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# Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Pluralistic Vision

\_\_\_\_\_ Amjad Abbas Khan  
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Among the galaxy of great men produced by subcontinent in the 19th century, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was one of the most outstanding. His greatness is to be judged by his impression made on the society and the transitional effect on thoughts of Muslims of India. In the history of Muslim Nationalism in British sub-continent, Sir Syed stands out most prominent as a philosopher, reformer, thinker and a dynamic force promoting modern scientific education, tolerance, progressiveness and consciousness. His ideas and practices proved to be a whirling point in restructuring the destiny of the entire India especially the Muslim community. He was a torch bearer of uplift of his community. For his cherished goal of ameliorating the Muslims, he adopted a policy of reconciliation. The most critical and contemporarily pertinent contribution of Sir Syed was to work out understanding between Islam and the Western Science. He also took up the task of bringing together the intellectualism of the West and the traditionalism of the East. His policy of reconciliation ultimately resulted in bridging the mistrust and bringing harmony among old and new and east and west. Literary works produced by Sir Syed are the core examples of his efforts of reconciliation among various communities. Sir Syed's vision and policy of pluralism helped the antagonistic Muslims and Britishers to improve mutual relations. He was a rationalist, moralist and above all a humanist. His movement paved the way for modernism, innovation and a large-hearted tolerance. However, owing to his policy of interfaith harmony he was labeled as Kafir or an Agent of the British but he never gave up his policy of reconciliation which brought positive and constructive results for interfaith harmony in the Sub-continent. He was a bridge builder not only between the rulers and the ruled but also among the

various communities. His approach of pluralism is quite relevant in today's Pakistan. This paper will explore pivotal role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan for the reconciliation and tolerance and its significance to our present society; hostile behaviors are needed to be replaced with positive energies towards knowledge and tolerance.

## Introduction

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a multi-faceted scholar, intellectual, educationist, political activist, journalist, theologian, social reformer and the chief organizer of the modernist Islamic movement of 19<sup>th</sup> century in India. His various efforts in different fields for furthering the cause of Muslims established his position as the foremost voice of the oppressed Muslims of the time. In his desire to bridge the gulf between Muslims and Christians, Sir Syed took the unprecedented step of writing a commentary on the Bible stressing those areas of common ground accepted both by Christians and Muslims. In doing so, Sir Syed conceded far more than what he thought he could gain from the opposite party. As a result, his Bible commentary was opposed by the Muslims vehemently.

In the years 1857 and 1858, which have rolled over us, the affairs of India fell into such a condition of disorder and confusion, that every idle rumour was eagerly accepted, groundless aspersions were taken for granted, and false and distorted view of passing events found a ground a read for their reception in the minds of men. It was a consequence of the state of things that people who talked or wrote about the mutiny or rebellion gave currency to various statements discreditable and injurious to Mahomedans as a class, which were wholly destitute of truth.

Sir Syed was a leader of enlightenment and progress. He was an important spice man of progressive humanity, a man with high spirits and moral courage, continued to do what he believed was right; to improve the conditions of Indian Muslims. He visualized the future and suggested to the Muslims that the community had no choice but to make a lot of adjustments. In the long run, his farsightedness proved true and Muslims succeeded to materialize their goals.

## Strategy adopted by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

First, he strived to reconcile the Muslims to the British rule. He was convinced that the Muslims had no choice but to cooperate with the British if they did not wish to be left out in the government services and professions. The lives and properties of the Muslims were safe under the British and no restrictions were placed on their religious freedom. Jihad was incumbent on the Muslims only if they were denied

peace and could not practice their religion without of the fear of persecution. Since none of these conditions prevailed in India, he argued, it was obligatory for the Muslims to be loyal to the British rulers.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, with the ultimate reprisals that followed, there was no other way to recover except by cooperating with the British. Secondly, Syed Ahmad Khan wanted the Muslim community to get the western education. The Hindus had already taken advantage of the new system of education. The Muslims must not lag behind. The connection between education and government was too obvious for him to ignore.<sup>2</sup> In emphasizing the need for western education, however, Sir Syed Khan was by no means suggesting that the Muslims should ignore their traditional areas of interest. He wanted them to acquire western education in addition to traditional education. Finally, Syed Ahmad Khan wanted the Muslims to realize that they had their own special interests, which must be secured and promoted through their own efforts and their own channels. He refused to accept the Congress had therefore the right to speak on their behalf too.

