



## **Social Thoughts of Lokahitavadi**

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### **Abstract**

The paper talks about the early life of Lokahitavadi. And sheds a light on his centuries ahead and progressive views on various social issues concerns such as caste system, hindu religion, widow remarriage, gender equality, religion and education. We can see in this how greatly he valued education and the advancement of knowledge.

**Keywords:-** Caste system, Hindu Religion, Widow Remarriage, Gender Equality, Education.

### **Preface**

Lokahitavadi's full name was GopalHariDeshmukh. He was born on February 18, 1823. 'Deshmukh' was his family's hereditary title by occupation. His actual surname was 'Sindhe'.<sup>1</sup> His father HaripantDeshmukh was the Phadnis of the Peshwa of Pune's commander-in-chief Bapu Gokhale.<sup>2</sup> Gopalrao's father died when he was just 13 years old.<sup>3</sup> By then, he had completed his Marathi primary education. He turned towards English studies in 1841 and in just three years, he acquired mastery over the English language. In 1843, he was appointed as a translator in the court of the Deccan government agent.<sup>4</sup>In 1846, he passed Munsif's exam.<sup>5</sup> He was appointed as a Judge in Wai in 1851. He was given another post, that of Assistant Inam Commissioner, in 1856.<sup>6</sup> He became Commissioner in 1857. He remained on the post till the dissolution of the commission in 1861.<sup>7</sup> He was appointed as Assistant Judge in 1862. He retired in 1879.<sup>8</sup>Prior to that, on January 1, 1877, he was honoured with a medal and the title of 'Raobahadur by Lord Litton'.<sup>9</sup> He worked in Ahmedabad, Mumbai, Ahmednagar, Nashik and some other places. He returned to Pune in 1880. In the same year, he became a member of the Legislative Council. <sup>10</sup> In 1884, he joined as Diwan of the Ratlam princely state but resigned after a year. He was also University Fellow Justice of Peace.<sup>11</sup>He died on October 9, 1892.

From his writings, it is seen that he was proficient in Marathi, English, Hindi, Persian, Gujarati, etc. He played a key role in bringing together the social reforms movements of Maharashtra and Gujarat. He has written books in both Marathi and Gujarati languages.



## **Caste System**

Lokahitavadi offers sharp elucidation in his analysis of the caste system. Valmiki was a Koli who became a Rishi by his pious deeds. Gadhi Raja was a Kshatriya; after performing penance, he became a Brahman. Rishi Parashar had a relationship with a Shudra woman (Matsyagandha, whose son was Vyas). Raja Harishchandra carried out works of lower castes in Kashi. We find several such instances in the Puranas. The point is, in those times, one's qualities and actions decided his caste.<sup>12</sup> Hence, it would be prudent to adopt the same practice today, he said. He said that the caste system should not be like air-tight compartments, as it was in his times so that if a Brahmin acts worse than a Shudra, he would not remain a Brahmin and if a Kshatriya acts like a Brahmin, he would be a Brahmin. He feared that if such a practice was not adopted, the undeserving would be called Brahmi and the real Brahmin would be called a Shudra. <sup>13</sup>

Lokahitavadi writes that there are divisions in the Indian society and such divisions are in other countries too. Priest, soldier, merchant and servant are universal classifications. But in other countries, these divisions are not hereditary.<sup>14</sup> Only in India, the classes are hereditary and that is the very reason for India's decline. If the divisions are not based on birth, but on actions (karma), they would become less intense rigid and, instead of being the culprits in the society's decline would become heroes of its progress. Here, Lokahitavadi is seen favouring the migration of people from one caste to another. He clearly had a very modern outlook.

## **Hindu Religion**

Lokahitavadi's writings do not spare even the Shastri-pandits. The so-called religious conduct of the pandits placed no value on morals, truth and uprighteousness. If an immoral person commits evil deeds but gives donations to Brahmins and offers them meals, they would regard him as a 'dharmavtar'. Corroborating his statement, Lokahitavadi gives the example of Amrutrao Peshwa. When he looted Poona, he put to death lots of women and children. In his greed for money, he put smouldering ash in people's mouths, scalded their skin and made them stand on hot pans. He poured hot oil on children's heads. After making money in this base, vulgar and irreligious manner, he went to Kashi. There, instead of chastising or excommunicating him, the 'religious' Brahmins told him to distribute half of the wealth he had brought with him to the Brahmins, and then they would take him back into the caste. For this, he gave feasts to Brahmins and performed yadnyas. Only after this did the Brahmins take him back in the caste and started eulogizing him.<sup>15</sup> Elucidating further, he writes about Principal Sadar Amin, Baba Bhide who, he



says, was selfless. He did not earn illicit money and, therefore, did not arrange feasts for Brahmins. The result was that Brahmins used to criticize him. <sup>16</sup>

