



# Communal Tensions and Revivalist Movements in Colonial Bihar: A Historical Analysis of the Emergence of Hindu-Muslim Conflict, 1908-1924

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## Article History

Received: 17-04-2024  
Acceptance: 09-05-2024  
Published: 10-06-2024

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## Abstract

This paper examines the emergence of revivalist and communal trends in colonial Bihar between 1908 and 1924, with a focus on the manipulation by the colonial state that led to the rise of these movements. The Arya Samaj movement, established in 1875, aimed to revitalize Vedic Hinduism and gained significant influence in Bihar through its advocacy for cow protection and the establishment of educational institutions, temples, and social welfare organizations. The movement's impact was evident in the lives of Hindus in Bihar, with efforts to eliminate the practice of 'untouchability' and caste distinctions, promote women's education and gender equality, and assist impoverished women and widows. However, the rise of revivalist movements and communalism led to increased tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, culminating in violent conflicts such as the Shahabad riots in 1917.

**Keywords:** Revivalist movements, Communalism, Colonial Bihar, Arya Samaj, Cow protection, Communal Conflict.

## Introduction

In the early 20th century, numerous Muslim revivalist organizations emerged in colonial Bihar, aiming to challenge the reconversion agenda implemented by religious movements such as Arya Samaj and Christian missionaries. The Arya Samaj exerted significant influence on the lives of Hindus in Bihar, with Dayanand Saraswati being a central figure in the movement's proliferation. Hindus viewed Dayanand as their savior. The Arya Samaj was established in Bihar in 1875 to revitalize the original purity of Vedic Hinduism and began to gain prominence in the 1880s. It strongly advocated for cow protection and played a crucial role in creating the Gaurakshini (Cow Protection) Sabhas. [1] Hindus saw this ideology as a means to enhance their social status and gain entry into the highest echelons of society. The Samaj initiated several Shudhi initiatives to safeguard against and prevent the forced conversion of individuals from lower castes to other religions, and also made efforts to regain those who had already embraced Islam or Christianity.

Rivalries emerged between followers of the Arya Samaj and Muslim religious groups. The fundamental concept for Muslims was to imitate the Prophet's Islamic religious practices, rejecting any mediation between God and humans. However, Hindu revivalists actively worked to prevent their community members from adopting other religious beliefs. The Sabha's campaigns were particularly influential in the western region of Bihar, especially in Patna. By 1893, there were nearly 23 Sabhas, and most districts in western Bihar had established cow protection groups by 1887 and 1888. [2][3] According to Professor Jawaid Alam, the Rajput, Brahmin, and Bhumihar elites played a significant role in the cow protection

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movement in Bihar, particularly in the regions of Saran, Shahabad, Gaya, and Patna. In the early 20th century, the campaign garnered considerable popularity among Ahirs, who were enthusiastic about emulating the higher castes by reaffirming their strong support for cow protection. Groups such as Ahirs, Kurmis, and Koeris participated in the cow protection campaigns, aspiring to attain higher social status.

Additionally, a small number of Hindus from lower castes also participated in the campaign. The involvement of middle-ranking and low-caste Hindus, who used threats and intimidation to organize the campaign, further heightened the enthusiasm for cow protection. [4] Historians note that the Arya Samaj exerted a substantial impact on the lives of Hindus in Bihar, [5] with Dayanand Saraswati being directly responsible for the movement's spread. By 1911, the Arya Samaj's presence in Phulwari Thana and Patna was notable, with documentation indicating around 2,575 Aryas in the 1911 census. [6] During the colonial era, Maulana Ilyas established the Tableegh Jamaat in response to the Arya Samaj. The Tableegh Jamaat believed that the Ulama maintained their affiliation with historic madrassas, and observed that the Indian Ulama aimed to enhance the religious education of Indian Muslims due to their perception that the Arya Samaj posed a threat to their Islamic culture.

