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## **Social Reform through Literature – Narmad’s Contribution to Renaissance in Gujarat**

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**Abstract:**

*19<sup>th</sup> century in India was a period of great transformation at social and cultural levels due to the various social reform movements and activities of individual social reformers. Literary writers in different languages played a significant role in advancing the cause of social reforms during this period. Narmad is the most prominent name in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Gujarati Literature who used the power of his words to argue for various social reforms like widow remarriage, adoption of modern education and reforms in caste system. This article summarizes the ways in which Narmad used his poetry and prose to propagate social causes.*

**Keywords:** *19<sup>th</sup> Century renaissance in India, Modern Gujarati Literature, Narmad, Reformist Gujarati Literature, Social Reform in India*

The nineteenth century in India is known as the period of the beginning and spread of movements for social reforms in several parts of the country. It is also known as the period of intellectual renaissance India when the age old traditions, social practices and orthodox beliefs came in for scrutiny and challenge from the new generation of English educated Indians. The intellectual trends of the 19<sup>th</sup> century led the youth to fight for the removal of centuries-old superstitions and unjust practices in Indian society - mainly among the Hindus. The thrust of the 19<sup>th</sup> century social reform movements in India was on fighting exploitative practices like Sati system and killing of girl child at birth. They also encouraged widow remarriage and women’s education for empowering women. The ideas of uplift of the downtrodden communities and fighting untouchability also surfaced during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Apart from the social organizations and movements, some individual social reformers played a key role in the process of social and cultural change in India during the 19th century. Educated Indians who were concerned about the suffering of the Indian people due to irrational and evil social practices launched social organizations or used medium of literature to make people aware about their social reform agenda. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Devendranath Thakur, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati, Jyotiba Phule, etc. made a great impact on the spread of social reforms and empowerment of women in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in India.

Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave (1833-1886), better known as poet ‘Narmad’, is a formidable name in the modern social and literary history of Gujarat who used the medium of his literature to push the agenda of modernity and social reform in Gujarat. He is often identified as the first modernist Gujarati writer. Educated at Elphinstone College at Mumbai, Narmad absorbed himself in the vibrant literary and cultural life of Mumbai’s Gujarati community and soon acquired a lot of popularity among the young people through his powerful, provocative and inspiring poetry and prose.

Narmad felt that India was backward because its people did not know how to get organized into associations and were unaware of the benefits that associations would give to people. Therefore, he founded a young people’s group called ‘*Juvan Purushoni Anyonya Buddhivardhak Sabha*’ (“Young Men’s Association for Intellectual Development through Mutual Aid”) to promote ideas of modernity and rationality among young writers and students. The first lecture that he delivered at the inaugural meeting of this association in 1950, titled “Mandali Karavathi thata laabh” (‘Advantages of forming an association’) was full of reformist insights and ideas. Narmad later published this lecture as an independent book which became very famous in Gujarati journalism and literature. In fact, it became the first prose writing of importance in Gujarati literature.

Later, Narmad also wrote his autobiography titled ‘Mari Hakikat’ (‘My Story’), becoming the first litterateur in Gujarati to write an autobiography. This was a radical step in the context of the 19<sup>th</sup> century social conditions as Narmad wrote quite candidly about his personal relationships, women in his life as well as about his impressions and relationship with contemporary writers. For many of

these contemporary writers, Narmad had had a very adverse comments to make. By publishing his subsequent books and articles, Narmad became the first significant prose writer in Gujarati language. Narmad is also famous as the creator of Gujarat's regional anthem "Jay Garvi Gujarat".

Though he did not write many popular and accomplished poems, Narmad is remembered more as a poet than as a prose writer. He attracted the adjective of 'Kavi'. He enjoyed this identity more than the identity as an essayist or as an autobiography writer. He studied western poetics and tried to bring in its elements into Gujarati poetry. He also wrote conceptual pieces on poems and poets and how western poetry contains some valuable poetic elements which can be emulated in our literature. Of course, some critics of Gujarati literature do not place Narmad's poetic contributions very highly in terms of their literary and aesthetic characteristics. Indeed, many observers consider Narmad's approach to poetry and his acerbic criticism of other contemporary poets of his time as indicating arrogance. Narmad believed that he was the best poet of his times and no other contemporary poet – not even Dalpatram, the most established poet of his era - could equal him in achievements as a poet. Indeed, in a show of such arrogance, Narmad wrote that Dalpatram and all other poets of his times were jealous of his popularity and his achievements as a poet.

