

Irfan Ahmed Shaikh \*  
Bashir Ahmed Jatoi \*\*  
Syed Faisal Hyder Shah \*\*\*

## **Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): An Educationist And Reformer Of South Asia**

### **Abstract**

*After they spearheaded the First War of Independence (1857), the condition of the Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent was pathetic and abject. The Muslims were subjected to a concerted campaign of persecution by the British, who identified them as the only potential threat to their new Indian Empire. The decimation of the Muslim population and the destruction of their political institutions and power were accompanied by a spiritual and intellectual crisis unprecedented in the history of Islam in South Asia until the emergence of Syed Ahmad Khan. At that critical juncture he came forward as a savior of the Muslim community and a defender of the integrity of indigenous Indian intellectual life. He adopted a cautious, pragmatic and long-term approach; abandoning the romantic illusions and unfounded sense of superiority of the pre-‘Mutiny’ days, he acknowledged the material weakness of the native civilization compared to the colonial authorities, thus he advised the Muslims to be loyal to the British pro tem and to devote themselves and gain modern education for the socio-economic upliftment of the community. This paper highlights the contributions of Syed Ahmad Khan and his pragmatic approach towards the problems and wellbeing of Muslims for their future, which changed the fate of the Indian Subcontinent.*

### **Introduction**

The conditions of the Muslims of Indian Sub-continent were very pathetic especially after the war of Independence in 1857. The consequences were disastrous for whole of the country but the Muslims were targeted particularly. Britishers started persecuting Muslims in every field as they grabbed the power from them and considered that the Muslims were the only threat to their power. They blamed Muslims the sole force behind the rebellion. Indeed, the darkest and awful period started for the Muslims of India. As recorded by Garratt and Thompson:

“The Mohammedans were packed up by the British in pigskins and pork's fat was applied on them. Their bodies were charred and the Hindus were compelled to defile them”.<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Irfan Ahmed Shaikh, Lecturer, Department of General History, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, [shaikhirfanahmed@hotmail.com](mailto:shaikhirfanahmed@hotmail.com), 03003043553

\*\* Bashir Ahmed Jatoi, Lecturer, Department of General History, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, [Jatoibashir@usindh.edu.pk](mailto:Jatoibashir@usindh.edu.pk), 03009856122

\*\*\* Syed Faisal Hyder Shah, Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, [Faisalhaider.sw@gmail.com](mailto:Faisalhaider.sw@gmail.com), 03332852352

Immediately after the defeat in first War of Independence in 1857 Muslims found itself bow down and its decline reached at lowest ebb. In those days of hopelessness and darkness, the man who took the responsibility of changing the conditions of Muslims was none, but Syed Ahmad Khan. In that critical situation for the Muslims it was he who came forward as rescuer of his fellow Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan feared that the wrath of the British would cause much distress among already troubled Muslims. He came forward at a critical time for the services of Muslims and gave the right direction to them. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had pragmatic approach and he deeply analyzed the ground realities of that time and advised the Muslims to be loyal to the British authorities, devotion to the modern education and refrain from politics for the time being. Had it not been for Sir Syed, Muslims of Subcontinent might have had a very dark history but he gave them the right direction at the right time.<sup>2</sup>

### **Life History of Syed Ahmad Khan**

The birth of Syed Ahmad Khan occurred in the well-known city of Delhi on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1817. Born as the son of Muttaqi and the grandson of an emigrant from Afghanistan, this renowned personage was a 'Syed', the word suggesting that he was Prophet Mohamed's descendant in the 36<sup>th</sup> generation. Syed Ahmad's family members migrated to India during the reign of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605) and were patronized by the royal Mughal court.<sup>3</sup> Mir Muttaqi, the father of Syed Ahmad was a pious man highly devoted to the court of Akbar II (1806-1837). As he believed in Sufism he had refused the offer of Emperor Akbar II to become his prime minister. He was among the closest associates of Emperor Akbar II and even permitted to sit in the royal presence.<sup>4</sup> Syed Ahmad was taught archery and swimming by his father. The patronage enjoyed by his family enabled him with access to the Mughal Court. During the royal celebrations at the court, he could even represent his father when he was not able to be present.<sup>5</sup> His father died when he was just twenty-one years old. After the death of his father Syed Ahmad went under the care of his mother. As Dr. Arshad Islam quoted:

