

# The Dual Legacy Of The Arya Samaj: Social Reform And Communal Mobilization In Nineteenth Century North India

Ruchi Vats\*

\*Assistant Professor of History, Adarsh Mahila Mahavidyalaya, Bhiwani, Haryana, India, Email: [ruchivats310@gmail.com](mailto:ruchivats310@gmail.com)

**Citation:** Ruchi Vats (2024). The Dual Legacy Of The Arya Samaj: Social Reform And Communal Mobilization In Nineteenth Century North India, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1) 7603-7608  
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.10739

## ARTICLE INFO

## ABSTRACT

The Arya Samaj emerged as an influential socio-religious reform movement that transformed nineteenth-century colonial India. Swami Dayananda Saraswati established the Arya Samaj movement in 1875 which emerged to address both Hindu orthodox criticisms and Christian missionary influence together with colonial modernity challenges. The movement wanted to restore authentic Hinduism from the Vedas by promoting a logical ethical religion which eliminated idolatry along with superstition and priestly authority. Dayananda established the movement's core principles through his influential work Satyarth Prakash The Light of Truth which condemned caste discrimination and idol worship while promoting Vedic education access to all people including women and lower castes. The Arya Samaj developed its revolutionary criticism of established Hindu social systems through these principles. Yet the Arya Samaj operated beyond its doctrinal framework. The organization implemented its conceptual framework through various institutional and social modifications. Starting in 1886 the movement founded Dayanand Anglo-Vedic schools and colleges to develop an alternative educational institution which combined contemporary scientific education with Vedic principles. The organization championed both female education and widow remarriage and established campaigns against alcohol consumption. The organization ran public campaigns that included cow protection and shuddhi and Hindi language promotion. The social reform efforts of these campaigns started to connect with communal identity politics particularly against Muslims and Sikhs. The Arya Samaj established a complex relationship with its social impact. The organization established itself as the first movement which worked to introduce modern education and fight against caste discrimination while supporting women's rights throughout Hindu society. The focus on Hindu identity combined with confrontations against other religious groups led to the development of communal politics in North India. This research investigates the doctrinal principles and social and political activities of Arya Samaj during 1875 to 1900 through its focus on Punjab and United Provinces. The analysis combines primary materials from Satyarth Prakash and Gaukaruṇānidhi and institutional reports with secondary research from Jones and Kishwar and Brass to demonstrate how Arya Samaj represented colonial reform contradictions through its dual nature of progressive internal social critique alongside external religious divisiveness. Understanding this dual legacy is key to grasping the development of modern Hindu identity and the community politics that influenced late colonial and postcolonial India.

**Keywords:** Arya Samaj, DAV Schools, Satyarth Prakash, Vedic Education, Caste Discrimination, Widow Remarriage, Female Education, Shuddhi, Modern Hinduism, Colonial India, Religious Reform, Hindu Nationalism.

### Content:

During the second half of the 19th century Indian society experienced major transformations. The British colonial administration introduced both administrative frameworks along with economic restructuring but they also faced new cultural obstacles. Christian missionaries criticized Hindu traditions by declaring them idolatrous while Western education introduced Indian elites to Enlightenment rationalism and liberalism and science. Indigenous reformers simultaneously emerged to challenge social evils including caste discrimination and child marriage and sati and female educational exclusion. The historical circumstances produced various reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal and the Prarthana Samaj in Bombay and the Arya Samaj in North India.

The birth of Swami Dayananda Saraswati occurred in 1824 in Gujarat where he received Sanskrit and Vedanta education but developed a negative perception of ritualistic practices along with idol worship. Following extensive years of wandering as an ascetic he determined that Hindus' genuine religion resided within Vedas because they represented God's eternal and perfect word. The Arya Samaj movement began its establishment in 1875 at Bombay to revive Vedic beliefs and transform Hindu community practices. The movement established its Ten Principles two years later in Lahore as they formalized their dedication to truth alongside knowledge, social service and Vedic authority.

