

Swami Shraddhanand: Development of His Political Ideology

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Abstract:

Swami Shraddhanand has been a colossal figure who not only manifested his ideas and activism to help in Indian national movement, but also gave Indians the necessary vision to make India progress to become a great cultural force in the present times. It is necessary to critically reflect on his political ideology to understand how Swami Shraddhanand developed as a human being and as a leader and has been instrumental in shaping the modern Indian society and its polity.

Keywords:

Arya Samaj, Educational initiatives, Gurukul, Leader, Modern India, Political Ideology, Swami Shraddhanand, Munshi Ram, Gandhi Ji

Swami Shraddhanand is known as one of the most influential leaders of the Arya Samaj. He played a very significant role in the shaping of Indian society, culture and polity. He emerged as one of the radical leaders of the Arya Samaj in Punjab. Over the Arya Samaj activities, he exerted significant influence. He was instrumental in the foundation of Gurukul institutions across north India. The first Gurukul was established at Kangri near Haridwar. As time progressed, he started taking an interest in the national liberation movement as well. During the anti-Rowlatt Acts Satyagraha, he assumed leadership in Delhi. After the Non-cooperation movement was withdrawn, Swami Shraddhanand left active politics and took to the Shuddhi and Sangathan movements of the Hindu community. The paper critically reflects on the making of the political ideology of Swami Shraddhanand to manifest how he played a noteworthy role in the Indian national movement.

When leaders participate in meaningful social, cultural and political movements, they sometimes have to compromise and validate on many issues. However, Swami Shraddhanand seems to have been working in a different trajectory. His actions were motivated more by

visions and passionate beliefs than by worldly matters. "He could not play the chess game of compromise so essential to politics. This made him a unique figure in the corridors of the Congress leadership and even among the leaders of the Hindu Maha Sabha" (JTF Jordens, *Swami Shraddhanand; His Life and Causes*, p. xv). At the same time, he enjoyed a personality with a great charismatic impact on the mass. He influenced many movements significantly in which he participated.

Swami Shraddhanand, whose earlier name was Munshi Ram, had to spend his early years moving from one place to another because his father was serving as a police inspector who had been transferred frequently. As his parents were busy, there was no one to take his care of properly. Thus, he writes, "I grew up like a wild forest tree" (Swami Shraddhanand, *Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, p. 14). However, he was able to learn many languages such as Hindi, Urdu and Persian. During these days, he could easily be influenced by the surrounding atmosphere. His aim was, as he writes, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" (*Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, p.45).

After reading Dayananda's *Satyarth Prakash*, he got many of his reservations cleared. His atheism evaporated, and he committed himself to become a member of the Arya Samaj (JTF Jordens, p. 16). Though Munshi Ram was not fully involved in the Arya Samaj activities early on, his Arya Samaj related deeds were innovative and also had a flavour of radicalism (Jordens, 24). Lala Saain Das, while commenting on the future policies and aims of *Saddharampracharak* (a newspaper started by Munshi Ram), termed Munshi Ram and his group as an extreme radical party (*Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, p. 203). Gradually, he became the most active preacher of the Arya Samaj.

In 1901 he established Gurukul Kangri at Haridwar. Against all odds, he developed an educational institution that was original in more ways than one. "Here was a complex institution of learning from primary to university level, conducted in Hindi, staffed by Indians only, totally independent of any government subsidy or interference" (Jordens, p. 73).

With the advent of the 20th-century, political movements were intensifying in India. As he was utterly absorbed in his educational endeavours, Munshi Ram could not actively participate in political activism. Instead, he confined himself to the role of a critical observer. He writes, "I am an old reader of *the Pioneer* of Prayag and *the Tribune* of Lahore, so I read everything about Indian National Congress. Now for the first time, it was decided to establish a Congress committee in each district of Punjab..... on 18 May 1888, my friend Kali Babu reached Jalandhar ... We kept on discussing the establishment of the Congress committee. I

and my friend Balak Ram Ji started thinking to help Kali Babu in his mission. On 24th May 1888, a large meeting was organized” (*Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, p. 78). He further writes, “At that time also, separating religion from politics was considered as a sin by me” (*Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, p. 78).

On sighting the princes of Indian states parading their loyalty to the British during the Delhi Darbar of 1903, Munshi Ram envisaged, “centuries must elapse before India can hope to have an independent rule” (Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab, 1902, p. 429). Munshi Ram felt that “the spectacle of the clumsy fat and useless native chiefs at the Delhi Darbar was a true picture of the helpless and fallen condition of India” (Selections from the Newspapers published in the United Provinces, 1903, Pp. 43-44).

As far as the members of the Indian National Congress were concerned, he felt that they were not worthy of representing the Indians. He was not very optimistic with regards to the role played by the revolutionaries as well. Still, he opined, “there can be no doubt that the time will come, be it two or three centuries hence when the British will have to leave India” (Selections from Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab, 1905, p. 35). During the early years of the 20th century, he did not severely criticise the British government. Yet he advised the British that “the Indians were no longer children and the government’s best interests required that now it should treat the people of India as friends” (Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab 1905, p. 204).

