

# Seeking a Cohesive Society: The Life and Times of Santram BA

## Introduction

Born in a shudra family, in a Kumhar caste, in Hoshiyar district of Panjab, Santram BA (1887-1998) was an ardent supporter of social equality, justice, liberty and fraternity. As he hailed from an economically well-off family, he did not experience the scourge of caste. However, his commitment to an egalitarian society was unflinching. He knew that the freedom of each Indian is crucial for liberation of the whole country. This vision of social inclusion is evident in his theory and practice. He was a prolific Hindi writer. He wrote innumerable articles which were published in magazines like Chand, Sudha and Saraswati. He also started a magazine called Kranti in Urdu. He became editor of Bharatiya, the magazine of the Jalandhar College for Women and Vishwa Jyoti, maintained by Vishveshvaranand Vedic Sansthan, Lahore. Rahul Sanskritayan was also influenced by him which the former mentions in his book Jinka Mein Kritagya. He penned down more than eighty books. He recollects in his autobiography titled Mera Jivan Mere Anubhav( My Life, My Experiences), that he faced the caste-based discrimination in Ambala, in his school when his school mates humiliated him with casteist remarks.

## Aiming for a Cohesive Society

The contribution of Santram BA in reforming Hindu society has been invisibilized from history in dazzling light of the star reformers such as Jotiba Phule and Dr. B.R Ambedkar. Unlike these social reformers, Santram BA aimed to resolve the problem of caste within the Hindu dharma. He is one of the finest thinkers of modern India. He worked with Arya Samaj. He established the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal in 1922, with Bhai Paranand as its president and himself as its secretary, to eradicate caste-based inequality and discrimination. He made special efforts to invite B.R Ambedkar to preside over the annual Lahore conference organised by his Jat-Pat-Todak

Mandal in 1936. However, B.R Ambedkar could not deliver his presidential address as some members of the Jat-Pat-Todak mandal had a few objections to Ambedkar's draft of the lecture. He was inspired by the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati, especially his message (that caste is determined by skill not by birth). Though he joined Arya Samaj at a young age but he attained fame due to his association with Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal. His association with Arya Samaj added to his intellectual, social and spiritual growth. It did not deter his fight against caste. His autobiography unravels his Self-caught in a vortex of social challenges. He never tried to mythologize himself. His autobiography appears to be a propaganda against the caste order. He writes:

**I thought that writing one's autobiography was like flaunting one's greatness... I am no extraordinary person... My whole life I have just struggled against caste and served the Hindi language. But my friends stated that caste is the biggest enemy of India. To remove it is the biggest service to the nation. Your autobiography in a way would be a history of fighting against caste in modern India and of diffusion of Hindi in Punjab... Thus I decided to write this book... When anyone engages in a social reform to get rid of caste, then not only strangers, even his own family and relatives oppose him. His photos are not published in papers. No statue of his is made. He has to burn on the pyre all his life.**

His autobiography reflects how his personal self and the social are intertwined; each of his actions was geared towards reconstructing Indian society and restoring its lost glory. It manifests his anti-caste thought, the orthodox practices and restrictions on interaction between the touchables and untouchables in the Hindu society.

## A Voice against Conversion

Santram BA was highly inspired by Dr. B.R Ambedkar due to the latter's intellectual prowess

and social commitment. Dr. Ambedkar's commitment to the nation and his extensive study of the caste issue propelled Santram BA to invite him to deliver the presidential address of the annual conference conducted by the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal. Though Ambedkar could not deliver his speech, however, the credit for the production and publication of the wonderful essay "Annihilation of Caste" by Ambedkar, goes to Santram BA. They shared a profound bonhomie as two great social reformers. But their major difference was with respect to religious conversion that Santram BA vehemently opposed. He firmly believed that the problem of caste has to be resolved within the framework of Hinduism. He did not endorse Ambedkar's idea of adopting Buddhism to dismantle caste hierarchy. Santram BA had the prescience that leaving Hinduism would not end isolation and alienation experienced by Scheduled Castes due to the caste-based discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, this move would hamper the possibility of the Hindu solidarity. As it was an internal matter, it required collective intervention from both the so-called upper-caste Hindus and lower-caste Hindus. As an experienced social reformer, he had this clarity that the formation of Hindu community calls for resolving all the problems such as caste inequality within the broad Hindu cultural framework. The solution for dispensing with untouchability and asymmetrical power relations would not emanate from coercive or violent methods; it needs a change of heart that Mahatma Gandhi also iterated; even Ambedkar viewed caste as a state of mind. So, it needs the social atmosphere of Samarasta (social cohesion). It is a collective responsibility. Santram BA unwaveringly remained a Hindu at his core, and did not espouse Ambedkar's act of converting to Buddhism. This firm faith in Hindu culture established his distinctive identity from other subaltern reformers like Jotiba Phule and Dr. Ambedkar. In spite of his disenchantment

with Arya Samaj, he did not leave the path of Hindu culture. He was a true revolutionary. He strongly interrogated caste but intended caste reform within the structure of Hinduism. Charu Gupta observes that Santram BA occupies the middle ground between Gandhi and Ambedkar, Arya Samaj and Ad Dharm. His anti-caste politics stemmed from this in-between space. His quests are pressing and leave a rich legacy. His sublime faith and commitment to Hindu culture are inspiring.

## Conclusion

The persistence of caste hierarchy has stirred the intellectual and cultural milieu of this country. The quintessential democratic ethos of India has unfurled space for salving the dissonance unleashed by various social evils and contradictions. Santram BA emerged as a reconstructive voice to bridge the gaps which surfaced due to the extremity of caste system. His creative engagement with the Hindu society engendered a site of dialogue between brethren who remained cut off and alienated from one-another due to social experience of untouchability. Santram BA attempted to restore the lost and disturbed order of Hindu culture by resolving the caste question. His critical voice shook the conscience of Hindus who remained ignorant and continued to practice caste inequality. His autobiography Mere Jeevan Ke Anubhav was also a major tirade against the caste system. It initiated anti-caste discourse. Importantly, his book Hamara Samaj (Our Society) offers a true and critical picture of Indian society. His aesthetic of dialogue, to eradicate social contradictions offers an alternative paradigm of resistance and reconciliation, is beautifully delineated in this book.

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