

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and His Social Movement.

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Abstract : *The history of British Islamic Nationalism cannot be complete without the mention of the name of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. His name is synonymous with the growth of the Muslim community as a whole. The paper throws light on the work and the efforts of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan focused on eradicating the educational backwardness of the Indian Muslims. The Muslim community owes a lot to the untiring efforts of this great man for the seeds which he sowed bore fruits.*

Keywords : *Nationalism, Imperial Legislative Councils, Resolutions, Fanaticism, Propagation.*

Introduction

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, hailed as one of the architects pioneering the importance of English education among the Indian Muslims, was born on October 17, 1817 in Delhi. He started his career as a civil servant. After retirement in 1876, he became a member of the Imperial Legislative Council in 1878 and was awarded knighthood in 1878. The Revolt of 1857 brought a turning point in his life making him understand the most pressing need of the Mohammedan community – acquire knowledge of Western education and sciences.

To quote Sir Syed, “After the Revolt of 1857, I was grieved neither on account of the plunder of my house nor on account of the loss of property that I had suffered. What saddened my heart was the misery and destruction of people. When Mr. Shakespeare offered to me the taluqa of Jehanabad, which originally belonged to a distinguished Saiyad family, and yielded an annual rental of more than a lac rupees, as a reward of my services, my heart was deeply hurt. I said to myself, how can I accept this jagir and become the Taluqdar while all the people are in distress. I refused to accept it.”¹ He emphasized that one could inquire freely and the revelations in Koran and the laws of Nature in modern science are similar. The social basis for Syed Ahmed was provided by U.P. Muslim landlords and traditional service families. From the 1870s, various forms of nationalism grew. To speak of educated unemployment and the slow growth of industry, the product of colonialism manifested in the Hindu Muslim elite conflict in U.P. and the growing unpopularity of Bengalis in northern India. The ill practice of racism expressed through Illbert Bill and the growing awareness of the link between the British poverty and the growing poverty and the rural indebtedness of the country triggered the nationalist feelings. Sir Syed advocated Hindu Muslim unity. Addressing a big gathering at Gurdaspur on Jan.27, 1884, he said, “Hindus and Muslims! Do you belong to a country other than India? Don't you live on this soil and are you not buried under it or cremated on its Ghats? If you live and die on this land, then bear in mind, that Hindus and Muslims is but a religious word; all the Hindus, Muslims and Christians who live in this country are one nation.”² It began with a reformist revivalist tendency in Islam which was anti-British too. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan made an attempt to convert the upper class Muslims of Western U.P. to avail the benefits of English education. This was sought to be accomplished through the Scientific Society (1864), Tahzib al-Akhlaq, an Urdu journal (1870) and the Aligarh Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College (1875). With the objective to encourage the scientific and western education among the Indian Muslims, he laid the foundation of Scientific Society in 1863. The Aligarh Institute Gazette, an organ of the Scientific Society was started in 1866. He is also known as a great social reformer. Despite of opposition faced by him, he brought out another journal named ‘Tehzibul Akhlaq’ meaning a ‘Mohammedan social reformer’.

In 1869, Syed Ahmad spoke of the Muslims as a separate identity. In an interview at Benaras Committee before British India established in 1869, he talked about Muslim purification and worked whole heartedly for Muslim interests.³

In 1875, he laid the foundation of Madarsatul Uloom in Aligarh. The building blocks of the M.A.O. College was to be on the Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He wanted to build this College on the lines of Islamic values and British education system thus, successfully combining the values of Western and Oriental learning. He intended to establish Muslim managed educational institutions throughout the country.

He laid the foundations of Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh in 1875 which was raised to the status of Aligarh University in 1920. To quote Sir Syed, “This is the first time in the history of the Mohammedans of India, that a college owes it not to the charity or love of learning of an individual, nor to the spending patronage of a monarch, but to the combined wishes and the united efforts of a whole community. It has its own origin in course which the history of this country has never witnessed before. It is based on principles of toleration and progress such as find no parallel in the annals of the East.” On January 18, 1877, Lord Lytton laid down the famous speech of Sir Syed which he made while laying down the foundation of M.A.O. College and is the soul of Aligarh Movement, “from the seed which we sow today, there may spring up a mighty tree, whose branches, like those of the banyan of the soil, shall in their turn strike firm roots into the Earth, and themselves send forth new and vigorous saplings.”⁴

The British supported Aligarh due to its fears of fanaticism and anti foreign mentality for they thought them to be quickly seized by religious passion. Following the same trend, the Hindus too looked forward to revivalism and extremist nationalism by the late 19th century. British India was not considered a unified nation and this made the belief that a single representative will fail to provide a viable solution to the problem of the various communities. It could not bring peace, prosperity and stability in the country and the ‘backward classes’ would be further pushed back by the ‘advanced classes’.

