

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Social and Religious Reform Movements

Paper 2 · Unit 6

Rammohan Roy to the anti-caste movements: 70 marks in four years, present in every paper, and the unit where the revivalism versus modernisation tension is examined hardest.

anantamias.com

UPSC SYLLABUS

Social and religious reform movements in Bengal and other areas; Christian missionary activities in India; the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, Ramakrishna Mission, the Aligarh movement, the anti-caste movements, Jyotiba Phule, Narayana Guru, Periyar, Ambedkar.

What the reform movements were responding to

The 2025 paper asked about the tension between cultural revivalism and modernisation, and the 2026 paper about Rammohan Roy as a living bridge. Both need the context before the movements.

- **Christian missionary activity** expanded after the Charter Act of 1813 opened India to missionaries, and Serampore under Carey, Marshman and Ward combined preaching with printing, translation and education.
- Missionary **criticism of Hindu practice** on caste, sati, idolatry and the position of women forced an Indian response, and much early reform is best understood as an attempt to defend Hinduism by purifying it.
- **English education** and the printing press created a class able to read Sanskrit texts critically and European texts comparatively, which made textual reform possible in a new way.
- **Colonial legislation** entered the field with the abolition of sati in 1829, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, the Age of Consent Act of 1891 and the Sharda Act of 1929.
- The **strategy of appeal to scripture** is the common method: reformers argued that objectionable practices were later corruptions absent from the earliest texts, which let them claim to restore rather than to innovate.
- That strategy created the tension the 2025 question names, since appealing to a purer past is simultaneously a modernising move, using historical criticism, and a revivalist one, locating authority in antiquity.
- **Regional variation** matters: Bengal produced textual and theistic reform, western India produced social reform focused on caste and widows, and the south produced the sharpest anti-caste politics.
- The **class base** was largely the new English-educated professional and commercial groups, which is why early reform addressed the practices of the upper castes and reached the mass of society much later.

Rammohan Roy and the Brahmo Samaj

The 2026 paper quoted Tagore's description of Rammohan as a living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future. That image is the answer's structure: he faces both ways.

- **Rammohan Roy** founded the **Atmiya Sabha** in 1815 and the **Brahmo Sabha** in 1828, which became the Brahmo Samaj, and he campaigned successfully for the abolition of **sati in 1829** with William Bentinck.
- His method was scholarly and comparative: he read Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, English, Greek and Hebrew, translated the Vedanta and the Upanishads into Bengali and English, and argued against idolatry from Hindu scripture itself.

- The **Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin**, a gift to monotheists, written in Persian with an Arabic preface, shows he applied the same rationalist critique to all religions, not only to Hinduism.
- He defended **freedom of the press**, campaigned against the Press Regulation of 1823, and argued for English and scientific education against the Orientalist preference for Sanskrit, which is the modernising face.
- The **backward-facing** half of the bridge is equally real: he grounded his reform in the Upanishads and Vedanta, insisted on the authority of the earliest texts, and framed change as restoration.
- **Debendranath Tagore** reorganised the Samaj from 1843 and edited a rationalist selection of scripture, and **Keshab Chandra Sen** brought in more radical social reform and greater Christian influence before the splits of 1866 and 1878.
- The **Brahmo splits** are examinable: the Adi Brahmo Samaj under Debendranath, the Brahmo Samaj of India under Keshab, and the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj formed in 1878 after Keshab's daughter's marriage below the age his own campaign had set.
- The Brahmo achievement was disproportionate to its tiny membership, since it supplied leadership to the national movement, to women's education and to the professions across a century.
- For the 2026 question, the answer is that Rammohan is a bridge because he used indigenous textual authority to argue for modern positions, and because both later revivalists and later modernisers could claim him.

Reform in western and southern India

Bengal dominates most answers unfairly. The western and southern movements were often more socially radical and they lead directly to the anti-caste politics of the twentieth century.

- The **Prarthana Samaj**, founded in Bombay in 1867 under **Atmaram Pandurang** with **M. G. Ranade** and **R. G. Bhandarkar**, concentrated on practical social reform rather than theology.
- Its programme was concrete: opposition to caste restriction, widow remarriage, women's education and raising the age of marriage, and it was rooted in the Maharashtrian Bhakti tradition of Tukaram and Namdev.
- **Ranade** also founded the **Widow Remarriage Association** and the **National Social Conference** in 1887, which met alongside the Congress until the separation forced in 1895.
- **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** in Bengal secured the **Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856** by demonstrating scriptural sanction, and he expanded girls' education substantially as a school inspector.
- **Jyotiba Phule** founded the **Satyashodhak Samaj** in 1873, wrote **Gulamgiri** in 1873 identifying Brahmanical dominance as a form of slavery, and with **Savitribai Phule** opened schools for girls and for lower castes from 1848.
- Phule's significance is that he rejected the reformers' method entirely: he did not appeal to scripture for sanction because he regarded the scriptural tradition itself as the instrument of subordination.
- **Narayana Guru** in Kerala, with the **SNDP Yogam** from 1903, led the Ezhava movement with the formula one caste, one religion, one God for man, and consecrated temples open to all, which the **Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924 to 1925** then extended into a wider struggle over temple roads.

