

Proselytization in Modern Indian Historical Scene and Activities of Arya Samaj (with special reference to Shuddhi Movement)

Shodh Siddhi

A Multidisciplinary & Multilingual Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Volume: 02 | Issue: 01 [January to March : 2026], pp. 1-6



Dr. Meghna Sharma

Associate Professor and Head
Department of History
Maharaja Ganga Singh University
Bikaner (Rajasthan)

Abstract

The Shuddhi Movement was a significant socio-religious reform initiative associated with the AryaSamaj, inspired by the teachings of Swami DayanandSaraswati in the nineteenth century. Swami Dayanand strongly believed in the supremacy of the Vedas and advocated a return to the pure and rational principles of ancient Vedic religion. He opposed idolatry, superstition, caste rigidity, and religious conversions that, in his view, weakened Indian society.

The idea of Shuddhi—meaning “purification”—was rooted in Dayanand’s conviction that individuals who had left Hindu society due to social discrimination or coercion should be respectfully reintegrated. Though Swami Dayanand passed away in 1883, his thoughts laid the ideological foundation for the Shuddhi Movement, which was later systematized by AryaSamaj leaders such as Swami Shradhdhanand.

The movement aimed at social reform by removing untouchability and providing a dignified place to marginalized communities within Hindu society. It also functioned as a response to organized religious conversions during the colonial period, emphasizing self-respect, cultural pride, and religious unity. The Shuddhi Movement promoted education, social equality, and moral upliftment through Vedic rituals rather than elaborate ceremonies.

Swami Dayanand’s role was crucial in shaping the philosophical base of the movement. His emphasis on rational inquiry, ethical living, and national regeneration transformed the Shuddhi Movement into a broader instrument of cultural nationalism. Thus, the Shuddhi Movement stands as an important chapter in India’s reformist history, reflecting Swami DayanandSaraswati’s enduring influence on religious and social awakening.

Keywords: Shuddhi Movement, Swami DayanandSaraswati, AryaSamaj, Vedic Revivalism, Social Reform.

The Shuddhi ceremony was used to readmit apostate Hindus into their ancestral faith. The Samajcultivated a militant spirit amongst its members, conducting a vigorous propaganda against both Christianity and Islam in which practically no holds were barred and in British India violence and the Samaj was shown no mercy by its Muslim enemies.¹Shuddhi was prevalent even in the earliest times. Hindus had forgotten that Shuddhi (Purification) was an ancient ritual and a custom. The Vedas and the Brahmanas prescribe the rite for the redemption of those fallen from the creed of Vedic dharma of the Arya Society.

The Shuddhi Movement occupies a significant place in the socio-religious history of modern India. As a reform initiative rooted in the ideals of the AryaSamaj and inspired by the teachings of Swami DayanandSaraswati, the movement aimed at the purification, reintegration, and moral upliftment of Indian society. Its conclusion, however, does not signify an abrupt end but rather a gradual transformation shaped by changing political, social, and religious conditions.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the Shuddhi Movement had achieved several of its immediate objectives. It succeeded in bringing back sections of people who had been alienated from Hindu society due to social discrimination, rigid caste practices, or historical circumstances. The movement also compelled orthodox Hindu society to confront internal weaknesses such as untouchability, social exclusion, and lack of unity. In this sense, Shuddhi acted as a catalyst for self-reform within Hindu society rather than merely a program of reconversion.

The Concept of Shuddhi; Dayanand's Initiative and Propaganda Against Proselytizing Activities and Call for Swadharma

Redeem those fallen from Satya Dharma. Bestow a new life to the sinful and the degraded.²Oh: Ye authoritative people purify others for the performance of divinely ordained Acts. The basicVedic fundamental of Krinvanto³VishwamAryam is yet another form of purification. Additionallythe Manusmriti⁴ also laid down various expiatory acts to restore those sinners or the fallen back tothe Vedic Dharma. Earlier, sages Yagnavalkya, Devala, Medatithi and other Smritikars also laid downsimilar expiatory acts after the early Muslim invasion of India. There- after certain exigencies ofenvironments and circumstances permit- ted shortcuts to atonements by the mere sipping ofAachman Water, by the mere recitation of the sacred syllable Om or the Gayatri Mantra or by simplybestowing to right to wear the Yagnopaveet (Sacred Thread) to those entitled to it for thereadmission of the fallen back to the Hindu fold after forcible conversion to Islam or Christianity.

