

Brahmo Samaj

Brahmo Samaj (Bengali: ব্রাহ্ম সমাজ *Bramho Shômaj*) is a Hindu reform movement. It is the societal component of Brahmoism, a monotheistic reformist movement of the Hindu religion that appeared during the Bengal Renaissance. It is practised today mainly as the Adi Dharm after its eclipse in Bengal consequent to the exit of the Tattwabodini Sabha from its ranks in 1839. After the publication of Hemendranath Tagore's *Brahmo Anusthan* (code of practice) in 1860 which formally divorced Brahmoism from Hinduism, the first Brahmo Samaj was founded in 1861 atLahore by Pandit Nobin Chandra Roy

It was one of the most influential religious movements in India ^[1] and made a significant contribution to the making of modern India.^[2] It was started at Calcutta on 20 August 1828 by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Devendranath Tagore as reformation of the prevailing Brahmanism of the time (specifically Kulin practices) and began the Bengal Renaissance of the 19th century pioneering all religious, social and educational advance of the Hindu community in the 19th century. Its Trust Deed was made in 1830 formalising its inception and it was duly and publicly inaugurated in January 1830 by the consecration of the first house of prayer, now known as the Adi Brahmo Samaj.^[3] From the *Brahmo Samaj*s springs Brahmoism, the most recent of legally recognised religions in India and Bangladesh, reflecting its foundation on reformed spiritual Hinduism with vital elements of Judeo-Islamic faith and practice.^{[4][5]}

Raja Rammohan Roy founded Brahmo Samaj in 1828 in the name of Brahmo Sabha.

Brahmoism	
Scripture	Brahmo Dharma
Theology	Monotheism
Pradhanacharya-1	Ram Mohan Roy
Pradhanacharya-2	Dwarkanath Tagore
Pradhanacharya-3	Debendranath Tagore
Founder	Ram Mohan Roy
Origin	1828 Kolkata, West Bengal, India
Separated from	Sanātanī Hinduism
Other name(s)	Adi Dharm
Official website	http://true.brahmosamaj.in

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Meaning of the name

The Brahmo Samaj literally denotes community (Sanskrit: '*samaj*') of men who worship Brahman the highest reality.^[6] In reality Brahmo Samaj does not discriminate between caste, creed or religion and is an assembly of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction, meeting publicly for the sober, orderly, religious and devout adoration of "*the (nameless) unsearchable Eternal, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe.*"^[7]

Doctrine

The following doctrines, as noted in Renaissance of Hinduism, are common to all varieties and ~~is~~shoots of the *Brahmo Samaj*.^[8]

- Brahmo Samajists have no faith in any scripture as an authority
- Brahmo Samajists have no faith in ~~A~~vatars
- Brahmo Samajists denounce polytheism and idol-worship.
- Brahmo Samajists are against caste restrictions.
- Brahmo Samajists make faith in the doctrines of Karma and Rebirth optional.

Brahmo Samaj as incremental propagation of Christianity

Writing in 1868, Anglican Christian missionary Matthew Atmore Sherring observed <r"The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times, Rev. M.A. Sherring". Trubner and Co., Paternoster Row 1868.</ref> [that]:

What the telegraph, and railroads, and canals, and bridges, and metalled roads are accomplishing, physically, in opening up the country, and in developing its immense resources, so much, and more, Christianity and education are effecting, intellectually in uprooting error and superstition, in imparting right notions respecting virtue and religion, and in elevating the people generally. *The most conspicuous and decided illustration of this, is, undoubtedly, visible in some parts of Bengal, particularly in Calcutta and other cities and towns in which the society called the Brahmo Samaj exists.* [...] I earnestly hope that, *having taken a great step in advance of gross heathenism*, the members of *the Brahmo Samaj will take another*, still further in advance, and yet more decided *and will embrace the pure religion of Christ*, in its entirety, *from which nearly all that is good in their own reformed religion has been derived*.