- **Periyar E. V. Ramasamy** founded the **Self-Respect Movement** in 1925, broke with the Congress over caste in the Vaikom and Cheranmadevi episodes, and pushed a rationalist and anti-Brahmanical politics that produced the Dravidian parties.
- **B. R. Ambedkar** moved the argument from reform to rights, through the Mahad satyagraha of 1927, the burning of the Manusmriti, the Poona Pact of 1932, *Annihilation of Caste* in 1936, the drafting of the Constitution, and his conversion to Buddhism in 1956.

KEY TERMS

Satyashodhak Samaj — Phule's truth-seeking society of 1873, which rejected Brahmanical mediation and scriptural authority outright.

Self-Respect Movement — Periyar's rationalist and anti-caste movement from 1925, the origin of Dravidian politics in Tamil Nadu.

Revivalist reform: Arya Samaj and Ramakrishna Mission

These two are where the 2025 question about revivalism and modernisation bites hardest, because both modernised institutionally while grounding authority in an idealised past.

- **Dayananda Saraswati** founded the **Arya Samaj** in Bombay in 1875, and his slogan **back to the Vedas** located all authority in the four Vedas while rejecting the Puranas, idolatry, pilgrimage and hereditary caste.
- The **Satyarth Prakash** (1875) set out the programme, and Dayananda's rejection of birth-based caste in favour of a varna order determined by merit was genuinely radical in its context.
- The Samaj's **institutional modernity** was real: the DAV schools and colleges from 1886, an organised missionary structure, and the **shuddhi** movement of reconversion from 1877 onwards.
- Shuddhi is where revivalism turned communal, since organised reconversion produced counter-organisation among Muslims and Sikhs, and the Arya Samaj's polemical style contributed to the hardening of religious boundaries in Punjab.
- The Samaj also split, between the Gurukul faction favouring Vedic education and the College faction favouring English education, which is the revivalism and modernisation tension made institutional.
- **Ramakrishna Paramahansa** taught the essential unity of religions from direct mystical experience rather than from textual argument, which is a different foundation from every other movement here.
- **Swami Vivekananda** founded the **Ramakrishna Mission** in 1897 after his address to the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1893, and reframed Vedanta as a universal philosophy compatible with science and social service.
- Vivekananda's contribution was the doctrine of **practical Vedanta** and service to the poor as worship, and his critique of the Indian neglect of the masses is among the sharpest of the century.
- The assessment to write: both movements produced modern institutions, education and social service while grounding their authority in an idealised Hindu past, and the same combination that gave them mobilising power also fed a majoritarian politics they did not intend.

The Aligarh movement and Muslim reform

Named separately in the syllabus. Judge Sir Syed on his educational achievement as well as his political position, since the two are usually confused.

- **Sir Syed Ahmad Khan** wrote the *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind*, on the causes of the 1857 revolt, arguing that exclusion of Indians from government and misunderstanding were responsible rather than conspiracy.
- He founded the **Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875**, which became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920, and its purpose was to reconcile Muslim religious identity with modern English education.
- His **theological method** was rationalist: he argued that nothing in the Quran could contradict the laws of nature, since both had the same author, which brought heavy criticism from the ulama.
- He opposed practices including polygamy and purdah, supported women's education in principle while moving cautiously, and campaigned for Muslim recruitment to government service.
- His **political position** was that Muslims should stay out of Congress politics, on the argument that a community lagging in education would lose in an electoral system, and this is the root of the later separate electorates demand.
- The **Deoband** school, founded in 1866, represents the opposite response, seeking revival through traditional Islamic learning and rejecting Western education, and Deobandi leaders were often nationalist while Aligarh was loyalist.
- Completing the spectrum are the **Ahl-i-Hadith** and the **Barelvi** movement of nineteenth century Muslim responses, and the Nadwat-ul-Ulama at Lucknow from 1894 attempted a synthesis of both approaches.
- The **Jamiat Ulama-i-Hind**, founded in 1919 out of the Deoband tradition, supported composite nationalism and opposed partition, which is essential evidence against any assumption that Muslim religious leadership was uniformly separatist.

Women and the reform movements

Reform was largely about women and largely conducted by men, and the best answers say so and then name the women who spoke for themselves.