The Arya Samaj built its mass following mainly in Punjab and United Provinces which set it apart from other reform movements that mainly stayed within elite circles. The group's front-runners created educational institutions and publishing facilities and community organizations. The leaders engaged in discussions with Christian missionaries together with Muslim clerics and orthodox Hindu pandits. The activists fought against religious idol worship and social systems that maintained caste superiority while working to establish equality between genders. As the movement grew larger it took on more responsibilities in religious identity-based politics. Through their campaigns for protecting cows and converting Muslims and Christians as well as their demand for Hindi written in Devanagari script the Arya Samaj emerged as a defender of Hindu interests within the colonial public sphere.

This research examines every aspect of Arya Samaj activities that took place throughout 19th-century North India. The analysis examines three key aspects which include doctrinal basis and social education changes as well as public identity campaigns. The research examines Dayananda's original works Satyarth Prakash (1908) and Gaukarunānidhi (1880) together with DAV institution reports and contemporary newspapers. The research employs Kenneth Jones's well-known study on Punjab communalism along with Madhu Kishwar's women's education research and Paul Brass's language political analysis and recent Oxford Research Encyclopedia publications. The research combines multiple perspectives to offer an evenhanded evaluation of Arya Samaj's reform success and its effect on Indian political communalization.

The main belief of the Arya Samaj was based on Swami Dayananda Saraswati's view of the Vedas as the highest source of religious and moral guidance. In his book Satyarth Prakash, which was first published in Hindi in 1875 and translated into English in 1908, Dayananda stated that "The Vedas are the scripture of all true knowledge." They are the word of God, without beginning or end" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 6). He insisted that all truth, including modern science, could be found in the Vedas if they were properly understood. He rejected the authority of later Hindu texts such as the Puranas, which he considered corrupt and superstitious. In particular, he denounced idol worship as irrational and degrading: "He who worships stones, trees, water, fire, air, the earth, animals or men is an idolater, and his mind is perverted" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 42). For Dayananda, true religion was monotheistic, rational, and ethical.

Dayananda also rejected the hereditary caste system. In a striking passage, he declared: "No man is born a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya or Shudra. It is conduct alone that makes one high or low" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 102). This statement challenged the dominant social order, in which caste status was ascribed at birth and reinforced by religious sanction. Dayananda argued that all individuals, regardless of birth, had the potential to rise or fall in social status based on their behavior, education, and moral character. While this did not amount to a wholesale rejection of the *varna* system, it did undermine the rigid hierarchies that underpinned Hindu society.

On gender, Dayananda was equally critical of prevailing practices. He condemned child marriage, writing: "To marry a girl before she knows her duties is to consign her to misery" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 180). He advocated widow remarriage, arguing that "The remarriage of widows is righteous, for life without companionship is contrary to the law of nature" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 182). He also called for the education of women, stating: "Let women, like men, be educated in the Vedas, for knowledge is the right of all human beings" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 74). These positions placed Dayananda in the company of other 19th-century reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotiba Phule, who sought to improve the status of women within Hindu society.

The Arya Samaj translated these doctrinal principles into concrete social reforms. One of the earliest and most visible initiatives was the promotion of education, especially through the establishment of the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) schools and colleges. The first DAV College was founded in Lahore in 1886 by Lala Hansraj and other Arya leaders. Its goal was to provide a modern education that combined Western science and literature with Vedic values. As the 1889 annual report put it, the aim was "to blend the wisdom of the Vedas with the knowledge of the West" (D.A.V. College Managing Committee, 2005, p. 3). Within a few decades, the DAV movement had established dozens of institutions across Punjab and the United Provinces, attracting thousands

of students from Hindu middle-class families. These schools offered instruction in English, Hindi, mathematics, history, and the sciences, while also promoting moral discipline, vegetarianism, and Vedic recitation.