Keeping this in mind the Legislative Council members at all levels were not elected but appointed by the British authorities. In the case of common elections, the Hindus and the Muslims should be given the equal quota. Sir Syed made his position quite clear when in 1883, the Legislative Council was debating a Local Self Government Bill for Central Provinces where the Muslims were in a small minority. He told

the Council, "The system of representation by election means the representation of the views and interests of the majority of the population in a country like India, where caste distinctions still flourish, where there is no fusion of the various races, where religious distinctions are still violent...." 5

On December 28, 1885, the Indian National Congress was founded claiming to represent all the communities of India. In the first session of the Congress in 1885, a resolution urging the reconstitution of the Legislative Councils on a representative basis was passed. This posed a challenge to the Muslim leadership for it suggested Hindu domination in the Legislative Councils. This was opposed by Sir Syed on the ground that the Muslims would be in a permanent minority.⁶ Many worked to achieve Sir Syed's educational goals and formed the core leadership of the Muslims in the United Province. The influence of Aligarh College in British India was expanded by establishing the Muhammad Educational Association in 1886. It emphasized the reformation of the public education to make it more acceptable to the Muslims, providing ample opportunities for the Muslims, urging the government to introduce religious education in government primary school and rewarding the English educated Muslims. It served as the means to spread British India Islamic Nationalism to the Muslims in other parts of British India.⁷ To revive the spirit of the Muslims at the national level, he instituted All India Muslim Educational Conference in 1886. Through this he meant to promote the objectives of the Aligarh Movement.⁸ His efforts bore fruits in the sense that a number of educational institutions opened infusing social and political awareness among the Indian Muslims.

The Indian Patriotic Association was founded in 1888 by Syed Ahmed aiming that INC did not represent all communities of India.⁹ Assistance from leading Islamic organizations was sought to offer resistance to the INC. Consequently, several resolutions to the effect were passed in the Muslim gatherings held at Lahore, Allahabad, Lucknow, Madras, Meerut and other places.¹⁰ A letter addressed to the British signed by Sir Syed and several Muslims in 1890 demanded more number of seats to the Muslims in the Legislative Council in British India. The same demand was made by Latif's Muslim Literary Society (members were to be appointed by the British authorities). Sir Syed came to the conclusion that the Hindus and Muslims could not be a unified nation and it is impossible to serve two nations at the same time.¹¹ Sir Syed also opposed the acceptance of certain INC demands by the Indian Councils Act 1892. He was of the view that the representative government in India could not produce any beneficial result.¹² In December 1893, influential Muslim leaders decided to form the Mohammedan Anglo Oriental Defence Association to promote the political interests of the Muslims. In 1896, Sir Syed drew a Memorandum in the Association demanding separate communal electorates and weightage in representation of the Muslims in municipal councils and district boards. ¹³ The necessity of forming a Muslim political organization became more imperative after the death of Sir Syed. In the midst of these deliberations, the provinces of Bengal and Assam were reconstituted. Nawab Salimullah of Dacca, the capital of the new province favoured the partition and decided to organize the Muslims into a compact body.

On March 27, 1898, Sir Syed breathed his last. Sir Syed's biography entitled, Hayaat-E- Javed is written by Maulana Altaf Hussain Haali. To quote him, "After Sir Syed's death, it was not only by words but also by actions that the people proved their love and respect for his high ideals.

Almost at once, some people began to press for the foundation of Muslim University. The movement spread all over India and abroad and people started raising money for Sir Saiyid's finest memorial... Even in England students raised money for the Muslim University. People were surprised to see the interests of Englishmen and their efforts to collect money to fulfill the dream of Sir Saiyad to make MAO College as Muslim University. There is an old saying that a good friend is like a leafy tree. For when a tree is in full bloom one has the pleasure of its shade and the enjoyment of its fruits, and when it withers, its wood is put to many uses. Sir Syed was such a friend to the Muslims. When he was alive, he laboured for them with his body, his words, his pen and his money. When he died he left the memory of his love and work imprinted on their hearts so that they might come together and build on the foundations he has laid." The two civil servants in Hyderabad, Mohsin ul Mulk and Viqar ul Mulk led the Aligarh College in 1920s.

The Aligarh Movement derived its name from the fact that its origins lay in the city of Aligarh in Northern India during the later years of the 19th century. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was the torch bearer of the Aligarh Movement. It was primarily launched to eradicate the educational backwardness of the Muslims. Urdu Defence Association is regarded as an offshoot of Aligarh Movement. The Aligarh Movement emerged as a modern, liberal trend among the Muslim educated classes with Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College, Aligarh as its base. The main objectives were to spread modern education among the Indian Muslims and to reconcile western scientific education with the teachings of the Quran and sought to improve the position of the women by opposing purdah, polygamy, divorce and advocating widow remarriage and women education. Unfortunately, he was used by the colonial government in its policy of divide and rule with the result that in his later years, he propagated the divergent interests of the Hindus and the Muslims in India. ¹⁴

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