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Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Hindu-Muslim Question in India

Abstract

Sayyid Ahmad Khan is normally credited as the first Muslim leader of the nineteenth century to identify that Hindus and Muslims of India, in spite of living together for centuries, were still two different entities. Many even consider him to be the founder of two nation theory in the modern times. This article, however, is an attempt to challenge this assumption on the basis of historical facts. Sayyid's initial stance about the Hindu-Muslim harmony, his reaction to the Urdu-Hindi controversy and opinion about the creation of Indian National Congress are discussed in details. However, the author has tried to bring forward the other side of the story as well according to which though Sayyid opposed any development or proposal which went against the interests of the Indian Muslims, yet he never developed hatred against the Hindu community living in India. Sayyid wanted to secure the political, social and economic interests of the Indian Muslims when he turned against Indian National Congress but at the same time he encouraged Hindus to join hands with him in the establishment of United Indian Patriotic Association.

Keywords: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Hindi-Urdu Controversy, Indian National Congress, Mohammadan Educational Conference, Hindu-Muslim Relations.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was born at a time when the British hold on India was gaining strength with every passing day and the Mughal rule was at the verge of its collapse. However, as a child, his orientation about the Indian conditions was limited as he was brought up in a controlled environment. His family was close to the Mughal court and thus he spent his early days in the company of the nobility of that era. He learned swimming and archery and was taught the traditional subjects like Arabic and Persian. He read holy Quran under the supervision of a lady teacher at home. Though, with the death of his father he had to search for his family's living hood at a young age of twenty-one and he had to start his career at a menial position of Saristadar in the court of law, yet since it was a government job, he was not completely exposed to the harsh realities of the Indian society at that important juncture of history. In spite of it, once he start attaining maturity, an inquisitive mind of his, compelled him to think about his surroundings.

One of the most important questions that needed to be addressed in that fast changing political and social environment of India was the future of Hindu-Muslim relations under the British rule. Sayyid hove his attention towards the issue and his first impression was that Hindu-Muslim unity should be the order of the day. He believed that "Hindu-Muslim harmony was a living experience" and he stood for amicable relations between the two communities as he considered

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them as the “children of the same land”.¹ He was of the view that the two groups should “cultivate mutual trust and tolerance” as “in this alone lay their salvation”. To him “religion is personal” but “humanity is common”. He wanted both Hindus and Muslims to “live together, suffer together and die together” and to “behave as charitable neighbors”.² He argued that the prosperity of India required that the two people should move hand in hand for the mutual good of their country. One could not find anything against Hindus or Hinduism in Sayyid’s writings and he always tried to find out opportunities to secure cultural collaboration between the two communities. In his famous pamphlet *Risalah-i-Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind*, he focused on the rights of Indians as a whole and not only about the Muslim population.³ He went to the extent that in order to avoid disharmony he asked Muslims to avoid, as much as possible, the slaughter of cow.⁴ For Sayyid, common territory forced upon all natives of India the responsibility of mutual co-operation and unanimity in order to guarantee the common good. While raising the questions before Hindus and Muslims he asked, “Do you live in any country other than India? Don’t you get cremated on or buried under the same soil?” He added that if they did so then they should remember that “Hindu and Muslim are merely religious terms”. To him, “the Hindus, the Muslims, and even the Christians constitute one nation by virtue of living in the same country”.⁵ In order to establish the fact that Hindus and Muslims of India could not survive in isolation, he dubbed them as two eyes of a beautiful bride. In his famous statement he commented, “India is like a beautiful bride blessed by two attractive eyes - the Hindus and the Muslims. If they maintain enmity or hypocritical relations with each other, then this beautiful bride will look cross-eyed, and if one destroys the other, [the bride] will look one-eyed. So! Inhabitants of India, do as you will - make this bride cross-eyed or one-eyed [or preserve both her eyes]”.⁶ He considered himself as a “liberal” and not a “conservative” and thought that it would be “foolish” on his part if he would not work for the welfare of the Indian community as a whole.⁷