“Sir Syed Ahmed Khan began his primary education under the guidance of his mother Azizun Nisa Begum. She hailed from an elite family of Delhi and was highly educated. She shared a revolutionary temperament and questioned and opposed all kinds of superstitions shared by the Muslim society of her times. In shaping the personality of Sir Syed Ahmad, she played a predominant role”.<sup>6</sup>

Dr. Arshad Islam further stated:

“As Syed Ahmed was enjoying his schooling, he too was being trained to recite Quran under the tutelage of Shah Ghulam Ali. Later Syed Ahmed was admitted to a *maktab* to learn Arabic, Persian and mathematics. In addition, there were other tutors who taught him the other regular subjects. His family physician Hakim Ghulam Haider Khan gave him some lessons in medicines too”.<sup>7</sup>

The death of his father struck him like a thunderbolt and brought about a completely new turn in his life. Earlier his father had entered some differences of opinion with a court person called Raja Sohan Lal, which resulted in the dwindling of pensions given to his family by the royal court. Even this had completely stopped after his father's death. To support his family, Syed Ahmad Khan decided to join the services of East India Company. Though Syed Ahmad was closely associated with the Mughal Court, he did not like the idea of approaching the Red Fort and seek its support. From this it was evident that he approached life with a realistic attitude being skeptic about the stability of the government under the decadent power. Syed Ahmad shared the liberal views towards the West encouraged by the predominant trends characteristic of the European dominated regions like Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. At such a young age, how Syed Ahmad could have farsightedness and a firm grasp of the international trend is a matter of wonder and appreciation.<sup>8</sup>

During his early life, access to knowledge was denied to Syed Ahmad. Therefore, he pursued it with great fervor as he grew up. Especially, he was drawn towards science. The advancement of science is what attracted him more towards the West as he felt the development of scientific temperament was highly essential to bring about the future that he visualized. The depraved nature of the Mughal Court had dragged it farther from the days of peace and enlightenment that it enjoyed once. The Mughal Emperor had become a puppet in the hands of the perpetrators. He was only enjoying a royal life of pomp and show and doing nothing more that is due to a responsible ruler. Observing all these signs of a weakening empire, Syed Ahmad decided it was not his place and took up jobs with the English. He got his first appointment in the court of justice through the reference given by his maternal uncle Khalillullah khan, who was then a sub-Judge.<sup>9</sup> According to Dr. Arshad Islam:

“Following the demise of Sir Syed's father in 1837, all the sources of steady income to the family were closed. For its survival and daily bread, his family had to totally depend on the small stipend given by the Mughal Court. Forced by the grave financial crunch, in 1837 he decided to join the services of the East India Company in Delhi. At the same time, he continued his association with the Mughal court too and received several honors. In February 1839, he was deputed as the *na'ib munshi* (administrative assistant) of Agra. In December 1841, he passed the judicial service examination and was therefore made as the Munsif (sub-judge) at Mainpuri (Dist. Etah, U.P). In the year 1842 he was deputed to Fatehpur Sikri (Dist. Agra). During this year, the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar conferred on him the title of Jawwad al-Dawala 'Arif Jang'. Upon his transfer to Delhi in 1846 he resided there for about eight years and then went to Rohtak. Upon being posted as the *Sadar Amin* (chief revenue collector) of Bijnor in 1855, he stayed there till 1857”.<sup>10</sup>

An overview of Syed Ahmad's life till this point adequately reveals the inclination he shared with many others towards favoring the British administration. To a large extent, this fact had dissuaded him from resisting the British rule in the country as his own occupation was very well tied up with the

British in India. However, earlier he had a great appreciation for the native system of administration especially during the glorious period when the Mughals ruled over the subcontinent. In fact he had always wanted to draw the attention of the public and the British rulers to the laudable merits of the Mughal administration so that it could help refine the contemporary approach to the statecraft.<sup>11</sup>

Talking of the influences that shaped Syed Ahmad, we cannot miss out mentioning how the death of his dear brother impacted him. His brother was more than a companion for him and when he lost him, he underwent an excruciating agony for quite some time. He was totally engrossed in the anguish it caused him that he did not even care much about his appearance and clothing. He had totally renounced all fun and sport in his life and got succumbed to wailing the loss inside the depths of his heart. In 1857, what is called as the mutiny or the great revolt broke out in India. The lead given by some chieftains that triggered mass participation attracted Syed Ahmad's attention. The British wanted to belittle the event and thus called it Sepoy Mutiny. But the people of India, especially Muslims heralded it was known as the First War of India's Independence.<sup>12</sup>

