

SOCIAL REFORMERS, CASTE AND CONVERSION

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Abstract:

In this paper, the attempt is to demonstrate how central the question of caste and conversion is in the agenda of national-level social reformers and their movements. A number of different threads feed into the negative mindset on the question of conversion. Many reformers, liberal humanists, modernists and nationalists acknowledge the fact that caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability are the root cause for the conversion. Yet they have not explored how this problem actually played out in recent Indian history. What follows is a review of the major schools of arguments on the issue of conversion. We have focused particularly on the arguments of the Social Reformers. It is popularly believed that these three schools of thought constitute, and in fact cover, the principal discussion on the issue of conversion. In subsequent paper we hope to show that there is a critical lacuna in this body of work. . Therefore, the paper begins with an analysis of how the major social reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and Vivekananda treated the question of conversion and caste. The discussion of these figures also covers the role of two organizations that have been influential and whose voice has been authoritative in the mainstream understanding of the conversion question: the Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj.

Keywords: Reformers, colonial, caste, conversion, religion, untouchability, media and nation.

Mainstream discussion in India, both popular and academic has tended to portray religious conversions as negative, as culturally alienating and as a political practice of disintegration promoted by the colonial project. There has been little genuine interest in the experience of the converts themselves on the part of Indian scholars of any school. No school of historians, not even those concerned with history from below, have treated conversions to Islamic and Christian religions as social reform initiatives, let alone as important moments in the opening up the field of specifically Indian forms and histories of modernity. Yet one could argue that seen from below, conversion was indeed such an initiative.

The Social Reformers:

It would be a mistake to read the late twentieth century revival of attacks on missionary activity and on conversion and the recent uproar around it, simply as examples of the new Hindu fundamentalist extremism. These concerns can be traced back to the early years of the nineteenth century Social Reform movement. We need to understand that the question of conversion is a complex phenomenon carrying in it anxieties with diverse histories and

deep roots. The question of caste is central to those anxieties. What might be regarded, from the Dalit point of view, as negative propaganda about conversion, came in waves over the last two centuries, and from different proto-nationalist and nationalist groups, each wave embodying a particular kind of political interest.

1. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833) and the Brahmo Samaj

We know that Raja Ram Mohan Roy, writing in the early nineteenth century was among the first to express his opposition to the activities of Christian missionaries (M.V. Nadkrni, 227). He is the founder of the Brahmo Samaj (1828) and the designated patriarch of the Bengal renaissance. Yet recent scholarship that is more alert to the caste issue has a somewhat different story to tell of this reformist thinker. Going into the entire existing scholarship on Ram Mohan Roy will take me away from the focus of my argument. I therefore present two counterposed readings of this massive figure.

Duncan B. Forrester says that Ram Mohan Roy's interests in the controversy with missionaries over conversion were mainly theological and philosophical. Thus, he shared fully in the efforts of the missionaries to seek certain reforms—for example, the abolition of *sati*, or the introduction of English education. Forrester argues that Roy also differed from the orthodox Hindus of the day in believing that religious truth and sacred writings should be equally accessible to all regardless of caste. Although “Roy does not seem to regard caste as a major social evil and there is no evidence that he ever took part in any movement against it (Duncan B. Forrester, 156).” Furthermore, Roy's position on the question of caste has other dimensions that are of interest for the discussion here. According to Forrester Roy “believed that caste discouraged the development of genuine patriotic feeling and made it difficult for Hindus to take advantage of the new occupational opportunities, which were...opening up before them (Duncan B. Forrester, 157).” He suggests that Roy perhaps did not pay much attention to caste because, first, he believed that the missionaries exaggerated the caste issue. Second, Roy thought that caste was not as evil as other social evils such as *sati*. However, I would argue that it is also very apparent that Roy's agenda of reform was limited to the Hindu upper castes, and even there to the reform of their family life. Further, that he wanted to reform them better to prepare them to receive the opportunities coming up out of colonial industrialization and modernity. No aspect of his reform initiative was directed at the annihilation of caste.

He resolutely believed that the restoration of a true spirituality of Hinduism and the elimination of the more glaring evils such as *sati* were far more pressing and important than that the question of caste, which, he believed, had been artificially inflated in importance by missionary propaganda. In contrast Braj Ranjan Mani, a Dalit Bahujan scholar writing in the 2000s, observes that Roy inherited the ideology of the *bhadralok*, which valorizes “Brahmanic values, selective modernity, and pro-British and anti-Muslim orientation, (which) were all present in embryonic form in the intellectual make-up of the ‘Father of Modern India (Braja Ranjan Mani, 200).” Mani further points out that Ram Mohan Roy was a ‘Raja’ and a ‘Rai Bahadur’ as well as the one-time dewan of the East India Company. The much celebrated rationalism and the spirit of inquiry that we find in the writings of Roy and other reformers of the time, were not only “generated by the

paradigmatic thoughts effected by their exposure to Western education,” but they had also inherited a brahmanical world-view (Braj Ranjan Mani,200).

