

## In the Age of Awakening: The Role of Dnyanodaya

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### Abstract:

*During the age of awakening in Maharashtra, the regional socio-religious movements indirectly looked for inspiration and support from the corresponding counterparts, which were operative at the national level. The period witnessed a fusion and emergence of the newfangled polity, social institutions, values, ideas and aspirations, a development which was duly reflected in 'Dnyanodaya'. The American Marathi Mission on June 20 1842 launched a periodical 'Dnyanodaya', a name which denotes the phrase 'Dawn of Knowledge'. The Ahmednagar-based periodical became remarkably significant, which chiefly intended to counter the myriad and widespread misconceptions about Hindu and Christian theology. 'Dnyanodaya' belongs to the rank of newspapers that played an imperative role during the nineteenth century reform movement. It would be unjust to say that 'Dnyanodaya' had a one-point agenda of religious conversion. It was a missionary-run newspaper and that was one of its goals. It critiqued public affairs and promoted reform in a broad way. It took on the promotion of social awareness and demolition of orthodoxy, both difficult tasks. Dnyanodaya took a simple and easy-to-understand approach to explaining a range of topics in Christian studies, geology, history, geography, and social science. It documented the society of its period. Moreover, it pressed for a moral life without social inequity, ignorance, untouchability, substance addiction and superstition. That is why it deserves credit for its significant attempts at social reform in the nineteenth century. 'Dnyanodaya' linked the spread of countrywide epidemics to the health perils caused by public ignorance and civic insensitivity, and worked against the same. It exposed, as equally unfortunate, the consequences of the faith placed in charlatans and the non-belief that met scientific facts. It forcefully mapped superstition as the blind belief of untruths, a belief that worked to the detriment of the*

*intellect. No subject was off-limits to 'Dnyanodaya'. It would carry an article on ethics with another on the history of Rome and a third on Sanskrit grammar. 'Dnyanodaya' remains but indispensable as a resource for the research of Maharashtra's social history. Keeping in mind multi-dimensional socio-religious reform issues taken over by Dnyanodaya, the paper maps the role of this foreign mission during the age of awakening in Maharashtra.*

**Key words:** Dnyanodaya, Maharashtra, 19<sup>th</sup> century reform movement, socio-religious reform.

With the consolidation of the British rule, the Indians were placed in a transformative phase. During that age, the British attempted to bridge two distinct societies born of two distinct cultures. Through their rule the British left a deeper mark on society by means of Western culture and education. Education emerged as the sole means of progress. With education came modern conveniences, clothing, customs and mores. Earlier, Christian missionaries had tried to spread their religion in India. They had gradually introduced Christian sermonising into their educational discourse. This gave rise to a class of people enquiring into religious matters, a class from which grew the work of such associations as the Brahmo samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Satyashodhak Samaj, Arya samaj, Theosophical Society, Ramkrishna Mission among others. It was a period of fundamental change. It was spurred on by numerous reformers and reformist associations.

The liberal western concepts such as individualism, humanism, and tolerance received exposure in India through education. But education was the preserve of the few. Then, too, few were those who wanted to change the social conditions of the period, the reformers scattered across various fronts. There existed a 'native' class to critique the situation, but also a Westernised class which indirectly critiqued the flaws of the 'natives'. This Westernised class put Indian customs and traditions under scrutiny. All in all, the 19th century saw an onslaught of criticism on ill practices, dark tendencies, and unquestioned traditions. This period saw real and public debate

on the issues affecting women. It was a period of accelerating social change, brought on mainly by the new sensibilities which progressive publications nurtured. Dnyanodaya is one of the significant periodical of the 19th century.

During the age of awakening in Maharashtra, the regional socio-religious movements indirectly looked for inspiration and support from the corresponding counterparts, which were operative at the national level. The period witnessed a fusion and emergence of the new-fangled polity, social institutions, values, ideas and aspirations, a development which was duly reflected in 'Dnyanodaya'. The American Marathi Mission on June 20 1842 launched a periodical 'Dnyanodaya', a name which denotes the phrase 'Dawn of Knowledge'. The Ahmednagar-based periodical became remarkably significant, which chiefly intended to counter the myriad and widespread misconceptions about Hindu and Christian theology. 'Dnyanodaya' belongs to the rank of newspapers that played an imperative role during the nineteenth century reform movement. It would be unjust to say that 'Dnyanodaya' had a one-point agenda of religious conversion. Keeping in mind multi-dimensional socio-religious reform issues taken over by Dnyanodaya, the paper maps the role of this foreign mission during the age.