Discussing the factors that steered the break of the revolt and the effects it caused will let us understand the stand that Syed Ahmad took regarding the situation. Down the history, the British entered India and got permission from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir (1569-1627) to trade in India. Eventually, they established their presence in the coastal towns of Bengal. What started as a trade organization in the subcontinent slowly started tactfully intruding into the internal administrative matters? In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the Mughal Empire was weakening under Shah Alam who started losing his hold over his territories. The British obtained his permission to rule over Bengal and Bihar. They did not stop with this. They rapidly expanded their territories by extending their sphere of influence over the adjacent regions. They started ruthlessly intruding into the administration of the different chieftains in the neighborhoods and even farther away in the distant provinces of India. By this time, the British had built strong forts and had developed strong bastions, armor and army. They motivated clashes between the local chiefs and participated in the foul game of playing against each other by supplying them military support to attack each other.<sup>13</sup> The mid nineteenth century was thus a chaotic period in the history of India when those who denied the involvement of the British suffered and started losing their territories while those that wanted to cheaply benefit from their support seemingly entered into an era of developments and expansions, which could not of course last for long. Zobairi observed:

“The first phase of Syed Ahmad's life and activities ended with the coming of the mutiny in 1857. The catastrophe and its after-effects suddenly brought him face to face with the harsh realities of his age and brought a consequent change in his entire outlook. After having witnessed large-scale suffering and misery among his fellow countrymen and, particularly, on a much large scale, among his co-religionists, Syed Ahmad was forced to abandon his dreamy visions of the past and narrow sectarian controversies. “The Mutiny showed him, as by a flash of lightning, the frightful danger in which his community stood.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus, rest of his life Syed Ahmad lived with a mission to restore the honor and dignity of his co-religionists and tried his level best to guide them to live according to the changing needs of the world.

### **Endeavoring to Reinstale the Honor of Muslims**

The entire political and social scenario in India during the mid-nineteenth century was unstable, chaotic and turbulent. The Indians could not decide on the proper stand they must take and the approach that will do those really good. They were quite confused whether to accept the supremacy of the British or continue to hang on to the falling umbrella of the Mughal Empire. The British in fact exploited the situation and wanted to turn the events in their favor by encouraging ill will and bad temperaments between the Muslims and Hindus in India. However, Muslims and Hindus together started feeling that they were slowly losing out their hold over the homeland as it was being snatched away by the British. When they stood united for the purpose of resisting the British occupation of India, the British act of greasing the guns and cartridges with the cow's and pig's fat received their stiff opposition.<sup>15</sup>

Muslim and Hindu Sepoys serving in the British army's together rose against the British in Bengal. The insurgence soon caught up like wild fire permeating the whole of India. With great difficulty, the British suppressed the rebellion and brought the situation under their control. Since the widespread belief projected Muslims as the prime cause for the rebellion, Muslims entered the bad books of the British. Stating the mass killing, loot and plunder followed by British occupation of Delhi, Albiruni describes:

“Not a house was safe; not a human being was secure. For several days after the British occupation of Delhi, civilians were shot at sight and when this was over, trials under the Martial Law started and any wretch, who had a grievance against another, or who wanted to win the favor of the victors, would come forward with accusation of complicity against the best and the noblest, and was readily believed. All the celebrities in Delhi, whom Syed Ahmad had described in Asarul Sanadid, were dead or were hiding to save their lives. The vast quarter of the city between the fort and Grand Mosque, which housed the Mughal aristocracy, was completely razed to the ground and ploughed up”.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas R. a contemporary historian described the events of 1857 War as:

“In Delhi Summary executions and systematic spoliation continued for four months.... Not content with the opportunities for revenge afforded by this protracted reign of terror, many Englishmen wished also to raze Delhi to the ground, or at least to destroy the Jama Masjid. Such an act Out ram pointed out, would be “a beacon and warning to the whole of India and heavy below to the Mahomedan religion.”<sup>17</sup>

Not only was Delhi alone sacked and persecuted but in the other parts of India like Lucknow, Kanpur, Moradabad, Patna, Jhansi, etc. the same story was repeated and many innocent civilians were also killed and persecuted who had no share in rebellions. During all this period the main target were Muslims as British

consider them the leaders of war.<sup>18</sup> Graham admits, “.During that time of terror, several innocent common people, I am so sorrowful to say, were punished for the crimes of the guilty.”<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, Muslims were not given any honorable positions and they were deprived of the benefits they enjoyed earlier. The situation also saw the end of the glorious Mughal Empire and it seemed that there was no chance for any revival for the once powerful Muslim rule in the subcontinent. Jawahar Lal Nehru observed that:

