

Campaign Against Child Marriage by Arya Samaj and its Social Reformist Approach (with reference to Sarda Act as its Expression)

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Abstract

Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), the founder of Arya Samaj and a prominent 19th-century social reformer, was a staunch opponent of child marriage. His views were deeply rooted in a desire to reform Hindu society by returning to what he believed were the true, rational, and scientific Vedic ideals. Dayanand viewed child marriage as a major social evil, responsible for the physical, intellectual, and moral degeneration of the Indian nation.

Dayanand was deeply distressed by the practice of early marriage, which was rampant in his time. He often lamented that because of this, the Hindu race had become "children of children". He argued that when children marry and bear children, it leads to a weak and unhealthy generation, directly causing a decline in the vitality of the society. He strongly believed that early marriages stunted the physical growth of both boys and girls. He argued that it prevented them from achieving full physical maturity, which in turn weakened the nation, making it vulnerable to foreign dominion.

Dayanand insisted on the strict observation of Brahmacharya (celibacy) for both boys and girls during their student life to acquire knowledge and physical strength. He believed that individuals should not marry until they were intellectually, physically, and emotionally prepared. In his seminal work, Satyarth Prakash, he proposed specific, mature ages for marriage to ensure a strong, healthy, and educated society. He recommended a minimum marriageable age of 25–30 years for boys and 16–24 years for girls.

Dayanand challenged the notion that child marriage had any scriptural sanctity. By interpreting the Vedas, he argued that early marriage was non-Vedic, or un-Vedic, and was a later corrupt addition to Hindu custom. He believed that stopping child marriage was essential for the liberation of women. He believed

that girls deserved the right to education, which was impossible if they were married off at a young age.

Through the Arya Samaj, Dayanand advocated for education and maturity, aiming to replace early, arranged marriages with unions between mature individuals. His, and consequently the Arya Samaj's, efforts significantly contributed to the movement that led to the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

This paper examines the ideological foundations of Arya Samaj's opposition to child marriage, its role in shaping public discourse, its contribution to legislative reform such as the Age of Consent Act (1891) and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) with the efforts of Harbilas Sarda and its continuing relevance. By combining scriptural reinterpretation with social activism, Arya Samaj contributed meaningfully to the broader reformist climate that sought to curb child marriage in India.

Keywords: Child marriage, Moral degeneration, Scientific Vedic ideals, Educated society, Scriptural reinterpretation, Hindu custom, Child Marriage Restraint Act.

Child marriage, defined as the marriage of individuals below legally recognized adulthood, was widely practiced across regions of India during the nineteenth century. The custom was reinforced by patriarchal structures, caste endogamy, concerns about female sexuality, and anxieties regarding family honor.¹ Girls were often married before puberty, and consummation frequently followed soon after, leading to serious health, educational, and psychological consequences.² Social reform movements in colonial India confronted this practice from diverse ideological positions. Among them, Arya Samaj emerged as a distinctive reformist force that grounded its critique in Vedic authority rather than Western liberalism. Founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875, Arya Samaj aimed to "return to the Vedas" while eliminating social evils that, according to its leaders, had no authentic scriptural foundation.³ Opposition to child marriage became one of its central social reform objectives.

Arya Samaj expanded rapidly in North India, particularly in Punjab and the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). It established educational institutions, printing presses, reform associations, and local congregations (sabhas), which became vehicles for social change.⁴ Its reformist agenda included widow remarriage, female education, opposition to untouchability, and the discouragement of child marriage. Unlike some reformers who relied heavily on colonial modernity as justification, Arya Samaj framed reform as indigenous and scripturally sanctioned. This strategy made its critique of child marriage particularly influential in conservative Hindu communities.

Arya Samaj's opposition to child marriage rested on its interpretation of the Vedas as rational and ethical texts. Dayananda argued that Vedic injunctions emphasized brahmacharya (a disciplined student life) during youth and did not prescribe marriage before physical and intellectual maturity.⁵ Samaj reformers asserted that marriage should occur only after individuals were capable of fulfilling Grihastha (householder) duties responsibly. They rejected the idea that pre-pubescent marriage was divinely mandated. In Satyarth Prakash, Dayananda explicitly criticized early marriage and argued that girls and boys should receive proper education before entering matrimonial life.⁶ This scriptural reinterpretation was crucial. By arguing that child marriage was a later degeneration rather than an ancient commandment, Arya Samaj provided religious legitimacy to reform. As Kenneth⁷ notes, Arya Samaj's strength lay in its ability to combine revivalism with reform—presenting change as restoration.

