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**THESES AND DISSERTATIONS**


Women in Colonial Punjab
Social, Economic and Political Perspectives

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Navdip Kaur

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Social, Economic and Political Perspectives
Edited By
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Contributors
The Efforts of Radha Soamis towards Improving the Condition of Women

Raman Nayyar

Radha Soami Satsang was one among the many socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century such as Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Aligarh Movement, Ahmedia Movement, Singh Sabha Movement, Namdhari Movement, Nirankari Movement etc.1 Basically, it was a religious movement by nature, which aimed to preach spirituality without any distinction of caste and creed.2 They preach the teachings of the saints of the past and hence also known as sant mat, the way of the saints. Sant means saint and Mat derived from Greek word mathema which means Science.3 With the passage of time, radha soamis played a part as social reformers also to root out the evils of society, in which the social evils concerning women also have a share.4

Radha Soami Satsang was founded by Shiv Dayal alias Soami Ji, a saint of Agra in 1861. The name Radha Soami was given to this movement by Salig Ram, one of the chief disciples of this saint in the honour of his guru and guru’s wife Narayani Dei alias Radha.5 Shiv Dayal approved this name in his writings Sar Bachan such as: Sing Radha Soami’s Name and give meaning to your life, Enshrine this Name in your inmost being, for this is the supreme Lord’s own Name (radhaswami gaa’e kar, janam suphal kar le, yahi naam nij naam hai, man apne dhar le).6 After the death of Shiv Dayal, his disciples preached his philosophy in different regions. With the passage of time, a number of different centres of radha soamis emerged.7

There are more than twenty centres of radha soamis running at present. Some Prominent among them are: Radha Soami Satsang, Soami Bagh, Agra (Utter Pradesh); Radha Soami Satsang Sabha, Dayal Bagh, Agra (Utter Pradesh); Radha Soami
Satsang, Peepal Mandi; Agra (Utter Pradesh), Radha Soami Satsang Beas (Punjab); Radha Swami Dera Baba Bagga Singh, Tarn Taran (Punjab); Ruhani Satsang, Delhi; Radha Soami Satsang, Dinod (Haryana); Dera Sacha Sauda, Sirsa (Haryana); Radha Soami Dera Saidpur (Punjab); Radha Soami Dera Dhyanpur (Punjab) etc. At present, there are more than fifty lakhs followers of this philosophy who have attached themselves with different centres of radhasoamis. Two major centres Agra at Utter Pradesh and Beas at Punjab led to a number of different centres of radha soamis.

Shiv Dayal the founder guru of radha soamis raised his voice against the prevailing customs and discarded purdah which was one of the restrictions imposed on women. He preached the concept of equality and hence the number of devotees in his life time rose to three thousand, which included men and women. After the death of Shiv Dayal, Radha Ji initiated women according to the wish of Shiv Dayal, though she did not take the tag of a guru and was known as Mataji among the radha soami devotees. The successors of Shiv Dayal gave her due respect till her death in 1894.