— M.A. Sherring, *The Sacred City of the Hindus: An Account of Benares in Ancient and Modern Times* (1868)

But this incremental view has not been endorsed even partially in any writing of Brahmo samaj or its proponents. Hence, this is just a view of the christian missionary Matthew Atmore Sherring.

Divisions of Brahmo Samaj

- Adi Brahmo Samaj
- Sadharan Brahmo Samaj

Anusthanic versus Ananusthanic Brahmos

To understand the differences between the two streams of Brahmo Samaj it is essential to understand that these implicit distinctions are based on caste. The Anusthanic Brahmos are exclusively either Brahmins or casteless, and exclusively adhere to Brahmoism and have no other faith. The Ananusthanic Brahmo Samajists, however, are from the remaining main caste divisions of Hinduism like

Kayastha, Baidya etc. and hence within the Karmic / Rebirth wheel to eternally progress (i.e. *Sanatan Dharm*) to God by moving up caste hierarchies, unlike anusthanic Brahmos for whom the next step after death is reintegration and renewal with 'God'.^[9]

History and timeline

Brahmo Sabha

On 20 August 1828 the first assembly of the *Brahmo Sabha* (progenitor of the Brahmo Samaj) was held at the North Calcutta house of Feringhee Kamal Bose. This day was celebrated by Brahmos as *Bhadrotsab* (ভাদ্রোৎসব *Bhadrotshôb* "Bhadro celebration"). These meetings were open to all Brahmins and there was no formal organisation or theology as such!^{[10][11]}

On 8 January 1830 influential progressive members of the closely related Kulin Brahmin clan^[12] scurrilously^[13] described as Pirali Brahmin ie. ostracised for service in the Mughal *Nizaamat* of Bengal) of Tagore (*Thakur*) and Roy (*Vandopādhyāya*) *zumeendar* family mutually executed the Trust deed of Brahmo Sabha for the first Adi Brahmo Samaj (place of worship) on Chitpore Road (now Rabindra Sarani), Kolkata, India with Ram Chandra Vidyabagish as first resident superintendent!^[14]

On 23 January 1830 or 11th *Magh*, the *Adi Brahmo* premises were publicly inaugurated (with about 500 Brahmins and 1 Englishman present). This day is celebrated by Brahmos as *Maghotsab* (মাঘোৎসব *Maghotshôb* "Magh celebration").

In November 1830 Rammohun Roy left for England. Akbar II had conferred the title of 'Raja' to Rammohun Roy^[15]



Raja Ram Mohan Roy

Brief Eclipse of Brahmo Sabha

With Rammohun's departure for England in 1830, the affairs of Brahmo Sabha were effectively managed by Trustees Dwarkanath Tagore and Pandit Ram Chandra Vdyabagish, with Dwarkanath instructing his *diwan* to manage affairs.

By the time of Rammohun's death in 1833 near Bristol (UK), attendance at the *Sabha* dwindled and the Telugu Brahmins revived idolatry. The *zameendars*, being preoccupied in business, had little time for affairs of *Sabha*, and flame of *Sabha* was almost extinguished.^[16]

Tattwabodhini period

On 6 October 1839 Debendranath Tagore, son of (Prince) Dwarkanath Tagore, established *Tattvaranjini Sabha* which was shortly thereafter renamed the Tattwabodhini (*Truth-seekers*) Sabha. Initially confined to immediate members of the Tagore family, in 2 years it mustered over 500 members. In 1840 Debendranath published a Bangla translation of *Katha Upanishad*. A modern researcher describes the Sabha's philosophy as *modern middle-class (bourgeois) Vedanta*.^[17] Among its first members were the "two giants of Hindu reformation and Bengal Renaissance, Akshay Kumar Datta "who in 1839 emerged from the life of an anonymous squalor-beset individual" and Ishwar Chandra Vdyasagar the "indigenous modernizer"^[18]