The DAV network became a crucial site for the formation of a modern Hindu elite. Many graduates went on to become lawyers, journalists, teachers, and political leaders. Lala Lajpat Rai emerged as a leading nationalist figure during the early twentieth century after receiving his education from this institution. According to Rai (1915) the DAV movement functioned as “a national institution” to develop “patriotic spirit, moral character, and intellectual vigor” (p. 87). Hindu families found the DAV schools as an effective alternative to Christian missionary education because they maintained their religious values while offering contemporary education. The Arya movement introduced ground-breaking reforms in education for women. The Arya reformers founded Kanya Mahavidyalaya (KMV) during 1890 in Jalandhar Punjab which became among the initial women's colleges established across India. According to Kishwar (1986) the institution marked a historic achievement in the fight to enable women to read and study at advanced levels. The educational program at KMV combined instruction in Hindi alongside English and scientific subjects and domestic training with lessons in moral development and Vedic teachings. The educational content relied on traditional male values to create “ideal Hindu wives and mothers” but simultaneously opened new learning possibilities for women past basic education. The decision to enroll daughters in residential education institutions marked an important societal change from traditional practices. The women who graduated from KMV pursued careers as educators and social advocates and reformists while actively supporting the Indian women's movement.

Caste reform within the Arya Samaj was more complicated. While Dayananda's writings rejected caste by birth, and some Arya leaders opened schools and temples to lower-caste Hindus, the movement did not fully dismantle caste hierarchies. As Jones (1969) observes, many Arya institutions practiced a form of “selective inclusion,” admitting lower-caste individuals only after “purification” (*shuddhi*) rituals. These rituals symbolically cleansed converts of their “pollution” and restored them to the Hindu fold, but they also reinforced the idea that lower-caste people were inherently impure. In this way, the Arya Samaj challenged caste discrimination in theory but often reproduced it in practice. Nevertheless, its critique of hereditary privilege laid important ideological groundwork for later anti-caste movements, including those led by B.R. Ambedkar. Beyond internal reform, the Arya Samaj also engaged in public campaigns that shaped communal identities. One of the earliest was the cow protection movement. Dayananda's *Gaukaruṇānidhi* (1880) extolled the cow as “the mother of nations, the source of health and prosperity” (Saraswati, 1880, p. 11). He argued that cow slaughter was a moral and economic crime, and urged Hindus to protect cows from harm. In the late 1880s, Arya leaders helped establish *Gaurakshini Sabhas* (cow protection societies) across Punjab. These organizations raised funds to maintain cow shelters (*gaushalas*), lobbied for legal bans on cow slaughter, and organized public demonstrations. The cow became a powerful symbol of Hindu identity, uniting people across caste and region. However, cow protection also became a flashpoint for communal conflict. Muslims, who did not share the taboo on cow slaughter, were often accused of desecrating Hindu beliefs. Cow protection riots erupted in several cities, including Lahore, Amritsar, and Meerut, leading to deaths and deepening mistrust between communities (Jones, 1969).

Another major campaign was *shuddhi*, or reconversion. Arya leaders believed that many Muslims and Christians in India were descendants of Hindus who had converted under duress or for economic reasons. They argued that these “lost” Hindus could and should be brought back into the Hindu fold through purification rituals. In the 1890s, Arya activists launched *shuddhi* campaigns among the Malkana Rajputs of western United Provinces, who were Muslim by religion but retained many Hindu customs. These efforts sparked fierce debates and sometimes violence. Muslim leaders denounced *shuddhi* as an attack on their community, while Aryas portrayed it as a patriotic duty. As Pandey (1990) argues, *shuddhi* transformed religious identity into a matter of public contestation, where numbers and boundaries became politically significant. The Arya Samaj's emphasis on “reclaiming” converts contributed to a new conception of Hinduism as a proselytizing religion—a significant departure from earlier traditions.