During the early years of the 20th Century, there is evidence that the government officials were growing impatient and nervous about the political role of the Arya Samaj. Many of them had a firm belief that the Arya Samaj was potentially a very dangerous political outfit. Thus, they started questioning the loyalty of the Arya Samajists. However, Munshi Ram and many other leaders of the Arya Samaj believed that the Arya Samaj was a religious institution. The members have learned the lesson of patriotism and independence from the various ancient texts. So even though they are entirely neutral towards India’s political movement, they still contributed to this movement by supporting it morally and practically” (*Swami Shradhanand Granthavali*. Vol. 11, p. 85).

After the partition of Bengal in 1905, Munshi Ram’s newspaper *Saddharam Pracharak* wrote, “the Government of India was not living up to Queen Victoria’s promises of justice for the natives” (Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab, 1906, p. 19). There were bits of advice that, “instead of a parade of elephants before the Prince of Wales, there should be a procession comprising the scores of starving, naked and homeless

natives, whom famines have driven out of their birthplaces and compelled to live by begging” (Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab, 1906, p. 290).

The Swadeshi movement acted as the first spark which ignited Munshi Ram's praise for the Indian National Congress. He thought that through Swadeshi, the people of India would get benefitted and take revenge for the oppression committed by the imperialists. He also felt that to be more effective, the Congress must reach out to the common people.

When Lala Lajpat Rai got arrested and deported from Punjab, Munshi Ram took up the defence of the Arya Samaj. He felt that he had to play a significant role in the reconciliation with the government (Jordens, p. 83). The government looked upon the Arya Samaj as if it was a hotbed of sedition.

During the years between 1907 and 1910, Munshi Ram developed some basic tenets regarding his political ideology. First among them was that “the Arya Samaj was a purely religious body and not a political one and that it had no connections with any political grouping ... he elaborated with considerable force the argument that Dayanand's writings had no reference to politics” (Jordens, p. 83). During this period, he used strong language indisapproving all forms of violence. He also criticised the extremist faction of the Congress, which according to him, was very close to the revolutionaries. “He particularly criticised them because they sought to influence and use the young students” (Selections from the Vernacular Newspapers published in the Punjab, 1907, p. 549). This way, he was trying to clear the government's doubts that he had no sympathy with such political groups that the government may have considered seditious.

Munshi Ram, however, kept on promulgating as to how the government and army officers were unjustly dehumanising the Arya Samajists. “He used harsh words about the deceit, hypocrisy and underhandedness of officials, and argued that they were destroying their prestige and lowering the British government in the estimation of the people” (Selections from the Newspapers published in the United Provinces, 1908, p. 670).

He was also aware that it was essential for the Arya Samaj to clear the administration's doubts at the topmost possible level. Yet, he believed that the Arya Samajists should not go to the government unless invited to meet. “I am opposed to the idea of waiting in deputation uninvited and to get castigation. Only when the government is resolved to be fair to the Arya Samaj, orders an extensive enquiry and invites the leaders to a conference, will our deputation wait upon the rulers of the land” (Munshi Ram and Ram

Deva, *The Arya Samaj and its Detractors: A Vindication*, Gurukul Kangri, 1910, p. 101). Munshi Ram strongly felt that “no person shall be declared disloyal simply because he is an Arya Samajist (Selections from the Newspapers published in the United Provinces, 1908, p. 959).

Munshi Ram also defended Lala Lajpat Rai. In a letter, he wrote, “We believe that these gentlemen were advocates of constitutional agitation only and that sedition had no place in their minds” (*The Punjabi*, 12th June 1907). Munshi Ram’s defence of the Arya Samaj did not go down well with the British officials. CR Cleveland, Director of the CID, while dealing with Munshi Ram’s book *Arya Samaj and its Detractors: A Vindication*, noted, “In this book as well as in his previous writings Munshi Ram stands out clearly as a bitter bigot, extremely resentful of the attacks that have been made on his sect and justifying to himself counterblows on the plea that they are defensive” (Government of India, Home Political B, July 1911, Pp. 55-8). Munshi Ram’s strong friendship with C F Andrews (a teacher at the St. Stephens College, who had joined the Cambridge Mission in Delhi in 1904) helped create a peaceful environment between the Arya Samaj and the government.

In 1917 Munshi Ram took *Sannyas* and became Swami Shraddhanand. “As sannyasi, he was a totally free individual not answerable to any demands of the social or ritual power structures of the Hinduism” (Jordens, p. 103). Swami Shraddhanand attended the 1916 Congress session as purely a visitor, but in private discussions, he was in sync with Madan Mohan Malviya’s opposition to the Lucknow Pact, mainly because of its proposed communal representation. He attended the Delhi session of the Indian National Congress in 1918, once again as a visitor. By now, he had little interest in active politics, but when Gandhiji entered the arena of the national movement with an approach that included self-denial, Swami Shraddhanand was deeply attracted” (*Kalyan Marg ka Pathik*, Pp. 85-86). Gandhiji’s new brand of politics was a combination of dedication, self-sacrifice and religious motives in the Satyagraha mode. It influenced Swami Shraddhanand to a great extent.

