DAYANANDA SARASWATI AND THE COLONIAL MACHINE

DAVID TAUBER
THE BIG PICTURE:

DAYANANDA SARASWATI (1824-1881)

• The Religion-Science Debate was not as robust in India compared to Europe

• Scholars have largely treated the debate as relatively insignificant, because there was not much explicit pushback

• This project aimed to challenge that notion by exploring the works of Dayananda Saraswati
THE GOAL!

Convince you that Dayanada Saraswati is the key to understanding the relationship between religion and science in colonial India.
HISTORIOGRAPHY: HOW SCHOLARS HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT A TOPIC

Scholars writing from within the tradition

- Write about him too much
- Assume he is correct about everything

Scholars writing from outside the tradition

- Write about him too little
- Assume he is crazy

Within both groups there is excellent scholarship. The key difference is in the assumptions they make about the factuality of his ideas.
DAYANANDA SARASWATI

• Received no formal western education- Ran away at age 18 and became a Sanyasi (traveling monk)

• Was educated by other Sanyasis in the Sanskrit language, and many religious text associated with it

• Traveled across the entirety of Northern India, from Mumbai (then Bombay), the Punjab (now split between India and Pakistan) and Bengal (now split between Bangladesh and India)

• Highly critical of British rule- considered to be one of the earliest Hindu nationalists
The Rigvedadi-Bhashya-Bhumika: Published 1877
Commentaries on the Vedas (4,000 year old religious texts)
Claims that the Vedas included references to telegraphs, guns, planes, steam engines, and the heliocentric model of the solar system

The Satyarth Prakash: Published 1875
Compiled lectures on religious and secular matters
Claims that the perfect reflection of the attainment of religious knowledge mechanical knowledge, knowledge of electricity, etc.
WHY WOULD A SANYASI WHO CRITICIZED THE BRITISH CLAIM THAT THEIR EPISTEMOLOGICAL TRADITION WAS PROOF OF RELIGIOUS ATTAINMENT IN HIS OWN TRADITION?
BRITISH SCHOOLS

• Switched to teaching exclusively in English in 1830 to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect”

• The school system had proliferated By the time Dayananda had visited Mumbai and Kolkatta, He met many people who had been educated in these institutions
The Railroad and telegraph had transformed the subcontinent by the 1850’s. There were still regions without access to these technologies, something a traveler such as Dayananda would have understood intimately.
CONCLUSION I

• It is likely that Dayananda was introduced to these topics by European educated elites in Mumbai and Kolkata, and that the social changes wrought by European technology were too compelling to argue against.
CONCLUSION II

If even an anti-British, non-English educated reformer like Dayananda had to intellectually engage with European science, then it is probably that most religious leaders in this period did, whether they left proof or not.

This should be investigated further in the archives.