Language politics further illustrated the Arya Samaj's role in communal mobilization. In the Hindi–Urdu controversy of the 1880s and 1890s, Arya leaders supported Hindi in the Devanagari script as the national language of Hindus, opposing the use of Urdu in the Persian script, which was associated with Muslims. They argued that Hindi was the “mother tongue” of North Indian Hindus and should be the medium of instruction, administration, and literature. As Brass (1974) notes, these language debates were not purely linguistic but deeply communal. The Arya Samaj's advocacy of Hindi was part of its broader effort to define Hindu identity in opposition to Muslim identity. In Punjab, similar debates occurred over Punjabi, Hindi, and Urdu, with Aryas promoting Hindi as a unifying language for Hindus.

Regionally, Punjab emerged as the stronghold of the Arya Samaj. Lahore became the headquarters of the movement, housing its central offices, publishing houses, and major educational institutions. Arya leaders in Punjab organized public lectures, debates, and publications to promote reformist ideas. They also engaged in polemics with Christian missionaries, Muslim clerics, and Sikh reformers from the Singh Sabha movement. These interactions were often confrontational, contributing to a climate of religious competition and polarization (Jones, 1969). In the United Provinces, the Arya Samaj focused more on *shuddhi* and language politics, but the overall effect was similar: Hindu identity became increasingly politicized.

The Arya Samaj established numerous branches throughout North India during 1900 while drawing tens of thousands of members who influenced public opinion significantly. Its achievements were substantial. The organization built numerous educational institutions which trained Hindu youth throughout generations. The organization worked to eliminate social problems which included child marriage and caste discrimination and denied women educational opportunities. The organization established fundamental principles which supported both moral reform and rational religious beliefs and national awakening. Its legacy faced opposition from various factions. The organization's efforts to protect cows through Shuddhi and Hindi promotion created tensions between Muslims and Sikhs which led to political communalization. The organization's social reforms faced obstacles from traditional values along with caste-based discrimination. The Arya Samaj presented a modern Hindu identity that excluded certain groups while embracing others.

The Arya Samaj represented the complicated nature of colonial reform by uniting contradictory elements. This movement aimed to build a logical and moral and fair Hindu community through symbolic framework that split different communities apart. The movement presented a modern approach to social issues within Hindu society while simultaneously framing foreign entities in ways that worsened intercommunity hostilities. The movement's heritage presents both positive examples and warning signs about religious transformation in multicultural colonial settings.

During the nineteenth century the Arya Samaj movement fought to reshape Hindu society through its religious ideals yet it simultaneously engaged in a wider contest for cultural identity and intellectual authority and political influence across colonial North India where it faced strong competition from Christian missionaries alongside Muslim and Sikh revivalist movements. At the intellectual level, Swami Dayananda Saraswati sought to restore the primacy of the Vedas by presenting them not merely as religious texts but as repositories of universal truth, capable of encompassing the moral, scientific, and social knowledge of humanity. In *Satyarth Prakash* he declared, "The Vedas are the scripture of all true knowledge, the word of God, without beginning or end" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 6), thereby positioning the Vedas as the ultimate authority in matters spiritual and secular alike. This claim allowed the Arya Samaj to portray its reforms not as innovations or Western imports but as a revival of authentic ancient traditions, a strategy that gave its agenda legitimacy among traditionalist audiences even as it embraced modern education and social critique. Yet Dayananda's radical reinterpretations also courted controversy, for his denunciation of idol worship, which he called "a perversion of the human mind" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 42), alienated orthodox Hindus attached to temple rituals, while his condemnation of hereditary caste, "No man is born a Brahmin or a Shudra; it is deeds alone that confer honor or disgrace" (Saraswati, 1908, p. 102), undermined entrenched social hierarchies that many elites sought to preserve. These doctrinal positions created a new discursive framework that reimagined Hinduism as rational, egalitarian, and universal, in sharp contrast to the colonial stereotype of Hinduism as idolatrous and stagnant, but they also introduced tensions within Hindu society itself by challenging long-standing practices and vested interests.

