

SOCIO-RELIGIOUS REFORM MOVEMENTS AS AGENTS OF COMMUNAL HARMONY IN MODERN INDIA

Shabir Ahmad Lone^{1*}, V.Thirumurugan²

¹Research scholar, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar-608002, Tamil Nadu

²Professor, Department of History, Faculty of Arts, Annamalai University, Annamalainagar-608002, Tamil Nadu

Correspondence author:

*Shabir Ahmad Lone

Email: shabirlone182@gmail.com

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Abstract

The interplay between socio-religious reform movements and communal harmony has been a pivotal aspect of societal transformation throughout history. Socio-religious reform movements, often arising during periods of social and political upheaval, have played critical roles in addressing and mitigating social inequalities, religious intolerance, and communal discord. This article delves into the historical context, philosophical underpinnings, and impacts of various socio-religious reform movements on fostering communal harmony, particularly in the Indian subcontinent. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed significant socio-religious reform movements across different cultures and religions. In India, movements such as the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, self-respect movement, and the Aligarh Movement aimed to reform societal norms, religious practices, and education systems. The reform movements were not limited to Hinduism and Islam; they also encompassed efforts within Christianity, Sikhism, and other religions. The Christian missionaries, while introducing Western education and healthcare, also advocated for social reforms like the abolition of untouchability and the upliftment of marginalized communities. These movements promoted education and rational thinking, which helped dispel myths, superstitions, and prejudices that often fuelled communal tensions. By advocating for universal education, reformers ensured that people from different communities could interact and learn from each other, thus building mutual respect and understanding. The reform movements addressed social injustices and inequalities that were often at the root of communal conflicts. These movements contributed to creating a more just and equitable society by fighting against practices such as untouchability, sati, and child marriage, as well as promoting the rights and dignity of women and marginalised communities. Socio-religious reform movements have played a crucial role in promoting communal harmony by addressing social inequalities, promoting education and rational thinking, and fostering interfaith dialogue. The article underscores the need for sustained efforts to build on the legacy of these reform movements to ensure a just, equitable, and harmonious society.

Keywords: *Communal harmony, Movements, sati, child marriage, women rights, superstitions.*

Introduction

India, a land renowned for its rich cultural tapestry and diverse religious landscape, has a long history of socio-religious reform movements. These movements have played a pivotal role in shaping the nation's socio-cultural and religious ethos, fostering communal harmony and social progress. The intertwining of religion and society in India has been profound, making the role of reform movements crucial in addressing social injustices, eradicating outdated practices, and promoting unity among diverse communities. The socio-religious reform movements in India can be

traced back to the 19th century, a period marked by British colonial rule. The encounter with Western ideas and the critical examination of traditional practices spurred a wave of introspection and reform among Indian intellectuals and religious leaders. Reformers sought to align Indian society with the values of rationality, equality, and justice while preserving its unique cultural and religious identity. Among the most significant reform movements were the Brahma Samaj, the Arya Samaj, and the Aligarh Movement. Each of these movements, while distinct in its approach and objectives, contributed to the broader goals of social reform and communal harmony. The Brahma Samaj aimed to purify Hinduism and promote monotheism. Roy, often regarded as the father of the Indian Renaissance, was a fierce advocate for the abolition of sati (the practice of widow immolation), child marriage, and the promotion of women's education. His efforts laid the groundwork for a more progressive and inclusive society. The Arya Samaj sought to return to the teachings of the Vedas, advocating for social reform and the upliftment of marginalised communities. The movement opposed caste discrimination and emphasised universal education and women's rights, thus fostering a sense of equality and unity. The Aligarh Movement aimed at modernising the Muslim community through education and social reform. Khan's efforts in establishing the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which later became Aligarh Muslim University (1920), were instrumental in promoting a modern and liberal outlook among Indian Muslims. This movement encouraged communal harmony by advocating for a syncretic culture and cooperation between Hindus and Muslims. The socio-religious reform movements significantly contributed to communal harmony in India by challenging divisive practices and promoting values of tolerance and mutual respect. By addressing issues like caste discrimination, gender inequality, and religious orthodoxy, these movements fostered a more inclusive and egalitarian society. Education was a cornerstone of these reform movements. The reform movements were instrumental in abolishing practices that perpetuated social divisions. The efforts to eradicate sati, child marriage, and untouchability challenged the entrenched social hierarchies and promoted a more inclusive society. These reforms not only improved the status of women and marginalised communities but also fostered a sense of unity and solidarity. The legacy of socio-religious reform movements continues to influence contemporary India. The values of equality, justice, and communal harmony espoused by these movements remain relevant in addressing the challenges of modern Indian society. Initiatives that promote mutual understanding and respect can help mitigate communal tensions and build a more cohesive society.