The radha soami leaders of different centres preached the concept of equality. Women are known as the stalwarts of the radha soami philosophy and a major part of the radha soami gathering is of women. A number of women go to the radha soami centres to serve the guru and the sangat. The prominent aim leads to this free service revolves around the concept of service or sewa which was concerned with the sant tradition as Shiv Dayal, the founder guru of radha soamis writes in his book Sar Bachan: Serve the Guru with love and devotion and sacrifice yourself to his darshan again and again (Sewa karo prem se gur ki aur darshan par bal bal jaat). The central point of radha soami philosophy is living guru being the first step on the mystic path and hence the different masters worked and preached as godmen. The positive aspect which has to be seen here is that they are providing a platform in which men and women play active role, women come to these centres and work jointly without any distinction of caste or sex.
The most praiseworthy effort towards the improvement of women was of the Radha soami Satsang Sabha Dayal Bagh at Agra. It took steps towards the education of the girl child. No doubt if one looks at the efforts of all of Radha soami centres then Dayal Bagh would take credit to give preference to the education of children without any discrimination on the basis of gender. The different educational institutions established by Radha soami Satsang Dayalbagh are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Institution</th>
<th>Year of Establishment</th>
<th>Prominent Aim of the Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Radha soami Educational Institute</td>
<td>1917</td>
<td>It was opened for providing the degree courses and known as the degree college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant School</td>
<td>1922</td>
<td>It was opened as open air play centre and converted in Nursery and Play Centre later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prem Vidyalya</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Arts, Science, Home Science &amp; Music Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radha soami Educational Institute High School</td>
<td>1930</td>
<td>Commerce, Science &amp; Agricultural Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's Training College</td>
<td>1947</td>
<td>Vocational courses for women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Comparative Religion</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Comparative study of different religions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Language</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Education of various languages</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These above mentioned institutes were established for boys and girls to provide education. Among these Prem Vidyalya and Women Training College are for girls only. The most prominent effort of Radha soami Satsang Dayalbagh was to merge these centres in an institute called Dayalbagh Educational Institute in 1968 which was converted into a deemed University in 1981 in which both girls and boys are getting education in different streams.

Radha Soami Satsang Beas did not open schools for giving education especially to girls alone but preached the need of equality through their literature. In 2010, an attempt was made by the Beas centre of Radha soami Satsang Beas when they published a book of Leena Chawla Rajan entitled Empower Women-An Awakening. This book reveals the intentions of the Beas gurus towards the
problems relating to women. A quotation from the Lawrence school song of Sanawar is quoted by the present spiritual master Gurinder Singh Dhillon in the Foreword of this book which is *Somebody's got to stop the rot, so why not you?*17 This book draws our attention to the prevailing malpractices in society such as female foeticide, female infanticide, dowry etc. It presents the current condition of women on the basis of data collected from different regions to reveal the declining sex ratio. The quotations of a number of saints are quoted including the spiritual masters of Beas to give the message of equality as they preach.18 Apart from publication of books, there are a number of departments which have been set up for the welfare of the women under the aegis of Mahila Association Radha Soami Satsang Sabha Dayalbagh such as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Department</th>
<th>Year of Establishment</th>
<th>Aim of Establishment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Silai Vibagh</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>To earn through stitching work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achaar Vibagh</td>
<td>1939</td>
<td>To prepare pickles for sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>To arrange the Sabha literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumble Cell</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>To arrange for the daily needs of the residents of Dayalbagh colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masala Vibaag</td>
<td>1975</td>
<td>To prepare spices for sale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivah Sangam</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>To find suitable matches for boys and girls of <em>satsangi</em> families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Bhandara Food Arrangements</em></td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>To make arrangements of food for visitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young Women Association</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>To fulfill the needs of the women of Dayalbagh colony</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Besides this women are working in the administration of Radha soami Satsang Sabha and in the educational institutions.19 A number of women are working in the different departments of Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Radha soami *Dera* Tarn Taran, Radha soami Satsang Soami Bagh, Radha soami Satsang Sabha Dayalbagh, Radha soami Satsang Peepal Mandi etc. Women are serving there as *pathis* to recite *shabds* as well as preachers to preach *radha soami* philosophy in the absence of the spiritual
masters. An attempt is being made by Radha soami Satsang Beas to tackle the problem of female foeticide which is one of the current problems leading to declining sex ratio. A documentary on female foeticide was prepared. It was named *Nanhi Beti Ko Jeevan Ka Var Do*. This documentary is played in the *satsang* shed before the *satsang* of spiritual master during the *bhandara* days. Radha soami *Dera* Tarn Taran is also preaching against this evil. Kehar Singh, the present master of this centre declared it the biggest sin and appealed to the people to wash it out from the society.