During 1860s Sayyid always used to advocate for the political, social and educational uplift of both Hindus as well as Muslims. He worked together with his Hindu countrymen in order to attain his objective of spreading education amongst the natives of India. One of his closest friends, Raja Jaikrishan Das Bahadur, was appointed by him as the first Secretary of the Aligarh Scientific Society. Many other members of the society were also Hindus.⁸ Sayyid frequently talked about the political ambitions and desires of both Hindus and Muslims and made no discrimination amongst them. He advocated Hindu-Muslim unity and demanded for the representative form of Government in India, though under British protection. Writing in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, he expressed, “When we possess an Indian Parliament, legislating mainly for the good of the country, filled by men whose fidelity is beyond suspicion, then shall bright days of India return, or rather brighter days than ever she possessed in the best of her times”.⁹ Sayyid set up the branch of British Indian Association at Aligarh in May 1866. He invited dignitaries of both Hindu and Muslim communities of the N.W. Province to attend the inaugural session of the party. In his opening address he highlighted the discriminatory attitude of the British towards the welfare of the Indians as a whole.¹⁰ He cautioned the people of India including Hindus and Muslims to be independent in their thinking and mindful of their rights. He questioned, “Is this state of things to continue, or has the time come when the interests of this great

dependency are to be properly represented in the governing body of the British nation? It has come gentlemen and I entreat you to interest your-self for your country".¹¹ He cautioned them that if they would not stand for their rights they ought to be marginalized.¹² In one of his articles written in 1866, he indirectly demanded for the formation of an Indian parliament on the pattern of House of Commons. He dubbed the then Indian representation in the council as "a toy being given to a child." He wrote that nominated Indian members sitting in the council were not fit for the job as they either remain silent during the proceedings of the council or they make useless proposals. He wanted members of the educated middle class to represent Indians in the council. For this he suggested that the nominations for the council should be made by the inhabitants of different districts.¹³ However, even in those days Sayyid was very much concerned about the activities of the extremist Hindu bodies including Arya Samaj, Bharata Warsha National Association and various anti-cow killing societies.¹⁴ He also wanted Muslims to remain focused on their religion. He believed that the Muslims had an "idealism to protect and a way of life to preserve". His religious sentiment alone revealed solidity and uniformity to the community. He felt that if that "feeling ceased to exist, Muslims would perish as community".¹⁵ In an address to the Muslim students at Lahore he stressed on the point that Muslims should hold religion in their "right hand and worldly pursuit in the left" and in "Islam alone lies" their "salvation." He added, "You are irrevocably lost to us if you turn your back upon religion. We have no part or lot with transgressors or derelicts even if they shine like the stars of the firmament. I want you to dive deep into European literature and science but at the same time I expect you to be true to your faith".¹⁶

First major set-back for him in this regard came when Urdu-Hindi controversy was surfaced at Baranas in 1867. Though Sayyid was emerging as the champion of the promotion of English education, yet his love for Urdu was quite obvious. He was convinced that Urdu was a rich language and it has taken its birth on the Indian soil. When on August 1, 1867, Sayyid got the opportunity meet the Viceroy on behalf of the N.W. Province chapter of the British Indian Association, he demanded for the establishment of a Vernacular University in the province. He wanted the university to teach all the science and arts subjects in Urdu and also to conduct the exams in the same language.¹⁷ He further demanded for the establishment of a Bureau of Translations with the aim to undertake the task to translate University text books in Urdu. Sayyid had presented these demands after consulting many stalwart Hindus of Banaras, who committed to give their hundred percent in order to achieve the same.¹⁸ As Urdu was already the court language and the medium of communication in N.W. Province since 1835¹⁹, it is needless to say that Sayyid demanded for the establishment of a vernacular university with the intention to serve the interest of the entire native population including Hindus of the province. However, to his utmost surprise, an anti-Urdu movement was started by the Hindus of Banaras. They presented a counter-proposal of having two Universities instead of one. They demanded that if there would be an Urdu University for the Muslims then there should also be a separate university for the Hindus in which the medium of instruction should be Hindi and Devanagri to be used as script. Later they went a step ahead and some influential Hindus of the city started demanding that Urdu language and Persian script should be entirely replaced by Hindi language and Devanagari script in the courts of the province.²⁰

Babu Shiv Prasad, who was himself an Urdu writer, termed Urdu as a symbol of Muslim rule in India and its heritage. He asked the Hindu members of the Scientific Society to replace Urdu by Hindi as the language of translation in the Society. He along with some other Hindu members of the society also demanded the publication of the Society's journal in Hindi, instead of Urdu.²¹