“After 1857, the heavy hand of the British fell more heavily on the Moslems than on the Hindus. They considered the Moslems more aggressive and militant, possessing memories of recent rule in India and, therefore, more dangerous. The Muslims had also kept away from the new education and had few jobs under the government”.<sup>20</sup>

Further in the words of Hafeez Malik:

“After 1857 the Moslems emerged as a backward nation— illiterate, hopelessly ignorant and at the same time steeped in prejudice and suspicion. They trusted neither themselves nor the British, who spared no efforts in crushing them. Consequently, despondency, sometimes amounting to sullen despair, took hold of the Muslims. They felt that as a nation they had no future in India. In this mood they sat back and watched the Hindus pass them by in the race of life”.<sup>21</sup>

By this time, Sir Syed had firmly settled with the British and had won their trust. At the times of the rebellion, he enjoyed a respectable place in the British regime as the sub-judge in Bijnore. Unfortunately, the turn of events played against him. He could not stay free from the impact of the calamity. His home was looted and his uncle and a cousin were murdered by the Sikhs. The disastrous situation also had its adverse effect on the health of Syed Ahmad’s mother who too soon succumbed to death. Syed Ahmad grew weary of the situation and wanted to move to Egypt to keep away from the turbulent conditions in India. However, his heart did not permit this idea. He thought it would be a matter of selfishness to leave the country when it was facing a severe crisis. He wanted to be bold and brave to share the plight of his brethren in the nation deeming it as a national duty. It struck him that he needs to represent Muslims to the British and fight for their welfare. He believed that Muslims should be empowered both socially and politically and made to win the favor of the ruling British so that they can stand on par with the Hindus in India.<sup>22</sup> Zobairi stated:

“After the upheaval subsided, Syed Ahmad was honored for siding with the British and saving the lives of many British people. In recognition of his services he was also offered the grant of property worth over a hundred thousand rupees. This property belonged to a rich Muslim landlord and was confiscated due to his complicity in the rebellion. Syed Ahmad politely declined the offer. He could not bring himself to accept anything which was forcibly taken away from a fellow country man as a punishment”.<sup>23</sup>

Syed Ahmad's initial efforts were directed to raise and uplift the Muslims from their state of despondency. R.C. Majumdar writes, "He (Syed Ahmad Khan) utilized the opportunity thus offered, not for advancing his own material interests, but for the uplift of his co-religionists."<sup>24</sup> He took steps to reconcile them with the British and made the Muslims realize the importance of English Education. He said it was through education that they can once again prosper and achieve an esteemed position. During those days, his ideas were received with cynicism, which he endured for good. Tirelessly he wrote on political questions and the issues of education. He strove hard to make the masses understand, appreciate and accept his views and stands. In this mission, the British too supported him. He endeavored to make the Muslims understand the necessity to be faithful to the rulers and win their favor. In a publication entitled 'Loyal Muslims of India', he highlighted the cases of all those faithful Muslims who served the British and were in turn rewarded by them. This book played a great role in patching up the differences between the two parties and putting them in good relationship with each other. Through his writings he apologized to the British for what had happened and repudiated all the allegations against the Muslims in India.<sup>25</sup>

### **Raising and Reforming the Muslims**

The encouragement, support and incentives given by the British to the Hindus gave a boost to their economic and social development. Down the history, Hindus did not show much resistance to the British regime in India. As they had accepted Persians inside the social and political framework of India eight centuries back, they had readily accepted the British customs, western education and their rule. Therefore, they had far more advanced than the Muslims in every regard. A significant difference between the educational systems of both these communities has also to be discussed here. A Muslim child had to first take up Quran classes in the Masjid for a few years before initiated into formal schooling. Whereas, this was not necessary for a Hindu child who could directly join the schooling without any religious education. While the Muslims in the middle and lower middle classes found it expensive to send their children to the normal schools, the wealthy ones felt proud and preferred to arrange for private tuitions for their kids by learned Muslims rather than sending them to schools. These factors accounted for the poor educational turnout in the Indian Muslims around those times. This had made Syed Ahmed anxious about the whole issue.<sup>26</sup> In the words of Syed Ahmad, "The reason why we are so backward being that whilst we are learned in and have benefited by the philosophy, science and arts of the antiquity, we are almost entirely ignorant of those of the modern times."<sup>27</sup>