Brahmo Samaj and Communal Harmony

Brahmo Samaj, founded in 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, is a socio-religious reform movement in India. It played a pivotal role in modernising Indian society and promoting communal harmony. Brahma Samaj's ideology emphasised monotheism, rejection of idolatry, and the integration of modern scientific thought with spiritual values. Its commitment to social reform, particularly in areas of education, women's rights, and the abolition of caste discrimination, significantly influenced Indian society's progress towards inclusivity and communal harmony. In India, the early 19th century was characterised by social and religious instability. Superstitious customs, gender discrimination, and the strict caste system ruled the day. Raja Ram Mohan Roy became apparent as a visionary reformer in this setting. The monotheistic beliefs of Islam, Christianity, and contemporary European philosophy had a profound impact on him. He was disillusioned with Hinduism's widespread worship and ritualism and set out to establish a new religion and social structure that emphasised reason, humanism, and fraternity among all people. From this vision came Brahma Samaj. Its original goal was to transform Hinduism from the inside out by promoting worship of a single, unchanging God and criticising idol worship.

But as time went on, its goals grew to include more extensive social reforms that complemented the ideas of justice, equality, and human dignity. The concept of monotheism the belief in a one, all-powerful, formless God is fundamental to Brahma Samaj theology. Brahma Samaj aimed to mend the rift between religions with this idea, which centres on a spiritual truth universal to all. Brahma Samaj promoted rationality and critical thinking. It promoted a faith based upon reason and moral behaviour, rejecting superstitions and rituals with no logical foundation. The movement was fiercely against social problems such as child marriage, the caste system, and Sati (the custom of burning widows alive). In addition to working to end untouchability, it promoted women's empowerment and educational opportunities. Brahma Samaj upheld the concept of universal brotherhood, emphasising that all individuals, regardless of their socioeconomic or religious background, are equal and worthy of respect and dignity. It is possible to examine Brahma Samaj's impact on societal cohesion by looking at its religious, social, and educational initiatives. Brahma Samaj gave people from all religious backgrounds a unified spiritual platform by promoting a monotheistic faith that went beyond

particular religious concepts. This promoted harmony and lessened tensions between the various religions. The initiative promoted communication between various religious groups. Brahmo Samaj leaders frequently interacted with Parsis, Muslims, and Christians, encouraging understanding and tolerance for one another. This interfaith discussion was essential to reducing religious prejudice and promoting harmony within the community. Brahmo Samaj founded several educational institutes accessible to all communities. These establishments were crucial in introducing the public to the principles of humanism, equality, and reason. By uniting students from various origins, these educational institutions created melting pots of religious and cultural variety that fostered social harmony in the community from an early age. The focus of Brahmo Samaj on morality and secular ideals instead of religious dogma struck a chord with Indian society as a whole. It influenced the formulation of India's secular constitution, which grants all citizens equal rights irrespective of their faith, as well as the nationalist movement. Its reforms and tenets laid the foundation for later Indian socio-religious organisations. Notable figures like Debendranath Tagore and Keshab Chandra Sen further increased its influence and reach. The contribution of Brahmo Samaj to the promotion of intercommunal harmony in India is evidence of the efficacy of social reform and enlightened thinking. Brahmo Samaj created a more inclusive and peaceful society by opposing the prevailing orthodoxies of the day and advocating for reason, humanism, and global brotherhood. Its legacy continues to motivate efforts to promote social justice and communal harmony in India and elsewhere. Through its innovative work, Brahmo Samaj showed that respecting the equality and dignity of all people, accepting diversity, and promoting discourse are the keys to real religious and social progress.

