

## Sayyed Jamaluddin al-Afghani

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Sayyed Jamaluddin al-Afghani was undoubtedly one of the most influential Muslim of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He was a versatile genius, intellectual and an orator. He was born in 1838 in Afganistan at the border of Iran. He studied the Quran, Fiqh, philosophy, tasawwuf, logic, mathematics, and medicine. He knew Arabic, Persian, Turkish, French, English and Russian languages. At a young age he set out on his sacred mission of bringing about an awakening in the decaying world of Islam, in Afghanistan, India, Iran, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire.

In 1856, at the age of eighteen, Afghani spent a year in Delhi-India and felt the rising political pulse of the subcontinent, which was soon to erupt in the Uprising of 1857. From India, he visited Arabia where he performed the Hajj. He spent the period 1858 to 1869 in Afghanistan working for successive Amirs (rulers). In 1869 he made brief visits to India and Cairo on his way to Istanbul, capital of the Ottoman Empire. He was elected to the Turkish Academy but Turkish *ulema* (religious authorities) found his teachings unacceptable, and he was expelled from Istanbul in 1871. He went back to Cairo where he had a major role in the events that led to the overthrow of Khedive Ismail Pasha. He was at the head of the Young Egyptian Movement and the nationalist uprising under Torabi Pasha that sought to expel the Europeans from Egypt. The British, suspicious of his motives, sent him back to India just before their occupation of Cairo in 1882. After a stay of about eight years in Egypt, Jamaludin Afghani left Cairo in March, 1879, and arrived in Hyderabad Deccan (India). Here he wrote his famous treatise, "Refutation of the Materialists", which created a stir in the materialistic world.

*"It is permissible... to ask oneself, why Arab civilization, after having thrown such light on the world, suddenly became extinguished, why the Arab world still remains buried in profound darkness. Afghani blames the Muslim rulers, theologian and likewise the orthodox Muslims.*

*The strangest thing of all is that our ulema these days have divided science into two parts. One they call Muslim science and one European science. Because of this they forbid others to teach some of the useful sciences. Science is International. There is no such thing as Islamic science. Science is like building a pyramid. Each person puts up a block. These blocks have never had a religion. It's irrelevant, the color, region or ethnicity of the person who put up the block"*

From India, Sayyed Jamaluddin embarked on a journey through Europe and resided for various lengths of time in London, Paris and St. Petersburg.

In Paris he met and influenced the Egyptian modernist Muhammad Abduh. Together, the two started a political organization *Urwah al Wuthqa* (The Unbreakable Bond) whose sole purpose was to "modernize" Islam and protect the Islamic world from the greed of foreigners. The British were annoyed and were instrumental in shutting down the organization. However, Iran's Minister of Press read a newspaper published by *Urwah al-Wuthqa*, and he persuaded the King, Nasiruddin Shah, to invite Afghani to Tehran. There Afghani soon won followers impressed by his ideas and his eloquence, but the shah was not one of them. In 1887 Sayyed Jamaluddin was forced to leave Iran.

He spent some time in London, then lived in Russia for about four years. He won the confidence of the Czar, and it was through his influence that the Muslims in Russia were permitted to print the Holy Quran and other religious books, whose publication was earlier banned in Czarist Russia.

In 1889 Nasiruddin Shah was visiting St. Petersburg, and upon meeting Afghani there he invited him to come to Tehran again, promising him the post of prime minister. Afghani saw an opportunity to have an impact in the Islamic heartland, but he soon found himself once again out of favor with the monarch. This time he took sanctuary in a well-known shrine just south of Tehran. There he was able to meet with influential figures who were interested in his ideas about modernizing Iran's political and economic systems. Inevitably the shah learned of Afghani's attacks on some of his policies, and in January 1891 he sent armed troops to drag Sayyed Jamaluddin forcibly out of the shrine and deported to Ottoman Empire. From there and sometimes from London, Afghani led a campaign over

the following years against Iran's policy of selling concessions for economic activities to foreign companies in order to get cash to fund the shah's visits to Europe and other activities. The most dramatic case was the awarding to a British subject of a concession for the production, sale and export of all Iranian tobacco to a British subject. Afghani got the highest Shi'i religious authority, to issue a decree forbidding Shi'is to buy or use any tobacco products from the concessionaire. The result was that beginning in December 1891, a remarkably effective boycott by smokers forced the government to cancel the entire concession early in 1892. A devoted Iranian servant and follower of Afghani named Mirza Reza Kermani visited him in Istanbul in 1895. On May 1, 1896, Kermani assassinated Nasiruddin Shah.

Jamaluddin Afghani spent the rest of his life in Istanbul and died of cancer in 1896.

Two principal themes run through the life and work of Sayyed Jamaluddin Afghani:

- I) He was a great Muslim revolutionary and reformer who aimed at the unity of Muslim people all over the world. He wanted to make Islam a great force in the world. The political principles followed by Afghani are as follows:
- a) He wanted to influence the head of states in to achieve internal reforms as well as to resist foreign domination. Through this principle, he wanted to establish a model country to be followed by other Asian and Muslim countries.
  - b) He wanted to use France and Germany as a third power to support the Asian struggle against the British as well as Tsarist Russia.
  - c) In case of failure of the above theory, he wanted to influence the British to support the eastern nations in order to push the Russian imperialist out of Asia.
  - d) He also sought help from Russians to support Asians against the British.

The Muslim world was living under colonial suppression with major problems of internal discord, illiteracy and poverty. Jamaluddin's ideas were noble but he was never been able to materialize his goals and objectives. He was dealing with the powerful imperialist of the time without any support from any Muslim government. The colonial powers' primary interest was the division of the world of Islam and they continuously conspired against Jamaluddin and did not allow him the propagation of his mission..The British, promoted the narrow-minded nationalism rather than the pan-Islamism preached by Afghani.

II) He sought to "modernize" Islam to make it responsive, as he saw it, to the needs of the age.

It was essentially a rationalist movement, which sought to bring about a renaissance of Islamic thought

The great French philosopher Renan says about Afghani: "The liberty of his thought, his noble and loyal character, made me believe, while I was talking with him, that I had before me, restored to life, one of my old acquaintances---Avicenna, Arerros, or another of those great infidels, who represented for five centuries the tradition of the human mind."

Dr. Muhammad Iqbal pays glowing tributes to Jamaluddin Afghani when he says: "A perfect master of nearly all the Muslim languages of the world and endowed with the most winning eloquence, his restless soul migrated from one Muslim country to another, influencing some of the most prominent men in Iran, Egypt and Turkey."

His influence throughout the east and especially in the world of Islam was indeed overwhelming. He was, to a great extent, responsible for the awakening of Muslims during the 19th century