Once Syed Ahmad had been to England to stay with his son Syed Mahmud. Upon his return to India, he realized the crucial need of reforming the Muslims in India. As Zobairi Stated:

"He (Syed Ahmad) was impressed by the practical energy of the West. The resourcefulness industry and thoroughness of the white men had mad Syed Ahmad their great admirer. Gradually he became convinced that it must be the western System of education which produced such promising results in Europe. Looking at the conditions of

his own people he concluded that the spread of modern education was the only cure".<sup>28</sup>

Further Graham stated: "Syed Ahmad's motto was Educate, Educate, Educate. 'All the socio-political ills of India, 'he once said to me, 'may be cured by this treatment. Cure the root and tree will flourish.'"<sup>29</sup>

Launching a series of activities to reform the Muslims, he started a periodical entitled "Tahzib-al-Akhlaq" predominantly dedicated to spreading reformist views. Conceived in the same lines of the journals like 'Tatler and the Spectator', this publication featured a good collection of brilliantly composed essays, discussions on general question related to morality and some interesting satires and comic pieces that ridiculed the outdated and corrupt ways of those times. He thoroughly condemned the social evils like slavery, polygamy, pretentious behavior and other derisible practices. When the Christians criticized the practice of Purdah (veil) among the Muslim ladies and frowned at it, Syed Ahmad was in its favor. Even some renowned novelists like Nazir Ahmad and Muhammad Abdul Halim Sharar strove hard to redeem Muslims from this yoke, Syed Ahmad deemed it a good traditional practice and good for them.<sup>30</sup>

While Syed Ahmad was working tirelessly to reform the Muslim community in India, there were others too who joined hands with him including Maulvi Chiragh Ali (1844-1895), Maulana Shibli Nomani(1857-1914), Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk(1837-1907), Nawab Waqar-ul-Mulk (1841-1917), Maulvi Zafrullah and Khawaja Maulvi Zainul A'bdin (d.1905). Among this group, there were two notable ones were Shibli Nomani and Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk. Shibli Nomani was a multifarious personality combining in him a historic, didactical patriotic and critical skills and temperaments. Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk was also a highly renowned writer during those times that had an intimate relationship with Syed Ahmad. Though Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk could not appreciate Syed Ahmad interfering in religious matters, he was later ably convinced by Syed Ahmad. Eventually, Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk started subscribing to the view of Syed Ahmad that a progression in the social and political status for the Muslims was not possible without winning the goodwill of the British rulers. The entire team of the writers and debaters listed above worked together in unison with Syed Ahmad towards reforming and uplifting Muslims in India around those times. During his sojourn in England, Syed Ahmad gave a brave and stringent opposition to the views expressed by William Muir in his book entitled 'The Life of Muhammad'. In appreciation of his bold statements, Syed Ahmed was conferred the title of C.S.I. During this period, several impacts and influences that he experienced encouraged Syed Ahmad to conceive an idea of establishing a residential college like the Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This thought was the seed that later gave rise to one of the most valuable contributions of Syed Ahmad to the Muslim community known as Aligarh Movement.<sup>31</sup>

### **Advancement of Education, Science and Technology**

Syed Ahmad had a strong belief that any national or religious cause can be promoted only on the strong foundation of education centered on a scientific temperament. So far he had succeeded in making the slumbering people rise with a resurgent spirit that they could now fearlessly face the situations of their times and



hope for a promising future. Syed Ahmad's views were farsighted and logical. During the aftermath of the revolt, he was subscribing to the views of the British that the language spoken by the masses is the best vehicle for educational instruction. However, the practical problem was the volume of scientific literature that had to be translated into Urdu. Even there was a dearth of translators who could do this. Therefore, Syed Ahmad thought English Education was a better and practicable option. Syed Ahmad had succeeded in establishing several schools and colleges by then. Graham stated:

“Syed Ahmad's first venture in the field of education can be traced to a Persian *madrasah* he established in Moradabad in 1859. Though the *madrasah* was founded on old classical lines, it had some important features which distinguished it from other Persian schools. First it included the study of English besides Urdu and Persian. Secondly, unlike other schools, the study of modern History was a very important part of its curriculum. The emphasis in this area was so great that it led Graham to observe that the school at Moradabad was opened “especially for the study of modern history”.<sup>32</sup>