These developments badly hurt Sayyid from inside as he considered it as “the way to a rift”. He viewed this development with hidden doubts and felt that it could create ill feelings for the future. He assumed that the question of language was fundamental and if a mock divide was made between the two communities on such an issue it might not be possible for them to have any mutual trust in the higher affairs of life. It was due to this development that while talking to Shakespeare, the Commissioner of Banaras, he only talked about the educational uplift of the Muslims of the areas. Shakespeare inquired that why was it so that for the first time Sayyid was concerned only about Muslims and not about the whole of the indigenous population. He replied, “The current disputes had convinced me of the futility of expecting the two communities to join hands on any issue whatever... At present the danger is almost imperceptible. But disruptive elements are bound to triumph in the long run. Those who live after me will bear me out. On my part, I can clearly read the writing on the wall”. When Shakespeare showed his concern by commenting that it would be regrettable if Sayyid's prophecy would come true, he replied, “I too should much regret. But I am sure it would prove true”.²² Sayyid was very much moved by these developments. Though he started Aligarh Institute Gazette with the intention to educate his people about the politics and society of England and the rest of the world, but during these years almost all the articles published in the gazette were related to Urdu-Hindi controversy. While in London, Sayyid wrote a letter to Mohsin-ul-Mulk on April 29, 1870 in which his complete focus was on Hindi-Urdu controversy. He expressed that, “Hindus are roused to destroy the Muslim's [cultural] symbol embodied in the Urdu language and the Persian script. I have heard that they have made representation through the Hindu members of the Scientific Society that the Society's Journal should be published in the Devanagari rather than in the Persian script, and that all translations of books should likewise be in Hindi”. He believed that this “proposal would destroy co-operation between the Hindus and the Muslims” as “Muslims would never accept Hindi and if Hindus persistently demanded the adoption of Hindi in preference to Urdu it would result in the total separation of the Muslims from the Hindus.” To him, “it would open an unending vista of split and strife between Hindus and Muslims” and the “rupture would never be healed”. He was sure that the “two communities would be irrevocably rent asunder”. He added, “If, after separating from the Hindus, the Muslims were to establish their own businesses Muslims would benefit more than the Hindus”. He, however, predicted that the divide would also have negative impact on the Muslims and would make them “jealous and vindictive”.²³

All this still does not mean that after the Urdu-Hindi controversy Sayyid completely lost interest in his age old agenda of Hindu-Muslim unity. The only change that occurred was that he became more conscious about the promotion of Muslim interests. As long as Muslim benefits were not compromised he was still ready to work for the betterment on Hindu community. In an article he wrote, “If

one nation were to advance in the scale of civilization and the other to lay behind, India would be no better than a one-eyed beauty".²⁴ There was still very little communal spirit in him as he had personal relations with Hindus and was willing to give important assignments to the qualified and non-communal Hindus. When he went to England in April, 1869, he left the charge of Aligarh Scientific Society and Aligarh Institute Gazette in the hands of Raja Jaikishan Dass Bahadur, a Hindu.²⁵ There were also a sizeable number of Hindu students who were enrolled in M.A.O College Alligarh and there was not a hint of discrimination against them in the institution. It is also on record that many Hindu Maharajas and middle class people donated handsome amounts in the establishment and running of the institution.²⁶ Sayyid was ready to co-operate with the organizations which were purely dominated by Hindu bourgeoisie. His association with Surendranath Banerjee's Indian Association of Bengal was a case in point. Main objective of the Association was to create an environment where Indian educated class could have a say in the political developments in the country. Sayyid worked in collaboration with the organization and supported its stance with full zeal and vigor from 1877 to 1883. When the British decided to reduce the age limit for the Indian candidates to appear in the civil services examinations, Banerjee and his aids considered it as a way of eliminating Indians from appearing in the competitive exams.²⁷ He launched a protest movement against this resolve. Though, this decision harmed Hindus more than the Muslims, yet Sayyid decided to support the cause of Civil Service Movement. He only distanced him from the Indian Association when Banerjee called for Indian National Conference on December 28, 1883. This conference proved to be a completely Bengali Hindu affair and Muslim stalwarts like Nawab Abdul Latif and Syed Ameer Ali were not invited.²⁸ Sayyid himself was ignored in spite of all his support for Banerjee and his team for the last six years. Sayyid even then persisted with his policy of raising his voice for the social and political rights of both Hindus and Muslims. He continued to support the cause of the Civil Service Movement.