### Ambassador of Hindu Muslim Unity

Once he was the supporter of Hindu-Muslim unity later he became the pioneer of interfaith dialogue in the sub-continent. He was not against the local communities; even he was believer, supporter and ambassador of unity among leading communities of India. His conception of Islamic tradition as inherently multi-cultured and multi-national meant that his perspective on the reform of Muslims societies had both national international dimensions. While addressing a meeting he stated that “we (Hindus and Muslims) eat the same crop, drink water from the same rivers and breathe the same air. As a matter of fact Hindus and Muslims are the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan. Weakness of any one of them will spoil the beauty of the bride (dulhan)”.<sup>3</sup> Syed was aware that the prerequisite of pluralistic and progressive society are unity, brotherhood and cooperation amongst segments of the society. And to materialize and implement that philosophy he “kept the doors of the college open to all. When he breathed his last in 1898 there were 285 Muslims and 64 Hindu students in the college. There were seven Hindu teachers on the staff. Arrangements for teaching Sanskrit were made effectively by him. He gave every year a gold medal from his own pocket to a Hindu student of the college who passed B. A. in the first division. He banned cow slaughter on the campus”.<sup>4</sup> He was fighting the case of Indians instead of Muslims only. He further observed in general that “if giving up of cow slaughter will establish amity and friendship among Hindus and Muslims, then please do not sacrifice cows which is thousand times better”.<sup>5</sup> Sir Syed went on the point to a critical tool in forging friendship namely a shared language: “who on the contrary, does not remember the prosperity of Bengal under the rule of Lord Hasting. I attribute the

knowledge of its peculiarities and the acquaintance with the vernacular which obtained in those days".<sup>6</sup>

Addressing to another gathering he stated that "remember that the words Hindu and Muslim are only meant for religious distinction: otherwise all persons who reside in this country belong to one and the same nation".<sup>7</sup> He stressed on his fellow countrymen that "it is the first and foremost duty of all the well-wisher of the country to strive for the welfare of all people irrespective of any consideration of caste or religion".<sup>8</sup>

He emphasized that "If we ignore that aspect of ours which we owe to God, both of us, on the basis of being common inhabitants of India, actually constitute one nation: and the progress of this country and that of both of us is possible through mutual cooperation".<sup>9</sup> He further stressed that our religious differences which "exists between Musalmans and Hindus ought not to prevent social dealings, mutual affection and love and sympathy between them, so also differences on political questions ought not to prevent social dealings, mutual affection and love and sympathy".<sup>10</sup>

At another occasion, he stated that "we (Hindus and Muslims) should try to combine our hearts and souls and act in unison. If united, we can sustain".<sup>11</sup> Sir Syed was a great advocate of pluralistic society. Even after the Urdu-Hindi Controversy he was in favour of rapprochement between both communities. However, formation, working and representative politics of Indian National Congress resulted in widening the gulf between the natives of India.

## Harmony between Muslims and Britishers as well as between Muslims and Hindus

Sir Syed's attempts to neutralize antagonism of his British masters, especially after the traumatic events of 1857 gathered speed. Contrary to his expectations, these efforts brought him into disrepute among the very people whose cause he claimed to espouse. They were seen as acts of abject appeasement to the ruling power. However, the British, always on the lookout for those who favoured their colonial presence, rewarded him for what they saw as his pro-British activities. Sir Syed's many books, essays, addresses and whirlwind tours of the country made him a one-man propaganda machine. Sir Syed even went so far as to question those bases of Islam that he saw would prevent a rapprochement between the ruler and the ruled, the conqueror and the conquered. He devoted his energy to explain away, without authority, the basic Islamic positions on these vital issues. As time passed, this pensionary of the British and minor functionary of the imperialist administration became more and more convinced that the British were somehow God-ordained to rule the subcontinent

in perpetuity. He, therefore, pursued those ends which would establish better relations between the Muslims and the Christians even if in their pursuit certain vital interests of Islam would have to be sacrificed.