## **Historical Perspective**

During the early consolidating years of the British in India, the Indian intelligentsia voiced their views and agitation through the medium of print media. Consequently, the period saw a mushrooming growth of newspapers-- 'Darpan' [1832], 'Kaal' [1898], 'Digdarshan' [1840], 'Dnyanchandrodaya' [1840], 'Prabhakar' [1841], Dnyanodaya [1842], 'Upadesh Chandrika' [1844], 'Bodhsagar' [1849], 'Marathi Dnyanaprasarak' [1850], 'Vichar Lahari' [1852], 'Vidyarthi Kalyan' [1856], 'Satyarthaa Deepika' [1861], 'Anand Lahari' [1861], 'Induprakash' [1862], 'Deenabandu' [1877], 'Kesari' [1881], 'Maratha' [1881],

'Karbhari' [1866], 'Upadesh' [1866], and 'Sudharak' [1888], among others. These newspapers were of thought-provoking and informative bent. With the aim of bringing Western knowledge, scientific developments and technology to the 'natives', these early products of the Indian press espoused the spread of education and the eradication of social and religious divides. They gave birth to modern thought in Maharashtra.

## **Socio-religious Awakening**

Maharashtra's movement for socio-religious awakening looked for inspiration and help to its national-level counterpart. The period saw a fusion of the new polity, the new social institutions, the new values of religion and social organisation, new ideas and new aspirations, a development which was duly reflected in 'Dnyanodaya'. As Prof. G.B Sardar rightly says, "Dnyanodaya' is labelled a Christian periodical, which is wrong... it dealt with a number of subjects. Its standards of accuracy reflect well on its editors, and the American and English scientific temper in general... 'Dnyanodaya' is indispensable as a resource for the research of Maharashtra's social history." (Sharma and Punekar 1997, 5)

It was a period of missionary work in Maharashtra by the Church Missionary Society, London Missionary Society, American Marathi Mission and other proselyting agencies. The American Marathi Mission set up base in Ahmednagar. It was headed by Gordon Gaulte. He focused on the education of the children of the so-called Untouchables for the most part. Under his leadership the Mission visited a number of villages and built a large number of educational, medical and drinking water resources, beside other things.

The missionaries used both education and clinics to further the goal of religious proselyting. They did not make much headway among the educated class here. They shifted their missionary focus mainly to the backward and uneducated classes, setting up institutions for universal education that

catered mainly to backward castes and to women. The Christian missionaries joined the educated Indian classes in the attack on such customs as child marriage and the tonsure of widows, to cite two examples. A public discourse was created which re-examined traditions. The Christian missionaries learned the native languages and studied Hindu scripture to make an effective appeal to the masses. It was in this period that religion was first discussed at all. A controversial development of 1842 was the 'purification' of Narayan Sheshadri. In 1850 Dadoba Pandurang founded the 'Paramhansa Sabha' and 1867 saw the birth of Mumbai's 'Prarthana Samaj', two associations that played crucial roles in bringing about social change. Against the backdrop of Sir Charles Wood's education manifesto of 1854 and the Uprising of 1857, universities were founded in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay.

### **'Dnyanodaya' - its Aims and Characteristics**

In this connection, American and Scottish missionaries played a key role. In 1842, the American Marathi Mission opened in Ahmednagar. It brought out 'Dnyanodaya' to further its missionary work, but that was not its sole intent. The purposes of the publication are spelled out in the maiden issue of Dnyanodaya dated June 1842. It was, among other things, a space for people to express their views. The editors say, "In particular, we aim to publish Ahmednagar-related articles and would welcome anyone who wants to take his views on religion, ethics and customs to the city folk. The periodical will not restrict itself, however, to news of Ahmednagar or even news of India but regularly take note of international developments." (Dnanodaya June 20, 1842, 1). The extract highlights the wide perspective of the 'Dnyanodaya' founders. Its other goal was to answer the criticism labelled against Christianity at the time.

