

## Reform Movements in Punjab and their Impact

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### **Abstract**

*Punjab, a land of five, has been a region of cultural diversity. Due to frequent invasions, this area saw a various religious, cultural, and social intermingling. The British annexation of Punjab indicated a crucial moment in its history, resulting in substantial political, social, economic, cultural, and administrative changes in the region. The socio-religious movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries emerged as a reaction to the various reforms implemented by colonial authorities and the widespread prejudice present in society and religion. It marked a significant period in Punjab's history, indicating a vital transformation in the region's social, cultural, and educational evolution.*

**Keywords-** *Punjab, Religious, Social, Namdhari, Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, Singh Sabha, Dev Samaj, Ahmadiyya movement*

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The Punjab, the land of five rivers encompasses the land west of the Sutlej to the Indus River, and from the Himalayan foothills south to the confluence of the Panjnad and Indus Rivers.<sup>1</sup> Since ancient times Punjab has been a land of diverse culture. Various religious, cultural and social practices were prevalent in this area due to constant invasion from time to time. The emergence of Sikhism in the 15th century, spearheaded by Guru Nanak, championed fundamental principles such as equality, social justice, and opposition to caste discrimination. Nevertheless, the formation of the Sikh Empire in the 18th century, followed by its deterioration post-Ranjit Singh's demise in 1839, ushered Punjab into a phase of political turmoil. The British annexation of Punjab marked a turning point in its history, leading to significant political, social, economic, cultural, and administrative transformations in the province. The socio religious reform movements in Punjab were a response to the numerous changes that were introduced by the colonial rulers and prevalent discrimination in the society and religion.

The Socio-Religious Movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries represented a pivotal era in Punjab's history, signifying a crucial turning point in the region's social, cultural, and educational development. Three kinds of reasons are mainly invoked to explain the emergence of socio-religious reform movements precisely from the early nineteenth century. First was a new colonial education, promoted through the state and Christian missionaries that altered and modernized traditional social perceptions. The second was the origin of new religious movements that revived and consolidated older humanitarian impulses and third was the sudden availability of a pool of human greatness, eager to save the weak and the helpless.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth Jones in his book *The New Cambridge History of India, Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* elucidates that the term 'socio' implies an attempt to reorder society in the areas of social behavior, custom, structure or control. A movement may have sought to reshape any one of these components or a combination of them. All socio-religious movements demanded social and cultural changes.<sup>3</sup> The term 'religious' refers to the type of authority used to legitimize a given ideology and its accompanying program. This authority was based on scriptures that were no longer considered to be properly observed, on a reinterpretation of doctrines, or on scriptural sources arising from the codification of a new religious leader's message.<sup>4</sup> The term movement<sup>5</sup> refers to an aggregate of individuals united by the message of a charismatic leader or the ideology derived from that message.<sup>5</sup> In short, a socio-religious reform movement advocated modification in social behavior, justified such advocacy by one or another form of religious authority and then built an organizational structure it maintained over time.<sup>6</sup> The uneven development of a colonial milieu and the persistence of indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent produced two distinct types of movement within the period of British rule, the one 'transitional' and the other 'acculturative'. Transitional movements had their origins in the pre-colonial world and arose from indigenous forms of socio-religious dissent, with little or no influence from the colonial milieu, either because it was not yet established or because it had failed to affect the individuals involved in a particular movement. The clearest determinant of a transitional movement was an absence of anglicized individuals among its leaders and a lack of concern with adjusting its concepts and programmes to the colonial world. The second of the two types of socio-religious movement, termed 'acculturative', originated within the colonial milieu and was led by individuals

who were products of cultural interaction. The founder of such a movement may or may not have been drawn into the world of British culture, but his followers and those who moved into positions of leadership were largely English-educated South Asians influenced by the specific culture of England.<sup>7</sup>

### **Evolution of Socio- Religious Movement**

Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, who challenged the conventional yard-sticks of religion and society of his times by welding the spiritual and the temporal planes of human existence' into a harmonious whole.<sup>8</sup> It was in keeping with the ideological direction provided by the first Guru that later Gurus took up the new pattern of response to the social, moral and political problems faced by the Indian society. They consolidated, enlarged and systematized that which was laid down by the first Guru. It was in pursuance of Guru Nanak's mission that the tenth Guru Gobind Singh performed the epitomic act of the creation of the Khalsa at Anandpur Sahib, in 1699, on the Vaisakhi day.<sup>9</sup> The creation of Khalsa by the tenth Guru in 1699 was the turning point both for the Sikhs and Punjab. The egalitarian principle introduced by the Guru was intended to be a complete break with the earlier religious tradition which sanctified caste. The doors of the Khalsa brotherhood were thrown open to all, irrespective of the distinctions of caste or class. Complete equality was practiced in the ranks of the Khalsa.<sup>10</sup> Guru's egalitarian message, grounded in the sanctity that all human beings are essentially equal, aroused the conscience of the people against untouchability and caste prejudice which had been so deeply rooted in the Indian society. It instilled new confidence and hope among the so-called lower orders of the society who had been degraded, dispossessed and deprived of equal rights for centuries. It also set stage for later reform movements both in religious and social fields.