To understand the significance of Arya Samaj's campaign, it is necessary to situate child marriage within its broader historical context. In many communities, girls were married before puberty to ensure chastity and protect family honor. Economic pressures and dowry customs also incentivized early alliances.⁸ India's struggle for independence. Penguin.

The issue gained national prominence after the 1890 death of eleven-year-old Phulmoni Dasi, who died from injuries sustained during marital intercourse. The case sparked public debate and ultimately led to the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which raised the age of consent for girls from 10 to 12 years⁹ Debates around child marriage became a site of contestation between colonial officials, Indian reformers, orthodox leaders, and emerging nationalist voices. Reformers like Behramji Malabari, M.G. Ranade, and organizations such as Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj contributed to public pressure for change.¹⁰

Arya Samaj mobilized through public lectures, pamphlets, debates, and reform conferences. Its leaders used vernacular languages to reach broader audiences, arguing that early marriage harmed girls' health and deprived them of education¹¹ Education became central to its strategy. The establishment of Dayanand Anglo-Vedic (DAV) schools promoted modern education combined with Vedic values. Female education was emphasized as a necessary precondition for social reform.¹² By advocating that girls should complete schooling before marriage, Arya Samaj directly challenged the logic of child marriage.

Moreover, Arya Samaj promoted simplified marriage ceremonies (Vedic vivah) that discouraged extravagant dowries and ritualistic excess. These ceremonies often emphasized legal age compliance and mutual consent.

Engagement with Legislative Reform :The Age of Consent Act (1891)

Although Arya Samaj was not the sole force behind the Age of Consent Act, it contributed to the climate of reform that supported raising the age of consent. The Act marked a turning point in state intervention in domestic customs¹³ Arya Samaj reformers supported legislative measures that protected minors, arguing that they were compatible with Vedic principles. Arya Samaj's campaign against child marriage intersected with emerging discourses of nationalism and women's reform. Reformers increasingly viewed women's uplift as essential to national strength.¹⁴

Har Bilas Sarda and The Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929)

Harbilas Sarda (The Head of the Paropkarini Sabha) constantly attempted to bring an end to the evil of child marriage by making Legislations and Acts in the Central Assembly during 1926-29. His objectives behind getting these regulations enforced were :

- (A) To prevent child-widowhood
- (B) To promote physical and mental development of the young girls and boys and to reduce the infant mortality rate.¹⁵

The Anti Child Marriage Act famous as '**Sarda Act**' was passed due to his efforts on 1st April 1929. This Act fixed the marriageable age of boys and girls as 18 and 14 respectively.¹⁶ The evil of

infant marriage was not only a matter of social reform in his eyes, but it was a means to prevent atrocities done on the small children. He said that political progress was not possible in the absence of social reforms. Both men and women were interdependent on each other for the complete liberation it was essential to free woman off the shackles of orthodoxy blind faiths staunch social bindings etc. They should be given humane treatment.¹⁷ Harbilas was appreciated throughout the length the breadth across the country for this act of his, even by the muslims.

After the enforcement of this Act, the marriageable age of girls and boys was fixed to be 13 and 16 years respectively at Jodhpur in 1930,¹⁸ 14 and 16 at Jhalawar in 1933¹⁹, 15 and 18 at Dungarpur in 1935²⁰ and 12 and 15 at Dholpur in 1937.²¹ Sharda Act was implemented in the British provinces.²² Taking advantage of it the people started conducting marriages in the Indian provinces and then returned to their own province.²³ They also started producing false medical certificates and documents like horoscopes etc.²⁴ Seeing its loopholes in realising its consequences, an amendment was made in the Act in 1938, according to which, the residents of British Provinces, performing the act of conducting marriages in the Indian provinces, would be penalized.²⁵