Mani makes it a point to argue that the concept of the ancient India envisioned by Roy was rooted in a utopian brahmanical order which supposedly created and nurtured a great civilization. Roy was helped in his imaginative recreation of such a past by his own training in the Oriental scholarship. Mani points out that in Roy’s framework, the India of the past was an ideal society in which men followed the ‘doctrines of true religion’, and enjoyed freedom under a just and competent government (Braj Ranjan Mani,201). Roy and his reformist friends had no problems with the brahmanical ideology, which for centuries upheld and perpetuated the worst kind of discriminatory practices against Dalits and women on religious grounds.

Mani points out that Roy, in his debate with Christian enthusiasts, had made his position clear by insisting that what he was defending was “the genuine Brahmanical religion, taught by the Vedas, as interpreted by the inspired Manu, not the popular system or worship adopted by the multitude and Roy’s avowed aim was to purge the ancient and ‘sacred’ brahmanical tradition of modern-day corruption”(Braj Ranjan Mani,206). Mani says that Roy and his followers now and then attacked degenerate caste practices as ‘undemocratic’, ‘inhuman’ and ‘anti-national’ but, at the same time, argued that the original caste system was a wonderful institution based on division of labor. He argues that Roy was, certainly, the pioneer who showed how to adopt and adjust brahminical ideas and institutions to a changing situation without breaking the *sanatani* structure. Sati is all but a non-issue in the twenty first century, but the brahminization of Indian modernity of which Ram Mohan Roy laid the foundation stone, is today a complex and continuing process. Mani explains that, in sum, a close look at Roy’s ideas makes it clear that Brahminism in its fundamental form was a glorious ideology for him. So the issue for the Brahmo Samaj was not to annihilate Brahmanism but to fully and firmly reinstate its norms and values for the “advancement” of society. Mani cites Roy’s own words: “The ground which I took in all my controversies was not that of opposition to Brahmanism but to the perversion of it (Braj Ranjan Mani,206).”

It is therefore not surprising to find that Roy never supported anything that challenged brahminical scriptural authority. For every step that he took, he cited the authority and approval of the shastras. In addition, Roy’s attempts at religious reform had no impact on the ground. Mani argues that the ineffectiveness of Roy’s much-admired ‘religious radicalism’ is laid bare by the prominent right-wing historian, R.C. Majumdar:

... The illuminated gates of two thousand Durga Puja pandals in Calcutta whose loudspeakers and Dhak or trumpets proclaim in deafening noise, year after year, the failure of Ram Mohan to make the slightest impression from his point of view on 99.9 per cent of the vast Hindu Samaj either in the 19th or 20th century(Braj Ranjan Mani,209).

Mani further argues that elitist history textbooks greatly exaggerate Roy’s role in the making of modern India. What is problematic about such books is that they do not offer us an objective evaluation of Roy and his *bhadralok* movement. Instead,

...there is a hagiographical tendency to lionize him [Roy] as ‘the morning star of modern India’, ‘the inaugurator of a moral revolution’, ‘prophet of a new age’, the Renaissance figure who brilliantly led the emergent middle classes in the early nineteenth century. He is even hailed as the ‘father’ of modern India (but the historians who decorate him with such superlative adjectives do not elaborate who exactly his ‘children’ are). The crucial questions of what social groups comprised the new middle classes, and what their aspirations and motives were in spearheading the reform movements are conveniently pushed aside(Braj Ranjan Mani,208).

Also overlooked is the contribution of the Brahmo Samaj in actually providing the proforma for consolidating the caste authority of these middle classes.

2. Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83): Valorization of the Aryan Race and Vedic Culture

Discussion of the nineteenth century religious reform would be incomplete without assessing the essential role of Dayananda Saraswati and the revivalist movement that he spearheaded in the north of India through the Arya Samaj which he founded in 1875. Braj Ranjan Mani points out that Dayananda’s ideology was similar to that of the early reformers of Bengal and elsewhere. Moreover, Dayananda constructed a more fundamental vision of the past based on the myth of the Vedic golden age. Being a man of ardent religious imagination, he is known for creating, rather than recalling, “that heavenly era in the Aryavarta, the land of the ‘superhuman’ race of Aryans, in which the first men were born...The Vedas were ‘not only true, but they contained all truth, including the ideas of modern science’(Braj Ranjan Mani,212).”