Sayyid was nominated to the Imperial Legislative Council as an additional member first by Lord Lytton in 1878 and then by Lord Rippon in 1880. He defended his selection by contributing in the house on almost every important matter that was discussed. His special interest in the council was on the issues which were directly or indirectly dealing with the problems of native Indians. He became the first Indian to introduce a bill for the betterment of Indians in the council when he presented the proposal of making small pox vaccination compulsory for everyone in the county. While speaking on the bill on October 18, 1879 he appreciated the British for providing fundamental rights like health to the Indians.²⁹ Throughout his tenure as the member of the council, Sayyid stressed about the rights of Indian people as a whole, and not only about Muslims. His speech on the Ilbert Bill, in which he tried to defend the political and social rights of both Hindus and Muslims, can be taken as a good example.³⁰ He delivered a noteworthy address at Patna on January 27, 1883, in which he declared that the primary duty of all the Indians should be to "aim at the welfare of the country as a whole." He claimed that "just as the higher caste Hindus came and settled in this land once, forgot where their earlier home was and considered India to be their own country", Muslims "also did exactly the same thing" as they also left their "former climes hundreds of years ago" and they "also regard this land of India" as

their “very own.” He added that both Hindus and Muslims “breathe the same air, drink the waters of the sacred Ganges and the Jamuna, eat the products which God has given to this country, live and die together.” In his opinion both the communities “have shed off” their “former dress and habits”. To him, if on one hand “Muslims have adopted numberless customs belonging to the Hindus” on the other hand “the Hindus have been vastly influenced by the Muslim habits and customs.” He said with conviction that “if we were to disregard for a moment our conception of Godhead, then in all matters of everyday life the Hindus and the Muslims really belong to one community as children of the soil”. He further emphasized on the fact that “the progress of the country is only possible if we have a union of hearts, mutual sympathy and love.” He declared that he grieved “at the sight of those who do not understand this basic point and inculcate views which would ultimately lead to a permanent cleavage between two sections of the Indian community.”³¹

During Sayyid’s tour of the Punjab in 1884, he highlighted the concept of Hindu-Muslim Unity in his speeches delivered at different places.³² In one of his speeches he said, “By the word *qawm*, I mean both Hindus and Muslims. That is the way in which I define the word nation. In my opinion, it matters not whatever be their religious belief, because we cannot see anything of it; but what we see is that all of us, whether Hindus or Muslims, live on one soil, are governed by one and the same ruler, have the same sources of our benefits, and equally share the hardships of a famine. These are the various reasons why I designate both the nationalities that inhabit India by the term Hindu - that is the nation which lives in India”.³³ It was because of these bold statements that Sardar Dayal Singh had to admit that the “remarkable feature of the Sayyid’s public career had been the breadth of his views and his liberal attitude towards sections of the country” other than his “own co-religionists.”³⁴

Despite the fact that Sayyid was working for the solidarity with the Hindus and he was trying to develop a long-term entente with them, he had started thinking about a political solution which suits the political environment of India, i.e. where both Hindus and Muslims could get their due share. During his visit to London in 1869-70, he tried to explore their political system and realized that the British concept of Democracy cannot be applied in Indian conditions without making necessary amendments. He observed that “only culturally homogeneous nationalities, though they may be divided on political and economic issues are capable of administering parliamentary democratic institutions” while to him “cultural heterogeneity would only choke democratic processes.”³⁵ This made him believe that in a country like India “the system of election, pure and simple cannot safely be adopted. The large community would totally over-ride the interests of the smaller community”. He was quite sure that “where the majority vote is the decisive factor in a political system, it is essential for the electors to be united by the ties of race, religion, manners, customs, culture and historical traditions. In the presence of these factors, representative government is practicable and useful; in their absence, it would only injure the well-being and tranquility of the land.”³⁶

With the introduction of Gladstonian Reforms and the Local Board Bill in early 1880s, Sayyid was further convinced about the idea to focus on the future of Indian Muslims.³⁷ He now became more vocal about the political rights of the

Muslims community. He was also showing his interest in earning concessions for the Muslims which could lift their social and economic status. In 1882 he sent a memorandum to Lord Rippon in which he highlighted that the Muslims were under-represented in the government jobs and thus asked for concessions in their recruiting process. e.g. since Muslims were less educated, the requirement for the university degree should be waived and they should only be appointed on the basis of comparable tests.³⁸ When British refused to accept his recommendations he established Muhammadan Civil Service Fund Association in 1883. He requested the well-to-do Muslims to donate just Rs. 2/- per month in the fund with the hope that if only five hundred Muslims would agree to contribute, the annual sum would reach Rs. 12000/-. He wanted to use this fund to send talented Muslim students to England for higher education with the ultimate aim of them joining Indian Civil Service.³⁹

