

# Emergence Of Caste Consciousness In Punjab And Maharashtra In The Second Half Of The Nineteenth Century

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**Abstract:** Swami Dayananda Saraswati founded Arya samaj in 1875. The revivalism of Arya Samaj had great appeal for the middle class in north India particularly in Punjab. The middle classes in Punjab comprising merchants, professional, service persons etc. came under the influence of Arya Samaj. During the phase of emergence of caste consciousness in Punjab, the Arya Samaj played very important role and was able to organize the people in Punjab. The Arya Samaj had accepted the caste system in principle. The question of caste posed the greatest challenge to the Arya Samaj. Economic power was vested among the Vashya community. The emergence of the British did not change the economic power vested with the Vaishya community.

The emergence of caste consciousness in Maharashtra was different from that in Punjab. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, founder of Satyashodhak Samaj, was a social reformer in Maharashtra who emerged from the lower castes. A strong advocate of female education he founded a girls school in Poona. He actively supported the widow remarriage movement and opposed polygamy and child marriages. The backbone of its support came from the Maratha peasantry. It also got support from untouchables. The commercial bourgeoisie were another source of support.

**Index Terms - Revivalism, Consciousness, Educational, Untouchables.**

## Introduction

By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century we find that British rule has been extended to cover the whole part of Punjab and the greater part of present day Maharashtra. The ensuing decades saw the establishment of British administration, institution and education in these areas. The introduction of new institutions and new ideas did not fail to elicit a response within the society. The impact of the British rule and the response of the colonized society had broad similarities in both Punjab and Maharashtra but there were also crucial differences. One area where the impact of the colonial rule can be analyzed is in the emergence of the caste consciousness in the two provinces of Punjab and Maharashtra. While the broad framework of colonial rule was similar in these two regions was the emergence of the caste consciousness, its nature and course were noticeably different.

## Social and Religious Scenario in Punjab

Situation in Punjab - By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century the whole of Punjab had been brought under British colonial administration. In Punjabi society the creative response to the colonial rule first emerged among Hindus from the *Vashya* community. There were historical reasons for dominance of this community. Long centuries of Muslim rule in the Punjab had led to the loss of political power among the *Kshatriya* community and the loss of privileges and patronage to the *Brahmin* community and consequently the marginalization of these two communities which in other parts of the country continued to maintain their dominance. Economic power however was vested predominantly among the *Vashya* community (among whom we can include *Khatris, Bania, Sud and Arora castes*). The emergence of the British did not change the economic power vested with the *Vaishya* communities both in rural and urban areas and this contributed to the latter's continued importance as well as dominance within society.

Similar to the case in Bengal earlier in the country, contact with the colonial administration led to the creation of a new (mostly urban based) elite. The original core of this elite were the Bengali *babus*<sup>1</sup> who followed the colonial administration into Punjab comprising mainly of high caste Bengali converts to Christianity and *Brahmo Samajists*. Both these groups were antithetical to the local Hindu orthodoxy but did not prevent their influencing the locally dominant groups from wanting to aspire to the same status. In time the demands these groups would make of the Colonial government would follow the same pattern as elsewhere, viz. the dissemination of English education and a greater share in the colonial administration. Gradually the elite would draw most of its members from the aforementioned economically dominant groups, especially the commercial classes.

Increasing contact with British administration and institutions saw a growing tendency among this new (anglicized) class to question existing societal values and the status quo. There was a felt need for change for reform as well as defending what they believed to be the true Hindu religion. There were sporadic individual attempts at reform societies but none sustained their momentum beyond their founders. The need for a new ideology “which satisfied personal need in an era of social and intellectual revolt”<sup>2</sup> saw conditions in Punjab ripe for the functioning of a creed like the *Arya Samaj*.

### **Arya Samaj**

The *Arya Samaj* was founded by Dayananda Saraswati who though originally from Gujrat found his strongest and largest number of adherents in Punjab. This is not surprising considering the strong anti-Brahmanical streak in Dayananda’s preaching in which he held the current degeneration of Hinduism to be the fault mainly of the priestly class. In Punjab due to dominance of the *Vaishya* caste his teachings found less opposition, though it was not absent, than in other parts of the country where the *Brahmins* retained their dominance.