### **Religious Rivalry and Communal Tensions**

The interreligious rivalry that characterized the early 20th century had a profound impact on the religious landscape, culminating in the emergence of the Tablighi Jamaat movement. Notably, this movement deviated from the traditional concept of charismatic leadership, instead emphasizing the importance of respect and reverence for religious figures, rooted in the Sufi mystical tradition. The primary focus of Tablighi Jamaat is to exemplify virtuous character and encourage others to emulate these traits. In their evangelizing efforts, members of the Tablighi Jamaat adopt a distinctive approach, showcasing Islamic values and virtues through indirect engagement. By capturing the attention of non-Muslims through exemplary conduct, they create an environment conducive to introducing the fundamental principles of Islam, without coercion or pressure to convert. This approach is guided by the belief that the exemplary character of Muslims will inspire non-Muslims to seek their guidance and emulate their virtues. [7]

The Arya Samaj movement had gained significant traction in northern India, leading some to suggest that its literature would polarize the world into two opposing camps. From the perspective of the Tablighi Jamaat, the influence of evil forces extended beyond the Jewish community, encompassing Hindus, Christians, and other groups that opposed their ideology. Notably, the Tableegh Jamaat viewed modernist Muslims, such as the Wahabis, as malevolent entities. While some Muslim Ulama advocated for the adoption of modern education, others resisted contemporary ideas, urging Indian Muslims to adhere to traditional thought and education. The Muslim identity was perceived as being threatened by both self-proclaimed liberals and the colonial state, prompting a desire to purify Islam from these influences. During the colonial era, preachers affiliated with madrasa education traveled extensively throughout various regions and towns, disseminating their message.

During this period, Muslim reformists sought to safeguard Muslim adherents from perceived threats. However, this era also witnessed the emergence of schisms among various Islamic sects. Dr. Mohammed Saleem expressed his disillusionment, arguing that the Tablighi Jamaat should have focused on promoting a purer form of Islam, but instead, they prioritized Sufi traditions, leading to a neglect of the true essence of Islam. [8] Each Muslim organization perceived itself as the true custodian of Islam, viewing its opponents as seditious. The rise of the Tableegh Jamaat movement in the mid-1920s must be reconsidered in the context of the concurrent growth of other religious and political factions. This era saw the emergence of various schools of thought, including Deobandi Tablighis, Shia, Ahle-Hadith, Barelvi, and Ahmadi Tablighi preachers, all of whom aimed to protect Muslims from Fitna (sedition) and expand their followers. These proselytizing organizations contributed to the complex and multifaceted landscape of Islamic reform movements during this period.

## **Political Movements and Communalism**

The Swadeshi movement began in 1905 after Curzon decided to partition Bengal. The leadership of this group used specific symbols and tactics that resulted in the estrangement of Muslims and hence fostered the spread of communalism. Bihar exhibited a stark depiction of the Muslim-Hindu dynamic. Although there was substantial competition between Hindus and Muslims in Bihar for government employment, this rivalry did not have any religious or separatist implications. The resurgence of revivalist movements in colonial Bihar, particularly among high-caste Hindus like Bhardlok in Bengal, was driven by concerns about the potential loss of their dominant position in the state. This anxiety fueled the escalation of communal tensions, ultimately leading to the outbreak of violent conflicts such as the Shahabad riots. The riots had a profound impact on the political landscape of Bihar, resulting in a stark polarization along communal lines, with far-reaching consequences for the region's social and political fabric. The cow slaughter issue was the primary catalyst for the riots in colonial Bihar. The rapid proliferation of organizations like Gaurakshini Sabha, Sanatan Dharma Sabha, Hindu sabhas, and Arya Samaj in the late 19th century contributed to the escalation of communal tensions. The rise of riots in colonial Bihar during 1917 can be attributed to the cow protection movements. The region had already experienced sporadic incidents of violence and conflict, but the events of 1917 were notable for their widespread nature, affecting areas from Arrah to Aurangabad. The number of participants in the Shahabad riots was estimated to be between 20,000 and 50,000. During the Bakr Id holiday in Ibrahimpur, Muslims continued to butcher cows despite objections. In response, Hindus strategically placed pigs near the mosque during the Gaidar festival. Despite limited transportation options, protests managed to spread across various regions, highlighting the depth of communal polarization. Bihar witnessed numerous incidents of violence and forced conversions, resulting in significant human suffering and loss of life. The violence claimed over 5,000 lives, and within a span of just one week, approximately 70,000 displaced individuals sought refuge in various locations, including camps. The frequency and intensity of these violent episodes led many to ponder whether partition had become an inevitable solution to prevent further bloodshed and loss of life, as the specter of communal violence and division loomed large over the region.