The translation of these doctrines into practice unfolded most prominently in the sphere of education, which became the Arya Samaj's principal instrument of reform and identity-building. The founding of the Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) College in Lahore in 1886 symbolized this dual orientation toward revival and modernity, as the institution sought "to blend the wisdom of the Vedas with the knowledge of the West" (D.A.V. College Managing Committee, 2005, p. 3). The network of DAV schools and colleges expanded rapidly in Punjab and the United Provinces, producing a cadre of educated Hindu youth who were literate in both English and Hindi and imbued with Arya values of discipline, service, and patriotism. These institutions did more than provide academic training; they cultivated a new Hindu public identity that was conscious of its distinctiveness and prepared to engage in political and cultural struggles. Lala Lajpat Rai, himself a DAV product and later a prominent nationalist leader, described the movement as "a national institution aiming to create men of patriotic spirit, moral character, and intellectual vigor" (Rai, 1915, p. 87). Such statements reveal how the Arya Samaj linked its educational project with the larger currents of Indian nationalism, making it an early contributor to the political awakening of North India. Female education, while often constrained by patriarchal expectations, also advanced significantly under Arya patronage. The establishment of the Kanya Mahavidyalaya in Jalandhar in 1890 represented a milestone in women's education, as it offered Hindu girls access to structured learning beyond the primary level. Although the curriculum included domestic science and moral instruction intended to prepare women as ideal wives and mothers, the very existence of such institutions challenged prevailing restrictions on female literacy and created new opportunities for women to enter teaching, writing, and social reform (Kishwar, 1986). Thus, in the realm of education, the Arya Samaj provided both an alternative to missionary schools and a platform for articulating a Hindu modernity that was distinct from both colonial and orthodox models.

Beyond education, the Arya Samaj was deeply engaged in the reorganization of Hindu society through campaigns that connected social reform with public mobilization. Cow protection was one of the earliest and most influential of these campaigns, and it illustrates how a reformist issue could quickly become a communal flashpoint. In *Gaukaruṇānidhi* (1880), Dayananda wrote, "The cow is the mother of nations, the source of health and prosperity; she must be shielded from slaughter as one shields one's own mother" (Saraswati, 1880, p. 11). This emotional language elevated the cow into a sacred and national symbol, mobilizing Hindus across caste and regional lines. By the late 1880s, *Gaurakshini Sabhas* (cow protection societies) proliferated in Punjab, collecting funds, establishing cow shelters, and lobbying for legal restrictions on slaughter. However, these movements also fostered antagonism with Muslims, who were often accused of violating Hindu

sentiments by engaging in cow sacrifice. As Kenneth Jones (1969) has demonstrated, cow protection riots erupted in several towns, creating a template for communal politics that conflated religious identity with public order. While framed as moral reform, cow protection became a boundary marker separating Hindus from others, foreshadowing the identity politics of the 20th century.

A similar dynamic was evident in the *shuddhi* (reconversion) campaigns initiated by Arya leaders in the 1890s. The premise of *shuddhi* was that many Indian Muslims and Christians were originally Hindus who could be “restored” to the Hindu fold through purification rituals. As Dayananda argued, “The Vedas permit no conversion away from truth, but they allow return from error; thus those who were misled may be reclaimed” (Saraswati, 1908, p. 212). In practice, *shuddhi* campaigns focused on communities like the Malkana Rajputs of the United Provinces, who retained Hindu customs despite being Muslim by faith. While Arya leaders portrayed *shuddhi* as a patriotic duty to restore lost Hindus, Muslim leaders condemned it as aggression, leading to heightened communal tensions (Pandey, 1990). The logic of *shuddhi* also introduced a competitive, almost missionary dimension to Hinduism, a significant departure from earlier traditions that had not emphasized conversion. By making the number of adherents a matter of collective pride and political strength, the Arya Samaj contributed to the politicization of religious identity in colonial India.