In response to Gandhiji’s 4 March 1919 appeal against the Rowlett Bills, Swami Shraddhanand entered active politics. Now onwards, he became one of the key figures of the national movement. In Delhi, he addressed three mass meetings on the 24th, 27th and 29th of March. It was decided to observe a complete strike on 30th March. Though initially, the strike remained peaceful, a dispute came up near the Delhi Railway Station, where the Satyagrahis tried to shut the shops of local sweet sellers. This led to the arrest of many Satyagrahis. As a result, the crowd kept on congregating in large numbers, and there was a riot-like situation. At

this juncture, the security forces had to open fire. The crowd dispersed from the Railway Station but again gathered near the Clock Tower in Chandni Chowk. Here also rioting took place, and there was consequent firing from the security forces. As a result, five persons lost their lives, and fourteen got injured.

Swami Shraddhanand could reach both places after the firing had taken place. He addressed a public meeting here and led the crowd along Chandni Chowk. While on the way, they were confronted by the security forces. A shot was fired, though accidentally. Swami Shraddhanand moved towards the soldiers. They pointed their rifles at Swami Ji, who bared his breast and invited them to fire. However, one European officer arrived and defused the situation (Jordens, Pp. 108–109). Swami Shardananda wrote, “The crowd could contain itself no longer and was about to rush when a wave of my hand and a short appeal to their vow stopped them” (*Inside Congress*, p. 60).

This agitation placed Swami Shraddhanand at a high pedestal of public life. He was invited everywhere to address gatherings. A unique hitherto unseen occurrence was witnessed on 4th April 1919, when he was invited to speak to the congregation from the podium of the Jama Masjid. It was an unbelievable and never to be repeated scene. A Hindu *sannyasi* in his orange clothes campaigning from the very pulpit of the most splendid mosque of India. This occurrence made him a living symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity (Jordens, p. 109).

Swami Shraddhanand believed that he was part of the *Dharam Yudh* (religious war). He declared that the movement was more *Dharmik* (religious) than political (*Inside Congress*, p. 51). During this time, he developed a close association with Gandhi Ji. At the beginning of the campaign, Gandhi Ji used to elaborate the plan of action. Munshi Ram thought that the plan was ineffective and thus countered it with his proposals (Jordens, p. 14).

With Mahatma Gandhi suspending the anti-Rowlett Act Satyagraha, many differences arose between him and Swami Shraddhanand who resigned from the Satyagraha Sabha on 2nd May 1919. At that time, Swami Shraddhanand had already become a prominent national figure. He was getting closely involved with the activities of the Congress. He became the chairman of the Reception Committee for the 1919 Amritsar Congress session. In this session, Gandhiji was able to clinch many of the agenda issues that Swami Shraddhanand considered differently. He opined this approach of Gandhi Ji as dictatorial and autocratic. Now onwards, his involvement in politics increased immensely. He also launched a newspaper called *Shradhha*, which was prominently political in its observations.

Visibly two main themes are evident in his approach here onwards: first, increasing disagreements with Gandhi Ji and a growing concern for the untouchables that the Congress had been neglecting. Eventually, this led to his breakaway from the Congress in 1922; secondly, his attitude towards the Muslims changed considerably. He started talking about the unity among the Hindu community more and more (Jordens, p. 118). He disagreed with Gandhi ji on two major issues: one, related to the method used by Gandhiji in his campaigns; secondly, the increasingly despotic nature of his leadership, Swami Shraddhanand was of the view that the non-cooperation should start from the upper strata of the society and should only be asked from the lower orders after provision had been made for the maintenance of their families (*Shraddha*, 14th May 1920).

Despite differences, Swami Shraddhanand felt that India would be successful with the Gandhian movements. However, in March 1922, Swami Shraddhanand resigned from the Congress Working Committee. Even though he continued as a member, this was the end of his active role in Congress.

While analysing his political ideology, it can be inferred that Swami Shraddhanand repeatedly stressed the fear of violence. He thought that people were not amply prepared for non-violent movements. He also stressed the need for a constructive side of the agitation. He was increasingly getting exasperated by Gandhi Ji's growing dictatorial attitude. Swami Ji thought, "to bow one's head before the majority is the duty of every leader" (*Shraddha*, 7th May 1924). For three years, he participated at the highest level of leadership in an agitation that shook the colonial empire. By the end of 1922, the Non-cooperation movement had vanished, and the unity of Hindus and Muslims had collapsed. He saw to it that the Hindu society got emancipated and got to know about their political suppression to be encouraged to get rid of this bondage. Thus, in all possible ways – with his political, social, educational and cultural interventions, Swami Shraddhanand moulded the consciousness of Indian national movement.

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