First Covenant and merger with the Tattwabodhini Sabha

On 7th Pous 1765 Shaka (1843) Debendranath Tagore and twenty other Tattwabodhini stalwarts were formally invited by Pt. Vidyabagish into the Trust of Brahmo Sabha. The Pous Mela at Santiniketan starts on this day.^[19] From this day forth, the Tattwabodhini Sabha dedicated itself to promoting Ram Mohan Roy's creed.^[20] The other Brahmins who swore the First Covenant of

Brahmoism are:-

- Shridhar Bhattacharya
- Shyamacharan Bhattacharya
- Brajendranath Tagore
- Girindranath Tagore, brother of Debendranath Tagore & father of Ganendranath Tagore
- Anandachandra Bhattacharya
- Taraknath Bhattacharya
- Haradev Chattopadhyaya, the future father-in-law to MahaAcharya Hemendranath Tagore^[21]
- Shyamacharan Mukhopadhyaya
- Ramnarayan Chattopadhyaya
- Sashibhushan Mukhopadhyaya

Disagreement with the Tattwabodhini

In Nov 1855 the Rev. Charles Dall (a Unitarian minister of Boston) arrived in Calcutta to start his mission and immediately established contact with Debendranath and other Brahmos. Debendranath's suspicion of foreigners alienated Dall and in 1857, Debendranath Tagore barred the entry of the Reverend from the Sabha premises for preaching *the name of Christ who some people worship as God* within.^{[22][23]} Debendranath then proceeded on spiritual retreat to Simla. Dall, immediately formed a counter group "The friends of Rammohun Roy Society" and then got admitted a protégé to Sabha. The presence of Dall's protégé Keshub Chandra Sen (a non-Brahmin) into the Calcutta Brahmo Sabha in 1857 while Debendranath was away in Simla caused considerable stress in the movement, with many long time Tattwabodhini Brahmin members publicly leaving the Brahmo Sabha and institutions due to his high-handed ways. In September 1858, Debendranath returned to Calcutta to resolve the simmering disputes, but his conservative mien did not allow him to take decisive steps. He proceeded on a sea voyage to Ceylon accompanied by Sen and his 2nd son Satyendranath (a firm admirer of Mr Sen) but no concord was achieved. In 1859, the venerable and beloved Secretary of the Tattwabodhini Sabha Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar resigned from the Brahmo Sabha in the face of Debendranath's vacillation. A meeting of the Tattwabodhini was promptly summoned with Debendranath resigning from the group he had founded. His third son Hemendranath Tagore then a boy barely 15 years in age, and the favorite pupil of Vidyasagar, was commonly acclaimed as Debendranath's successor to head the Tattwabodhini. In the course of time he would become known as the *MahaAcharya* (or *Great Teacher*).

Expansion of the Tattwabodhini Sabha

Disgusted by politics within the Tagore family and the support to K. C. Sen's faction by his own brother Satyendranath Tagore, Hemendranath took the bold decisions to expand his Sabha out from Calcutta. His close associate Pandit Nobin Chandra Roy who had joined the new institution of "Railways" in 1860 as its "Paymaster" for Upper India was tasked to spread Brahmoism there. With a predominantly monotheistic populace following Islam and Sikhism it was perceived as fertile soil for Rammohun's message. The Tattwabodhini decreed that the uncorrupted faith of the original 1830 Trust Deed would be known there as the Adi Dharm to distinguish it from the distorted versions of the squabbling factions of Calcutta. The steps taken by Hemendranath Tagore, with the blessing of his father, was to institute in 1860 a suit before the Supreme Court to restore the title "Brahmo Samaj" to his faction. After losing in this suit in 1861, Keshub Sen's faction altered the name of their Samaj from "The Brahmo Samaj of India" to "Navavidhan (or the New Dispensation)". With victory in this suit and the promulgation of his *Brahmo Anusthan* (Code of Brahmaic doctrine and practice) in 1861, Hemendranath's Samaj-ists are henceforth known as the "Anusthanic" Brahmos (or Brahmos who follow the Code). The other factions were designated as "Ananusthanic" Brahmos (or those who do not follow the Code) (this distinction was again to be legally examined before the Privy Council of Great Britain in 1901 and in 1902 the Privy Council upheld the 1897 finding of the Chief Court of the Punjab that the *Adi Dharm (anusthanic Brahmos)* were definitely not Hindus whereas the *Ananusthanics Brahmos* of Calcutta fall within Hinduism).

