pierced to the truth and fastened on that which was essential' (Aurobindo 1940:60).

Along with redefining the Vedas and developing a unique hermeneutic framework to interpret Vedic texts, Dayananda also undertook the ambitious project of writing a commentary on the Vedas in Hindi along with Sanskrit. Rigveda adibhaashyabhumika, which is a foreword to his commentary on the Vedas, was published from 1887 onwards in fascicules. He also wrote his extensive commentary on the Rigveda and the Yajurveda. Arya Samaj took years after the death of the Swami (1883) to publish his voluminous work, which comprised over 7,000 large pages of print. It is worth mentioning that this mammoth work was 'written out within a span of six years, at an average of 1,200 pages per year. This was a remarkable achievement as it occupied only part of the Swami's time; his other writings and his guidance to the Arya Samaj also demanded much attention' (Jordens 1998:18). Dayananda's intellectual exercise of presenting the Vedas in Hindi liberated the age-old foundation of the Hindu tradition from the clutches of orthodoxy.

This attempt to present the Vedas to 'all' struck at the foundation of the authority of the brahmin pandit, as he was regarded as the living representative of ultimate Vedic authority. The Vedas have been the ultimate reference point for authoritative decisions in matters of dharma and

the text meant 'what, at any time or place, the referees said they meant' (Derrett quoted in Jordans 1998:27). So the ultimate authority of the interpretation of sacred texts remained the exclusive concern of "specialists", i.e., brahmin pandits. They were, practically, 'the living representatives' of the age-old life force of dharma. Dayananda didn't claim that his was the final word but forcefully said that his composition was as per the method of interpretation of the ancient saints and seers from Brahmaa to Vyaasa. Most importantly, he underlined that he was putting efforts in this direction 'for the purpose of that all people should know the eternal true meaning of Vedas' and the true meaning of these foundational texts 'should be known to the world' (Dayananda 2018: 18).

His presentation of the commentary on the Vedas in Hindi opened the holy books to the ordinary. It, naturally, undermined hereditary caste and gender privileges with reference to knowledge of the Vedas and dharma. From 1878 onwards, in particular, the growing dissemination of his Vedabhashya in Hindi in monthly fascicules across north India, which got a new impetus with the establishment of the Vedic Press in 1880, was indeed a novel phenomenon striking at the very roots of the hereditary privileges of the brahmin pandit.

Conclusion

Dayananda's unique engagement with the Vedas not only makes him one of the most iconic figures of Vedic knowledge, but his pursuit sparked a process of reform in the spiritual, intellectual and social realms of Indian society. It was a socio-cultural project embedded in Dayananda's spiritual and intellectual discourse on the Vedas. The three aspects outlined above with reference to the Vedas form the bedrock of his thought and oeuvre, propelling one of the most extensive and important social reform movements in modern India. Following his 'long pilgrimage' to the sources, Dayananda finally came to accept only the samhitas as the Vedas and the only text of revelation. These were accepted as 'universal' and 'total' (containing the fullness of truth). This helped in driving off many entrenched rituals of religious life, including idol worship and philosophies like monism. With this, Dayananda also came up with an interpretive framework of the Vedic corpus embedded in logical reasoning and morality on the one hand and the rules of grammar on the other. This included purging fanciful elements from the religious and spiritual domains and de-mythologization of the religious tradition. Finally, Dayananda undertook the project of translating and interpreting the Vedas in what he saw as the people's language, i.e., Hindi, resulting in unsettling the age-old authority structure of the brahmin pandit apropos interpretation of the Vedas and dharma. This allowed him to sculpt a social and cultural programme

as an alternative to the widely prevailing orthodoxy in Hinduism.

References

1. Sri A. Bankim-Tilak-Dayananda, Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press: Pondicherry 1940.
2. Dayananda, Swami. Satyarth Prakash/Light of Truth, (Ed. Bhavesh Merja, Translation pandit Led Mitra Thakor), Propkarini Sabha: Ajmer 1884-2023.
3. Dayananda, Swami. An Introduction to Commentary on Vedas, English translation of Rigvedaadibhaashyabhuumika by Satish Arya, Parimal Publication Pvt Ltd. Delhi 2018.
4. Jordens JTF. Dayananda Sarasvati: His Life and Ideas, Oxford University Press: Delhi 1978.
5. Jordens JTF. Dayananda Sarasvati Essays on His Life and Ideas, Manohar: Delhi 1998.
6. Vivekananda, Swami. The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Advaita Ashrama: Kolkata 2021; 5.
7. Yadav KC. (ed.) The Autobiography of Dayanand Saraswati, Manohar: Delhi 1978.