Dayananda gave the clarion call of ‘back to the Vedas’ in which he held out the vision of a glorious past of Hindustan which had degenerated through the ages due to priestly exploitation and the introduction of various rituals and corruptions. These he said had weakened the moral and spiritual fibre of society leaving them susceptible to succeeding invasions culminating in the then prevailing British colonial rule. Ideas and beliefs were written down in his book *Satyarth Prakash*<sup>3</sup> (Light of truth) brought out in 1875. Among his major ideas was that of the infallibility of the Vedas, which he held to be divinity revealed. From his interpretation of the Vedas he derived the ideas of monotheism and the unity of God, rationalistic monotheism and the rejection of popular rituals and superstitions which he held to be corruptions which had crept into Hinduism. He argued that social and religious reforms were needed to rid Hindu Society of the stagnation which it found itself in and to regain its golden past. He also argued for reform of customary law which he said should be based on reason and for a complete reform of Hindu society.

Dayananda attacked Brahmin exclusivities and prerogatives, a Brahmin he said

was one who possessed true knowledge. True knowledge could be got from the correct interpretation of Vedas. Neither truth nor caste was a bar to one who sought true knowledge. His attacks on Brahmanical privileges and his active espousal of the cause of education appealed to the upwardly mobile *Vaishya* community in Punjab and he found in them a major source of support.

## Arya Samaj in Punjab

The Punjab Arya Samaj was founded in 1877 on the lines of modern organization resembling the *Brahmo Samaj* and Christian missions. *The Arya Samaj* quickly spread roots in Punjab. The principles of *Arya Samaj*, ten in number, were written down and this ten point credo became the doctrinal basis for the entire *Arya Samaj* movement. While the *Arya Samaj* established in Lahore which had emerged as the urban intellectual centre in the Punjab provided the leadership and served as the model, the organizational network of *Arya Samajes* had a great deal of autonomy. Unlike the other movements it continued to gain in strength after the death of its founder and no personality cult around Dayananda developed to hinder the activities of the organization. Newspapers, periodicals, pamphlets constituted the main forms of communication resorted to by the *Arya Samaj*. At times street preaching was also resorted to. The *Arya Samaj* held out hope of revitalization and regeneration of society and country. It held out prospects for upward economic and social mobility for the locally dominant groups.

## Objectives of Arya Samaj

The activities of the *Arya Samaj* were centred around two objectives. The first, as with any new ideology, was to gain new converts. The second, as the organization matured and gained in prominence, was as a defender of Hinduism and as a bulwark against Christian missionary propaganda. These two objectives were interconnected and not independent of each other.

The *Arya Samaj* began as a body to propagate the teachings of Dayananda Saraswati and to carry out the reforms both in the religious as well as social sphere. As part of their efforts at reform they advocated doing away with useless ceremonies and rituals, simplifying the necessary rituals omitting the traditional needs for priests, promoted the cause of female emancipation and running of orphanages. They attempted to change or adapt local customs, festivals to *Arya Samaj* precepts. In ceremonial aspects new ceremonies were introduced ostensibly in the Vedic pattern, which after initial opposition from Hindu orthodoxy were gradually accepted without much protest. They pronounced the cause of education, especially that in English, setting up many schools, their efforts finally culminating in the establishment of the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College at Lahore which became the breeding ground of Punjabi Hindu intellectuals in the years to come. In their encouragement to the cause of education they rivaled the efforts of the Christian Missionaries. Indeed they saw education not only as a means to social and economic mobility but also ideologically as necessary to counter missionary propaganda.<sup>4</sup> (Refreshingly their ideological commitment to the primacy of the Vedas did not prevent them from giving due importance in contemporary Western and Scientific knowledge. In this they echoed the pragmatism of their founder who had always advocated a reasoned reinterpretation of and not a blind adherence to the Vedas.)