In the school founded by him in Gazipur, English was given importance on par with other languages that were taught including Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. Even Hindus came forward to contribute to this laudable mission of Syed Ahmad. So, to say, the very first patron of the school in Gazipur was Raja Herdev Narayan Singh.<sup>33</sup> For quite some time, Syed Ahmad wanted his educational initiatives to address the interests of Hindus as well. According to Begum Naz:

“But even at the school he founded at Ghazipur, English was considered equally important and joined the other main languages like Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. That was not long after war of Independence in 1857. Funds were raised from Hindus as well. In fact the first patron of this school was Raja Herdev Narayan Singh. For a long time, Sir Syed in his educational programs also included the interests of Hindus. He wished to found a University at Benares, a manifesto had already been sent to government. His attitude only changed when the Hindus of Benares started an agitation against Persian and Urdu script in favor of Devanagari and Hindi. While having an interview with Benares Commissioner Mr. Shakespeare, he surprised him by discussing with him the language of instruction for Muslims. Hitherto he had always spoken in terms of both Hindus and Muslims. Said Mr. Shakespeare: “Today is the first time that I hear you speak of the progress of the Muslim only, previously you appeared to think always of the welfare of the Indian people in general”. It was at this stage that Syed Ahmad first expressed his fear about Hindu-Muslim Unity. He said, “I am now convinced that not in work could both these communities co-operate. The opposition of those people who regard themselves as educated is not yet fierce but in future it will increase”.<sup>34</sup>

The middle of the nineteenth century witnessed a series of movements around the world. The main impetus too many such movements were given by the Industrial revolution in England that had completely modernized the thinking of

people in all spheres of life. Most people realized that the old models and ways of life were no more effective and a new paradigm and standards must be evolved for life during the times ahead. Motivated to advance the cause of educating the Muslims, Syed Ahmad visited the Cambridge and took up an intensive study of the University and the educational system prevailing there. Zobairi observed:

“During his stay in England Syed Ahmad visited Universities and schools, studied the English educational system, saw museums and libraries, engineering workshops, ship-building yards and ammunition factories and was impressed by all that he saw. His numerous letters to his friends in India reveal his unqualified admiration for western culture and civilization, and his deep frustration over the backwardness of his own countrymen and especially of the Muslims”.<sup>35</sup>

In the words of Smith, “He (Syed Ahmad) suddenly saw European civilization in full swing, and was overwhelmed with it, dazed like a young child.”<sup>36</sup> From the speeches he delivered during those times reveal that he was more preoccupied with Higher Education than primary education. Several others felt that the way out was to work from the bottom upwards. One reason for Syed Ahmed’s stand point could be this. Though not of appreciable quality, the primary education was already there in India in some form. The question was continuous educational opportunity to the youth in India in the lines of scientific education of the west. To advance the cause of higher education, the crucial need of the times was to find qualified and talented pool of teachers, instructors and professors.<sup>37</sup> Begum Naz further recorded:

“At the Mohammadan Educational Conference he said: “There are people who think that our national cause will be the best promoted by discussing political affairs. I do not agree with that but regard the spread of education to be the only means for the promotion of the national cause. In these days, our nation should not strive for anything but the spread of education. When our country education will be sufficiently propagated then we shall have sufficient means to emerge from our backward condition.”<sup>38</sup>

It is evident that Syed Ahmed always wanted Muslims to play an active part in the politics. However, he deemed that the time was not appropriate. While many others directly spoke of patriotic and nationalist impulse raising their voice against slavery, Syed Ahmad wanted to be practical and realistic in his expression and approach.

### **Reforming the Religion**

One of the central features of Syed Ahmad’s mission was to reform the social life of Muslims and exterminating those views that were not in conformity with the changing times. In the baseline, he wanted to reconcile Islam with the emerging scientific temperament of his times. Syed Ahmed was quite brave and highly positive that he would succeed in his mission. He fought a tireless battle against those which he deemed were outdated and wrong and took extreme pains to reinstate what he deemed as right and futuristic. In every possible way, his effort was to defend Islam and the Muslim community and he strove hard to see

that they do not remain objects of mockery and cynicism. He was a hardcore rationalist and in his writings elaborately dealt on the continuous chains of causes and effects brought about by the laws of nature. He rationalized even the so called superhuman and spiritual phenomenon. His religious and educational reformist views were thoroughly intertwined. Whatever is the sphere of activity, all his revolutionary views stemmed from a modern scientific temperament. Studying the history, we can assert that he was the forerunner in modernizing Islam. Regarding his religious philosophy W.C. Smith observes:

“He (Syed Ahmad) was genuinely tolerant, deeming a man’s religion his private affair which should not be obtruded and hardly even discussed between those of different faith, lest friendship be weakened. The slightest religious bigotry distressed him”.<sup>39</sup>

In the words of Zobairi, “The affairs of the College that he founded were conducted on a strictly non-sectarian basis.”<sup>40</sup> His thoughts, philosophy and views were so advanced that he did not have many contemporaries who subscribed to his views. At first the ‘ulema’ of Deoband called Sir Syed an atheist or *mulhid* and criticized his views and beliefs specially his views about the event of *Ma’araj* in Sir Syed’s *Tafsir-i-Quran*. His critics called him as “*neicher*” (Nature believer, not in God).<sup>41</sup> Dr. Arshad Islam quoted a story of Mulla Dost Mohammad, a graduating Afghan Student in Deoband about his personal experience regarding Syed Ahmad:

“A large number among the faculty working for Darul Ulum Deaoband ever saw in Syed Ahmad an atheist, an agent of the British and an anti-Deoband. Therefore, I was unconsciously forced to hate Syed Ahmad Khan while I was a student for about eight years there. While I was about to graduate, I once carried Syed Ahmad’s *Tafsir-i-Qura’an* to Mawalana Qasim Nanotavi. I requested him to share with me which of the book’s chapters he found offensive, and he showed me a few passages. I was moved to fury and decided that I would strike and break Sir Syed Ahmad’s head with a rod. With this idea in my mind, I forced myself to Aligrah. Upon reaching the MAO College, I asked for Syed Ahmad and reached his office. When I entered his office, I found a distinguished old man. I told him I was from Deoband and came there to meet Syed Ahmad to discuss some objectionable passages from his *Tafsir*. With a smile, Syed Ahmad asked an attendant to get me a cold drink. The hospitality I received changed my impression about him and I got cooled down. At that point, a student came to the room and Syed Ahmed introduced me to him stating that I was an ‘*alim* from Deoband and had come to the college for the first time. In a highly polite tone, the student introduced himself to me. Then Syed Ahmad told me that I could give the student some advice since he was pursuing only English education in the college and was totally ignorant of Islamic learning. To this, I humbly said I was only a new graduate of Deoband and I was not good at public speech. Syed Ahmad told since it was the night of *Mi’raj* (27 Rajab 1294), I should throw some light on the occasion. I narrated a popular *hadith*. Hearing this, the student rose to fury and yelled that he was of the view that only Jews and Christians regarded irrational stories,

but Islam has everything sensible in it. Though I (Dost Muhammad Khan) got irritated, I had no answer for the student. Seeing this, Syed Ahmed asked me to open his *Tafsir* and read the passage where he (Syed Ahmad) had written about it. The passage stated that *Mi'raj* was spiritual, not physical. This view was quite acceptable to the student. After this, Syed Ahmad looked at me and said he had in fact authored his *Tafsir* for the readers who resembled the student and not for the '*ulema*'. However, he said in the heart of his hearts, he had a high regard for the views of the '*ulema*'. I founded this institution for changing the way the government looked at the Muslims. I wanted to see that the Muslims got some respectable administrative positions. Right from the start of this college, I clearly stated that the graduates of this college shall carry the Qur'an on their heads while having the book of *hadith* in their right hands and other subjects in their left hands. While authoring *Tafsir*, I adopted the ideas stated in Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) book which is a part of the syllabus in Deoband. It is a matter of surprise why they see me as a *mulhid* (atheist). Listening to what he spoke, I rose immediately to hug him in reverence and told him that it is right that he always stuck to his ideas. I too said that I shall carry this message to the *ulema* of Deoband. Immediately, I threw away the iron rod that I had carried to break Syed Ahmad's head. When I had just gone to the railway station, Syed Ahmed had sent a man to hand over a ticket to travel back to Deoband along with five gold coins to meet my travel spending from there to Afghanistan. Upon setting my feet back in Deoband, I shared the heartening experience I had with Syed Ahmed to the *ulema*. What I narrated to them had significantly taken away their prejudices against him. Once I came back to Peshawar and settled in Char Saddah, I had recommended a few students from Peshawar including Kohat and Bannu to pursue their English education in Aligrah. Syed Ahmed exclusively cared for them".<sup>42</sup>

However, he laid a solid foundation on which the famed poet Iqbal could build a strong mansion and successfully reach out the masses with many of the views of Syed Ahmad. In fact, Iqbal's reputed work named 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam' clearly reflected Syed Ahmad's standpoints.