Sir Syed was knighted by Queen Victoria in 1888 for promoting cross-cultural understanding among Christians, Hindus and Muslims. He sought shared intellectual ground among the three major stakeholders of the subcontinent and world religions which helped him to endorse a form of naturalism based on the metaphysics of atomism, which reverberated with the Greek roots mutual to Christianity, Islam and current scientific age. Furthermore, atomism's belief in bodily death as an evolution in the recombination of particles was relevant to the Hindu doctrine of the transmigration of the souls. However, Sir Syed was criticised by more fundamental Muslims for stressing exactly those features of the oriental heritage that were most favourable to make them obedient to the Western colonization.

Do not show the face of Islam to others; instead show your face as the follower of true Islam representing character, knowledge, tolerance and piety.<sup>12</sup> In a speech in 1880, the lieutenant governor of North West Frontier Province recalled Sir Syed's action in these words that "no man ever gave nobler proofs of conspicuous courage and loyalty to the British government than were given by him in 1857; no language that I can use would be worthy of the devotion he showed".<sup>13</sup>

How good is the saying, whoever may be its author, that a human being in composed of two elements, his faith which he owes to God and his moral sympathy which he owes to his fellow beings hence leave God's share to God and concern you with the share that is yours. Sir Syed also believed that Muslims and Christians are the people of the book so both communities should live together peacefully.<sup>14</sup>

## Divergence of Opinion between Muslims

The policy of enlightenment and modernism welcomed a severe criticism from Muslim clerics. Sir Syed was declared an agent of British and *kafir* (infidel)<sup>15</sup> by the fellow countrymen but failed to contextualize both his work and text within the oppressive colonial period. In fact, from the All India Muslim Education Conference to the Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College and from establishing Scientific Society in Aligarh to editing *Tahzeeb-ul-Akhlaq*, Sir Syed played to key role in saving his community from complete cultural and intellectual annihilation. To pacify the situation, he also requested Maulana Qasim Nanatvi to lead religious committee of Aligarh to normalize the situation of anxiety but his request was declined by the later. A number of *fatwas* were issued against Sir Syed which enlarged the worries of between different sects of Islam in India. At the same there were some moderate Muslims who tried their level best to resolve the issues of differentiation. Sir Syed

suggested to the fellow countrymen and scholars of India that "I hope you will try to set an example in both scholarly pursuits and the practice of Islam. Only then will our community be honored and respected".<sup>16</sup>

Sir Syed was equally sensitive intra-Muslim problems owing to Shia-Sunni dissension. He made special arrangements to neutralize sectarianism. MAO school and College not surprisingly could be first secular institution where you may find the students from every religion, caste, creed and colour.

## Political Associations to Bridge the Gulf among Different Communities

Sir Syed was the founder of different socio-economic and political organizations of the sub-continent. Organizations like The Loyal Muhammadans of India, British Indian Association and Muhammadan Educational Conference were the core examples. In a series of pamphlets entitled, *An Account of the Loyal Muhammadans of India*, Sir Syed tried to correct and convince the British government of the wrongness of its suspicious regarding the Muslim's loyalty, by citing the cases of Loyal Muhammadans that Muslims are not permitted by their religion to wage a war against the Britishers.<sup>17</sup> Another purpose of formation of these organizations was to bring to the notice of the British rulers the sentiments of the people of India about the administration and its policies. These organizations were also made to prove their faithfulness and devotion to the government. But where these organizations have some positive impetus at the same time government, considering the establishment of these associations as a political move, threatened to withdraw financial assistance for the college. He also formed a committee named the Committee for Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among Muhammadans of India.<sup>18</sup> The main purpose of that committee was to eradicate misconceptions among different communities especially Muslim's reservations about English language and western education system.