## Arya Samaj as a Reform Body

As a reform body the Arya Samaj was one of the most successful. It propagated its ideas with greater success than either the *Brahmo Samaj* or the *Prarthana Samaj*. Partly its success was due to the relatively weaker strength of *Brahmins* in the Punjab but mostly it depended on its success in positioning itself and gaining recognition as a body for reform within mainstream Hindu community. The *Arya Samaj* tried to establish its authenticity as an Indian movement in inspiration, one that developed from within Indian society and not imposed by or imported from the West. This it did by being sharply critical of other reform movements like the *Brahmo Samaj*<sup>5</sup> and *Prarthana Samaj*<sup>6</sup> for their refusal to accept the infallibility of the Vedas and decrying the perceived influence of Western and Christian sources of inspiration in their teachings. It could well be said that in the fierce competition to gain new converts they actually weakened other reform movements in the Punjab. On the other hand they took care to distance themselves from Hindu orthodoxy by actively advocating and encouraging reforms within Hinduism. They effectively carried the war of propaganda to the missionary camp (through both spirited defense of their faith as well as sometimes crude attacks on that of their opponents) and through their social work reduced the flow of converts to other religions. Reforms were seen not only as an end in themselves but as a most effective means for counter propaganda. Thus by positioning themselves in the middle ground they gained credibility as reformers among those desirous of change and the grudging respect of the orthodoxy as defenders of Hinduism.

## Consciousness in Punjab

The situation of the Hindu community in Punjab was quite unique in many ways. The Hindus were a minority in Punjab but belonged to the majority community in relation to the country as a whole. They were continuously assailed by the threat of conversion from within the ranks both by individuals and by whole sub-castes. Before British rule Islam and Sikhism and during colonial rule Christian missionaries, encouraged and financed by the colonial administration, competed for converts. Conversions to Christianity though many in number were numerically insignificant relative to the larger population but gained wide publicity and fueled fears that the mass of the Hindu community was in danger of being lost. The British administration contributed to these fears by institutionalizing all social divisions through censuses, public commissions etc. The drive to gain and/or retain converts or to prevent erosion from their ranks became part of a number's game played equally by all the communities.

Among the most important reasons for mass conversions from Hinduism was the rigidity of the caste system and the desire for upward social mobility. *The Arya Samaj* had following Dayananda's example had accepted the caste system in principle and though sharply critical of its obvious evils was ultimately forced to accept it in practice as well. For instance *Aryans* themselves rarely married outside their caste and at least outwardly maintained caste rules scrupulously. In fact, having accepted the principle of reform from within Hindu

society and being highly suspicious of outside interference in such matters, the question of caste posed the greatest challenge to the *Arya Samaj* which despite their best efforts could never be settled satisfactorily.

### **Shuddhi Movement**

One way in which the *Arya Samaj* tried to get around the constraints of caste was through their campaign of *Shuddhi*.<sup>7</sup> The *Shuddhi* movement was first used by Dayananda as a purification ceremony in which Hindu converts lost to other faiths could be received back into the Hindu fold. From 1900 onwards there were conscious moves within the *Arya Samaj* to induct lower castes as well. Towards this end, purification ceremonies (mass *shuddhi*) were conducted where lower castes like *Rohtias*, *Odes*, *Meghs* and *Jats* were raised to higher caste status and inter dining and inter marriage with higher castes were technically allowed. This rarely took place in practice.

There were obvious limitations to the *Shuddhi* campaign. While individual conversions or mass conversions could be dealt with in a paternalistic manner, the conversion of non-Hindus and of out-castes posed far more serious problems. Not all attempts to integrate the depressed castes within the hierarchy met with support. Immediate social equality for the lower castes was an impossibility. “More often than not attempts to move up the social scale ran directly into the existing power structure, producing in response social boycotts and occasional violence”.<sup>8</sup> (Quoted in K.W. Jones, *Arya Dharm*)

### **Maharashtra**

Similar to the case of Punjab the need and impetus for reform in Maharashtra came from the realization of stagnation in the society. However the perceptions differed as to its cause. The social background and the context in which caste consciousness emerged in Maharashtra were also very different from that in Punjab.