### **The Bhakti and Sufi Movements**

The Bhakti and Sufi movements were significant socio-religious movements in medieval India, both emphasizing devotion and spiritual experience. And laid emphasis on equality, religious tolerance and addressing various inequalities that were prevalent.

During 19<sup>th</sup> century period, Indian societal life was founded on idolatry, the caste system, and religious intolerance. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who initiated a campaign against religious and social injustices, characterized the socio-religious conditions of that era. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was born in 1772 in the village of Radha Nagar, located in the Hooghly District of Bengal, belonged to an orthodox Brahmin family. Raja Ram Mohan Roy opposed idol worship and traditional Hindu practices and trivial ceremonies and rituals. He resolutely opposed all forms of social intolerance, conservatism, and superstition. The movement was established in Bengal in August 1828, which was subsequently renamed Brahmo Samaj (The Society of God). it rapidly disseminated to numerous significant towns across the country. It was predominantly an anti-idol worship acculturative movement. The first branch of The Brahmo Samaj in Punjab was established in 1861 by Pandit Nobin Chandra Roy, at Lahore with the aim to promote monotheism, social equality, and rationalism. Later on, many Bengalis and Punjabi Hindus joined this association and its branches were opened in Amritsar, Rawalpindi and Quetta.

The Nirankari movement was founded by Dayal Das in Peshawar. He asserted that God is formless, or Nirankar, which is the etymological root of the term Nirankari. He underscored the importance of meditation. The movement further expanded under the leadership of Darbar Singh (1855–70) and Ratta Ji (1870–1909). The Nirankaris, recognized the authority of a living guru and consider Dayal Das and his successors as gurus. Their members differentiate themselves from other Sikhs through their contempt for the militant brotherhood of the Khalsa. The principal contribution of the Nirankari movement is the codification of rituals pertaining to birth, marriage, and death, based on Sikh scriptures. Its support base is primarily composed of urban trading communities. The organization headquarters is based in Chandigarh.<sup>11</sup>

Another social and religious movement in Punjab was Namdhari, also known as Kuka movement. The Namdhari movement was established by Balak Singh (1797–1862), who rejected all religious rituals other than the recitation of God's name (or naam), which is why adherents of the group are referred to as Namdhari. His successor, Ram Singh, in 1857, formally inaugurated the Namdhari movement with a set of rituals modelled after Guru Gobind Singh's founding of the Khalsa. Ram Singh used a recitation of gurbani (hymns from the Granth Sahib), ardas (the Sikh prayer), a flag, and baptism for entry into the new community. Each of the baptized Sikhs was required to wear the five symbols with the exception of the kirpan (sword) no longer allowed by the British government. Instead of the sword, Ram Singh required them to keep a lathi (a bamboo staff). In addition, the Namdharis wore white clothes with a white turban and carried a rosary to further set them apart from all others.<sup>12</sup> The Namdharis were told to abstain from 'drinking, stealing, adultery, falsehood, slandering, back-biting and cheating'.<sup>13</sup> The Namdharis granted women a degree of equality. They too were initiated through baptism, allowed to remarry when widowed; dowries were rejected, and child marriage forbidden.<sup>14</sup> Under Ram Singh's leadership, the Namdhari sought a revival of Sikh governance in Punjab. In January 1872, British police captured and executed approximately 65 Namdharis by cannon. Ram Singh was banished to Rangoon, Burma.

Dayanand Saraswati established the Arya Samaj in 1875 in Bombay with ten principles. The Punjab Arya Samaj was established in 1877 in Lahore. which had become the urban intellectual hub of Punjab. The Arya

Samaj was established to spread the teachings of Dayanand and to implement reforms in both religious and social domains. Swami Dayananda proclaimed the motto 'Back to the Vedas. In their reform efforts, they fought for the abolition of superfluous ceremonies and rituals, streamlined essential rites by eliminating the customary requirement for priests, championed female emancipation, they endeavored to modify or adjust local customs and festivals to align with Arya Samaj principles. New ceremonies were reportedly introduced in accordance with the Vedic pattern. Arya Samaj focused significantly on social activities in Punjab to reconstruct and transform society based on its fundamental principles.