## Writings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

Following the policy of appeasement, Sir Syed planned a study of the Christian scriptures

aimed at pointing out the common beliefs that existed between the two. For this, he purchased a printing press, imported Hebrew fonts; sought instruction in Hebrew from a Jew named Salim, obtained many books on the Bible which were translated into Urdu by an unnamed Christian translator,<sup>19</sup> as he could not himself read English. The difficulties incurred by him may be imagined, as Col. Graham writes, when it is borne in mind that he was ignorant of English; that all the works accessible regarding his subject were written in that language; and that

he had to have these various books translated into Urdu.<sup>20</sup> Undeterred by these difficulties, however, he worked at the commentary for years. Suraiya Husain in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan aur unka 'ahd* gives a list of 40 books consulted by Sir Syed. These include various translations of the Old and New Testaments in Arabic, Persian and Urdu. Thus the decade of the 1860s was devoted by Sir Syed to this paramount task. The first volume titled *Tabyīn al-kalām fī tafsīr al-torah wa al-injīl 'alā millah al-Islām* ('the clear exposition of the words in the explanation of the Torah and the Injil according to the Muslim community').

According to Aziz Ahmad, Sir Syed's "Biblical apologetics has therefore to rely on his exegetical subtlety."<sup>21</sup> The initial spur for the Bible commentary may have been his desire to ingratiate himself with the British who rewarded him for his 'loyalty' by conferring distinctions and degrees. The only objection that Sir Syed makes against the British is the widespread missionary activity by Christians. In his *Causes of the Indian Revolt*,<sup>22</sup> Sir Syed mentions one reason for the outbreak of the revolt as being the unchecked and malicious propaganda by missionaries who appeared to be paving the way for a mass conversion of Indians to Christianity by holding public meetings, addresses and debates.<sup>23</sup> His own approach to points of difference was to tear out of context verses from the holy Quran and to state that they were identical to those in the Bible in meaning and intent. As A. Maiello writes: "(Sir Syed) sacrificed scholarship and objectivity to political expediency. His immediate goal was the elimination of English mistrust... He tried to stress the similarity of the two creeds".<sup>24</sup> Sir Syed failed to convince the English despite his powerful advocacy of 'unity' among the two religions. He felt that the fault lay with the Muslims for they contributed to the gulf between themselves and the Christians by assuming a rigid attitude towards religious differences. He tried to advocate what he called 'obedience to the laws of Nature' in order to soften the rigidity of the Muslims. Sir Syed was unable to dent the Christian prejudice against Islam and its denial of the divine origin of the Quran and the Prophethood of the Holy Prophet. Similarly, Sir Syed's attempt weak in its exposition to assert that the Christian scriptures predicted the advent of the Holy Prophet of Islam never made any headway among the Christians. In short, Sir Syed conceded much to Christians and gained no concession in return. As A. Maiello writes, "Sir Syed may be regarded as the father of modern Islamic apologetics in the subcontinent".<sup>25</sup>

By taking certain points of dispute between Christians and Muslims and smoothing them over, Sir Syed claims to develop further inter-religious understanding. According to different writers it was not a commentary (*tafsīr*) in the sense of a Muslim commentary of the Quran. It is a collection of critical essays on certain aspects of Christianity that tend to stress the common ground (rather than the differences) between Christians and Mu

slims. The main contention of Sir Syed is that there is no fundamental difference between the account of Christianity given in the Bible and that given in the Quran.