In Maharashtra the Brahmins had been the dominant caste till the arrival of the British and even after the establishment of the colonial administration formed the bulk of the new elite that had emerged due to English education. Leaders of the social reform movement were high caste (Ranade, Teland, Chandravarkar, Bhandarker were Brahmins). In fact two movements for social reforms can be identified in Maharashtra. The first was the Brahmin led movements like the National Social Conference and the *Prarthana Samaj*. The second was the non-Brahmin (at times even anti-Brahmin) movement of Jyotiba Phule began in the 1870s. The prominent concern of this movement was the social improvement of the middle and lower castes especially among the Marathas.

## Social Reform Movements and Caste Consciousness in Maharashtra

### Mahadev Govind Ranade

The Brahmin led movement for social reform in Bombay was careful to take into account resistance from the orthodox section. Social opprobrium and disapproval could often be personally costly to reformers. This was manifested in their need for social sanction and not mere legal sanction for reform. By supporting gradual social and religious reform they hoped to avoid a radical break with tradition. Mahadev Govind Ranade was the most prominent figure in this movement. He advocated against rebellion and revolt from society fearing that such radicalism would do more harm than good to the cause of social reform.

Other reformers however were critical of the evolutionary nature of reform proposed by Mahadev Ranade. Awaiting social sanction for the path of reform may make it more sure but the pace would be excruciatingly slow to confer immediate benefits. Social reform thus far had been restricted mainly to issues concerning the upper castes (like female education, widow remarriage etc). Issues of caste and the social advancement of the lower castes rarely received attention. To leaders from lower castes like Mahatma Phule “the progress alone lines of least resistance” as advocated by Ranade often implied no progress at all. The close link between the social and political movements in Bombay presidency also resulted in social reforms being sidelined in favour of political reforms.

### Mahatma Jyotiba Phule: Satyashodhak Samaj

Disenchanted with the Brahmin leadership of the social reform movement many reformers dissociated themselves from existing reform bodies to start their own. Most prominent among them was Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, the social reformer who emerged from the lower castes. The accent on nationalism before reform, the gradual nature of the transformation advocated, the lack of concerted attempts to reform the caste system were some of the reasons that increasingly alienated Mahatma Phule from the Brahmin-led social reform movements. A strong advocate of female emancipation and female education, he founded a school for girls in Poona. He actively supported the widow remarriage movement and opposed polygamy and child marriages.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj for the uplift of lower castes and prevent their exploitation by Brahmins and upper castes. Rationality and equality were the principles on which he based the Satya Shodhak Samaj. The former principle was used to overthrow tradition and deny the supremacy of the scriptures. The principle of equality was used to attack the caste system. The Samaj worked to undermine the cultural and religious sanction for priest hood by conducting rituals and ceremonies without Brahmins. In its attack on the cast system it drew from both western rationalism as well as indigenous sources of social revolt like the *Bhakti*. What distinguished the *Samaj* was its non elitist mass nature. In propagating its ideology it made wide use of the vernacular. The backbone of its support came from the Maratha peasantry (Maratha

Kunbis, Malis, Kolis etc.). It also gained support from untouchables. The “commercial bourgeoisie” comprising of tradesmen, contractors etc. were another source of support.

### **Support from Maharaja of Kolhapur**

The activities of the Satya Shodhak Samaj got a fillip when the Maharaja of Kolhapur extended his support to it. The Maharaja had realized that political power was also necessary for advancement of the backward classes. To this end he encouraged the education of lower castes and introduced reservation for them in his administration. Following Mahatma Phule he aided in replacing religious ceremonies which previously were the prerogative of Brahmins by those performed by the lower castes themselves.