Arya Samaj and communal harmony

Swami Dayanand Saraswati established the Hindu reform movement Arya Samaj in 1875 with the goal of going back to the Vedic teachings. It has had a big impact on Indian society, helping to advance social justice, education, and harmony within the community in addition to religious reform. The Vedas, which are regarded as the only reliable source of knowledge and infallible, form the foundation of Arya Samaj ideology. Swami Dayanand Saraswati aimed to cleanse Hinduism by doing away with superstitions, caste prejudice, and idolatry with his writings, such as "Satyarth Prakash." Truth, non-violence, and universal brotherhood are among the ideals that Arya Samaj espouses as being essential to building communal peace. He launched a frontal attack on idolatry, caste systems, polytheism, meaningless rituals, and magic charms. Arya Samaj's emphasis on education is one of its major contributions to social harmony. Swami Dayanand held that social ills and intergroup strife stem from ignorance. Arya Samaj founded many educational establishments, including the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) institutes that offer both modern education and Vedic teachings. These institutions foster an atmosphere of tolerance and respect for one another by being open to everyone, regardless of caste, creed, or religion. Arya Samaj has been actively advocating for social reform and interfaith understanding. Swami Dayanand personally participated in conversations and arguments with religious leaders from various faiths, promoting a logical and moral approach to religion. Arya Samaj encourages tolerance among various religious communities and opposes forced or dishonest religious conversions. The goal of social reform is to create a more equal and peaceful society by doing away with gender discrimination, child marriage, and untouchability.

In the Indian independence movement, Arya Samaj was a key proponent of both Swadeshi (self-reliance) and Swaraj (self-rule). Its leaders, including Lala Lajpat Rai, were well-known participants in the liberation movement. Arya Samaj's inclusive nationalist fervour emphasised the oneness of all Indians, irrespective of regional or religious distinctions. The Arya Samaj prioritised national identity over sectarian differences, which aided in fostering a larger sense of communal peace. The Arya Samaj's impact on fostering intercommunal cooperation is still felt in contemporary India. Its social assistance programmes, educational facilities, and emphasis on reason and ethics are in line with modern secularism and inclusion ideals. Arya Samaj's approach to social justice and interfaith discourse is still applicable to addressing today's communal issues and building a stronger sense of community. Arya Samaj's tenets of global brotherhood and truth provide an enduring model for societal harmony in a varied and diverse society. Swami Dayanand Saraswati gave political slogans as India for Indians. Samaj produced eminent leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Lala Hansraj, and Pandit Guru Dutt.

The Aligarh Movement and communal harmony

The Aligarh Movement, initiated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in the late 19th century, was a crucial socio-political and educational reform movement in India. While primarily focused on the educational upliftment of Muslims,

the movement had significant implications for communal harmony in India. The movement is frequently discussed with regard to Indian nationalism and communal relations in general, with special emphasis on how it affects the unity of Hindus and Muslims. The Indian Rebellion of 1857, a pivotal moment in Indian history, gave rise to the Aligarh Movement. The Muslim community was especially vulnerable as a result of the rebellion's collapse and the British government's subsequent retaliation. They were seen as the main catalysts for the rebellion, which resulted in extensive suppression, property loss, and a sharp drop in their socioeconomic standing. After observing the rebellion's catastrophic effects, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan came to the conclusion that the Muslim community had to change with the times in order to live and prosper. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan responded by establishing Aligarh's Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875. This institution subsequently evolved into Aligarh Muslim University (AMU). The college, which combined Western scientific knowledge with Islamic beliefs, was designed with Muslims in mind. The college drew inspiration from British educational institutions. This programme was part of a larger cultural and intellectual movement that aspired to modernise Muslim society rather than just reforming education. The Aligarh Movement strongly advocated for modern education because it believed that illiteracy and a lack of modern skills were the main causes of the Muslim population's decline. Sir Syed aspired to empower Muslims to actively participate in British India's political and economic life by advancing education. But he did not confine his vision to the Muslim community; he supported educational reform in all Indian communities. The Aligarh Movement placed a strong focus on Western-style education, which was considered necessary for the advancement of all Indians, regardless of faith; this was one of its main features. This inclusive approach, by encouraging a sense of shared purpose and goals, has the ability to heal the division between various religious communities. However, the movement's emphasis on uplifting Muslims occasionally gave rise to accusations of communalism, especially from Hindu leaders who were concerned that the movement would sabotage national unity in order to develop a distinct Muslim identity.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan firmly supported the notion of intergroup peace and cohabitation. He maintained that Muslims and Hindus were "the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is India," and that cooperation between the two groups was necessary to secure the advancement of the nation. He continuously promoted harmony and understanding between India's two largest religious groups, highlighting the necessity of their collaboration for the nation's future. Sir Syed's various writings and speeches advocating for mutual respect and understanding between Muslims and Hindus demonstrate his attempts to foster communal harmony. He thought that the advancement of a unified India should not be impeded by religious divisions. A major grievance levelled against the Aligarh Movement was its purported endorsement of the British government, which certain Indian nationalists perceived as a betrayal of the fight against colonialism. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan believed that maintaining peace and security in the nation, as well as advancing Muslims, depended on collaboration with the British. In opposition to the rising nationalist movement in India, he maintained that Muslims should concentrate on social and educational reform rather than political agitation against the British. This alleged pro-British posture resulted in accusations that the Aligarh Movement was divisive and contributed to India's final partition. It was essential to the social and educational advancement of Muslims in India and contributed to the development of a contemporary and forward-thinking Muslim intelligentsia. Sir Syed did not support the marginalisation or exclusion of other communities, but his attempts to advance social change and education were motivated by a sincere desire to better the lot of Muslims in India. In reality, he believed that communal harmony played a crucial role in the country's growth, and he linked the advancement of the Muslim community to the advancement of all Indians. In India, the Aligarh Movement was a trailblazing endeavour in the fields of social and educational reform, especially for the Muslim population. Although its effects on interfaith harmony are complicated, it is evident that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan envisioned Hindus and Muslims living in concord and collaboration. He believed that an educated and cohesive populace was critical to India's development and that education was the solution to resolving intercommunal conflicts. The movement's emphasis on communication, cooperation, and education provides insightful lessons for building a more inclusive and harmonious society in which many communities can live in harmony and make meaningful contributions to the advancement of the country as a whole.