By this time Sayyid had realized that in a future democratic India the rule of majority would prove to be a tyranny for the minority community.⁴⁰ In his speech delivered on January 12, 1883 he claimed that India was a “vast country inhabited by diverse folks deeply divided by racial and religious antagonism”. To him Indians “lack homogeneity” as “different sections of the population stand at varying levels of cultural development”. He declared that as “long as religion and caste are the chief props of the Indian social system electoral machinery based upon the western pattern would lead neither to equality nor to fraternity. It would enable the more advanced sections of the population to hold their less fortunate countrymen in thralldom”. He added that “cultural differences, caste dissensions and religious wrangling would be more pronounced than ever. Inequalities would sink deeper into the structure of society”. He was sure that the “larger community could totally override the interests of the smaller community and the ignorant public would hold government responsible for introducing measures which might make the differences of race and creed more violent than ever”. In the same speech he also asked for more autonomy for the local boards and districts boards.⁴¹ A good look at this speech suggests that it was more of a warning and advice for the British think-tanks and not a charter for the rights of Muslim community living in India.

The next major political development was the establishment Indian National Congress in a session held at Bombay between December 28 and 31, 1885. It was expected that this first all-Indian political organization would work for the rights and benefits of the Indian community across the board. In the very first session, the newly founded political body demanded for the introduction of democratic institutions in India by holding elections for the legislative assemblies. One could not find an immediate response or even a comment from Sayyid about Congress and its demands for almost a year. He for the first time expressed his opinion about Congress only when he was invited to attend the second session of the party at Calcutta. He refused to attend the session and also to become member of the party. In defence of his decision he wrote an article in Aligarh Institute Gazette on November 23, 1886, in which he opined that, “If at any future time there should be a parliament with Hindus and Muslims sitting on two sides of the House, it is probable that the animosity which would ensue would far exceed anything that could be witnessed in England”. He further argued that “the Mohammedans would

be in a permanent minority and their case would resemble that of the unfortunate Irish members in the British Parliament would have always been outvoted by the Englishmen”. Commenting on the reconstitution of the Legislative Councils on the basis of democratic norms, he questioned, “How will the mixture of nationalities affect the working of (Indian) Parliament”.⁴²

Allan Octavian Hume, the founder of Congress, was well aware of the importance of Sayyid in the future politics of India. In order to convince Sayyid to become member of Congress, he informed him that Sayyid’s pamphlet, *Risala-i-Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind* was one of his inspirations which compelled him to organize a political party for Indians.⁴³ Yet it had no impact on Sayyid’s thinking as he anticipated that the Muslim community will have to face problems in the future if they would support Congress. He believed that though in the beginning Congress was taking the patronage of the British but as soon as it would get its demands accepted from them it would declare itself as people’s voice. He predicted that if Congress would manage to achieve their goal Hindus would themselves take the credit and in case of a failure they would put blame on the Muslims and make them villains in front of the British. He was also very clear that in the case of the democratization of India, Muslims would be left at the mercy of their numerically loftier countrymen. He was sure that even a Muslim of the stature of Moulvi Khawaja Muhammad Yusuf could not win the elections from Aligarh, without making special arrangements for the Muslims in the electoral process.⁴⁴ It was also in the year 1886 that Sayyid laid the foundation of Mohammadan Educational Congress⁴⁵ in the meeting of the Committee for the Advancement of Education held at Aligarh on December 27. The main aim of the body was not to “try for anything except progress in education”. Its goal was to endeavor the “educational progress” of the Muslims “through nation-wide co-operation and with national support” by holding “annual conferences of representatives of the various districts” at different venues. However, since the Muslims living in different parts of India knew “little” about each other and the requests they used to present before the government were “mutually contradictory”, the new organization also was supposed to “establish mutual affection and sympathy, and achieve a sense of unity” amongst the Muslims.⁴⁶ Under the umbrella of the Mohammadan Educational Conference, committees were set up in different cities and towns to assist it by supplying it information about the Muslims’ progress in the fields including trade, industry and agriculture etc.⁴⁷ In short, it provided the Muslims of India with their first meeting ground and common platform, on which in the times to come they also discussed their political issues.⁴⁸ It created consciousness in the minds of the Indian Muslims that they were a “single all-India community”, distinct from other Indian communities and had needs, problems and ambitions of their own. Badruddin Tyabji was unanimously elected as the president of the third annual session of Indian National Congress held at Madras in December 1887. There were also other Muslim delegates who attended this session. Because of this development, Congress leaders tried to give impression that Muslims of India had not responded to Sayyid’s call of not joining the Congress and were actively participating in the affairs of the political organization. Sayyid immediately responded to that development and rejected the Congress claim that it represented Muslims of India. He termed it as a “false impression that the Mussalmans have joined” the