The Shahabad riots of 1917 were a watershed moment in the history of communal violence in Bihar, surpassing all previous instances in ferocity and brutality. Women were specifically targeted for sexual assaults, which led them to resort to jumping into wells to escape further victimization. Discussions about the problem of division arose as a means to prevent the escalation of community hatred. The Hindu leaders faced criticism during the 9th session of the All India Muslim League in 1917 for their lack of concern regarding the repercussions of the riots. Hasan Imam deliberately avoided discussing the riots and instead concentrated on providing specific information on the Lucknow Pact and how it was implemented in Bihar. According to Papiya Ghosh, this action caused the Muslims to feel isolated and estranged. Gandhi, who was heavily involved in the Champaran Satyagraha at the time, expressed his inability to relocate to Shahabad. He conveyed to the Hindus that they should make an effort to halt the routine large-scale killing of cows. During a series of well-attended assemblies, Muslims across social strata rejected the leadership of Hasan Imam, Mazharul Haq, Safaraz H. Khan, and Jinnah, opposing their political ideologies. The Shudhi movement and conversion efforts in Shahabad escalated communal tensions, with some Muslims opposing uncompromising leaders. The Congress was deemed non-secular because of its aim to merge "communalism in culture with nationalism in politics." The Khilafat Committee's intervention in Shudhi cases heightened animosity within the Muslim community. The Arya Samaj movement, which emerged in the 1880s, aimed to restore Vedic Hinduism's purity and gained significant influence in Bihar through its advocacy for cow protection and the establishment of educational institutions, temples, and social welfare organizations. Dayanand's campaigns against idolatry and his presence in Danapur became a stronghold of the Arya Samaj's impact on Bihar's Hindu population.

The 'Arya Samaj' embraces individuals from various religious backgrounds through a process known as 'shudhi'. This movement is dedicated to improving the social status of indigenous peoples, marginalized groups, and socioeconomically disadvantaged communities. The impact of the Arya Samaj was evident in

the lives of Hindus in Bihar. [9] They made multiple attempts to eliminate the practice of 'untouchability' and caste distinctions. They opposed caste discrimination based on ability and achievement rather than on one's birth. The Samaj placed great importance on addressing the welfare of women. They promoted women's education and supported the idea of gender equality. They assisted impoverished women and widows, but attacks on Islamic communities led to an escalation of violence in other regions. Separatism and communalism emerged during the Swadeshi Movement. Initially, the region of Bihar exhibited a distinct scenario in which Muslims and Hindus were in a state of unity. However, in 1907, the establishment of a Hindu organization sparked a significant movement that ultimately had a profound effect on Hindu-Muslim unity. The Maharaja of Darbhanga first proposed this notion, and with much regret, the Beharee population observed that the movement's progress would inevitably result in a catastrophic relationship between the two groups. Vernacular newspapers were highly critical of these endeavors and frequently emphasized the importance of Hindu-Muslim unity.