The Singh Sabha Movement, which emerged in the 1870s, significantly contributed to the advancement of social change in Punjab. The movement's focus on Sikh identity, education, and social equality facilitated the questioning of conventional societal norms and customs, fostering a more contemporary and progressive perspective. The primary objectives were the revitalization of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the creation of holy literature in Punjabi, and an initiative to combat illiteracy. Following the British takeover of the Khalsa Raj, in 1849, Christian missionaries intensified their process of conversion in Punjab. Dalip Singh, Sikh monarch was converted to Christianity in 1853, followed shortly by Harnam Singh, a Sikh aristocracy from Kapurthala. Christian missionary endeavors were promptly recognized as a menace to indigenous religious customs. They systematically developed their branches in other places across Punjab during the 1860s. the Singh Sabha initiated their own programs which covered educational institutions, charitable hospital in Amritsar, and a Dharamshala in Shimla. A weekly newspaper, along with Gurmat Parkash, a monthly magazine in Rawalpindi, were published. The educational initiatives of both Singh Sabha Lahore and Amritsar garnered significant notice. The Singh Sabha encouraged Sikh women's active participation in their religious, social structure and educational structure. In 1892, a Sikh Kanya Pathshala was established at Ferozepur for this purpose. Istri Satsang Sabha were formed by the female members of the Ferozepur and Taran-Taran Singh Sabha.

In 1869, Punjabi Muslims, motivated by a desire to preserve their legacy, established the inaugural Anjuman-i-Islamia, an organization aimed for enhancing the religious, educational, and social circumstances within the Muslim community, in Lahore.

The Dev Samaj movement was established by Shiv Narayan Agnihotri in 1887 in Lahore. The objective of this movement was to transform Hindu society. This movement advocated for the progressive reforms to eradicate the social injustices within Hindu society and modification of Punjabi society. The doctrines of the Dev Samaj movement were codified in the book "Deva Shashtra."<sup>15</sup> The adherents of this movement believed in the immortality of the soul, the preeminence of the Guru, and achieving the Supreme Being by virtuous activities. The Dev Samaj demanded that its members abandon all caste restraints; they were expected to practice intercaste dining and intercaste marriage. Pandit Agnihotri also wished to restructure the role of women. He attempted to eliminate child marriage by setting the age of marriage at twenty for boys and sixteen for girls. Agnihotri discouraged excessive dowries, the seclusion of women, and their traditional mourning rites. He taught that widow marriage was acceptable and married a widow himself after the death of his first wife. The Dev Samaj encouraged the education of women and opened a coeducational school in Moga (Ferozepore district) on 29 October 1899.<sup>16</sup>

The Gurdwara reform movement, or Akali Movement, was an extensive campaign by Sikhs aimed at liberating their shrines, or Gurdwaras, from the priests (mahants) who claimed property rights over them. The Gurudwara Reform Movement significantly influenced Punjab society by initiating a campaign to liberate the Gurudwaras from corrupt Mahants and transfer their control to a representative Sikh body. Under the increasing pressure from Nationalist and Gurudwara activists, the Gurudwaras were placed under the authority of an elected committee known as the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee in November 1920.

In 1889, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad established the Ahmadiyya movement. The movement originated in Qadian, Punjab, and garnered popularity in the area, especially among Muslims disillusioned with conventional Islamic customs.<sup>17</sup> Ahmadiyya missionaries disseminated the movement's doctrines across Punjab, establishing a robust presence in the province. The movement underscored the significance of non-violence and harmonious cohabitation, while advocating for social reform, especially in education and women's rights. A significant number of Muslims in Punjab embraced the Ahmadiyya movement, perceived as a more contemporary and reasonable interpretation of Islam. Nonetheless, the movement encountered resistance from orthodox Muslims, who see it as a challenge to conventional Islamic traditions.<sup>18</sup>

All the reform and religious movements in Punjab were dynamic and interconnected with the aim to purify the religious practices and to counter external influences. The reform movements in Punjab reveals a spectrum of strategies and approaches. On the other hand, the Namdharis linked religious reform with social and political activity, and the Nirankaris concentrated on spiritual purity within the Sikhism spiritual tradition. The Singh Sabha focused on the holistic revival of Sikh identity through education and literature and spiritual Sikh tradition. The Akali movement immediately addressed the problem of Gurdwara management, The Arya Samaj aimed to transform Hinduism through Vedic principles, while the Brahmo Samaj championed monotheism and extensive social reform. The Ahmadiyya movement intended for Islamic renewal, but it caused theological dispute. The Akali movement achieved Gurdwara reform and helped to political mobilization; the Arya Samaj had a huge impact on Hindu society and education in Punjab; and the Namdhari movement sparked early anti-British

emotions and supported social reforms. However, the movements had limitations. The Singh Sabha had to face internal conflicts, whereas the Ahmadiyya movement faced resentment from traditional Muslims, The Brahmo Samaj's influence in Punjab was less as compared to Bengal. Movements such as Chetramias and Dev Samaj had a more localized impact.