Foundation of the Brahmo Samaj

In 1861 the *Brahmo Samaj* (as it was spelled then) was founded at Lahore by Nobin Roy.^[24] It included many Bengalis from the Lahore Bar Association. Many branches were opened in the Punjab, aQuetta, Rawalpindi, Amritsar etc.

First Secession

Disagreement with the Tattvabodhini came to a head publicly between the period of 1 August 1865 till November 1866 with many tiny splinter groups styling themselves as *Brahmo*. The most notable of these groups styled itself "Brahmo Samaj of India". This period is also referred to in the histories of the secessionists as the "First Schism".^[25]

Brahmo Samaj and Swami Narendranath Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda was a member of the Brahmo Samaj when he was studying in Scottish Church College, India, from 1881 to 1884, and remained with the Brahmo Samaj until he met his guru, Sri Ramakrishna in November 1881, and eventually became his disciple.^{[26][27]}

Current status and number of adherents

While the various Calcutta sponsored movements declined after 1920 and faded into obscurity after the Partition of India, the Adi Dharm creed has expanded and is now the 9th largest of India's enumerated religions with 7.83 million adherents, heavily concentrated between the states of Punjab and Uttar Pradesh. In the Indian census of 2001 only 177 persons declared themselves a "Brahmo", but the number of subscriber members to Brahmo Samaj is somewhat larger at around 20,000 members.^{[28][29]}

Social and religious reform

In all fields of social reform, including abolition of the caste system and of the dowry system, emancipation of women, and improving the educational system, the *Brahmo Samaj* reflected the ideologies of the Bengal Renaissance. Brahmoism, as a means of discussing the dowry system, was a central theme of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's noted 1914 Bengali language novella, *Parineeta*.

In 1866, Keshub Chandra Sen organised the more radical "Brahmo Samaj of India" with overtones of Christianity. He campaigned for the education of women and against child marriages. But he nonetheless arranged a marriage for his own underage daughter. The *Brahmo Samaj of India* split after this act of underage marriage generated a controversy and his pro-British utterances and leaning towards Christian rites generated more controversies. A third group, "Sadharan (ordinary) Brahmo Samaj", was formed in 1878. It gradually reverted to the teaching of the Upanishads but continued the work of social reform. The movement, always an elite group without significant popular following, lost force in the 20th century

After the controversy of underage marriage of Keshub Chunder Sen's daughter, the *Special Marriages Act of 1872* was enacted to set the minimum age of 14 years for marriage of girls.^[30] All Brahmo marriages were thereafter solemnised under this law. Many Indians resented the requirement of the affirmation "I am not Hindu, nor a Mussalman, nor a Christian" for solemnising a marriage under this Act. The requirement of this declaration was imposed by Henry James Sumner Maine, legal member of Governor General's Council appointed by Britain. The 1872 Act was repealed by the Special Marriage Act, 1954 under which any person of any religion could marry. The Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 applies to all Hindus including followers of the Brahmo Samaj. In India the statutory minimum age of marriage for followers of Brahmo Samaj is the same as for all Indians, viz., 21 years for males and 18 years for females. It is also the age of marriage in Bangladesh.

It also supported social reform movements of people not directly attached to the *Samaj*, such as Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar's movement which promoted widow remarriage.

See also

- History of Bengal
- Prarthana Samaj

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External links

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 - Brahmo Samaj.net
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