### **Mahatma Phule on British Rule**

The major difference of Mahatma Phule with movement with the national Movement in Bombay, dominated by Chitpavan Brahmins, <sup>9</sup> was over the primacy of social reform over political reform. Increasingly he found that attempts to address the question of caste were sacrificed in the interests of national unity. Mahatma Phule was not blind to the exploitative nature of colonial administration. And while he questioned the wisdom of opposing the British through a movement that would come under upper-caste control and influence he was well aware that the elite dominated colonial administration was also a cause of exploitation.

But for Mahatma Phule, the source of lower caste exploitation were two viz. the colonial regime and the Brahmanical culture system. He was well aware that political reforms in the absence of substantial social reforms would at best result in the substitution of one form exploitation by another.

Mahatma Phule thought well of British rule and western influence as he hoped that they would help to liberate the *Shudras* and the lower castes indeed he once said the creator has purposely sent the English people to this country to liberate the *Shudras* from the slavery of the crafty *Aryas*. The anti-Brahmin nature of the movement of Mahatma Phule cannot be denied. The anti-Brahmanism was part of developing consciousness among the lower castes for a social revolution the raising in status of the most impure (*untouchables* and lower castes) could only take place when the status of the top most is devalued. Hence the anti-Brahmin nature of most lower caste movements. Mahatma Phule’s movement was anti Brahmin because the existing cultural system rested on the primacy and superiority of the Brahmin any social revolution must aim at the overthrow of this superiority and the dominating ideology of Brahmanism.



## Conclusion

The Satya Shodhak Samaj as a lower caste body had a great role in breaking down the barriers among the Marathas and the creation of a Maratha identity. Its contribution to the emerging domination of the Maratha in the political scene and their upward mobility in social status was no small one. But as a non-Brahmin movement it failed to carry all sections of the lower castes with it. The political and social ascent of the Maratha caste was to some extent based on the exclusion of the out-castes and untouchable communities. The higher the status that the caste gained in the social and cultural ladder, the lesser was its inclination to undermine the system and the further the prospects for social revolution receded into the background. To a certain extent it was co-opted into the same cultural system that it set out to overthrow.

The objectives of the Arya Samaj in bringing to the Aryan fold the lower castes and those of the latter differed. For the latter it was rarely a matter of religious conviction. More often it was a means of social mobility. Differing perceptions about the role of caste and the constraints imposed by having to work within the parameters of mainstream Hindu community meant that the Arya Samaj's campaign for caste reform proved less successful than their other programmes.

## References

1. Bengali 'babus' was a new class of Bengal was eager to imitate western manners who gave their services to the British in establishing Commercial and Political activities. They managed all commercial affairs of Calcutta. 'Babu' was an honorary title given to these people by the East India Company.
2. Quoted in, Heimsath, C.H. 1964. Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, Princeton University Press.
3. *Satyarth Prakash* is a great Scholarly book written by Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati, Socio-Religious reformer in India, in 1875. It is originally written in Hindi.
4. Refreshingly their ideological commitment to the primacy of the Vedas did not prevent them from giving due importance in contemporary Western and Scientific knowledge. In this they echoed the pragmatism of their founder who had always advocated a reasoned reinterpretation of and not a blind adherence to the Vedas.
5. *Brahmo Samaj* – A Socio-Religious Reform Movement in India established by Raja Ram Mohun Roy in 1828 in Calcutta.
6. *Prarthana Samaj* – A Socio-Religious Movement in Maharashtra, established in 1867 at Bombay by Atmaram Panduranga. It became very popular after Mahadev Govind Ranade joined it.
7. *Shuddhi* was started by Arya Samaj to bring back the people who had transformed their religion to Islam and Christianity from Hinduism. Shuddhi had a reform agenda behind its rationale and was

aimed at abolishing the practice of untouchability by converting outcasts from other religions to Hinduism.

8. Quoted in, Jones, K.W. 1976. Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth century Punjab. (He emphasizes that Arya Samaj was an ideology of the English educated urban nationalists of the Punjab who disenchanted with colonial rule.)
9. Chitpavan Brahmins is a Hindu Maharashtrian community living in the coastal areas, at Konkan, Maharashtra. Chitpavans held a low status till 18<sup>th</sup> century.

