

## RELIGION THREAT ON HINDUS DURING BRITISH RULE IN INDIA

**Dr. Hitendra Yadav**

*Associate Professor*

*Dept. of History*

*Lajpat Rai College,*

*Sahibabad, Ghaziabad*

*Email: dr.hitendra2011@gmail.com*

**Abstract:**

*The British colonial rule in India was not just an era of political domination but a complex period of socio-religious transformation. One of the most impacted communities during this time were the Hindus, whose religious traditions, practices, and social institutions experienced a multi-dimensional threat. These threats emerged from Christian missionary proselytism, legal and institutional changes, educational reforms, and colonial interference in religious and social customs. This article analyzes the extent to which Hindu religious and cultural life was disrupted by colonial policies and the colonial state's covert support to Christian missionaries. Simultaneously, the article also explores how these threats ignited a counter-response among Hindus, leading to reform movements, religious revivals, and the development of a politically charged Hindu identity. In doing so, it evaluates the unintended consequences of colonial intervention and the complex interaction between suppression and resistance.*

**Keywords:**

*British colonialism, Hinduism, Christian missionaries, religious reform, Arya Samaj, legal reforms, Hindu identity, colonial education*

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

**Received: 09.12.2023**

**Approved: 26.12.2023**

**Dr. Hitendra Yadav**

*RELIGION THREAT ON HINDUS  
DURING BRITISH RULE IN  
INDIA*

*RJPSSs 2023, Vol. XLIX,*

*No. 2, pp.424-429*

*Article No.51*

Similarity Check: 16%

**Online available at:**

<https://anubooks.com/journal/research-journal-of-philosophy-amp-social-sciences>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.31995/rjps.2023v49i02.51>

## **Introduction**

British rule in India, formally starting in the mid-18th century and lasting until 1947, marked a significant period of upheaval in all spheres of Indian life. While the primary British motive in India was economic exploitation, the colonial administration's engagement with Indian religion—particularly Hinduism—had profound and lasting effects. Hinduism, a diverse and deeply rooted cultural-religious system, found itself scrutinized, altered, and at times directly challenged by British colonial practices. Unlike the earlier Muslim rulers who often coexisted with Hindu institutions, the British came with a worldview steeped in Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism. These ideological underpinnings shaped their perceptions of Hinduism, leading to various interventions that posed a threat to Hindu religious traditions.

From legislative reforms like the abolition of Sati to the active encouragement of missionary schools, British policies slowly eroded the traditional structures of Hindu religious life. Though often couched in the language of social progress, these reforms were perceived by many Indians as intrusive and alien. Hindu leaders, scholars, and commoners alike responded in different ways, from accommodation to outright resistance. Reform movements such as Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and Sanatan Dharma movements emerged not only to defend Hinduism but also to redefine it in light of colonial challenges.

**Missionary Activities and Christian Proselytism** One of the earliest and most visible forms of threat to Hinduism during British rule came from Christian missionaries. Until the early 19th century, the East India Company discouraged missionary activity to avoid antagonizing local populations. However, this policy changed with the Charter Act of 1813, which permitted Christian missionaries to enter and operate in India. Evangelists like William Carey, Alexander Duff, and others were fervent in their attempts to convert Hindus, often portraying Hindu religious practices as idolatrous, immoral, and inferior to Christianity.

Missionary schools were established to teach English, science, and Christian doctrine. While these institutions did offer opportunities for upward mobility and access to modern education, they also became tools of religious conversion. Textbooks often contained subtle or overt criticisms of Hindu deities and rituals. Moreover, missionaries were given privileges and protection by the colonial government, including access to land and legal immunities.

This association between British rule and Christian evangelism was seen by many Hindus as a coordinated attack on their religion. Prominent Hindu leaders accused the government of promoting Christianity under the guise of education and social reform. The conversion of lower castes and tribal groups, often through

inducements or socio-economic incentives, further aggravated these sentiments. In response, Hindu leaders launched reconversion campaigns and set up their own educational institutions to preserve their religious identity.

**Legal Interference in Hindu Religious Practices** British legal reforms aimed at modernizing Indian society often had profound religious implications. The most notable example is the abolition of Sati (widow-burning) in 1829 by Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. Though justified on humanitarian grounds and widely supported by reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, this legislation was opposed by conservative Hindus as an infringement on religious freedom.

Similarly, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, the Age of Consent Act of 1891, and laws relating to inheritance and guardianship redefined family and gender roles within Hindu society. While many of these laws aimed to improve the condition of women, they were perceived by traditionalists as imposed changes influenced by Western and Christian ideals. British courts, unfamiliar with the diversity of Hindu customs, relied on limited interpretations of Hindu law derived from select Sanskrit texts, thereby distorting its application.

Another area of legal interference was in temple management. Through the Religious Endowments Act of 1863, the British took over control of Hindu temples and religious trusts, ostensibly to reduce corruption and mismanagement. However, this move was seen by many as a way to weaken traditional Hindu authority and divert temple resources. The legal reconfiguration of caste councils and panchayats also eroded the autonomy of religious communities to govern themselves.