Dnyanodaya's maiden issue dated 1842 was a 20-page, foolscap-sized and *shilachaap*. The printing was overseen by

Reverend A. Abbot. The words 'American Mission Press Ahmednagar, Raja Gujarathi Printer' are seen on the masthead. The first six issues of Dnyanodaya were published from Nagar; then from Nagar and Bombay simultaneously. It appeared monthly in the period 1842-44, fortnightly from 1844-72, and weekly from 1872 onwards. There was an effort to reach out to every social class in Maharashtra, with the result that English and Marathi language matter was given roughly equal space in terms of column-inches. The first six issues were Marathi-language exclusively, but English and Marathi articles were carried in the issues dated 1846-1866. In the period from 1867 to 1872, Shahurao Kukade brought out Marathi-only issues. Thereafter, he brought out bilingual issues. These issues featured Marathi and English articles laid side by side. The issues of the period from 1845 to 1866 include Gujarathi and Urdu articles as well. From 1842 onwards, the editorial duties of the publication passed to Reverend Henry Ballantyne, Rev. Robert Wilson Hume, Rev. Dr. Samuel Bacon Fairback and others. These editors followed up on issues of morality, knowledge, religion and social reform through the periodical. They made efforts to boost its circulation. They subsequently added a children's supplement, pictures, short stories and poetry. They tried to get more donations. It is notable that 'Dnyanodaya' had many non-Christian donors on its list. Among these are Dadoba Pandurang, Dadabhai Naoroji, Bhau Daji Lad, Subhedar Solomon, Ismael, Munshi, and Ajeer Ali. 'Dnyanodaya's Christian readers included Narayanrao Sheshadri, Baba Padmanji, Ganpatrao Navalkar, Major Caddy among others. (Dnyanodaya June 1<sup>st</sup> 1851, 205)

### **Dnyanodaya: Variety of Themes**

It may have been the first Marathi-language newspaper with pictures. The map of Asia was published in the first issue of Dnyanodaya. The issue dated February 15, 1845, carried a picture headlined 'The Judgement of Solomon'. (Mule 1978, 30)

In its maiden issue of 1851 map of Europe was published. The wide variety of sections included short stories, poetry, novels, biographies, travel writing, literary criticism, history, geography and geology. All in all, 'Dnyanodaya' had a wide range of objectives, a broad editorial focus and an emphasis on social reform.

No subject was off-limits to 'Dnyanodaya'. It would carry an article on ethics with another on the history of Rome and a third on Sanskrit grammar. It would carry a mix of geography, algebra, geometry, and 'The Incident with the Balloon'. (Sharma and Punerak 1997, 9) 'Dnyanodaya' chronicles the advent of the railway in India. The first train ran from Bombay to Thane, and the 'Dnyanodaya' article describes the inauguration ceremony. (Mule 1978, 24) In subsequent articles the paper treats of the inconveniences faced by the commuters, taking an outraged look upon the overcrowding and the problems of women commuters. One of the published letter of the reader in 'Dnyanodaya suggested for the reserve a compartment for women. The 19th-century technological advances had found an advocate in 'Dnyanodaya'. Make use of the railway, the paper appealed to its readers. It supported the issuance of coinage with Devanagari inscription. This reflects its connect with popular causes. Telegraphy was introduced in India in 1852, and 'Dnyanodaya' had this to say, "It is a most useful contraption. It allows a man in Kashi to speak with his counterpart in Rameshwar. We may soon see the Governor-General in Calcutta speaking with a grocer in Srirangapattinam." (Dnyanodaya December 15<sup>th</sup> 1853, 393) This goes to show how effectively 'Dnyanodaya' demystified technological advances for its readers.

### **Dnyanodaya: Major Sections**

Newspapers were few and far between in the period when 'Dnyanodaya' came out. A thoughtful essay or editorial rubbed shoulders with news articles. In fact, many of the articles

carried had their origins in news developments. News and the related articles were used to broach issues such as Sati, infanticide and dowry. 'Dnyanodaya' followed this template. During the first eight years of its publication, it carried news on its front page. Its front-page articles were printed legibly and topped with headlines such as 'Arrival of Missionary', 'Religious Conversion in Nagar', 'Pandharpur Yatra'. It often wrote of England and Ireland. A number of articles dealt with 'the drought in England and the poor crop of potatoes'. Eventually such articles were brought together in a section called 'Vilayeteche Baatmipatra' or 'England Bulletin'.

After 1850, all news articles were moved to a single section on the back pages of the issue. This section was named 'Kirkol Baatmya' or 'Miscellanies'. In subsequent years, very important news was promoted to the front page. It is important to note, however, that Dnyanodaya dealt not only in news but also editorials. Dnyanodayas editors carried comments on news developments. For instance, the news article on 'Pandharpur Yatra Begins' came with an analysis titled 'Expect a Cholera Outbreak'. (Mule 1978, 24) The following issue duly followed up with an article which mentioned the death toll.