Arya Samaj was started in Bombay and it evolved into an organization with an all-India reach in the Punjab. The Samaj eventually spread its tentacles into many parts of north India. The Arya Samaji rhetoric of the glorious Aryan civilization has indeed become a sort of commonsense in the modern Hindu consciousness of this region, if not all over India. Mani observes that Arya Samaj movement actually “brought in its wake a mythological awareness of the past permeated with an ‘Aryan consciousness accompanied by its attendant baggage of associations such as virility, spirituality and high-mindedness.’(Braj Ranjan Mani.212)”

Dayananda’s social vision and his views on caste were clearly shaped by his faith in brahminical ideology. He merely denounced idolatrous and superstitious practices of contemporary Hinduism but essentially remained committed to its orthodoxy in many ways: belief in the superiority of Vedic faith over all religions, the theory of *karma* and the transmigration of soul. Mani argues that this theory is the most reactionary construct of brahminism, which justifies the status quo based on the premise that every human being is born in a particular situation because of his or her deeds in the previous births (Braj Ranjan Mani,213). Further, Dayananda was a willing prisoner of the *karma* doctrine. He did not even believe that it was not necessary to launch an attack on caste, nor did he expect any anti-caste action from his followers. Therefore, it is obvious that his

views on uplifting shudras were half-hearted. In the first edition of Dayanada's *Satyartha Prakash* (The Light of Truth), he advocates school education for shudra children, but denies them the right to study the Vedas(Braj Ranjan Mani,213).

In order to understand Dayananda's social orthodoxy, it is important to examine his views on other religions and his notion of *shuddhi* or 'purification,' which became a major flashpoint of communal confrontation. Speaking about the notion of *Shuddhi*, J.T.F. Jordens points out that Dayananda Saraswati was the first reformer to seriously turn his attention to this concept as a process of re-conversion in order to bring back the converts from Islam and Christianity. The question of *Shuddhi* first arose during Dayanand's visit to the Punjab in 1887, towards the end of his life. Six months after his arrival there, he performed the *Shuddhi* of a Hindu who had become a Christian. *Shuddhi* continued to be a major issue and although Dayanand never actually prescribed a specific rite for this he clearly asserted the principle that re-conversion was the right procedure. This was "a principle that the Arya Samaj would later fully put into practice (J.T.F. Jordens,146-47)."

Jordens divides the history of the *Shuddhi* movement of the Arya Samaj after the death of Dayananda in 1883, into two main periods—from 1883 to 1900, and from 1900 to 1925. He brings our attention to the fact that from the year 1884 onwards several references to *Shuddhi* ceremonies appeared in the pages of the Panjab Arya Samaj journals. Most of the re-converts were either Christians or Muslims. This increase in individual *shuddhis* is definitely connected with the substantial success of the missionaries during the eighties: between 1881 and 1891 the number of Christian converts rose from 4,000 to 19,000. The editor of the Arya Patrika put it:

Up to this time the Hindu community has been the storehouse on which other religions used to feed themselves, but the Hindus also have been forced by circumstances to feel that if they will take no steps to recover their lost brethren, they one day, one by one, will be engulfed wholly by other religions(J.T.F. Jordens,149).

Later, an All India Shuddhi Sabha was established, and the movement spread systematically out into Kashmir and the United Provinces. By 1910 between sixty and seventy thousand *Shuddhis* had taken place in the Punjab alone, and between 1911 and 1921 the number of Aryas in Kashmir rose from 1,047 to 23, 116, while in the United Provinces their numbers reached 205,000 by 1921. As Jordens puts it, "this was a truly massive achievement by a small group of Aryas over a period of twenty years(J.T.F. Jordens,152)." However, he raises a question that is very pertinent to our discussion: "What happened to the convert in relation to the existing caste system?" and goes on to argue that the converts who had been born Hindus were simply received back into their old caste. However, those who had been born Christian or Muslims did not have a caste to go back to and their problem was much more complex. As members of the Arya Samaj, they could share its life. But the other (non-Dalit) members of the Samaj were still totally dependent on their caste for social intercourse and marriage. Therefore they generally refused any social intercourse with those converts beyond the functions and activities of the Samaj, out of fear of their own *biradari*. Jordens argues that the Samaj was acutely aware of this problem and says that "during the eighties and nineties voices were constantly raised by ex-untouchables protesting that the Samaj was not living upto the

social ideals of Dayananda (J.T.F. Jordens,154-155).” However there appears to be no serious effort to actually address of deal with the question.