**Colonial Education and the Decline of Hindu Knowledge Systems** Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of colonial rule was in the sphere of education. In 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay authored his famous "Minute on Indian Education," in which he advocated for a system of education based on English and Western science rather than traditional Indian learning. The new education system, which emphasized rationalism, Christian morality, and British history, replaced the ancient gurukula and pathshala systems.

As Sanskrit colleges declined and missionary schools gained prominence, Hindu scriptures, philosophy, and traditional sciences were marginalized. Young Hindus who went through colonial education often became disconnected from their religious roots. Some even internalized the colonial critique of Hinduism as backward and superstitious. While English education did create a modern intelligentsia, it also led to a crisis of identity for many Hindus caught between two worldviews.

This marginalization of Hindu thought led to the rise of alternative centers of learning by Hindu organizations. Institutions like Gurukul Kangri (established

by the Arya Samaj) and the Benares Hindu University were created to revive traditional learning and counter the dominance of Western education. These initiatives were part of a broader effort to reclaim Hindu intellectual heritage and restore pride in its philosophical and scientific traditions.

**Census Operations and the Solidification of Caste Identities** The colonial state's attempt to categorize and systematize Indian society had significant religious implications. The decennial censuses, starting from 1871, required individuals to identify themselves by religion and caste. This bureaucratic classification led to the rigidification of previously fluid identities.

Hindu society, which had functioned for centuries through regional and sectarian diversity, was now compartmentalized into neatly defined categories. The classification of castes, sub-castes, sects, and denominations created tensions and competition among communities for recognition and status. British anthropologists and administrators often misunderstood the nuances of Hindu society, leading to flawed categorizations that had long-term consequences.

Moreover, the classification of certain communities as “animist” or “non-Hindu” paved the way for targeted missionary activity. Dalits and tribal groups were often encouraged to convert with the promise of education, jobs, and social mobility. Hindu leaders viewed these conversions as a serious threat to the integrity of their religion and launched efforts to reconvert and reintegrate these communities.

**Hindu Responses: Reform and Revival** Faced with these multi-pronged threats, Hindu society responded with both reformist and revivalist movements. The Brahmo Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828, sought to modernize Hinduism by discarding idol worship and promoting monotheism and rationality. It supported social reforms like women's education and widow remarriage but remained elitist and urban-centric.

The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875, adopted a more aggressive stance. It called for a return to the Vedas, denounced idolatry and caste discrimination, and launched the Shuddhi movement to reconvert Hindus who had embraced other religions. It also emphasized education, self-reliance, and national pride.

Orthodox groups like the Sanatan Dharma Sabha and Bharat Dharma Mahamandal aimed to protect traditional Hindu practices from colonial interference. They set up religious schools, published literature, and organized pilgrimages and festivals to assert Hindu identity. These movements reflected a broader trend of cultural nationalism that laid the groundwork for political nationalism in the 20th century.

**Women and the Religious Threat** The position of Hindu women became a central issue during British rule. Missionaries and colonial officials often portrayed Hindu women as oppressed victims in need of salvation through Christianity and modern laws. Practices like Sati, child marriage, and purdah were criticized heavily, sometimes unfairly, as representative of all Hindu society.

In response, Hindu reformers and nationalist leaders took up the cause of women's upliftment as part of their broader religious and cultural revival. Figures like Pandita Ramabai, though influenced by Christianity, initiated debates on women's rights within a Hindu framework. Women's organizations like the Arya Mahila Samaj emphasized both religious education and social reform, demonstrating that Hindu women were active participants in preserving and redefining their faith.

### **Conclusion**

The British colonial period was a time of significant religious challenge and transformation for Hindu society. While the colonial administration claimed to maintain religious neutrality, its support for missionary activities, legal reforms, and educational policies clearly favored Western and Christian ideals. These policies disrupted traditional Hindu institutions and practices, leading to a sense of cultural and religious loss among many Indians.

Yet, this very threat also served as a catalyst for introspection and renewal within Hinduism. Reform movements emerged to defend, adapt, and rejuvenate the faith. The colonial encounter thus became a crucible in which modern Hindu identity was forged—a blend of tradition and reform, resistance and accommodation.

In understanding the religious threat to Hindus during British rule, we also gain insights into the enduring tensions between tradition and modernity, faith and reform, and identity and power. These historical experiences continue to shape contemporary debates on religion, nationalism, and cultural identity in India.

### **References**

1. Jones, Kenneth W. (1989). "Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India." Cambridge University Press.
2. Kopf, David. (1969). "British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance." University of California Press.
3. Bellenoit, Hayden J. A. (2007). "Missionary Education and Empire in Late Colonial India, 1860–1920." Pickering & Chatto.
4. Bhatt, Chetan. (2001). "Hindu Nationalism: Origins, Ideologies and Modern Myths." Berg.
5. Macaulay, Thomas B. (1835). "Minute on Indian Education."

6. Majumdar, R.C. (1962). "British Paramountcy and Indian Renaissance." Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan.
7. Sen, Amiya P. (2003). "Social and Religious Reform: The Hindus of British India." Oxford University Press.
8. Laird, M. (1972). "Missionaries and Education in Bengal, 1793–1837." Oxford University Press.
9. Bayly, Susan. (1999). "Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age." Cambridge University Press.
10. Sharma, Arvind. (1993). "Hindu Responses to Religious Pluralism." State University of New York Press.