- The **legislative sequence** is sati abolished 1829, widow remarriage legalised 1856, age of consent raised to twelve in 1891 and to fourteen for marriage by the Sharda Act of 1929.
- The **Age of Consent Act of 1891** provoked fierce nationalist opposition led by **Tilak**, on the argument that a foreign government had no right to legislate on Hindu domestic practice, which shows how reform and nationalism could collide.
- **Pandita Ramabai** converted to Christianity, founded the **Sharada Sadan** in 1889 and the Mukti Mission for widows, and her *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) is a first-hand indictment rather than a male reformer's account.
- **Tarabai Shinde's** *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882) is the sharpest feminist text of the century, arguing that the vices attributed to women were general to both sexes and that male authors had written the record.
- **Savitribai Phule** taught in and ran the first schools for girls and lower castes from 1848 and endured organised harassment for it, and she belongs in any answer alongside her husband rather than as a footnote.
- **Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain** founded a school for Muslim girls in Calcutta in 1911 and wrote *Sultana's Dream* (1905), a feminist utopia that inverts purdah by confining men.

- Organised women's bodies followed, with the **Bharat Stree Mahamandal** in 1910, the Women's Indian Association in 1917 and the **All India Women's Conference in 1927**, which shifted the initiative from male reformers to women themselves.
- The critical point to make: most male reform was concerned with the practices of upper caste women, treated women as objects of rescue rather than as agents, and did not address the labouring majority at all.

Assessment and the questions asked

Four questions in four years and they repeat a shape. Prepare the assessment rather than the chronology.

- For the 2025 tension question, argue that revivalism and modernisation were not alternatives but a single method, since appealing to a purified antiquity was how modern positions were made legitimate in a colonial context.
- Distinguish the **reformist** movements, which sought change within the tradition, from the **revivalist**, which sought return to a purified tradition, and from the **radical anti-caste** movements of Phule, Periyar and Ambedkar, which rejected the tradition's authority altogether.
- State the **achievements** concretely: legislation on sati, widow remarriage and the age of marriage, a network of modern educational institutions, and the beginnings of women's and Dalit organisation.
- State the **limits** just as concretely: an upper caste and urban base, women as objects rather than authors of reform, minimal reach into the countryside, and a religious idiom that hardened community boundaries.
- The **communal consequence** is the hardest thing to state fairly. Shuddhi and its counter-movements, and the Aligarh political position, contributed to the separation of communities without any of the reformers intending partition.
- Always name at least one figure from outside Bengal and one anti-caste leader, because an answer built only on Rammohan, Dayananda and Vivekananda is the commonest and weakest version of this answer.

Last-mile revision

- Rammohan: Atmiya Sabha 1815, Brahmo Sabha 1828, sati abolished 1829, Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidin, press freedom, Vedanta as authority.
- Brahmo splits: Adi under Debendranath, Brahmo Samaj of India under Keshab, Sadharan 1878.
- Prarthana Samaj 1867, Ranade, National Social Conference 1887; Vidyasagar and the 1856 Act.
- Phule: Satyashodhak Samaj 1873, Gulamgiri 1873, schools from 1848 with Savitribai.
- Narayana Guru and SNDP 1903, Vaikom 1924-25; Periyar Self-Respect 1925; Ambedkar Mahad 1927, Poona Pact 1932, Annihilation of Caste 1936, conversion 1956.
- Arya Samaj 1875, Satyarth Prakash, back to the Vedas, DAV from 1886, shuddhi from 1877, Gurukul and College split.
- Ramakrishna Mission 1897 after Chicago 1893; practical Vedanta and service.
- Aligarh: Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind, MAO College 1875, rationalist theology, stay out of Congress; Deoband 1866 and Jamiat 1919 as the nationalist counterpart.

- Women: Pandita Ramabai 1887 and Sharada Sadan 1889, Tarabai Shinde 1882, Rokeya 1905 and 1911, AIWC 1927.

Common errors to avoid

- Writing the unit entirely from Bengal. Phule, Narayana Guru, Periyar and Ambedkar are named in the syllabus and their absence caps a script.
- Treating revivalism and modernisation as opposites. The 2025 question is asking you to see that appealing to a purified past was itself the modernising method.
- Calling Sir Syed a separatist. His position was that Muslims should prioritise education before electoral politics, and Deoband and the Jamiat show the range of Muslim opinion.
- Forgetting that Tilak opposed the Age of Consent Act. Reform and nationalism were not always on the same side.
- Presenting reform as something done for women. Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Savitribai Phule and Rokeya wrote and acted for themselves.
- Ignoring the communal consequences of shuddhi and its counter-movements, which followed from revivalist reform even though no reformer intended them.

Mains Practice

'Raja Rammohan Roy stands in history as the living bridge over which India marches from her unmeasured past to her incalculable future.' Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2026

“The tensions between cultural revivalism and modernization shaped the trajectory of the socio-religious reform movements in nineteenth-century India.”

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

The universalist perspective of socio-religious reform movements was not a 'purely philosophic concern; it strongly influenced the political and social outlook of the time'. Examine.

20 marks · 250 words · 2023

In course of the nineteenth century, the agenda of social reform was gradually replaced.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024