



SIR SYED AHMED KHAN'S EDUCATIONAL ENDEAVOURS – A REVISIT

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Abstract

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan devoted his life to spread education among Muslims. When the British introduced modern education in India, the Muslims looked upon it with suspicion for they feared that the English language would weaken their faith. On the other hand the Hindus who wholeheartedly embraced it progressed in all walks of life. This opened the eyes of the Muslim intelligentsia of the time, chief among whom was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. He felt that English education was the only panacea for the regeneration of Muslims. A great milestone in this direction was the foundation of the Aligarh Scientific Society. The system of education, which Sir Syed advocated was the modern European education without compromising with religious values. It was in fact a rapprochement between science and religion.

Key words : modern education, movements for Islamic revival, reformation, synthesis of western education and traditional education

A great saviour of Indian Muslims, Sri Syed Ahmad Khan was not only a social reformer but also a theologian, a political and educational thinker. His reformist programmes, built upon a scientific attitude of mind and secular aspects of human life, at times amounted to a blind aping of the west. It led to his being branded as a collaborator of the British at a time when India was stepping into nationalism. As for the orthodox Muslims of the time, they vehemently opposed the anchoring of his faith on the premises of eighteenth century British rationalism, and some of them lost no time in bringing *fatwas* against him. This article tries to look at Syed Ahmad's efforts of spreading modern education among Indians, particularly Muslims.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed two movements for Islamic revival and reformation, one traditionalist and religious with pan-Islamic ideas, represented by the theological seminary at Deoband and the other modernist and secular represented by the Mohammadan Anglo- Oriental College at Aligarh. The former insisted on the need for going back to the Quran and the *Hadith*, while the latter, without underrating their importance, called for the reinterpretation of Islam considering the requirements of modern times. The religious seminary at Deoband, founded in 1867 by the *Ulema* imbued with the tradition of Shah Waliyullah, was a leading centre in the field of Islamic learning aimed at spreading, through education, among the religious classes of Muslims, the spirit of freedom (Ahammad, 1999). They believed that education was meant to train Muslims in the art of survival in a world where Muslims had no power. They sought to provide religious guidance to Muslims to enable them to live as per the tenets of Islam. They put special emphasis on preserving separate identity, both social and religious, for Muslims, and was opposed to the political and religious teachings of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. They resisted the educational modernization and sided with the nationalist forces. The Aligarh school of thought, led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, attracted in modern Muslims of the middle class, educated in modern educational institutions and clamouring for positions for themselves in the new dispensation established by the British. Though Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was brought up as an orthodox Muslim, his movement was aimed at popularizing British culture, education and administration. India was under the Muslim rule for nearly seven centuries. After the battle of Plassey in 1757, the English took over the control of those places hitherto ruled by the Muslims. Sooner than later the British started to bring about reforms not only in the field of administration but also in the field of education. The western education they tried to spread here was looked upon by the Muslims with suspicion as it was thought that it posed a serious threat to their culture and heritage (Chand, 1967). On the otherhand, the Hindus, having realised that their future lay in embracing the

western education had gone about progressing in leaps and bounds vis-à-vis the Muslims, resulting in the latter being left out of all important positions. To add fuel to fire, the Muslims had to contend with another handicap: the hostility of the British on account of the part played by them in the uprising of 1857 [William Hunter, p. 161]. The Muslims thus found themselves in a sorry state of affairs.

This opened the eyes of the Muslim intelligentsia of the time, chief among whom was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. (Graham, 1885). The system Sir Syed introduced was one modeled on the West but which gave facilities to the students to learn something about their history and religion along with what they learnt from the West. Sir Syed felt that unless the Muslims combined their religious education with the arts and sciences of the west, they could not make any progress in life. (Abbasi, 1987). It was definitely a blessing to those who aspired to get into various government services, but it came in for severe criticism from the orthodox *ulema* who felt that it did nothing to preserve the real Islamic heritage, and some overzealous *ulema* even went to the extent of bringing *fatwas* against him.

To Sir Syed modern education was an instrument for reconstructing the society and a strong means of socio-economic and cultural change. Though educated in traditional education, he stood up with a mission to provide modern education to Muslims. Having found that the western education was lacking in elements of morality, he advocated a synthesis of western education and traditional education. This elicited scathing criticism from some Muslim quarters, but in spite of that he was able to gain wide support for his educational endeavours amongst the Muslims of the sub-continent. In this regard he said, “Philosophy will be in our right hand and natural science in our left, and the crown of ‘there is no God but Allah and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is His Prophet’ will adorn our heads” (Iraqi, 2008).

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, having felt that the only panacea for the regeneration of Muslims lay in the overhaul of the education system and its reorganization on modern times, as a first experiment founded a primary school at Moradabad in 1859

and an English school at Ghazipur in 1864, both being a joint Muslim-Hindu endeavour. Another important mile stone was the founding of the Scientific Society in 1864 for the translation of standard works, mainly on political economy and history, into Urdu. When later it was moved to Aligarh, it came to be known as Aligarh Scientific Society (Qureshi, 1992). Its other objectives included publishing of rare and valuable oriental works, newspapers, journals, etc. to improve the native mind and organizing lectures on scientific or other useful subjects (Selected Documents from Aligarh Archives). Some of the works which the society had translated and published include such works as Elphinston's History of India'', Max Miller's works on Sanskrit and Darwin's works. Its other important objectives also included the introduction of improved methods of agriculture into India, and the improvement of native female education (Aligarh Institute Gazette, June 8, 1866). In 1866 it began publishing the journal 'Aligarh Institute Gazette', a bi-lingual journal in Urdu and English.

Another organization, which was founded at his behest in the same year was the British Indian Association of the North Western Provinces and Oudh aimed at improving the efficiency of the British government and promoting its best interests. Both the organizations, it required to be noted, had both Hindus and Muslims as members. Nevertheless his interest in joint Muslim-Hindu endeavour began to wither primarily due to the rise in 1860s of a pro-Hindu movement aimed at replacement of Urdu by Hindi. This turned a new leaf in his mind somuch so that he set about to impart higher education on modern lines to some of the leading Muslim families. That was the time when most of the Muslims were keeping aloof from western education partly because of the memory of their past but mainly out of fear of losing their religion if they took upon western education. His scheme was such that it gave instructions in modern education simultaneous with the tenets of their religion. Though the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College wholeheartedly admitted students of other religions from the very beginning, it turned out to be a symbol of Muslim

solidarity and awakening.

It was to spread the message of Aligarh far and wide that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan founded the 'All India Muhammedan Education Congress' in 1886. Its name was changed to All

India Muhammedan Educational Conference in 1890. It brought home to the Muslim elites of the time their modern educational needs and problems. Apart from its educational objectives it concerned itself with their political and economic matters also, acting as the political voice of the Muslim elites before the foundation of the All India Muslim League in 1906.

In conclusion Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a multi-faceted personality who fought against fanaticism, conservatism and traditionalism in an attempt to reform Muslims. For this he was wrongly stigmatized as a stooge pigeon of the British. At the same time he was vehemently opposed by the orthodox *ulema* for his brave attempts to provide western modern education to Indian society, particularly the Muslims. In spite of all this his educational experiments gained wide support amongst the Muslims of the sub-continent. He was able to convince the Muslims that English education was the only panacea for all the ills they suffered from. Though he tried to promote western education, he laid particular emphasis on the need for promoting religious values which were woefully lacking in the British system of education.

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