The Bihar Provincial Muslim League, established by Maulana Shibli Nomani in 1908, played a significant role in the Shudhi Sangathan campaign led by Arya Samajists and Hindu Mahasabhis. [10] Certain groups of Muslims initiated the Tableegh and Tanzeem movements, which caused significant polarization between the two populations. The persistent feelings of disharmony, cow slaughter, purification campaigns, and instances of forced conversion within both communities contributed to the enduring growth of communal hostility. The creation of the Arya Samaj facilitated the emergence of Hindu nationalism rooted in religious beliefs. Cow slaughter and the playing of music before mosques became contentious issues for both populations. Hindu communalists actively opposed the union between Hindus and Muslims, especially when the British publicly supported Muslim communalists. The Shahabad riots in Bihar in 1917, as previously noted, resulted in a proliferation of communal violence. Compulsory conversions and the killing of cows exacerbated tensions between the two factions, leading to a significant number of fatalities. The resurgence of religious groups in Bihar resulted in the escalation of communal tensions between Muslim and Hindu communities. [11]

### **The British Colonial Policy and Communal Conflict in India**

The British policy of 'Divide and Rule' significantly contributed to the rise of antagonism between Hindu and Muslim communities in India, leading to a series of uprisings that threatened the lives of both groups. Following the uprising of 1857, the British implemented a policy of religious division, specifically targeting these communities. This policy served as a primary motivation for the British rulers to conduct the first census in India. The partition of Bengal further exacerbated communal tensions, contributing to the emergence of communalism. Then the introduction of separate electorates, which allocated parliamentary seats to religious minorities based on their demographic proportions in the provinces, intensified communal animosity. This policy deepened the division between Hindu and Muslim communities. Additionally, the division of Bengal and the Swadeshi movement further contributed to the growing divide between these populations. The British Government aimed to curtail the propagation of Indian nationalism by fostering division among the people, effectively creating two distinct societies. Instances of riots, particularly during periods of anticipated conflict, often followed discussions between the involved parties. It is important to note that in many cases, differences in interests did not escalate into violence. While there were instances of Bakr Id riots in certain villages or neighborhoods, the majority of other villages and neighborhoods experienced no such clashes. In many places, procession routes were carefully planned and adhered to in order to prevent conflict, allowing neighbors to coexist peacefully despite potential tensions. [12]

Narratives about revivalist movements and the rise of communal conflict between these communities vary. Some studies did not address the plight of women who faced sexual violence, focusing instead on defending cows' rights and religious places. During the Shahabad riots, many voices called for the protection of women from violence and rape, urging that women be treated with the same reverence as sacred places and symbols. The violence in Bihar reached alarming levels, with mosques being damaged, the Quran desecrated, and women subjected to rape and humiliation. [13] In Eastern Bengal, the Muslim population constituted the majority, while in Western Bengal, the Hindu population formed

the majority. The colonial rulers intentionally sought to garner support from the majority group at the expense of the minority group, recognizing that this would inevitably lead to their separation. Their goal was to incite religious animosity between Muslims and Hindus, acknowledging the deep significance of religion for both groups. Consequently, communalism became a fundamental characteristic of Indian culture, particularly with the increasing call for separate electorates and the establishment of the Muslim League. The practice of categorizing voters based on religion, along with the divide and rule policy, significantly bolstered the foundation of communalism in India.

## **Conclusion**

The period between 1908 and 1924 in colonial Bihar was marked by the emergence of revivalist and communal trends, which had a profound impact on the region's history. The Arya Samaj movement, established in 1875, aimed to revitalize Vedic Hinduism and gained significant influence in Bihar through its advocacy for cow protection and the establishment of educational institutions, temples, and social welfare organizations. The movement's impact was evident in the lives of Hindus in Bihar, with efforts to eliminate the practice of 'untouchability' and caste distinctions, promote women's education and gender equality, and assist impoverished women and widows. However, the rise of revivalist movements and communalism led to increased tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, culminating in violent conflicts such as the Shahabad riots in 1917. The British colonial policy of 'Divide and Rule' significantly contributed to the rise of antagonism between the two communities, leading to a series of uprisings that threatened the lives of both groups. The narratives about revivalist movements and communal conflict vary, with some studies neglecting the plight of women who faced sexual violence during the riots. The violence in Bihar reached alarming levels, with mosques being damaged, the Quran desecrated, and women subjected to rape and humiliation.

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