Congress, and judged it as “a most unwarrantable interference” in the affairs of their nation. He argued that there was hardly any reputed Muslim personality who participated in the session. He also claimed that the Muslims who participated in the Madras Congress did not represent local Muslims as well as the Muslims of Bengal. He declared that the Muslim community of that region did not even know that what did the National Congress stand for?⁴⁹ Sayyid’s stance can be supported both by statistics, as there were only 33 Muslim delegates in the gathering of 431, and the statement of Surendranath Banarjee who admitted that the Congress in those days was unsuccessful in attracting Muslims of social or political repute to its gatherings.⁵⁰ Tyabji also endorsed Sayyid’s stance when he admitted in a letter to Hume that “Nizam and Nawaz Jung and above all Husain Bilgrami have joined the opposition led by such well known men as Sayyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali and Abdul Lateef”.⁵¹

In this era Sayyid and Tyabji exchanged their ideas with each other in a series of letters. They got so emotional about their stance in those letters that they could not keep them secret and went to the extent that they sent them to the press to be published in a newspaper, “The Pioneer”. In a letter Tyabji claimed that the Congress was working on “questions of general interest affecting the whole of India at large” and it was the duty of Indian Muslims to join Congress and to bring forward all the issues on which there was “either absolute or at least practical unanimity on the part of the Hindus and Mussalmans”.⁵² Sayyid disagreed and questioned, “Is it supposed that the different casts and creeds living in India can become a nation? Can their aspiration and goals be similar?” In his opinion there could be “no such things as the National Congress”.⁵³ He rather considered that the Congress was in fact “misnamed as National Congress”.⁵⁴ He believed that the rational result of the Congress’ agitation would be violence and if Muslims would join the party the Muslims would have to shoulder the burden of the consequences single handedly.⁵⁵ He asked that since the aims of Hindus and Muslims were divergent, should the two communities “have their own Congress for their special objects in which they differ from one another”?⁵⁶ Sayyid was so determined about his view point that Tyabji had to admit that there was no common ground between two of them and thus he eventually withdrew from this exchange of letters in the press. Sayyid’s most comprehensive stance about the politics of Congress and the future of Muslims in India, however, can be derived from his two speeches, one on December 28, 1887 at Lucknow and the other one on March 16, 1888 at Meerut. Both these speeches personified his anti-Congress discourse which intensely affected the future political thinking not only at Aligarh but also of the Muslims of India at large. He delivered his Meerut speech before a large and very influential audience⁵⁷, which had come from different parts of the country to attend the second annual session of the Mohammadan Educational Congress. His speech was delivered in Urdu and it lasted for almost an hour and a half. The session was chaired by Munshi Imtiaz Ali, a member of a very well reputed family and the legal adviser of the Oudh Taluqdars’ Association. In his speech Sayyid himself admitted that he never ever had “given a political lecture” earlier and was only talking about politics because the “circumstances” have compelled him to “explain the attitude which the Mohammadan community ought to adopt with regard to the political movements of the time”.⁵⁸ Sayyid’s focus in this speech was not on the criticism of Congress or its members but he only questioned about the political

future of the Indian Muslims in light of the suggestions presented by the Congress leadership.

