



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

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Volume 3; Issue 1; 2025; Page No. 160-165

Received: 02-10-2024
Accepted: 13-11-2024

Arya Samaj and the Struggle Against Child Marriage: Social Reform, Legal Advocacy, and Women's Rights in Colonial India

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17053255>

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Abstract

In colonial India, the fight against child marriage was closely linked to larger campaigns for women's rights, social reform, and legal change. The Arya Samaj, which was established by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875, was one of the several groups that led reformist agendas. It was significant in influencing public opinion and promoting legislative action. The Arya Samaj, which was founded on a reinterpretation of Vedic ideas, vehemently opposed long-standing social customs like child marriage because they believed that they were incompatible with the moral and spiritual underpinnings of Hinduism. This study examines the Arya Samaj's persistent attempts to stop child marriage from 1875 to 1947, with particular attention to how it responded to the Age of Consent Acts of 1891 and 1929.

Keywords: Arya Samaj, Child Marriage, Social Reform, Women's Rights, Colonial India, Age of Consent Act 1891, Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, Religious Reform Movements, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Gender Justice

Introduction

Historical Context: Child Marriage in Colonial India

Child marriage was one of the most pervasive social practices in nineteenth-century India. Deeply embedded in patriarchal norms and justified through misinterpreted religious traditions, the practice often condemned young girls to a life of early widowhood, physical suffering, and social marginalization. Within Hindu society, particularly in conservative circles, child marriage was defended as a safeguard for chastity and family honor, but in reality, it perpetuated cycles of gender-based inequality and denied women the opportunity to pursue education, autonomy, and social participation.

Colonial administrators and Christian missionaries frequently criticized child marriage, portraying it as evidence of India's "backwardness." However, early British intervention was cautious, since colonial governance depended on not alienating powerful orthodox communities. This tension created a complex terrain where indigenous reform movements, rather than the colonial state, often took

the lead in addressing social issues. Among such movements, the Arya Samaj stood out for its vigorous campaign against child marriage, rooted in both scriptural reinterpretation and social activism.

Emergence of the Arya Samaj and Its Reformist Philosophy

The Arya Samaj, founded in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, was a reformist Hindu movement dedicated to returning to the "pure" teachings of the Vedas. Rejecting idolatry, caste hierarchy, and ritualism, Dayananda emphasized rationality, equality, and moral discipline. One of his central tenets was that many social evils—such as child marriage, untouchability, and sati—were not sanctioned by the Vedas but rather were later corruptions introduced into Hindu society.

The Arya Samaj's philosophy thus provided a religious and intellectual foundation for challenging child marriage. Unlike some reformers who argued for women's upliftment on humanitarian or Western liberal grounds, Arya Samaj

leaders claimed that the Vedas themselves promoted marriage at a mature age, women's education, and gender dignity. This enabled the movement to speak with moral authority within Hindu communities while resisting the charge of adopting "foreign" or "colonial" values.

Child Marriage as a Site of Social and Legal Contestation

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed intense debates around child marriage in both Indian and colonial spheres. The Age of Consent Act of 1891, which raised the age of consent for girls from ten to twelve years, sparked controversy across the subcontinent. Orthodox Hindu leaders denounced the Act as interference in religious customs, while reformers—including many Arya Samajists—welcomed it as a step toward women's protection.

Arya Samaj's Strategies Against Child Marriage

The Arya Samaj's struggle against child marriage can be understood through three interrelated strategies:

1. **Religious Reinterpretation:** Leaders used Vedic exegesis to argue that early marriage was not a part of authentic Hindu tradition.
2. **Institutional Reform:** The Samaj established schools, particularly for girls, promoting education as a means of delaying marriage.
3. **Public Advocacy and Legal Support:** Through pamphlets, debates, and political alliances, the Arya Samaj lent its support to legal reforms such as the Age of Consent Acts.

These strategies reveal the movement's dual approach: working within Hindu religious frameworks to persuade its followers, while also engaging with colonial legislation to secure structural reforms.

By addressing these questions, this paper situates the Arya Samaj not merely as a cultural reform movement but as a critical agent in the legal transformation of women's status during colonial rule.

Aims and Objectives

The present study seeks to explore the Arya Samaj's multifaceted struggle against the practice of child marriage in colonial India, with particular attention to its role in shaping public opinion and influencing legal reforms such as the Age of Consent Acts of 1891 and 1929. The research builds on the recognition that social reform movements in India were not merely derivative of Western liberal ideas but were deeply rooted in indigenous intellectual and religious traditions. By grounding their campaign in the authority of the Vedas, Arya Samaj leaders offered a culturally resonant critique of child marriage that was both reformist and authentically Indian.