### Summing Up

Within the limited space and scope of this paper, it is rather a tough job to give an adequate coverage to the venerable qualities, capabilities and achievements of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. What is presented here is just a glimpse of what he could achieve during his life time. The advent of Syed Ahmad occurred during a crucial time when the Muslims in India were facing a disastrous situation with bleak prospects and hope of any promising future. He strove hard to put courage and confidence in them and redeemed them from their old and outdated views and ways. While stressing on the importance of a higher education tuned to the modern and scientific temperaments, he tried to purge the religious views of Islam that were corrupted by the superstitious and idolatrous creeds of the Hindus. Thus, he infused a new resurgent spirit in the Muslims and laid a way towards a bright future. We can therefore say that before and after his lifetime, none else than Syed Ahmad Khan had championed the cause of reforming and redeeming

Muslims to the extent he did it. It would not be a wrong idea to say that the free and independent nation of Pakistan wholly for the Muslim community was born from the posthumous victory of Syed Ahmad Khan. When Syed Ahmad Khan left his mortal coils on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1898, many people thronged to his final resting place in the Aligarh College to pay their obeisance to the great leader forgetting the religious and social differences altogether. The impulses he created were far reaching and the impressions he left was long lasting. Immediately following his departure, all the mourners turned the procession into a political demonstration urging for the grant of University status to Sir Syed Ahmad's college in Aligarh in fulfilling the cherished dreams of the visionary. This is a sure sign to attest the power of the influence wielded by this venerated historic personality.

## Notes & References

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward Thompson and G.T Garret, *Rise and fulfillment of British Rule in India*, reprint, (New York: AMS Press, 1971), p.462; Dr. Arshad Islam, 'Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim shift to modern education', *Quarterly Journal of Pakistan Historical society*, 2007, p. 31

<sup>2</sup> Begum Naz, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, (Islamabad: National Book foundation, 1992), 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> Arshad Islam, 'Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim shift to modern education', *Quarterly Journal of Pakistan Historical society*, 2007, p. 28

<sup>4</sup> G.F.I. Graham, *The life and works of Syed Ahmad Khan*, (London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1885), pp. 3-4

<sup>5</sup> Arshad Islam, *Opcit.*, p. 29

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29

<sup>8</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, pp.4-5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8

<sup>10</sup> Arshad, *Opcit.*, p. 29-30

<sup>11</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p.10.

<sup>12</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p.10-11

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11

<sup>14</sup> Riazuddin H. Zobairi, *The Educational and Social Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan*, (Southern Illinois University, Ph.D. thesis 1971), pp. 107-108.

<sup>15</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> A.H. Albiruni, *Makers of Pakistan and Modern Muslim India*, (Lahore: Ashraf, 1950), pp. 21-22

<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Matcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt ---India, 1857-1870*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.295

<sup>18</sup> Zobairi, *Opcit.*, pp. 112-113

<sup>19</sup> G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Works of Syed Ahmad Khan*, (London: William Blackwood and sons, 1885), p.28.

- <sup>20</sup> Jawahar Lal Nehru, *Towards Freedom—An Autobiography*, (New York: The John Day Company, 1942), p. 289.
- <sup>21</sup> Hafeez Malik, *Muslim Nationalism in India and Pakistan*, (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1963), pp. 207-208.
- <sup>22</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, pp. 15-16.
- <sup>23</sup> Zobairi, *Opcit.*, p. 120.
- <sup>24</sup> R.C. Majumdar, *The History and Culture of Indian people* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965), p.305.
- <sup>25</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p. 18
- <sup>26</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, pp. 23-24
- <sup>27</sup> G.F.I. Graham, *Opcit.*, p. 74
- <sup>28</sup> Zobairi, *Opcit.*, p. 141.
- <sup>29</sup> Graham, *Opcit.*, p. 70.
- <sup>30</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p. 24.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25.
- <sup>32</sup> Graham, *Opcit.*, p. 70.
- <sup>33</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, p. 26.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28
- <sup>35</sup> Zobairi, *Opcit.*, pp. 163-164.
- <sup>36</sup> W.C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India*, (Lahore: Minerva Book shop, 194 3), p. 9.
- <sup>37</sup> Begum Naz, *Opcit.*, pp. 30-31
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.33-34
- <sup>39</sup> W.C. Smith, *Opcit.*, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>40</sup> Zobairi, *Opcit.*, p. 208
- <sup>41</sup> .Arshad Islam, *Opcit.*, p.37
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37-38.