#### Impact Of Socio-Religious Movements

The socio religious movements in Punjab significantly contributed towards awakening the people against the injustice both in the social and religious sphere and had a profound and lasting impact on Punjab and the various communities.

**Religious Revival and Standardization:** These movements led to a more awareness among various communities in Punjab like the Singh Sabha emphasized the Sikh beliefs, The primary objectives were the revitalization of the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, the creation of holy literature in Punjabi, and an initiative to combat illiteracy. Namdhari Sikhs emphasize their identification as members of the Khalsa, although they diverge from the mainstream Sikh community by equally valuing both the Adi Granth, the sacred scripture of Sikhism, and the Dasam Granth, a compilation by the followers of Guru Gobind Singh. The Namdhari community operates its own gurdwaras and adheres to a strict vegetarian diet. They do not intermarry beyond their sect and incorporate fire in their matrimonial ceremonies. The Dev Samaj conducted regular services that included hymns, a sermon, and readings from the Deva Shashtra. Murti puja (idol worship) was integrated with these other forms of worship. The Ahmadiyya movement advocated for a reformist perspective on Islam, endorsing a more rational and contemporary understanding of Islamic doctrines. The Arya Samaj was established to disseminate the teachings of Dayanand and to implement reforms in both religious and social domains. In their reform efforts, they fought for the abolition of superfluous ceremonies and rituals, they endeavored to modify or adjust local customs and festivals to align with Arya Samaj principles. New ceremonies were reportedly introduced in accordance with the Vedic pattern. These movements fostered a stronger sense of collective identity, pride in heritage, and a distinct cultural and religious consciousness.

They promoted the idea of equality, rejected castism. At the same time these movements helped to revive and strengthen religious identities The Khalsa Movement's emphasis on religious discipline and equality set the stage for the Singh Sabha's focus on Sikh unity and religious purity. The Arya Samaj, while a Hindu reform movement, contributed to the strengthening of religious identity across communities in Punjab by advocating for the return to original scriptural teachings.

**Social Transformation:** Arya Samaj, Singh Sabha, Namdhari movements contributed significantly to social reforms, including the upliftment of lower castes, the promotion of women's education and rights, and the challenging of discriminatory customs. The emphasis on simple marriage ceremonies (Anand Karaj) and the discouragement of dowry. These movements advocated for the abandonment of antiquated norms and traditions. encouraged widow remarriage, and opposed child marriage and the purdah system.

**Educational, Linguistic and Literary Development:** The Singh Sabha movement played a key role in promoting the Punjabi language and Gurmukhi script, leading to a flourishing of Punjabi literature and journalism. The leaders of the Singh Sabha Movement recognized that the education of both genders is an indicator of a progressive society. In 1892, a Sikh Kanya Pathshala was established at Ferozepur for this purpose. To promote Punjabi language, schools were opened to provide instruction in the Punjabi language to kids. The establishment of numerous educational institutions played a crucial role in modernizing the people of different communities and fostering intellectual growth within the community. Similarly, the Arya Samaj opened Gurukuls and D.A.V schools and colleges in Punjab. which became a nurturing ground for Punjabi Hindu intellectuals in subsequent years.

**Political Consciousness and Nationalism:** As colonialism grew stronger, socio-religious movements in Punjab became closely tied to the broader national movement for Indian independence. These movements played a key role in promoting nationalist sentiment, as they advocated for social reforms and the restoration of indigenous culture and religious practices. The ideological underpinnings of these movements later helped to fuel political movements against British rule. The struggle for Gurdwara reform in the Akali Movement directly contributed to the political awakening of the Sikh community and their engagement in the broader Indian nationalist

#### CONCLUSION:

The social-religious reform movement in Punjab constituted a continuous and interconnected process of reform and resurrection rather than being viewed as discrete events in the historical narrative of Punjab. The aim of these reform movements was to transform religious practices: challenging ritualism, idolatry, and the hereditary governance of Gurdwaras by Mahants, as well as responding to external influences such as the proselytizing efforts of Christian missionaries. The elevation of societal concerns such as caste discrimination, untouchability, female infanticide, child marriage, and the oppression of women. Educational institutions were established for the development and enhancement of their respective communities, while considering their language and reinforcing

their identity. These movements, in their effort to reform society, also fostered a sense of nationalism in Punjab, resulting in the emergence of several notable nationalist leaders from the province during that time.

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