Lokahitavadi's caustic criticism of contemporary Brahmins was not contemptuous of the caste. He was always respectful to meritorious and learned Brahmins. (He held Ramshastri Prabhune in great regard), <sup>17</sup> His anger was directed towards those Brahmins who tried to make people ignorant, superstitious, egoistic and ritualistic.

### **Widow Remarriage**

When 25 years old, Lokahitavadi felt that efforts at social reforms should be initiated at the government level. He wrote an open letter to Lord Falkland with the headline: "Miseries of and crimes incidental to Brahmin widowhood: with suggestions for their removal". The letter was dated May 26, 1848 and signed 'Well-wisher of public'. It was published in the June 10, 1848 issue of Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce. <sup>18</sup> In this letter, he pointed out that religious customs and practices had put Indian women in a pathetic condition. Widows were compelled to offer themselves as Sati, their heads were tonsured, they were prohibited from participating in auspicious functions, their mere sight was thought to be a bad omen, and they had to face several such ills. By prohibiting Sati, the British had saved innumerable widows from immolating themselves, he wrote. Similarly, by starting the practice of re-marriages, several widows would be saved from suffering life-long pains and their illegitimate children would be pulled back from the throes of death. In this letter, Lokahitavadi not only discussed the problems but also suggested some solutions over them:-

- 1) All civil officers should be directed to present a report on the crime of abortions of widows.
- 2) Students should be encouraged by the grant of scholarships to write essays in native languages on re-marriage. The managements of Sanskrit colleges and schools, especially, should be given such instructions.
- 3) The charitable grant given to Hardas and Gosawi on behalf of the government by the district collector of Poona should be made conditional upon their undertaking to campaign against this evil tendency.
- 4) Hindu youths who are in favour of re-marriage should be encouraged to write about it.



5) People can be persuaded to change their established outlook on widow re-marriage by telling them that one of the Hindu texts stipulates re-marriage of a girl who is less than 14 years in age at the time of her husband's death.

6) A Widow Fund should be set up to encourage people to marry widows.<sup>19</sup>

Hindu colleges are the defenders of this prejudice. By announcing gifts, students can be made to come forward to write and think on this issue. He, therefore, suggested that an annual prize should be established for the best essay. He clearly writes that even after making so many suggestions on this issue, the British administration does not heed to them, it would indicate that its policy of not interfering in the religious matters of natives is dictated by shrewd calculations. But the government's prohibition of Sati tells us at this policy is harmless, prejudicial and is only in relation to religious ceremonies. The policy doesn't come in play with regard to cruel practices like Sati. Here, Lokahitavadi tries to emphasize the point that the practice of not allowing widow re-marriage was as much a crime as the practice of Sati.<sup>20</sup> It is necessary to prepare the mindset of youths for social reforms. It was with this objective that he had written this letter to Lord Falkland. Lord Falkland forwarded the information to the government's education department. Consequently, one of the essay topics in the 1850-51 exam was related to this burning issue.

First Year --- The early marriage question

Second Year -- The influence of custom in India

Third Year - The disadvantages of education exclusively English

This information is mentioned in the Annual Report of the Elphinstone Institution included in the Report the Board of Education, Bombay 1851, P.P. 249-286.<sup>21</sup>

### **Gender Equality**

On gender equality too, he had a modern outlook. He held that inequality between males and females was harmful to society. A society which doesn't give the same dignity to women as it gives to men neither progresses nor has the potential to progress. Lokahitavadi makes a forceful assertion of male-female equality for the progress of society. His writings give an indication of his sympathetic and respectful attitude towards women. Countries which do not respect the rights of women find themselves in a bad state,<sup>22</sup> he writes. He has explained the way in which evil customs and traditions are responsible for the low status of women. A woman is not allowed to re-marry after the death of her husband but a man can re-marry after the death of his wife. If God has created