Since the ex-untouchables were mostly excluded from the caste circles of the Aryas except in a few rare cases, the radicals found this an “impossible and unworthy situation” and started a new reform body in 1922 called the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, whose leading figure was Bhai Paramanand. It was for this body that Ambedkar wrote his masterpiece *Annihilation of Caste*. The aim of the Mandal was not to form a new caste, but to work for the abolition of the caste system by promoting inter-caste marriages and dinners. The Mandal claimed that this programme would “foster feelings of social equality, fraternity, and liberty among the Hindus and unite them into a coherent nation (J.T.F. Jordens,156).” The difference between this organization and the Arya Samaj, its sincerity and strength as well as its weakness are apparent in the exchanges reprinted by Ambedkar in *Annihilation of caste*. It is not without interest that even this committed organization floundered over the issue of conversion (B.R. Ambedkar,158).

The *Shuddhi* movement rose to a rapid peak in 1922, and then tapered off slowly by 1926. Shuddhi thus reached its dramatic culmination in the twenties, creating an unprecedented alliance between Aryas and orthodox, contributing strongly to Hindu consolidation or sangathan: the firming-up of the Hindu community in order to maximize the Hindu potentialities of moral and ritual purity, physical strength, numerical size, and political power. Thus, as Jordens also rightly concludes, the Shuddhi movement did very little to the untouchable converts in terms of social and economic betterment on the ground. On the other hand, it laid “a firm foundation for the influence of, first, the Hindu Mahasabha and later the R.S.S (B.R. Ambedkar,159).”

3. Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902)

Swami Vivekananda occupies a central position in the nineteenth century Hindu reformist movement. Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Vivekananda was disturbed by the prevailing disunity in Hindu society, and the ‘misery’ of Hindus that resulted from it. Amalendu Misra points out that Vivekananda was perhaps the only ideologue of the nineteenth century Hindu reformist movement who actually developed a subtle new paradigm for religious and political objectives. Hindu society of Vivekananda’s time was in a state of turmoil, confronted by a multitude of vicissitudes. Some of these were internal, but the rest external. According to Vivekananda, casteist practices and the presence of many sects within Hinduism prevented this religion from acquiring a collective and well-defined identity. He felt that Hindu society was weakened and disintegrated by the long Islamic rule followed by Christian colonization. Therefore, his mission was to rescue Hinduism from this general state of confusion, which required a radical reorganization of the Hindu religion itself. This new program was also aimed at uniting the Hindus. Attempts were also made to bring people from other faiths into the fold of Hinduism (Amalendu Misra,29). Misra argues that the immediate agenda of Vivekanda’s scheme was to cultivate a common bond among the Hindus and simultaneously stall the spread of Islam and Christianity. Next it tried to evolve an ideology which would generate spiritual as well as physical dynamism among Hindus. The final objective of this reformation was to conceive a nation whose people would

follow these objectives. As Misra puts it, through these objectives, Vivekananda aimed at countering the spread of Islam and Christianity (Amalendu Misra,50).

Vivekananda's convictions on religion are deeply intertwined with his politics and his idea of a Hindu nation. He identifies *Vedanta* as the basis for India's nationhood. Furthermore, it would check the growth of non-Hindu religions and their influence in India's political process. This process would not be violent in the overt sense of the term, but it would aim at eliminating the power and influence of non-Hindu forces through gradual neutralization. Misra argues that *Vedanta*, with these objectives, was embedded in its ultimate goal to reestablish Hindu dominance in the form of benevolent hegemony over the entire Indian subcontinent. According to Misra, two major factors account for the uniqueness of Vivekananda compared to his predecessors and contemporaries. First, that he was the only reformer to emphasize Hindu regeneration in both the religious and political future of India. Second, he consolidated the essence of Hindu interest and positioned the exact identity of the 'other' as the enemy (Amalendu Misra,30).

Turning more specifically to the question of caste: on the one hand Vivekananda justifies the principles of caste as a functional division of labour within an organic society and claims that caste is a great value system which India can offer to the world. On the other hand, he believes that this inherently good system has been corrupted over the years and become oppressive, which must be reformed immediately. Duncan argues that, for Vivekananda, Caste is a natural order. In Vivekananda's own words: "I can perform one duty in social life, and you another; you can govern a country and I can mend a pair of shoes, but there is no reason why you are greater than I, for can you mend my shoes? Can I govern the country? I am clever at mending shoes, you are clever at reading Vedas, but there is no reason why you should trample on my head; why if one commits murder should be praised, and if another steals an apple why should he be hanged! This will have to go. Caste is good (Duncan B. Forrester,159)."