After the War of 1857, Sir Syed felt that such a work would bridge the gulf between the ruler and the ruled and

reduce the friction that existed between the two communities. The supreme irony is that its target audience (the British) ignored it while the Muslims were infuriated with the many deviations from consensual truth. They saw in it a cover for unabashed appeasement of the ruling class. Far from building a bridge between the two communities, it set them even further apart. The professed aim of Sir Syed was frustrated. According to J.M.S. Baljon, "on account of the small interest the public took in this undertaking, he lost enthusiasm for it".<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, Sir Syed was aware of how his approach to the Bible would find favour neither with the Muslims nor with the Christians. In his letter to J. M. Arnold, Sir Syed explicitly admits, "Muslims will attack me so long as I live. Christians are unhappy with my *tafsir* (of the Bible). I agree with Biblical teachings but I do not find support for the Trinity in it".<sup>27</sup>

Other literary work including, *Risla Ahkam-i-Ta'am-i-Ahle-Kitbab*, *Tabeen-ul-Kalam*, *Khudbat-e-Ahmadiyah*, *Risalah Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq* played a crucial role in minimizing the differences and promoting harmony, equality, love and affection. These works proved very impressive catalysts to dilute the misunderstanding and misconceptions among different segments of the society. The basic philosophy in Sir Syed's works is that the righteous and pious people, to whatever religion or community they might belong, deserve our respect in the same way as the righteous people of our own religion. Unfortunately like so many other leaders all ventures and endeavours rendered by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan failed to create an environment of peaceful co-existence among different communities of sub-continent.

## Visit of England

Sir Syed's Journey to UK in 1869 was a milestone in the development of his views regarding the political, religious and social problems of the Muslims of subcontinent. Syed was inspired by the modern education system of the west. Even there was time when he was a great admirer of Indian culture and critic of west arrogant behaviour. During his stay in London, he witnessed the society as well as the educational system of the Britishers and found the justification of their pride and arrogance. He not only observed the culture, traditions and values of the white men but also was impressed by their civilized manners. He was so convinced by different magazines especially 'Tatler and Spectator' that he made his mind that he would start a magazine on the same lines for social reformation of the Muslim society. *Tahizul-ul-*



*Ikhlāq* (Muhammadans Social Reformer) was started by him to convince Muslims to accept modern way of life. He also made up his mind to establish educational institutions like Oxford and Cambridge.

## MAO College and Educational Services

Sir Syed's broad-minded approach anticipated the requirements of modern multi-cultural society where there is a great need for mutual respect and tolerance. At the same time, he was staunch believer that solution of all miseries of Muslims of India lies in acquisition of knowledge of science and technology. The Muslim community was reluctant to get education of science and technology because according to them it was planned effort to malign and weak Muslims and Islam.

Sir Syed was so worried about the future of the Indian Muslims. English newspapers were projecting Muslims and portraying drastic picture like that the condition of the Muslims has become so bad. According to Hali, there was no need of condemning Muslims. His being a Muslim was enough crime. Graham himself admits that "during that time of terror, several innocent common people, I am so sorrowful to say, were punished for the crimes of the guilty".<sup>28</sup>

In this situation of anxiety and curiosity, Sir Syed stood strong for the education and of whole community and formation of first Scientific Society comprising on equal number of members' executive council from Hind-Christen and Muslim society was the ample proof of Indian nationalism. Another proof of his pluralistic vision was that the books translated by the society were related to History, Science, Technology and Literature instead of particular religion.

The educational institutions established by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan proved that he was a leader and guide of all Indian nations. In the "un-suffocating atmosphere of Aligarh, the affection and paternal care of the hostel authorities for the inmates, the spirit and de corp among students, and their sense of service towards the both the community and the nation"<sup>29</sup> Lord Lytton laid the foundation of the college. On that occasion, Sir Syed expressed his high hopes in these words: "that this college may expand into a university, whose sons shall go through the length and breadth of the land to preach the gospel of free enquiry, of large hearted toleration and pure morality".<sup>30</sup> He further wished for that MAO would be the Oxford of tomorrow. He also urged that it would restore the popularity and charm of Gharnata and Cardova. Sir Syed while speaking the venue quoted that it is just for the prophetic terms. He further said the establishment of the college itself will give the place a name which eclipses the fame of all other towns of India. "Are not the towns of India Oxford and Cambridge, with their limited population, more visible than all other towns of England"?<sup>31</sup>