Objectives

1. To examine the ideological foundation of the Arya Samaj's opposition to child marriage.
2. To assess the Arya Samaj's institutional interventions against child marriage.
3. To evaluate the Arya Samaj's role in shaping public debates around the Age of Consent Acts (1891 and 1929).

4. To analyze the interplay between religious reform and colonial law.
5. To situate the Arya Samaj's struggle within the broader context of women's rights in colonial India.

Review of Literature

The historiography of child marriage reform and the role of the Arya Samaj is vast and multidisciplinary, spanning social history, women's studies, religious reform, and legal studies. This review synthesizes the major scholarly contributions and identifies the gaps this research intends to address.

1. Colonial Critiques of Child Marriage: Early colonial administrators and missionaries frequently condemned child marriage as evidence of India's "social decay." Writers such as James Mill in his *History of British India* and Christian missionary accounts highlighted the practice as oppressive, backward, and morally reprehensible. These critiques were often infused with orientalist stereotypes that sought to justify colonial rule as a "civilizing mission."

The British were reluctant to intervene too deeply in Hindu personal law, fearing backlash from conservative elites. Consequently, while they condemned child marriage rhetorically, legislative reforms came only after decades of lobbying by Indian reformers.

2. Indian Social Reform Movements

The late nineteenth century witnessed the rise of reform movements across India that sought to address social practices like sati, child marriage, and widowhood. Scholars such as Sumit Sarkar and Kenneth Jones have highlighted the role of organizations like the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, and Arya Samaj in redefining religious practice.

The Arya Samaj is particularly noted for its aggressive reformist zeal. Unlike the more moderate Brahmo Samaj, which operated primarily among Western-educated elites in Bengal, the Arya Samaj had a broad base in Punjab and the United Provinces. Its use of Vedic authority allowed it to challenge orthodoxy from within, making it more persuasive to ordinary Hindus.

3. Women's Rights and Gender Reform

Historians such as Geraldine Forbes (*Women in Modern India*), Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (*Recasting Women*), and Padma Anagol have examined how debates around child marriage were part of a larger discourse on women's status. The suffering of child widows, the denial of education, and the high rates of maternal mortality were all linked to early marriage. Reformers argued that raising the marriage age would allow women to pursue education, exercise agency, and contribute to national progress.

Arya Samaj leaders like Pandita Ramabai, Lala Lajpat Rai, and others actively engaged with these debates, situating women's rights within a framework of national regeneration. This scholarship underscores that child marriage reform was not just about morality but also about building a modern nation.

4. Legislative Interventions: Age of Consent Acts

The Age of Consent Act of 1891 has been studied extensively as a landmark in colonial legislation. Historians

such as Anupama Rao and Radha Kumar argue that the Act was less about protecting women and more about asserting colonial authority over Indian society. The orthodox backlash-most famously led by Bal Gangadhar Tilak-framed the law as an attack on Hindu dharma, while reformers welcomed it as overdue.

The Arya Samaj, in contrast to orthodox Hindu leaders, openly supported the Act, arguing from the Vedas that marriage should occur only after puberty. This positioned the Samaj as a bridge between colonial law and Indian tradition.

5. Arya Samaj in Historiography

The Arya Samaj has been the subject of numerous studies. Kenneth Jones's *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th-Century Punjab* emphasizes its role in shaping Hindu identity. Yogendra Malik and others highlight its contribution to social reform, particularly education and women's upliftment.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a historical-analytical research design. Since the subject of inquiry is rooted in the socio-religious reform movements of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century India, the research is qualitative in nature. The focus is not only on reconstructing historical events but also on interpreting their meanings and implications in the context of women's rights, colonial law, and indigenous reform movements.

The design combines

- **Historical Analysis:** Examining primary and secondary sources to trace the evolution of Arya Samaj's opposition to child marriage.
- **Textual Analysis:** Close reading of Vedic reinterpretations, speeches, and reformist writings to understand the ideological basis of the campaign.

This triangulation ensures that the research does not remain confined to a single dimension (religious or legal) but brings together the cultural, social, and political aspects of reform.

Nature and Type of Data

The research relies on qualitative data drawn from both primary and secondary sources:

Primary Sources

- Texts written by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, including *Satyarth Prakash*.
- Pamphlets, speeches, and writings of Arya Samaj leaders such as Lala Lajpat Rai, Pandit Guru Datt Vidyarthi, and others.
- Debates and proceedings of the Indian Legislative Council on the Age of Consent Bills (1891, 1929).
- Reports of Arya Samaj institutions, including Arya schools and women's associations.