There are three hospitals running under the Maharaj Jagat Singh Relief Society of Beas centre of *radha soamis* such as Maharaj Sawan Singh Charitable Hospital at Beas (Punjab); Maharaj Charan Singh Charitable Hospital at Sikanderpur (Haryana) and Bhota Charitable Hospital at Bhota (Himachal Pradesh). These hospitals provide eye surgery; general and obstetric gynaecological surgery; laboratory services and diagnostic facilities such as X-Ray and ECG. There are two ayurvedic dispensaries, one female and one general, homeopathic dispensary and two allopathic dispensaries are working under the Dayalbagh Medical Relief Society of Agra to provide the facilities free of cost to the people of surrounding areas. A number of departments such as Surgical Operations, X-Ray, Radiology Section, Dental Section, Maternity Section and General Wards for males and females are available to give their services to all especially women.

Some *Deras* of *radha soamis* such as Radha swami *Dera* Tarn Taran and Radha soami *Dera* Saidpur of Punjab perform the marriages of poor girls in a simple way and discourage dowry. In 1942, Radha soami Satsang Sabha Dayalbagh made a marriage *panchayat* to perform the marriages in simple manner and with little expenses. The age is 25 for boys and 22 for girls that was fixed by this *panchayat* for marriage of the residents of Dayalbagh colony. The marriages are performed after medical fitness test of both the boy and the girl to confirm their health reports. Radha soami Satsang Peepal Mandi at Agra is one among them which preaches liberty for common women. Agam Prasad Mathur, the present master of this centre raised this point...
and hence emphasized the need to perform the marriages without dowry.\textsuperscript{28}

It is pertinent to note here that though not all but at least two Deras of radha soamis have given prominent place to women by appointing them as gurus. These are Radha Soami Satsang Soami Bagh at Agra and Radha Soami Dera at Dhianpur. Maheshwari Devi played the role of a guru at Soami Bagh from 1907 to 1913; she also initiated a number of persons to the faith. She was called as Bhuaji Saheba by their followers.\textsuperscript{29} The second such Dera of radha soamis is Dhianpur where Kailashwati acted as guru from 1981 to 1991 after the death of her husband Gurbachan Lal.\textsuperscript{30} At present, Indira Rani is the guru. She became the guru after the death of her husband Baldev Raj in 2001. The followers of this Dera call her Mata Ji and give her due respect as they did to the last guru.\textsuperscript{31}

In retrospect, one can see that the efforts of radha soamis for improving condition of women also revealed their response towards gender. No doubt their efforts can change the perception of the people who are attached with them. They are known as the spiritual gurus and have a high place among their followers and hence they can play a big role in improving the condition of women. It can change the perception of the masses and can serve as a beginning of a new era in which sex would not matter and all will be treated as equal.

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10. Ibid, p. 36.
14. Shiv Dayal, Sar Bachan Poetry (Selections), Bachan 8, Shabd 10, p. 65.
21. This documentary played twice in the bhandara days only to aware the devotees of Radha Soami Satsang Beas about the sin of female foeticide as its lyrics showed Nanhi Beti ko Jeewan Ka Var Do (Bless to girl child to live in this world). Round about ten or twelve minutes, this documentary demonstrates the bad evils concerned with women prevailing in society such as dowry, female infanticide especially female foeticide, the current issue of modern society. A message is given by this documentary to shoot out the all discriminations created on the question of sex and preached equality.
22. Tulsi Saheb, Ghat Ramayan, Tarn Taran: Association of Radhaswami, 2008, p. 5. The Dera master of Tarn Taran published his own satsangs in this book also in which he presented his views about the female foeticide and urged to wash out this problem from this society.
23. Visits to Bhota Charitable Hospital, Bhota (Himachal Pradesh) in 2006, Maharaj Charan Singh Hospital, Sikanderpur (Haryana) in 2009 and Maharaj Sawan Singh Charitable Hospital, Beas (Punjab) in 2011, Souvenir, Part-II-In Commemoration of the Sesquicentenary of the Radhasoami Satsang (1861-2011), pp. 94-95.


31. Visit to Radhasoami Dera Dhianpur in September 2010. Indira Rani is working there as spiritual master from 2001 after the death of her husband Baldev Raj, the previous guru.