Adi Shankar simplified the process still further by blowing the Conch and whoever heard it was considered Shuddha or purified. The simplification process was carried still further to purify thesinner by a mere dip in the Holy Ganga and other rivers.⁵Shuddhi movement took back into theHindu-fold those of its members who had been converted to some other faith. The AryaSamaj tookinto the Aryan fold persons belonging to other faiths by birth.⁶ Literally, Shuddhi meanspurification, but when used by AryaSamajists it also included reclamation and conversion. It wasachieved by AryaSamaj, by means of Shuddhi. Swami Dayanand made the first convert from Islam at Dehradun.⁷Dayanand thought that without recognizing and adopting Swadharma the nationcannot be made to think of its glorious past and Vedic way of life. A number of foreigners werepurified and included in the Hindu fold. ⁸They increased the number of Hindus. But, this practicestopped when the Hindu society was enclosed in the

walls of rigid casteism. Birth, became the criteria of caste. Modern Shuddhi movement was initiated by the AryaSamaj.⁹

The Rajputs and converted Christians were included again in the Hindus which created indignation among the masses. AryaSamaj laid emphasis on Shastras to prove that their action was right.¹⁰ The number of depressed classes in India according to the Census of India, 1921, mounted up to nearly 52.7 millions.¹¹ The British Government also realized their importance as a weapon against the Indian aspirations for Swaraj.

In their name they could reserve some seats for their own nominees in the legislatures. Christian missionaries did not lose sight of the situation and tried to capture the depressed classes to their fold. For this they opened their schools, orphanages and hospitals. It was in these institutions that the people of Hindu origin were influenced by the Christian missionaries and after a passage of time brought them into their fold. In fact the Christian missionaries were trying that they all sorts of methods to bring Indians into their fold. They hit upon the device of dressing themselves like the Hindu Sadhus and organized the Salvation Army. They even went to the extent, as to follow Hindu customs in the matter of wearing the holy thread etc. in order to convert Hindus to Christianity.¹²

The Gait Circular threatened the Hindus that in the Census of 1911, the out-caste might not be classified as Hindus, agreed that, The Gait Circular had a quite unexpected effect and galvanized the dying body of orthodox Hinduism into sympathy with its untouchable population.¹³ Even as far back as 1890, the Aryas were called upon to ask the Superintendent of Census operation to show them in the Census papers as belonging to a separate religion and not as a sect of Hindus.¹⁴ Census Report of Uttar Pradesh for 1921 records that "there is no doubt that a deliberate attempt was made and successfully made by members of the Samaj, the open enemy of Christianity in this province, to induce Christian converts from Hinduism to their former religion."¹⁵ Census Report of Uttar Pradesh for 1921 records that there is no doubt that a deliberate attempt was made and successfully made by members of the Samaj, the open enemy of Christianity in this province, to induce Christian converts from Hinduism to their former religion.¹⁶

It was in the sphere of proselytizing that AryaSamaj came into direct conflict with Christianity. It tried to convert, through Shuddhi, the Hindus lost to Christianity. They also tried to prevent any more conversions. In this way, their means were offensive but their aim and approach was defensive.

According to Sir Herbert, It is a notable fact that the Hindu sectarian movement which appeals most strongly to the educated classes is bitterly opposed to Christianity and lays itself out not merely to counteract the efforts of missionaries but to reconvert to Hinduism high Caste men who have become Christians.¹⁷ In fact, "in the AryaSamaj and among the Hindus in general, there was a kind of determination not to allow the untouchable to be considered as anything but Hindus. This attitude stemmed largely from political considerations. The Hindus required these people to keep up the numbers of political claim"¹⁸ Similarly Miss Mayo insinuated that "the concern being shown by the Hindus of upper caste for their low-caste brethren was due, not so much to humanitarian feelings, as to the consciousness that in neglecting the untouchables lay a political danger to their community."¹⁹ The admission of low-caste Hindus to the AryaSamaj sometimes was also of the nature of mass conversion. In the territories of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, 10000 and in the district of Sialkot 36000 were admitted en bloc into the Samaj. The Rajput Shuddhi Sabha formed by the Aryas for the purpose of

reconverting to Hinduism. It is estimated that nearly two thirds of the Arya members in the Punjab were of the depressed classes.²⁰