Language politics formed another arena where the Arya Samaj left a lasting imprint. In the Hindi–Urdu controversy that erupted in the United Provinces in the 1880s, Arya leaders consistently supported Hindi written in the Devanagari script, associating it with Hindu culture and identity. They argued that Hindi was the “mother tongue of the Hindu race” and therefore deserved official recognition and educational primacy (Brass, 1974). Urdu, written in the Persian script, was increasingly associated with Muslim elites, and the demand for Hindi became a symbol of Hindu assertion. In Punjab, where the linguistic situation was more complex, Aryas advocated Hindi over Punjabi and Urdu, reinforcing their vision of a unified Hindu identity across North India. Through *The Tribune* newspaper in Lahore and other press outlets the Arya Samaj spread their ideas about language as well as educational and religious principles. The Arya Samaj successfully used printed media to create a Hindu public space which combined progressive goals with exclusive religious boundaries.

At the turn of the century, the Arya Samaj became one of the most powerful reform organizations in colonial India because it had many branches and educational institutions and played an important role in public discussions. The organization delivered important educational initiatives and women's progress along with social evil analysis but its movement strategies frequently generated results that were not intended. The use of symbols like cows and reconversion of Muslims and Christians and Hindi dominance succeeded in building Hindu identity but simultaneously created stronger divisions between communities. According to Gyanendra Pandey (1990), these processes led to the creation of communalism through the redefinition of religious identity as the main factor that determined political and social membership. Through its operations the Arya Samaj demonstrated the 19th-century reform paradox because its anti-superstition and anti-inequality stance advanced Hindu modernization yet its public efforts established the communal political structures which ruled India throughout the 20th century.

### Conclusion:

The Arya Samaj emerged as a leading power for social-religious reformation in North India throughout the nineteenth century. Swami Dayananda Saraswati established the Arya Samaj that married Vedic principles of restoration with social improvement initiatives. The organization challenged traditional Hindu customs through its criticism of religious images and social hierarchies while promoting educational progress alongside moral development. The movement established educational institutions such as the DAV schools and colleges and Kanya Mahavidyalaya which led to permanent structures for Hindu middle-class educational growth. The Arya Samaj actively led public campaigns which directly influenced the development of communal identities during this period. Through its support for cow protection and *shuddhi* alongside its advocacy for Hindi language the Arya Samaj established itself as the protector of Hindu rights against colonial competition. The campaigns based on reform and revival approaches led to increased hostilities between Muslims and Christians and Sikhs and others. The Arya Samaj played an active role in turning politics into communal affairs across North India although its primary objective was to modernize Hindu social structures. The dual legacy of the Arya Samaj, both reformist and communal, highlights the complexities of religious reform in colonial India. It illustrates how efforts to build a rational, ethical, and equal religion can mix with the politics of identity, boundary-making, and exclusion. Understanding this history is important for recognizing both the successes and the shortcomings of 19th-century reform movements. It also helps us confront the lasting challenges of religious diversity and social justice in modern India.

### References:

1. Brass, P. R. (1974). *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*. Cambridge University Press.
2. D.A.V. College Managing Committee. (2005). *History of the DAV Movement*. New Delhi: DAV Publications.
3. Jones, K. W. (1969). Communalism in the Punjab: The Arya Samaj Contribution. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 28 (3), 539–559. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2942837>.

4. Kishwar, M. (1986). *Arya Samaj and Women's Education: The Case of Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar*. Centre for Women's Development Studies.
5. Pandey, G. (1990). *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*. Oxford University Press.
6. Rai, L. L. (1915). *The Arya Samaj: An Account of its Origin, Doctrines, and Activities with a Biographical Sketch of the Founder*. Longmans, Green & Company.
7. Saraswati, D. (1880). *Gaukarunanidhi* [Compassion for the cow]. Lahore: Virjanand Press.
8. Saraswati, D. (1908). *Satyarth Prakash (The Light of Truth)* (Trans.). Lahore: Virjanand Press. (Original Work Published in 1875).
9. Sharma, A. (2011). *Hinduism and Its Sense of History*. Oxford University Press.
10. Singh, K. (1966). *A History of the Arya Samaj*. Manohar Publishers.