

# 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY INDIAN CULTURE

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## Architecture

**Colonial** Although Hindu and Islamic architecture continued with the trends set in the early modern period, the 19<sup>th</sup> century was the grand era of colonial, mostly British, architecture. Libraries, museums, universities, law courts, railway terminals and government buildings were all erected with massive dimensions as a visual display of power. Most were designed in the neo-classical style, such as the Government House in Calcutta.

**Indo-Saracenic** Toward the end of the century, European architects in India began to build in the Indo-Saracenic style, which combined features of Victorian Gothic with Mughal architecture. Mughal architecture was preferred to Hindu architecture because its domes and arches were considered more compatible with European buildings methods than were the post and beam structure of Hindu temples. The Napier Museum in Trivandrum (1880) and the Taj Hotel in Bombay (1903) are both fine examples of this composite style.

## Painting

**Cloth** While court painting declined from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, painting traditions at the local level maintained their vitality. Painted cloth scrolls depicting mythological scenes were (and in some cases are still) used as a backdrop to storytelling traditions in Bengal, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

**Kalighat** One of these cloth-painting traditions became a commercial success in the Kalighat district of Calcutta. Local folk artists produced these paintings and then sold them to the pilgrims who came to the temples and shrines in the area, eventually attracting interest from Europeans and Bengali elites. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, this popular visual art had been undermined by mass-produced wood-cuts and later by poster art.

**Raja Ravi Rama** Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore (1848-1906) is thought to be the first Indian to adapt western techniques of perspective and composition to Indian content in painting. He chose traditional Indian scenes and figures from both real-life and mythology. Having won a prestigious award in the 1870s, he soon became famous in British colonial society and then in European capitals. Toward the end of his life, he set up a lithographic press that mass-produced his paintings and made them available to people who could not otherwise afford them. This technology of reproduction then led to an explosion of popular visual culture in the next century.

## Theatre

**Parsi** From the 1850s, Parsi theatre (named after the Iranian Parsi community who subsidised it) thrived in Bombay and later in other north Indian cities. Parsi theatre drew on European techniques of presentation (principally the proscenium arch) but was largely Indian in content. Most stories were taken from Hindu and Persian sources, dialogue was in Indian languages and the acting was accompanied by light-classical music from the Mughal courts.

**European** A more strictly European theatre, presenting European plays in English, was introduced during the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the British for entertainment in the provincial centres. *Othello* was staged in Calcutta in the 1840s, and that city continued to be a centre for modern theatre into the next century. Shakespeare was performed by travelling troupes (sometimes in Indian languages) well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Folk** Several forms of folk theatre were also popular in the cities and towns during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Jatra, a theatre tradition in Bengali, for example, influenced the development of modern theatre in Calcutta, while the Tamil-language Teru Kuttu tradition did the same in Madras.

### Print

Print emerged as an important element of culture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially in the provincial capitals (Madras, Calcutta and Bombay) but also, by the end of the century, in towns and cities. From the 1830s onward, publishing by missionaries and provincial governments was augmented by Indian-owned presses that found commercial success in supplying textbooks for the increasing number of schools and traditional texts (classical poetry, tales, epics, myths) for the emerging Hindu revival movements.

### Hindu Revivalism

**Origins** By the 1820s, British colonialism (particularly in the form of Christianity and the English language) had sufficiently penetrated the lives of Indian elites in the provincial capitals to provoke a cultural backlash. This cultural revival was facilitated by the dissemination and consumption of ancient Hindu texts (both in Sanskrit and Tamil) in the form of printed books. In other words, Indian cultural revival was made possible by European technology and European philology (assisted by traditional Indian scholarship).

**Bengal Renaissance** Hindu revivalism was most prominent in Calcutta, appropriately the capital of colonial India. From the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Bengalis were exposed to colonial institutions of law, church and learning, which led to a reassessment of tradition known as the Bengal Renaissance.