The importance and value of his decision could also be judged by the address of Keene, the Director of Public Instruction in NWFP recalled it as that MAO

was...likely to form a germ of a very wide and important movement that would live in history. It was the collective statement given by Sir Syed that the "from the seed which we have sown today, there may be spring of mighty tree who branches like those of the Banyan of the soil, shall in their turn strike, from roots into the earth and themselves send forth new and vigorous saplings; that this college may expand into university".<sup>32</sup> He further pointed out that religion and civilization. Main thrust of Sir Syed was to prove that Islam does not oppose the progress.

Sir Syed stated that "this is the first time in the history of Muhammadans of India that a college owes neither to its establishment nor to the charity or love of learning neither of an individual, nor to the splendid patronage of a Monarch, but to the combined wishes and united efforts of the whole community. It has its origin in causes which the history of the country has never witnessed before. It is based on the principles of toleration and progress such as find no parallel in the annals of the East".<sup>33</sup>

### Sir Syed and War of Independence

"Government has not cultivated the friendship of its people as was its duty to do. The Creator has instilled it into the heart of man and the instinct of animals that the strong should be kind to and care for the weak..... It was, therefore, for government to try and win the friendship of its subjects..... Government has hitherto itself isolated from the people of India as if it had been fire and they the dry gas..... It was....incumbent upon it to show towards its native subjects that brotherly kindness which the Apostle Paul exhorts us to....."<sup>34</sup>

In his book, 'Causes of Indian Revolt in India' he pointed out the reasons of the war. Accruing to him Government failed to win the hearts of the masses and rulers have no attachment with the land and subjects. Last but not least the reason was the ill-informed policies and actions of the government. Sir Syed's work welcomed a huge criticism and Mr. Cecil Beden the then Secretary of State in the viceroy's council said "the man has written a very seditious article and he must be punished".<sup>35</sup>

Sir Syed was staunch believer that both communities advance side by side. He emphasized that "we need to be unflattering in our faith, but refrain from prejudice. All mankind are our brothers, thus it is obligatory for us to love them, care for them, and develop friendship with them as it is our primary duty".<sup>36</sup>

### Today's Pakistan needs Pluralistic Vision of Pakistan.

Sir Syed had a multi-dimensional personality. He was a creative thinker, community leader, educationist, theologian, philosopher, prolific writer and liberal modernist. He was one of those dynamic leaders of history that not only molded the fate of nations

but also changed the history. He was a savior of Muslims in subcontinent whose real greatness lies in his stressing a scientific attitude of mind and adopting a secular approach in all matters of human relationship. He believed in the supremacy of the reason and logic in all matters, spiritual or temporal.

If someone turned the leaves of history, he must acknowledge that in the journey of "India's transition from medievalism to moderation, Syed Ahmad Khan stands out prominently as a dynamic force pitted against conservatism, superstition, inertia and ignorance. He contributed many of the essential elements to the development of modern India and paved the way for the growth of the healthy scientific attitude of the mind which is a sine qua non for advancement, both material and intellectual".<sup>37</sup> Sir Syed "stood for; dynamic movement of the society according to the needs of the time; supremacy of the reason in all matters, worldly or spiritual; liberty of conscience and freedom of expression; hard work and incessant struggle for the betterment of the society; secular approach in human relationship and a concept of nation which overrode all parochial considerations. He contributed many essential elements to the development of Indian society and is certainly one of the most distinguished architects".<sup>38</sup>

He emphasized on religious harmony, tolerance, importance of education, protection of rights of minorities and pluralistic society. He was staunch believer of idea of stronger together and he skillfully created an environment of peaceful coexistence among different communities of the subcontinent. Unfortunately, today's Pakistan is also facing the same menace in the form of religious intolerance, sectarian conflict and social dogmatism and we as a nation should adopt a policy of patience, tolerance, acceptance, importance of education, love of humanity and social justice as adopted by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.

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