While criticizing the proposed political set-up for India based on democratic values, Sayyid questioned that how it could accommodate the Muslim community? He talked about four different prospects and commented that following any of them would result in the no win situation for the Muslims. In his words, the first option could be where “Hindus vote for Hindu candidate and all the Muslims for the Muslim candidate”. To him in this situation the “Hindu candidate will have four times as many votes as the Muslim, because that is the proportionate strength of the two communities”. He questioned that “How then will the Muslim stand a chance against the Hindu?” In his opinion it would “be like a game of dice in which the Hindu will have four dice and the Muslim only one”. The second option could be “form of election” in which “some lower limit will have to be fixed to qualify people as such, for example, with a certain minimum income”. He supposed that if the qualifying income was fixed as “five thousand rupees per annum” there would hardly be any Muslim who would “qualify and who will have more electors to vote for him”. He commented that “barring a fluke or a windfall, not a single Muslim, rationally speaking, will have a chance to be elected” in this scenario.⁵⁹

In the third situation, seats could be “separately” reserved for the Hindus and the Muslims. He commented that since the seats would be fixed “on the basis of population”, it would “mean that the Hindus will have four seats to one” in comparison with the Muslims and the latter thus would have no say in matter of making decisions. The last option could be that “irrespective of population” fixed number of seats could be reserved “separately for the Hindus and the Muslims” and the two communities be entitled to elect their “own representatives”. He believed that even if the two communities were “given equal number of seats” the problem for the Muslims would still not be resolved as there was not even “a single man in the whole Muslim community who will be a match for Hindus in the Viceroy’s Council”. He gave his own example that he as a “member of the Council for four years” always felt that he was the “poorest and least able of all the members”. In the end he asked the Muslims to remain aloof from Congress and to focus on education as until the Muslim nation could “give birth to highly-educated people”, it would “remain degraded” and would “not attain such honors” as Sayyid desired for it.⁶⁰ Three months later Sayyid was invited to Meerut, by the influential Muslims of the city, where he delivered a speech which supplemented his Lucknow address. He expressed that the Muslims till that time were “unconcerned with what the Babus of Bengal, the Hindus of the North-West Provinces and the Europeans of Eurasians resident in India were doing”. But, in his opinion, the resent political developments had made them mindful about their political future. He was worried about the activities of Congress as to him in “some districts” pressure was placed on “Muslims to join the Congress”. He felt that “it was not well-to-do and prominent Muslims who were approached but those who were amenable to pressure”. He added that in “some districts the power of the administration was used to compel them; in others, appeals were made to them that, unless they joined the Congress, it could not get on with its work”. He, however, admitted that in “some cases people joined on their own initiative,

fearing that if they did not, they would find it difficult to earn their livelihood". Sayyid considered those Muslims who joined Congress as "no better than hired men". He claimed that those Muslims "were taken to Madras and exhibited there as "Nawabzadas" and "leaders of the Muslims". He said that it was because of these circumstances that he, against his desire, had to talk about politics.⁶¹

Sayyid identified that everything Congress was "proposing runs counter to the interests of the Muslims". He raised that question that if "British and all their forces" would go back "who will then rule India? Will the Hindu and the Muslims occupy the seat of authority on an equal footing?" To him, it was "not at all" possible as it would "be unavoidable that one should overpower the other". He raised the question that if the Muslims were to "be ruled by a foreign nation", which nation would they choose to rule them? He remarked that it was an open secret that all the other options were "far worse than the British". Thus he suggested that it was "necessary for the peace and progress of India that the rule of the British should continue here for a long time". Commenting on the demand "for the right to vote on the budget" he declared that it could only be achieved in the societies where there was "representative government and where the rulers and ruled belong to one nation". He wanted Muslims to be practical and "should only demand for the things which the Government" could give and for which they deserve. He wanted to make the Muslims realize that they were "backward in education, especially higher education, and in wealth". He said that the Muslims of India were in a "weak position" as the internal trade of the country was "entirely in the hands of the Hindus" and foreign trade was "the monopoly of the British." To him, Hindus, if they desired so, could "destroy" the Muslims even in an "hours' time". So the only solution for the Muslims was that they should first "focus on improving themselves" before thinking about other matters.⁶² Sayyid's anti-Congress campaign continued. In an article he warned the British that if they subscribe to the Congress' demands, it would become "impossible" for them "to preserve the peace, or control in any degree the violence and civil war which would ensue".⁶³ When in 1890s, under the leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Congress straightforwardly adopted a policy of Hindu nationalism by organizing Ganesh and Shivaji festivals and supporting the cause of anti-cow-killing societies, Sayyid openly criticized such activities. His fight for the protection of Urdu also continued till his last breath. Only eight days before his death, he in an article opposed the memorandum presented by the Hindus to the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Provinces and Oudh in which they had demanded for the introduction of Hindi in the Devanagari Script in place of Urdu and Persian script in the law courts of the province.⁶⁴