**Brahmo Samaj** At the centre of this reassessment was the Brahmo Samaj. Formed in 1828 by Bengali elites and led by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), it encouraged a monotheistic, rational Hinduism that opposed the worship of idols, widow-burning (*sati*) and caste inequality.

**Arya Samaj** In 1875 a Hindu ascetic named Dayananda Saraswati (1827-1883) founded the Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj also rejected the caste system but differed from the Brahmo Samaj in that it maintained the authority of the Vedas and appealed to the masses. Dayananda Saraswati began his reform activities somewhat earlier with the establishment of 'Vedic school' intended to revive ancient Indian culture. The schools failed, however, and he broadened his revival campaign to attract more popular support by championing the protection of cows from slaughter.

**Vivekananda** Perhaps the reform movement with the most lasting effect was that begun by Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902). A brilliant speaker, and fluent in English (he famously addressed the Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893), he was a traditional Hindu holy man and renouncer who combined the monism of the Vedanta school of philosophy with the social uplift message of 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformism.

**Saiva Siddhanta** Saiva Siddhanta was a south Indian reform movement led by Ramalinga Swamy (1823-1874), among others. Like Vivekananda, Ramalinga Swamy

came from a historical lineage of traditional holy men, but he was far more provincial and lacked the Bengali man's cosmopolitan outlook. Again, and like most 19<sup>th</sup>-century reformers, he (a non-Brahmin) denounced the caste system and dedicated himself to uplifting the poor.

### Muslim Revivalism

**Origins** Muslim reform movements, beginning in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with the decline of the Mughal Empire and centred in Delhi, took diverse forms in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Some strove to rid Islam of Hindu practices and the belief in the intercessionary power of Sufi saints, some spoke of a *jihad* against infidels and some sought reform through inner purification. After the suppression of the Indian Revolt/Mutiny in the 1850s, Muslims felt a further sense of loss and responded by seeking reform through three strategies.

**Deoband** The first of these was rooted in the Deoband seminary of Islamic scholars founded in 1867 in a small town north of Delhi. The curriculum emphasised the authority of the Qur'an and other traditional Islamic texts, in other words a scriptural Islam far removed from the popular practices centred on saints' tombs. This strategy was nevertheless popular among educated Muslims, and by 1900 forty Deobandi schools had been set up in different parts of north India.

**Aligarh** The Aligarh movement was led by Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) and based at the Anglo-Oriental College (est. 1875-1878) in Aligarh, north India. It advocated reform based not on strict Islamic tradition but on an English education combined with Islam. Islamic texts, it was argued, should be interpreted in their historical context and adopted to fit new and evolving social situations. Several important Muslim thinkers were influenced by the Aligarh movement and went on to develop what some have called a 'modernist Islam.'

**Barelvi** The third strand of Muslim revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century centred on the thinking of Ahmad Raza Khan of Bareilly (1856-1921) and came to be known as 'Barelvi.' His solution to the problem of Muslims in colonial and post-Mughal India was to emphasise the role of the Prophet, who (he argued) was nearly identical to God himself. Barelvis allowed for the intercessionary power of saints, but they placed them below Allah in a hierarchy of soteriological assistance.

## Reading

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## Discussion questions

Architecture is often said to reflect social and political realities more than any other form of visual culture. Defend or refute this argument by analysing colonial and Indo-Saracenic building in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India.

Some historians have argued that the British Raj contained the seeds of its own destruction. In other words, the very values and institutions that it established in India provided the arguments and produced the men and women who led the Independence movement. Evaluate this thesis by analysing colonialism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India.

Select one of the Hindu revival movements and discuss its place in 19<sup>th</sup>-century India. Pay attention to the origins, ideas and leading figures of the movement, as well as the means by which these leaders communicated with the masses.

Muslim reformers faced a somewhat different task to that of their Hindu counterparts. The loss of empire, the failure of the 1857-1858 revolt, the decline of Persian culture and the perceived incompatibility between Islam and British colonialism left Muslims in India with difficult choices, ranging from accommodation to outright rejection of social and political realities. Analyse the strategies chosen by three main reform movements. What factors best explain their origins, their differences and their subsequent histories?