A Brahmin family of Beawar tried to marry their 11 years old daughter with a man of 41, at Sojat. Arya Samaj Sojat and Arya Samaj Beawar both opposed this marriage as it was not only a child marriage but also an unsuitable match. But, Gumansingh the Jagirdaar of Sojat, was reluctant as he could not take any action against the party in the absence of any regulation in his territory.²⁶ At Shahpura, the marriageable age of girls and boys was fixed to be 14 and 18 in 1939²⁷, 13 and 18 at Alwar in 1940²⁸, 13 and 18 at Udaipur in 1941²⁹ and 14 and 18 at Jaipur in 1945.³⁰ Arya Pratinidhi Sabha sent Anti Child Marriage Groups in native states who prepared environment against child marriage by taking the support of the traders and the intelligentsia.³¹

In 1939, a conference was held at Arya Samaj Bhawan, Nagore in which a proposal related to Child Marriage and Incoherent Marriage Prohibition Act was passed so that the king of Nagore may pass orders to improve the economic, social and moral standards of the people.³²

In this way the incessant efforts of Arya Samaj played decisive role in making native states pass Anti Child Marriage Acts between the period of 1925-1945. Police interference also played significant role in preventing child marriage. In 1933, Raibahadur Seth Champalal fixed his son's marriage with a girl of 13. Police interfered and got this marriage cancelled. Similarly the marriage of 13 years old daughter of Madhosingh, a worker in Ajmer Municipal council, which was to be held on 28th July, 1933 was postponed for one year. The marriage of 13 years old son of a Brahmin family of Peesangan, was cancelled due to police interference. The rate of child marriage got reduced upto some extent by this. Practically, Sarda Act made the movement of Arya Samaj successful, partially.³³ Thus, it could be said that Anti Child Marriage Movement was specific amongst all the social reform movements of Arya Samaj, Sarda Act being its expression.

The Child Marriage Restraint Act (popularly known as the Sarda Act) was a landmark reform that set minimum marriage ages at 14 for girls and 18 for boys (later amended upward). The Act

resulted from sustained advocacy by Indian reformers, including women's organizations and social reform groups.³⁴ Arya Samaj's decades-long opposition to child marriage helped normalize the idea that legal intervention was necessary. By the 1920s, reformist discourse had shifted from theological debate to legislative action. Arya Samaj leaders supported Harbilas Sarda's efforts to pass the bill, framing it as aligned with national progress and social regeneration.

By promoting female education and discouraging early marriage, Arya Samaj positioned itself within a broader vision of social regeneration. However, scholars caution that reform movements were not always purely emancipatory. While opposing child marriage, Arya Samaj continued to support patriarchal family structures and emphasized women's roles as educated wives and mothers³⁵. Thus, its reforms were progressive within limits. Arya Samaj marriage ceremonies today generally require compliance with the legal minimum age under the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006). The Act currently sets minimum marriage ages at 18 for women and 21 for men in India.

While Arya Samaj historically opposed child marriage, contemporary scrutiny has occasionally arisen regarding age verification practices in some local institutions. Courts have emphasized strict adherence to legal safeguards to prevent misuse of religious ceremonies (Indian judiciary observations, various High Court rulings). Nevertheless, the ideological position of Arya Samaj remains firmly opposed to child marriage. Its historical legacy continues to influence reformist Hindu discourse.

Finally, in conclusion it could be said that Arya Samaj's campaign against child marriage was significant in several respects:

- (a) Scriptural Legitimization of Reform – It challenged orthodoxy using Vedic authority rather than colonial moralism.
- (b) Institutional Reform – Through schools and simplified marriage rites, it provided practical alternatives.
- (c) Legislative Support – It contributed to the intellectual and moral climate supporting legal reform.
- (d) Public Discourse – It reframed child marriage as a social evil rather than sacred duty.

However, reform was gradual and uneven. Child marriage did not disappear after legislation, highlighting the limits of ideological and legal interventions alone. Arya Samaj played a pivotal role in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century movement against child marriage in India. By combining scriptural reinterpretation, educational activism, and legislative advocacy, it helped reshape social norms surrounding marriage and childhood. Although it was one of several reformist forces, its distinctive reliance on Vedic authority enabled it to influence conservative constituencies effectively.

The legacy of Arya Samaj's anti-child-marriage campaign demonstrates how religious reform movements can function as agents of social transformation. While challenges persist, the historical contributions of Arya Samaj significantly advanced the cause of child protection and women's rights in India.

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