Narmad's most important contribution to social reform and renaissance in Gujarat is through his journalistic contributions. He launched a fortnightly Gujarati magazine called "Dandiyo" (literally meaning a crier of the town) in the month of September 1864. Dandiyo was expected to act the herald of social reforms. Narmad strongly believed that without his own magazine, he would not be able to give justice to his ideas and articulate them freely. Publication of 'Dandiyo' was really a noteworthy development during that period as there were not many such magazines published at that time. Narmad used a lot of sarcasm and irony in his writings in 'Dandiyo' to drive home his strong arguments in favour of social change and reforms. The themes he covered in 'Dandiyo' cover a wide range of themes - issues related to widows and women's welfare, British education, women's clothing and its meaning, welfare of Gujarat, poetry and criticism etc. 'Dandiyo' was not so much a news-centred magazine as an intellectual magazine that contained opinions and analysis. The magazine continued its publication for the next five years and brought out 117 issues. Each issue contained eight pages during the early period of the magazine. The pages were increased to twelve later. Narmad continued the publication of Dandiyo for the sake of social reforms even though he bore losses due to the cost of its printing and distribution.

Narmad's literary contributions are quite diverse and basic. He studied not only Gujarati poets but also Sanskrit literature and English poetry and tried to write what he felt was the purest form of Gujarati language. Narmad engaged with several kinds of literary and scholarly pursuits like producing a lexicon, mythological dictionary, book of grammar, writing about prosody, study of history and folklore, literary criticism and process etc. Though social reform themes dominated his writings, Narmad also dealt with tender human emotions, love and nature in his prose and poetry. He carried out translation of some seminal Sanskrit works into Gujarati, including of Bhagavadgita which Gandhiji appreciated.

Both in its content and approach, Narmad broke away from the past conventions and beliefs. He is most well-known due to his adoption of modernist and reformist practices and advocacy of the same through his literature. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century conservative Gujarat, he favoured English education, widow remarriage and loosening of caste system. He wanted people to abandon religious orthodoxy and revolt against religious leaders and swamis who were not in favour of social change. In fact, his battle with a religious priest of the popular and powerful Vaishnav sect in Gujarat makes for an interesting and sociologically revealing reading. He also helped in the cultivation of a Gujarati identity and identified its characteristics. He simultaneously talked about patriotism and Indian identity among the people. Narmad tried to stimulate what he called pride in one's own nation and used the expression *swadeshabhiman* for the first time in Gujarati to denote this idea. Albeit, while promoting patriotism, he was careful not to go against the British rule in India which he saw as a blessing for Indians and as a source of their happiness. He praised British rule as a reason for reduced social exploitation and creation of jobs in his poems and prose.

In fact, there are two phases of Narmad's literary life. During the earlier phase of his literary career Narmad was in his youth. Hence, his promotion of social reform was very radical and uncompromising. This literature contains words full of energy, power and passion. He questioned almost everything that existed before him or during his times. He did not hesitate to use caustic words for such conventional practices and about the writers who were rooted in conventions. However, during the latter period of his life, he exhibited greater openness to accept traditional practices of society and tried to combine it with his western liberal bent of mind under the concept of what he called '*swadharmā*'. He mellowed down in his approach and implicitly changed many things that he had advocated as his truth during the earlier phase of his literary life. A book titled 'Dharma Vichar' (Cogitations on Dharma) published in the later part of his life actually contains a revision of many of his earlier radical positions on social reform.

In view of his diverse contributions, it is doubtless that Narmad has contributed greatly to the advancement of modernity and social reform in Gujarat through his frank and firebrand writings. He responded to the socio economic situation of his times and tried to steer Gujarat towards reforms. In doing so he became a precursor of many new trends and thinking in Gujarati literature.

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