A society was affiliated to the aryasamaj, popularly known as the Rajput ShuddhiSabha whose objective was the re-conversion of Mohammedan Rajputs to Hinduism through the AryaSamaj.²¹ A provincial Hindu Sabha at Ajmer was established in 1923 which laid stress on Shuddhi movements weekly Satsangs and Kirtans etc.²² The Rajput ShuddhiSabha, affiliated to the Samaj converted Mohammedan Rajputs to Hinduism through the AryaSamaj. Mohammedan Rajputs, is said to have won for the Aryas the conversions of as many as 370 in one day. Between 1907 and 1910, the society claimed to have reconverted 1052.²³

On Sunday 3rd October, 1937 at 10:00 AM Mr. A.C Agebeth and Smt. Badami Devi gave up Christianity and readily accepted the Vedic Religion.²⁴ The Sabha took back in their fold 1,83,342 people within eight years, protected 1,451 women and 3,155 orphans conducted 127 Sammelans and 156 Panchayats, organised 81 big feasts.²⁵ Similarly large scale Shuddhi was done at places like Layalpur and Ropar etc.²⁶ In order to encourage, an All IndiaShraddhanandaShuddhiSabha was established in 1931. The king of Tirva Raja Durga Narayan Singhwas the Chairman of this Sabha. Swami Chidanand, the Prime-Minister and KunwarChandkranSardaof Ajmer were elected as Minister. Shraddhanand Bazaar, Delhi was the Head Office of this Sabha. Two letters, namely Shraddhanand and Prajabandhu, were published by the Sabha. 6953 Hinduswere brought under Shuddhi in eight years out of which 192 were ladies. 205 orphans wereprotected and kept under proper management.²⁷

The AryaSamaj of Gujranwala openly took back into theArya dharmaa Mohammedan by birth.²⁸ A great tumult was created in the Muslim world after the Shuddhi of Muslim graduate, Abdul Gafoorin Gunjarawala city of Punjab, in the year 1903. He was named as Dharmpal in the Arya world. In1907, we come across the news that 375 Muslims of Banthara entered the Arya world. Similarly, in1909, a European Mr.Decky entered AryaSamaj, Delhi as Dharmdeva after having undergoneShuddhi. In the same way, AryaSamajLucknowmade Miss Yamsen as Sita Devi.²⁹ P. Thomas, Bishop of Gunter, expressed that Christianity must be presented in eastern clothes in a way suitedto the imagination and temperament of the Hindu race. Hindu systems of philosophy andinstitutions can be studied and an entrance can be affected into the stronghold of Hinduism in the terms of Eastern Philosophy, without sacrificing the integrity of Catholic doctrines or whittling downCatholic dogmas.³⁰

The Samaj first evoked opposition from the Hindus. At an assembly of about 400 Hindu Pandits, held inthe Senate House of the University in Calcutta, the views of the founder of the AryasDayanandSarawati, were condemned as heterodox.³¹ Many of them were impressed by the Christian wayof life, listening to their sermons; others were against the Samaj because of their Shuddhi campaign. But with the Passage of time, these very Hindus began to accept the Arya ideology. At one time we find Swami Shradhanand the Arya and Swami Dayanand of the SanatanDharm at one platformperforming the Shuddhi ceremony.³²

However, the movement gradually lost momentum due to multiple factors. The rise of the **Indian national movement** shifted public attention from religious reform to political freedom. Leaders like Mahatma Gandhi emphasized social harmony, inter-religious understanding, and moral reform over organized reconversion efforts. Additionally, communal tensions that emerged in the 1920s led to

criticism of the Shuddhi Movement, as it was sometimes perceived as deepening religious divisions rather than promoting unity.

Colonial administrative pressures and growing concerns over communal violence further limited the scope of the movement. The assassination of key leaders such as **Swami Shradhanand** in 1926 marked a turning point, weakening organized leadership and dampening enthusiasm for mass Shuddhi campaigns. Consequently, the movement gradually merged into broader social reform efforts within Hindu society.

In its concluding phase, the Shuddhi Movement left behind a lasting legacy rather than an active organizational structure. Its emphasis on social equality, education, and dignity for marginalized communities influenced later reform movements and debates on caste reform. The AryaSamaj continued to work toward social upliftment, though with less focus on reconversion and greater attention to educational and cultural activities.

In conclusion, the Shuddhi Movement ended not in failure but in transformation. While its organized activities declined, its core ideas contributed significantly to the reshaping of Hindu social consciousness. It played an important role in awakening self-respect, encouraging internal reform, and reinforcing cultural identity during a critical phase of India's struggle for social and national regeneration.

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