## **Dnyanodaya and Women-centric Issues**

This period of social transformation saw the birth of a movement for women's rights. We can say that the 19th century periodical was an effective medium of advocacy for women-centric reforms. Through 'Darpan', first published in 1832, Balashastri Jambhekar brought into existence the Marathi-language periodical. He launched the quarterly 'Dnyandarshan' in 1840, in order to bring general attention to the adverse conditions in which women lived. 'Dnyanodaya' [est. June 1842], emphasised issues faced by women in family life, religious and social affairs. 'Dnyanodaya' sought the public interest by promoting education, criticising certain traditions, and taking up the cause of drought survivors. It was also an

educator. Women writers were encouraged. It was a platform to express them on various women related issues.

The missionaries who founded 'Dnyanodaya' had a sense of social commitment. Their work did not attract the disapproval of the British Raj. In order to address a wide range of intended audiences, the village folk, the depressed classes, and the educated and cultured classes, the missionaries employed a range of mediums. Initially they opened schools for teaching as well as preaching. 'Dnyanodaya' too emphasised ethics and theology. Besides the establishment of schools for the purpose of proselyting, there was other missionary work that left a mark on society, such as the free distribution of Christian scriptures, holding gatherings in which to explain the differences between the Christian and Hindu faiths, having religious congregations and fairs, and opening schools, orphanages, student hostels, girls' schools, educational institutions and hospitals. The newly educated turned away from religion, ritual, traditions, casteism, and idolatry.

### **Dnyanodaya and Reformism**

'Dnyanodaya' printed a reader's letter that said, "Idolatry is waning like the moon in its second phase." (Dnanodaya 16 September 16<sup>th</sup> 1861, 278) 'Dnyanodaya' persuasively argued with examples that bad traditions had kept 'natives' lagging behind the West. The February 15, 1851 issue of 'Dnyanodaya' listed the disadvantages of not travelling abroad. "The people of the West travel for discovery. Hindus stay at home when they had better familiarise themselves with the lay of the world. The prohibition to leave their land has led them to ignorance. They know nothing beyond the Seven Seas and the Mount Meru. They must adopt the way of knowledge through rational enquiry." (Dnanodaya February 15<sup>th</sup> 1851, 9.)

The April 1, 1861 issue of 'Dnyanodaya' continues in like vein. "The natives are not disgusted by crime. They are disgusted when good men receive education." (Dnanodaya April

1<sup>st</sup> 1861, 98) In this way 'Dnyanodaya' persuasively identified harmful traditions as obstacles in the progress of the 'natives'. Moreover, 'Dnyanodaya' boosted the cause of educational reform in Maharashtra. Western traditions of education inspired 'Dnyanodaya' to argue against government control of education and for non-governmental educational and cultural organisations. Thought-provoking and informative 'Dnyanodaya' had adopted social reform as its motto. Its concern extended to public health. Around 1842 the belief was widespread that the epidemic *patkicha rog* and smallpox were a result of British rule, and loud processions were organised to appease the wrathful goddess *Mari-Aai*. In response, 'Dnyanodaya' pointed to the food item called *Ambe Mejwani* as the cause of *Patki rog* and explained that smallpox could be staved off through inoculation of two-month-old children; criticised *mangnichi pooja* and *Bhutache bhajan* as foolishness. (Sharma and Punerak 1997, 96) Dnyanodaya linked adverse social customs to the spread of tuberculosis.

The prohibition of alcohol was one of Dnyanodaya's causes. It persuasively argued against the belief that liquor was medicine and urged the government to put up prohibition. It held up the American Temperance Society as an example worthy of emulation in this regard. Further, it also took special note of the many malpractices which accompanied the festival of Holi. It said that government bans were not effective without community participation. We see a debate on the evils of gambling, even as an addiction. We see information about the legal punishment and the fine for gambling, coupled with criticism of the practice of gambling in *dharamshalas*. In this period, 'Dnyanodaya' did remarkable work to raise awareness against the belief in evil and auspicious omens. Rationalist books were being published, and 'Dnyanodaya' took note of them. We cannot overlook its work in spreading the scientific temper. It touched upon such topics as eclipses, astral charts, fortune-telling, omens, and astrology. It is remarkable for touching upon the naivete of the 'natives'.