Secondary Sources

- Scholarly works on Arya Samaj, child marriage, and women's reform (Forbes, Sangari, Sarkar, Jones, Kumar).

- Histories of Indian social reform and colonial law.
- Feminist analyses of child marriage and gender reform in colonial India.

Sampling and Scope

The scope of this study covers the period from 1875 (founding of Arya Samaj) to 1947 (Indian independence). Within this period, the focus is on two legislative landmarks:

1. The Age of Consent Act (1891) – raising the age of consent for girls to 12 years.
2. The Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929, Sarda Act) – setting minimum marriage ages at 14 for girls and 18 for boys.

The research does not attempt to document every instance of Arya Samaj's reform activity but instead samples key interventions, speeches, institutions, and debates that reveal its ideological and practical contributions.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework integrates:

- **Religious Reform Analysis:** How the Arya Samaj used Vedic reinterpretation to delegitimize child marriage.
- **Social Movement Theory:** Understanding Arya Samaj as a reformist movement mobilizing communities, institutions, and print culture.
- **Legal History Analysis:** Tracing the relationship between Arya Samaj advocacy and legislative change in colonial India.
- **Gender Studies Lens:** Evaluating the reforms in terms of their impact on women's agency, rights, and lived experiences.

This multi-layered approach allows the study to transcend a one-dimensional narrative and situates Arya Samaj's campaign within the broader interaction of religion, society, and law.

Results and Interpretation

The results of this research are presented under thematic categories that highlight Arya Samaj's contributions to the struggle against child marriage.

Ideological Foundations: Vedic Reinterpretation and Moral Authority

The Arya Samaj's central argument against child marriage was rooted in its claim that the Vedas prescribed marriage only after the attainment of physical maturity. Swami Dayananda Saraswati, in *Satyarth Prakash*, insisted that premature marriage harmed both physical health and spiritual growth, and therefore could not have divine sanction.

Interpretation: This religious reinterpretation was significant because it shifted the debate from foreign liberal-humanitarian terms to indigenous spiritual authority. It enabled the Arya Samaj to counter accusations that reforms were "Western imports."

Educational reform as a strategy against child marriage

The Arya Samaj established a network of Dayanand Anglo

Vedic (DAV) schools and women's institutions that promoted female literacy. Girls educated in Arya schools were often married later than their uneducated peers, reflecting a deliberate social strategy to delay marriage through education.

Interpretation: Education became both a tool of empowerment and a practical way of resisting child marriage. By linking women's education to national regeneration, Arya Samaj fostered a cultural climate where delaying marriage was increasingly viewed as desirable.

Public Advocacy and Print Culture

The Arya Samaj actively used newspapers, pamphlets, and public debates to spread awareness. Journals like *The Arya Gazette* carried editorials criticizing the social and health consequences of child marriage. Leaders like Lala Lajpat Rai wrote extensively in favor of raising the marriage age.

Interpretation: Print culture gave the Arya Samaj a powerful medium to mobilize public opinion across provinces. It was through such media campaigns that reformist arguments reached both policymakers and ordinary citizens.

Support for the Age of Consent Act, 1891

When the colonial government introduced the Age of Consent Bill in 1891, it met fierce resistance from orthodox Hindu leaders, who denounced it as interference in religious custom. In contrast, the Arya Samaj openly supported the Act, providing scriptural arguments to show that raising the age of consent was in line with Vedic teaching.

Interpretation: Arya Samaj's support was crucial in legitimizing the Act among Hindu constituencies. By framing the law as not alien but consistent with Hindu tradition, the Samaj bridged the gap between reform and religion.

Contribution to the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929

The campaign for the Child Marriage Restraint Act was a prolonged struggle that involved women's organizations, nationalist leaders, and reformist groups. Arya Samaj institutions and leaders were vocal in their advocacy. Their schools and women's associations campaigned for delayed marriage, while Arya newspapers supported the bill.

Interpretation: The Arya Samaj's contribution here lay in its institutional support and grassroots mobilization, which created a favorable climate for legislative reform.

Broader Impact on Women's Rights and Social Transformation

The Arya Samaj's struggle against child marriage was not an isolated campaign. It was linked to its broader agenda of women's upliftment-including widow remarriage, education, and participation in public life. By normalizing the idea that girls could marry later, study longer, and exercise agency, the Arya Samaj contributed to the slow but steady transformation of gender roles in Indian society.

Interpretation: The campaign against child marriage thus

served as a gateway reform, opening space for further debates on women's dignity, rights, and social participation.