It should be pointed out that Vivekananda's version of Hinduism also retained the Brahmin or the priest at its centre. He manipulated the principles of the caste system in such a way that they seemed to create a state of castelessness, but with the position of the priests intact. He would argue that we need to follow the system of caste. In addition, he makes caste into a mysterious category by saying not even one in a million understands what caste really is. He naturalizes caste and its inhuman practices, and even makes caste into a universal category when he says that no country in the world is without social division. In his scheme of affairs, social inequality is a non-issue and also justified as a natural phenomenon. It was with this bent of mind, Vivekananda argued for the brahminization of Indian society. As Misra has also argued, for Vivekananda, Brahmin was the ideal of humanity and he wanted everybody to become a Brahmin (Amalendu Misra,51). This aim of brahminising Indians and Indian culture continued to find powerful adherents in nationalist thinking also.

Hindu reforms were always top-down and therefore also paternalistic in character. However, they claimed that the reforms were in the interest of the lower caste people. Braj Ranjan Mani argues, these kinds of piecemeal attempts were made within Sanskritic parameters and were necessitated by the political compulsions of those days, "particularly

the growing fear of Muslim and Christian proselytisation and the resounding reverberations of anti-caste movements all over the country (Braj Ranjan Mani,224).” These important factors are obscured in the narratives of mainstream modern Indian histories.

More importantly, what such authoritative histories also buried are the many popular egalitarian movements that emerged in the last decades of nineteenth century, especially in the south and west India when Vivekananda was capturing the world stage and finding his way into upper caste nationalism. Social revolutionaries such as Phule, Iyothee Thassar, Ayyankali and Naryana Guru arrived on the scene. More work needs to be done to establish the specific connections between Vivekananda’s campaigns and formulations and the disturbance caused by these egalitarian movements.

Vivekananda vehemently opposed any social movements which opposed brahminism. For example, Mani argues, Vivekananda scorned the anti-brahman movements of the south and accused them of inciting fighting among the castes. In the same vein, he believed that the underprivileged castes were wasting their energy in petty quarrels and advised them to use all their energies in acquiring the culture of brahmins by pursuing Sanskrit education. According to Vivekananda acquiring brahmanhood through learning Sanskrit, was the road to freedom for the caste-oppressed. All this apart, the true colours of Vivekananda become obvious when he curses the British for educating the masses and cautions the upper castes about the threat of a looming mass awakening:

...and the Europeans are now educating those ignorant, illiterate low caste people, who toil fields in their loin cloth, are of the non-Aryan race. They are none of us. This is going to weaken us and give benefit to both these Europeans and the low caste people (Braj Ranjan Mani,226).

Vivekananda often got into bitter conflict with Christianity, Islam, and also Buddhism. When Christian missionaries leveled criticism against issues like caste and Untouchability, as Mani argues, “he retaliated with vengeance, questioning Christ’s historicity, and even fatuously opined that early Christians may have had Hindu origins (Braj Ranjan Mani, 230).”

In sum, I would like to point out that the hegemonic politics of the Dayananda-Vivekananda kind and their ambivalence on important social issues such as caste and conversion, served to shield brahmanical culture. Furthermore, such movements were intensely concerned with the consolidation of Hinduism, and the firming up of a Hindu majority in India. The ‘untouchables’ especially were a significant category here. They were substantial in number, but had traditionally been excluded from ‘Hindu’ society. The task now was to bar them from joining other religions, and to claim them, numerically, but not necessarily in any other manner, as Hindus and to swell the number of Hindus in order to make the claim of being a majority. The Arya Samaj practice of *shuddhi* was an institutionalized ritual that reflected a less overtly articulated effort to claim all Dalits as Hindus. Gandhi carried forward this legacy and gave nationalism a strong tinge of brahminical ideology in his own times (Braj Ranjan Mani,233). Thus, from the early years of the nineteenth century to present times, religious conversion, especially conversion into Christianity or Islam, has been a fraught question. Major

figures in the intellectual and political history of modern India have directed this discussion. Much has been written about this in popular forums and there have also been scholarly studies of major reform and nationalist views on the question of conversion. With one or two exceptions, the scholarship, taking its cue from the elite and therefore inevitably 'upper caste' standpoint on the conversion question, has placed the analysis in the frame of faith, religious freedom and/or cultural authenticity. Again, all discussion of the significance of conversion as a political issue is dominated by the discourse of colonial interests promoting conflict and disintegration. As a result, both at the personal and political levels, conversion is defaced with the paint brush of inauthenticity and conspiracy. The mainstream media too has consistently played the game of counterpoising an ideal of genuine/authentic conversion to what is regarded as the inauthentic and corrupt forms of it.

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