'Dnyanodaya' linked the spread of countrywide epidemics to the health perils caused by public ignorance and uncleanliness, and worked against them in the field. It exposed, as equally unfortunate, the consequences of the faith placed in charlatans and the non-belief that met scientific facts. It forcefully mapped superstition as the blind belief of untruths, a belief that worked to the detriment of the intellect. 'Dnyanodaya' did not restrict itself to the news of Mumbai and Pune, but wrote of the major developments emanating from Bengal, Punjab, Madras; and wrote of American women as an ideal for the 'natives', while also featuring the views on women found in other countries such as China and Israel. Moralistic teaching was a prime focus of the missionaries. They wrote that god was for moral living and was not to be feared. They wrote in favour of knowledge as a keystone of the family's honour. They knew, of course, that the 'natives' working for social reform were in fear of public disapprobation. They wrote that "Reformers have always faced severe adversity." (Dnyanodaya September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1868, 287) 'Dnyanodaya' met with some success in raising public awareness of the need for social reform. That is evident in the letters it got from its readers, which spoke of men having stopped the worship of idols, and of women who read Dnyanodaya's articles and lost their fear of ghosts.

### **Dnyanodaya's References to 'Native' Publications**

Like 'Dnyanodaya', its contemporary publications such as 'Darpan', 'Digdarshan', 'Prabhakar', and 'Dnyanprakash' worked for the spread of knowledge and social reform. 'Dnyanodaya' duly took note of its contemporaries. It also kept an eye on its reception among its audiences. The June 15, 1855 issue of 'Dnyanodaya' remarks, "Poona University takes every newspaper but 'Dnyanodaya' because of the paper's religious content." (Dnyanodaya June 15<sup>th</sup> 1855, 192) We find 'Dnyanodaya' derided in the pages of such periodicals as 'Upadeshchandrika', 'Dwadambhaharak', and 'Vicharlahari'

which aimed to refute Christian thought. 'Dnyanodaya', which wrote of its contemporary publications, has become an important resource in the research of the 19th century press. 'Dnyanodaya' republished a number of articles from 'Vartamandepika', 'Dhoomketu', 'Prabhakar' and other newspapers. To some extent, 'Dnyanodaya' shows us the objectives, editorial stance and popularity of its contemporaries. The 'Dnyanodaya' editors favoured the growth in the number of newspapers. They strove to encourage the reading habit among the 'natives'.

'Dnyanodaya' belongs to the rank of newspapers that played a notable part in 19th century reform. It would be unjust to say that 'Dnyanodaya' had a one-point agenda of religious conversion. It was a missionary-run newspaper and that was one of its goals. It critiqued public affairs and promoted reform in a broad way. It took on the promotion of social awareness and demolition of orthodoxy, both difficult tasks. 'Dnyanodaya' helped to shape contemporary reformism. The Lokahitawadis and Phule were critical of the caste system. The Lokahitawadis, who were themselves Brahmins, excoriated Brahmins in severe fashion. Mahatma Phule launched an all-out assault on Brahminical superiority. His work met with considerable censure. This is where 'Dnyanodaya' stands out. It took due note of these two reformist forces. 'Dnyanodaya' played a large role in publicising Mahatma Phule's work. It also gave coverage to the work of the Bengal reformers Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Vidyasagar and others. That 'Dnyanodaya' expressed its solidarity with these reformers says a lot about its role in the native social reform.

### **Concluding Remark**

'Dnyanodaya' grasped the pulse of the public sentiment and gave expression to it. It adopted the humane approach to influence public opinion in favour of social change. It used parables for this purpose. For instance, it carried a parable to

help women combat their fear of ghosts and evil spirits. Its *bodhaparata* was based on its religious outlook. It even gave space to letters from readers. It was a forum for discussions on various topics. It was a missionary-run newspaper and that was one of its goals. It critiqued public affairs and promoted reform in a broad way. It took on the promotion of social awareness and demolition of orthodoxy, both difficult tasks. Dnyanodaya took a simple and easy-to-understand approach to explaining a range of topics in Christian studies, geology, history, geography, and social science. It documented the society of its period. Moreover, it pressed for a moral life without social inequity, ignorance, untouchability, substance addiction and superstition. That is why it deserves credit for its significant attempts at social reform in the nineteenth century. 'Dnyanodaya' linked the spread of countrywide epidemics to the health perils caused by public ignorance and civic insensitivity, and worked against the same. It exposed, as equally unfortunate, the consequences of the faith placed in charlatans and the non-belief that met scientific facts. It forcefully mapped superstition as the blind belief of untruths, a belief that worked to the detriment of the intellect. No subject was off-limits to 'Dnyanodaya'. It would carry an article on ethics with another on the history of Rome and a third on Sanskrit grammar. 'Dnyanodaya' remains but indispensable as a resource for the research of Maharashtra's social history. It is notable not only as a newspaper but also a paper of views. Launched in 1842 and brought out in the face of general adversity, 'Dnyanodaya' is still being published today. That is one measure of its success.

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