Discussion and Conclusion

1. Reassessing the Arya Samaj's Role in Social Reform

The struggle against child marriage in colonial India cannot be fully understood without recognizing the pioneering role played by the Arya Samaj. Unlike other reformist groups that limited their activism to urban elites, the Arya Samaj worked actively among middle-class and semi-rural Hindu communities in Punjab and the United Provinces. Its insistence that the Vedas condemned child marriage gave reformers moral authority in the face of conservative backlash.

2. Religion as a Resource for Reform

One of the most significant findings is the way in which religion itself became a tool of reform. Arya Samaj leaders did not reject Hinduism but sought to purify it through rational and scriptural reinterpretation. Their arguments against child marriage emphasized that:

- The Vedas prescribed marriage only after physical and intellectual maturity.
- Early marriage led to ill health, premature widowhood, and moral decline.
- Hindu society could not regenerate or modernize without protecting its women.

This approach ensured that reforms were perceived as authentic, indigenous, and spiritually sanctioned. It also distinguished the Arya Samaj from Western missionaries and even from reformers like the Brahmo Samaj, whose rejection of traditional scriptures alienated many Hindus.

3. Bridging the Gap Between Social Reform and Law

The Arya Samaj's struggle reveals a complex interplay between social reform movements and colonial legislation. On one hand, the colonial state sought to present itself as a modernizing power, willing to intervene in "native customs" that violated human rights. On the other hand, it was cautious not to provoke large-scale religious resistance.

Here, the Arya Samaj played a mediating role

- By supporting the Age of Consent Act (1891), it gave colonial legislation legitimacy within Hindu communities.
- By mobilizing opinion for the Sarda Act (1929), it reinforced the demand for legislative action.

Thus, colonial laws were neither imposed unilaterally nor accepted passively; rather, they were shaped in a dialogue between reformist movements and the state.

4. Comparison with Other Reform Movements

While the Arya Samaj was not the only group to campaign against child marriage, its methods and reach were distinctive:

- **Brahmo Samaj:** Advocated reforms but focused largely on Western-educated elites in Bengal. Their rejection of Hindu scriptures made their message less acceptable to the wider Hindu population.
- **Prarthana Samaj:** Promoted social reforms in western

India but lacked the mass organizational strength of Arya Samaj.

- **Women's Organizations:** Groups like the All India Women's Conference played a major role in the 1920s. Yet, they often worked in alliance with reformist religious movements like the Arya Samaj to extend their impact.

5. Child Marriage Reform as Part of a Larger Agenda

It is important to view Arya Samaj's struggle against child marriage not in isolation but as part of a broader vision of social regeneration and nation-building. The movement simultaneously advocated:

- **Widow Remarriage:** Challenging oppressive traditions that condemned women to lifelong suffering.
- **Women's Education:** Establishing institutions that empowered women to delay marriage and participate in public life.
- **Gender Equality in Religion:** Arguing that the Vedas upheld women's dignity and agency.

These contradictions reveal the limits of reform movements operating within patriarchal structures. Nevertheless, they do not negate the significant advances made by Arya Samaj in legitimizing women's rights.

7. Legacy of Arya Samaj's Struggle

The legacy of Arya Samaj's campaign against child marriage extends beyond the colonial period. It influenced:

- **Indian Feminism:** By creating space for women's education and delayed marriage, it laid foundations for women's activism in the nationalist era.
- **Post-Independence Legal Reform:** The Hindu Marriage Act (1955) and later amendments raising the age of marriage for women reflected the trajectory set by earlier reformist struggles.
- **Cultural Discourse:** Arya Samaj's reinterpretation of scriptures demonstrated that religious tradition could be a source of progress rather than resistance.

Thus, the movement's contributions remain integral to the history of gender justice in modern India.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the Arya Samaj played a pivotal role in the struggle against child marriage in colonial India. By combining Vedic reinterpretation, institutional reform, and legislative advocacy, it challenged one of the most oppressive practices faced by women.

Its support for the Age of Consent Act (1891) and Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) illustrates how indigenous reform movements collaborated with colonial legislation to produce meaningful, if gradual, social change. The Arya Samaj's strategies reveal that religion was not merely a barrier but also a resource for reform, capable of mobilizing communities in favor of women's rights.

While limitations remained in terms of reach, enforcement, and gendered frameworks, the Arya Samaj's struggle significantly advanced the cause of women's upliftment. It not only redefined Hindu society's approach to child marriage but also contributed to the legal transformation of women's status in India.

In essence, the Arya Samaj's campaign against child marriage exemplifies how religious reform movements, working in dialogue with colonial law, could become powerful engines of social transformation. Its legacy continues to inform debates on gender, tradition, and reform in India today.

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