man and woman as equal then their rights too should be equal. Prohibiting re-marriage to widows and allowing it to widowers is cruelty, he pointed out. In anger, he calls people who do not allow widows to remarry as butchers.<sup>23</sup> In a letter titled 'Remarriage and other reforms'<sup>24</sup>, he bitterly writes that if he somehow acquires the power to make laws and if he enacts that a man whose wife dies should renounce the world, he should be thrown out of the house and should be prohibited from carrying tika" on their heads, then what would be the position of males?<sup>25</sup> The same treatment that is meted out to women after the death of their husbands should be meted out to men after the death of their wives. The same rule should apply to both. Men should give company to women even in death. If they are unable to do all this, they should start a new tradition of re-marriage. A Brahmin would not accept if he is told that the janew he is wearing would not be replaced and if it breaks, he would have to burn it and burn himself with it otherwise he would be defaced, put to hardships throughout his life and his hair would be removed. Similarly, on the death of her husband what else can a woman do other than marry a second time.<sup>26</sup> In this connection, he says –

- 1) Marriages are finalized after consultation with astrologers. Despite this, the girl becomes a widow. So why consult the astrologer?
- 2) There should not be too much expenditure on marriages.
- 3) Girls should be given education in their childhood. After becoming mature, she should marry at the age of 20 years with the permission of her parents.<sup>27</sup>
- 4) Girls should be allowed to marry as per their choice. She would not like to get married to an older man or a very old man who is on his death bed.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, marriages between a girl and an adult man or between a girl and an old man would automatically come to an end.

The old texts, Smruti and Shruti were cited as the bases of religious practices. Lokahitavadi writes that if Manu was an agent of God, he should have created some text by which the husbands of Brahmin women would not have died, or that the woman's death would precede that of her husband's. If he had established such sequentiality, then it would have been possible to accept that he was God and that what the Brahmins were doing at present was right. But this is not the situation. He who has to die dies; he who has to live, lives. It is beyond Manu's control. So, is his job merely to make rules and tell people about them, he bitterly asks.<sup>29</sup>

He offered a way out on this issue also. A meeting should be convened in this matter. Initially, some 400-500 people would give their approval. Such



meetings should be held at several places so that more people begin to look favourably at re-marriage. If this happens, there would be no fear of being thrown out of the caste due to re-marriage. Indians kept the British outside their caste. That caused neither any loss to the British nor any gain to the Brahmins. Therefore, instead of becoming followers by heeding to the directions of fools, thousands will become a nation. It should adopt new religious practices which include re-marriage.<sup>30</sup> Re-marriage is the foundation of the reforms movement of Hindus. In re-marriage, itself lies half the reforms.<sup>31</sup>

His letters are an expression of his desire to improve a lot of women and to bring about their development. Because a woman is uneducated she is regarded as a lowly being and treated like an animal. If she is given education, she would stand up against the pandits who tie up her freedom with the old customs and traditions. The pandits are aware of such an eventuality; that is why they are opposed to educating women, he opined.<sup>32</sup>

### **Religion**

The preface of the book *HindustanchaItihaas'* describes the position of Muslim kings, Islam and Muslim culture. Regarding their religious reforms, he said that there has been a decline in Muslim knowledge. There is contempt for other religions. Therefore, rulers of other religions do not encourage this knowledge. The religious laws of Muslims are cruel as they allow a man to desert his wife whenever he wants religions in the world which are in the fight between good and evil. If people improve themselves, their leaders would improve automatically and reformed leaders would result in reformed people.<sup>34</sup> He used to reluctantly admit that 'good doesn't come to every person in the present religion'. There is no need for any person to discuss the gods of other religions. A person's life and the Almighty are two different things.<sup>35</sup> They should be kept separate. Laws which affect ordinary people should be common in every caste and religion so that many problems would be nipped in the bud.<sup>36</sup> Lokahitavadi's modern religious outlook comes to the fore when he holds that religion should be observed at the individual level and not at the mass level. About religion, he said that those rules which give generally good results should be communicated to the masses. There is no harm in that. And the good that happens is virtuous and the virtuous is religion.<sup>37</sup> He is seen disparaging religious blind faith. One should understand the meaning of knowledge. Rituals are a waste; only morality is the true path. He said that the offering of a thousand Tulsi leaves has no effect; instead, the mind should be pure.<sup>38</sup>