All this still does not mean that Sayyid in the last phase of his life had turned against the Hindus as a community. He still had a number of Hindus among his personal friends. There were many Hindu students still enrolled in the Aligarh College and even important positions in the administration of the college were also held by Hindus.⁶⁵ In order to counter Congress, Sayyid was the first to take the initiative of organizing the United Indian Patriotic Association, with the aim to organize a common front of the anti-Congress elements among the Hindus and the Muslims. If on one hand he managed to convince fifty-one Muslim societies from all over India to join the association on the other hand the hand many prominent

Hindu rajas and maharajas also became members of the new body. More than five hundred Hindus participated in the meeting of the United Indian Patriotic Association at Town Hall Delhi on October 5, 1888.⁶⁶

Conclusion

To conclude, one can say that Sayyid Ahmad Khan was in favor of Hindu-Muslim friendship in India during the early phase of his career and probably, from the core of his heart, he kept believing in the same concept even till the end of his life. The only thing that came in his way of achieving this ideal was his concern for the protection of heritage and rights of the Muslims, something on which he was not willing to compromise. First time he felt hurt when the status of Urdu language was challenged and second time he reacted when Congress not only demanded for a political system in which the future of Muslims was insecure but also wanted Muslims to join hands with them in order to achieve their aspiration. Even in those conditions, Sayyid did not break his terms with Hindus and never criticized them as a community. He only opposed their acts, which to him would harm the Muslims and warned his co-religious to be conscious about their future. One could hardly see anti-Hindu sentiments in any of Sayyid's speeches or writings. He never claimed that Muslims of India were a separate nation, yet the indirect impact of his teachings was that the community began to look upon themselves as a separate entity, a different community and a group apart, which eventually resulted in the creation of a separate homeland for them in 1947.

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- ¹⁰ George Farquhar.Irving Graham, *The Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1909), 92.
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- ¹⁴ Malik, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Contribution", 139.
- ¹⁵ Hamid, "The Aligarh Movement", 523.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Tahzibul Akhlaq*, June 15, 1920.
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- ¹⁹ Urdu was also declared as the court language and the medium of communication in the Punjab and Behar in 1835.
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- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Muhammadan Observer*, May 26, 1883.
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- ⁴² M. Yusuf Abbasi, *Muslim Politics and Leadership in South Asia, 1876-92* (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization, 1981), 237.
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- ⁴⁴ Shamim Akhtar, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Audiences", *Social Scientists* 43 (January 2015): 28.
- ⁴⁵ It was in 1890 that the name of Muhammadan Educational Congress was replaced by Muhammadan Educational Conference. Few believe it was done in order to avoid an embarrassing association with Indian National Congress.
- ⁴⁶ Hussain, *Syed Ahmed Khan*, 219-220.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 221.
- ⁴⁸ All India Muslim League was founded at a session of the Muhammadan Educational Conference held at Dacca in 1906 and thus could be considered as an evolutionary product of the Conference.
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- ⁵⁵ Sayyid in a letter to Tyabji claimed that the Hindus started the Mutiny and the Muslims joined them. However, after the defeat, "Hindus washed off the stain by bathing in the holy water of the Ganges; but whole families of Muslims were wiped out and ruined." See Hussain, *Syed Ahmed Khan*, 241.
- ⁵⁶ Letter from Sir Syed to Tyabji, n.d., in Khan ed., *The Present State of Indian Politics*, 57-62.
- ⁵⁷ Those who were present there included Taluqdars of Oudh, members of the Government Services, military personal, lawyers, journalists etc.; members of the noble families like Syeds, Shaikhs, Moghals and Pathans; representatives of all school of thought i.e. from orthodox Sunni and Shiah maulvis to the graduates of Indian and British colleges and universities. See Hafeez Malik, ed. *Political Profile of Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan: Documentary Record* (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization, 1982), 342.
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- ⁶⁵ Sham Bihari Lal held the important position of treasurer of the college till 1895.
- ⁶⁶ Prominent Hindus including Raja Udai Partap Singh, Maharaja Pratap Misra and Raja of Banaras actively supported United Indian Patriotic Association. For details see, Abbasi, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Reawakening of the Muslims", 31-33.