Self-respect movement and communal harmony

The Self-Respect Movement, initiated by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, popularly known as Periyar, in early 20th-century India, primarily focused on the eradication of caste discrimination and the promotion of social equality. Even though the movement's main goal was to elevate society's outcasts, especially the lower castes, it also made a big contribution to promoting harmony within communities. In the 1920s, both customary Hindu rituals and British

colonial power upheld the harsh caste system in Tamil Nadu, giving rise to the Self-Respect Movement. For its time, Periyar's vision was revolutionary; he aimed to establish a society in which every person could live with equality and dignity, regardless of gender, caste, or religion. Self-respect, rationalism, and rejection of religious dogma and Brahmin dominance were among the movement's guiding ideals. In the Self-Respect Movement, the struggle against discrimination based on caste was central. Periyar and his adherents waged a fierce struggle against the social hierarchy, which condemned some communities to lifelong servitude. In order to break down the social barriers that divided Indian society, the movement fought for the rights of Dalits and other underprivileged communities. His ideology was reflected in his weekly journal, *Kudi Arasu* (1910), in Madras. Since the goal of this activism was to bring people from all communities together under the banner of social justice, it was, by its very nature, inclusive.

A fundamental component of the Self-Respect Movement, rationality prompted people to critically analyse and query social and religious conventions. Periyar challenged the myths and dogmas that are common in many religious traditions with his rationalist approach, which went beyond caste. The movement encouraged critical thinking and a scientific temper, promoting mutual respect and understanding among many faith communities. This emphasis on reason as opposed to blind faith assisted in bridging the gaps between religiously divided populations. A crucial component of the Self-Respect Movement's plan to bring about social equality was education. Periyar thought that illiteracy and ignorance posed serious barriers to societal advancement. The movement created institutions of higher learning that offered an impartial, secular science education free of religious bias. The Self-Respect Movement promoted education for everyone, irrespective of caste or creed, contributing to an informed and enlightened public. People with higher levels of education were more likely to rise above group prejudices and strive for social harmony. The Self-Respect Movement also pioneered women's rights advocacy. Periyar ran a campaign opposing customs, including child marriage and the dowry system, and stressed the value of female equality. By advocating for women's education and involvement in public life, the movement questioned patriarchal conventions that frequently collided with religious beliefs. As a result, empowered women started acting as change agents in their communities, encouraging collaboration and respect between various social groups. The self-respect movement continues to influence Indian society, demonstrating its legacy. The movement's tenets of social justice, equality, and rationalism are still relevant today and are impacting initiatives to advance peace in communities. In India, the Self-Respect Movement was instrumental in fostering communal harmony because of its steadfast dedication to social equality, rationalism, and education. The movement brought about a more egalitarian and inclusive society by questioning repressive societal conventions and promoting marginalised population. Its legacy still serves as an inspiration for current initiatives to heal rifts in society and create a peaceful country where each person may live with dignity and respect for themselves.