## **Education**

He believed that writing books was the real test of intelligence and scholarship. Reforms can take place only by the removal of social ignorance. Ignorance is a disease and devotion to knowledge is the medicine for it. One would have to make sacrifices to gain knowledge and the traditional Sanskrit books do not render sufficient help in this. The knowledge with which these books were written at that time would be inadequate to tackle the problems of today. Hence, we would have to learn modern subjects. All people are equal; there is no high and no low. All have the same right to education. He frequently urged men and women to enroll in English schools, develop a scientific attitude, have compassion and to free themselves from the grips of traditionalism. He felt that ethics, intelligence and wealth were necessary to improve a nation and all the three are the outcome of knowledge. He had extensive views on education.<sup>39</sup>

He was of the view that there should be changes according to circumstances and times. Lokahitavadi has written a story criticising Hindu practices, customs and traditions:-There was a poor Brahmin. He used to wear pancha. After some years, his son became rich but he still wore pancha. He used to say that he would wear what his father used to wear. One should act as per the custom of the family. On repeated pleadings of the people, he stopped wearing it at all times except the Shraddh period. He did not give up wearing it till death. He says that Hindus do not ponder over the circumstances and time when some practice began and whether it has any relevance at present. They just jump into acting according to their tradition-fidelity.<sup>40</sup> Religion, conduct and holy texts are different matters. If people had been wise, they would not have had the foolish tendency to harm themselves.<sup>41</sup>

It appears that he laid all his stress on the spread and increase of knowledge for bringing about religious and social reforms. Criticising Brahmins, he says that by spreading the idea that the ancient texts were written by gods and Rishis, they had closed the doors attaining knowledge. Due to this, all new things have been ascribed as impure and all old things have been regarded as pure. People stopped thinking for themselves, and speaking against the ancient began to be considered as irreligious. According to him, the obstacle in the accretion to knowledge created by religion and Brahmins was the prohibition on the sailing of seas. Due to this, we did not come in contact with other countries and ignorance increased. The young generation should get a good education. He believed that a study of different subjects would lead to the destruction of a lot many blind beliefs.



The traditional rules and laws were established by the Rishis. They for ages are with us. So, a question may arise as to how we can change them. Explaining the role of Rishis, he says that the Rishis were text-writers. If we write new texts, we too can be like Rishis.<sup>42</sup> Making laws and rules are the job of the nation. If the British can, on a daily frequency, make new laws providing for the management of administration, governance and military, then we too can, after giving appropriate proposals, make new laws related to marriage.<sup>43</sup>

He published some of his letters in Prabhakar newspaper. They are known as 'Shatpatre'. The letters he published in Dnyanprakash newspaper called 'Dashpatra'. Inspired by him, a Gujarati-English newspaper called 'Hitechhu' was started in Ahmedabad. He also wrote in a Gujarati magazine called 'Buddhiprakash' which was published by the Gujarat Vernacular Society. In his articles, he wrote on inhuman religious practices, the status of women in society and their plight, religiousness, the hold of customs and traditions on society and the ways in which one can liberate oneself from it. In unequivocal words, he wrote that there could be no progress without the acceptance of new sciences and new knowledge. In reference to social and political reforms, he said that ignorance and credulity resulted in tyranny in every sphere.<sup>44</sup> This statement is important. It brings out the central theme of thousands of years' old history, the untouchables and the women were treated cruelly because they were ignorant. Lokahitavadi realized this 170 years ago. This reflects his foresightedness. He reveals and explains all the reasons for society's rise and fall in his writings. Some extracts from his writings have been presented in this research paper in order to better understand him.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout his life, he devoted himself to gaining knowledge and spreading it through writings and speeches. For him, 'knowledge' included information about the outside world and about oneself. He had great vision. The then society lived in ignorance. During his 52-year-long service to society, he always kept in mind the need for making available the most useful knowledge to the people. He wrote books,<sup>45</sup> published them himself and distributed them free of cost. He gave away the re-print rights also. He himself sent his books to newspapers and magazines for getting their reviews. He started 'Granth-Uttejak Sabha'. In his old age, he wrote 'British Rajvatiteel Anubhavache Saar' and 'Aaplya Dnyanopasnechi Hakikat'. His articles are found in Prabhakar, Kesri, Dnyanoday, Dnyanprakash and some other Marathi newspapers and in Buddhiprakash Gujarati newspaper.

He was an extraordinary personality and a pioneer of intellectual and social awakening who inspires us to move forward even today.





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