Rama Krishna mission and communal harmony

The Ramakrishna Mission, founded by Swami Vivekananda in 1897, has played a significant role in promoting communal harmony in India. Rooted in the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, the mission's philosophy emphasizes the unity of all religions and the universal brotherhood of humanity. This foundational belief has been instrumental in shaping its approach towards fostering communal harmony. Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual experiences and teachings form the bedrock of the mission's philosophy. He emphasized that all religions lead to the same ultimate reality and that the essence of every religion is the same. This inclusive outlook is encapsulated in his famous saying, "Jato Mat Tato Path" (As many faiths, so many paths). His most famous disciple, Swami Vivekananda, disseminated these ideas, stressing the importance of harmony, acceptance, and tolerance across various religious groupings. The vast network of educational institutions that the Ramakrishna Mission maintains is one of the main ways that it fosters social harmony. Students from a variety of religious backgrounds can receive a top-notch education from schools and universities managed by the Mission. The curriculum frequently incorporates lessons on universal principles and moral education influenced by Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna's ideas, creating an atmosphere of respect and understanding among students. In addition, the mission provides healthcare services, disaster relief efforts, and rural development initiatives to all communities without discrimination. Through cooperative efforts, these programs not only meet the immediate needs of diverse populations, but they also foster understanding between various social and religious groups. The Ramakrishna Mission regularly participates in spiritual talks and interfaith interaction. The mission fosters mutual understanding and collaboration by arranging conferences, talks, and debates that unite adherents of various faiths. By highlighting religious similarities and fostering a sense of shared spiritual heritage, these

discussions frequently dispel preconceptions and prejudices. People of many faiths join in the yearly festivities of Sri Ramakrishna, Holy Mother Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda's birthdays, which furthers the message of harmony and fraternity. The Mission, which frequently emphasises themes of harmony and unity, has made significant contributions to Indian literature and culture. Books, journals, and magazines published by the Ramakrishna Mission spread the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, emphasising the value of social harmony and the unification of all religions. These literary masterpieces have a broad readership and significantly influence how people view tolerance and acceptance in society. During periods of communal tension and conflict, the Ramakrishna Mission has been instrumental in fostering peace and resolving disputes. To bring about harmony again, the monks and volunteers of The Mission actively participate in peace marches, community discussions, and mediation initiatives. Their impartial and well-respected status frequently aids in mending divisions and promoting harmony. The Ramakrishna Mission's profound spiritual philosophy, which recognises the divinity in every being and values all religious paths, is the foundation of its attempts to foster social harmony. The mission remains a force for unity and hope in a varied and frequently divided society via social assistance, education, interfaith discussion, cultural contributions, and active peace building initiatives. Its work shows that a world that is inclusive and harmonious may be achieved through spirituality and service that is based on a deep respect for all religions. He advocated for the peaceful coexistence of Hindus and Muslims, and he believed the merger of two religions was the holy hope for India.

Conclusion

The socio-religious reform movements in India- Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Aligarh Movement, Ramakrishna Mission, and the Self-Respect Movement- played crucial roles in shaping modern Indian society. These movements sought to address social injustices, eradicate superstitions, and promote rational thinking and moral values, thereby laying the groundwork for communal harmony. Brahma Samaj aimed to purify Hinduism by eliminating practices like sati and idol worship. Its emphasis on monotheism and universal brotherhood fostered a sense of unity among diverse religious communities. The movement's advocacy for social reform, including women's rights and education, created a more inclusive society. Arya Samaj focused on returning to the Vedas and eliminating caste distinctions. Its principles of equality and social justice played an important role in reducing social divisions. The movement's support for widow remarriage and opposition to child marriage also helped integrate marginalised groups into mainstream society. The Aligarh Movement aimed at modernising the Muslim community through education and social reforms. By promoting scientific education and rational thought, it sought to bridge the gap between Muslims and other communities. The movement's advocacy for Hindu-Muslim unity was pivotal in fostering communal harmony during the British colonial era. The Ramakrishna Mission emphasised the universal aspects of all religions, advocating for mutual respect and understanding. Its humanitarian activities, including education, healthcare, and disaster relief, transcended religious boundaries and contributed to social cohesion. Vivekananda's message of unity and his appeal to the youth to rise above sectarian divides resonated deeply across the nation. The Self-Respect Movement challenged the caste hierarchy and Brahminical dominance in South India. Its call for equality and social justice resonated with the oppressed sections of society, fostering a sense of unity among them. By promoting rationalism and self-respect, the movement worked towards creating a society free from caste-based discrimination. In conclusion, these socio-religious reform movements were instrumental in promoting communal harmony in India. By addressing social injustices, advocating for education, and promoting values of equality and brotherhood, they helped bridge religious and social divides. Their legacy continues to inspire efforts towards building a more inclusive and harmonious society in contemporary India.

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