Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: A Visionary and Reformist of His Time

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October 2020 was the one-hundredth anniversary of Aligarh Muslim University India, the first educational institution that offered science in India. It was among the first to introduce science in an institution of higher learning in the Muslim world after a hibernation of 500 years.

Sir Syed Ahmed was a great Muslim scholar, a great visionary, statesman, educator, and a Muslim reformer of the 19th century. He revived the teaching of Science to Aligarh Muslims after five centuries of neglect.

**Muslims were at the forefront of science, technology, and innovation from the 7th till the 15th century**. Due to the dominant Asharite ideology, the Muslim countries abandoned the teaching of science and philosophy. As a result, they lost their lead globally. It was more comfortable for the western world to colonize the entire Muslim world (including the great Safavid, Ottoman, and Mughal empires) during18th and 19th century.

Sir Syed was born when the British were colonizing India and Mughals were not able to defend themselves. He was one of the great thinkers, surrounded by Maulvis (Theologians) and poets among the Indian Muslims, who recognized that **the severe underlying factor for the defeat and humiliation of the first war of Indian independence was lack of progress in science and technology**. While Europeans were making technological advances, with leaps and bounds from the 16th century onwards, Muslims were going downhill by abandoning sciences in the Muslim universities.

**Sir Syed recognized Muslims' pathetic conditions and felt deeply pained to see the educational backwardness dominating the masses. He made a mission of his life to bring Muslims out of Jahalia(ignorance) with very little support but loads of opposition**. He foresaw that modern education was the only tool to uplift educationally backward masses' condition to compete and have dignity and respect.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was born in Delhi to a middle class, pious family on 17 October, 1817. His initial education was focused on learning Arabic, Persian, and Islamic studies. Later on, he studied the English language. In 1938 he was employed by East India Company, and after a few years of service, he served as Judge. **During the 1857 revolt against the British, he witnessed British atrocities in which several of his family members died**. **He wrote a book about his experiences highlighting the causes for a humiliating defeat in colonialists' hands**. His book was translated into English and sent to the British Parliament and Queen Victoria members, and the East India Company got expelled from India.

Soon after the 1857 Indian Revolt, he set up schools and convinced people to send their children for modern education. It was met with significant criticism owing to the educational backwardness of even great Muslim leaders of the time, as only a few realized the significance of his message.

He went to England (1869-70) and visited Oxford and Cambridge universities to study the British educational system. He observed that British people participated in the hard work of industrial development of their country, which was lacking in the Indian community. On his return, he set up a committee for establishing teaching institutions and started an influential journal, Tahdhib al-Akhlaq "Social Reform," for the "**uplift and reform the Muslim**." A Muslim school emerged at Aligarh in May 1875, and after his retirement in 1876, Syed devoted himself to enlarging it into a college. **He also organized a "Scientific Society" at Aligarh, where he entrusted scholars with translating the great scientific works from English to Urdu and Hindi to make them understandable to the masses**.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan founded Mohammaden Anglo-Oriental College (MAO College), which became the Aligarh Muslim University on 14 September 1920. His motto was "**a true Muslim is one who must have the Holy Quran in one hand and the book of science in the other.**" His supreme interest was the intellectual development of the people through modern education.

**He wrote several volumes of a modernist commentary on the holy Quran, several books on Islam, and hundreds of articles to motivate Muslims to get modern education.** He argued that understanding the Quran rested on a deep appreciation of reason and natural law and therefore did not preclude Muslim involvement in scientific methodology. He explained that "Religion is the word of God and our surroundings are the work of God. An explanation of the existence of the work of God is Science. Hence, no contradiction is possible between Science and Religion as the word of God cannot be in opposition to the work of God."

Syed Ahmad considered Madrasa Education better than what the British schools offered in terms of Islamic Education, but it is unlikely to lead Muslims into a new future. He emphasized Western Education's importance and persuaded his coreligionists to abandon their conventional approach of supporting indigenous institutions and adopting new knowledge in these institutions. **His supreme interest was the intellectual development of the people through modern education.**

He based his education philosophy on science, theology, and morality as an integrated education system. He introduced rationalism in theology and initiated modernist reforms in India's Muslim society when Muslim morale was down and prevented it from decline and cultural decay. He faced severe criticism from religious orthodoxy when learning the English language was considered sinful. **His advocacy of Western Education of Science and English caused apprehensions and doubts in people's minds. Many Muslims were perplexed due to clergy that believed that modern education was incompatible with and against the religion**. It was of no surprise as science as a subject in any university of the Muslim world since the 15th century. Orthodox Muslims opposed him for his progressive, liberal and secular views and labeled him a Kafir. Deobandi clerics opposed his proposal, saying that they cannot associate an institution with Shia students on the campus. Several Muslim scholars had signed fatwas accusing Sir Syed of disbelief and apostasy. One cleric went all the way to Makkah and secured a fatwa calling for Sir Syed's beheading if he persisted with his plans to establish the college.

 In his famous speech at the foundation of MAO College, he said: "Oh my dear children, you had reached a particular stage, and remember one thing that when I undertook the task, there was criticism all-around against me, and abuses upon me. Life had become so difficult for me that I aged before my age. I lost my hair, my eyesight, but not my vision. My vision never dimmed, my determination never failed, I built this institution for you, and I am sure you will carry the light of this institution far and wide; darkness will disappear from all around". It summarizes his lifetime struggle to build Aligarh University, a fine institution of higher education in India.

If Sir Syed were alive today, he would continue to experience pain because his community remains in the same state as it once was in his time. **Due to science's introduction in the educational system, the universities produce Muslim doctors, engineers, and IT professionals. Unfortunately, none of the universities are producing scientists**. Education among Muslims remains the same or slid down to a lower status in some indices. 40% to 50% in urban and 60% to 70% of Muslims remain illiterate in rural areas. A significant Muslim population still prefer sending their children to indigenous institutions like Madrasas where they are not getting any education in science. **The belief that religious sciences and worldly sciences are separate and mutually opposed is still prevalent**. Students in both the categories, those in modern educational institutions and those in Madrasas, are not getting a proper understanding of Islam, as explained by Sir Syed, which is a complete way of life and commands everyone to excel in Islamic and worldly knowledge.

Today we can see the Aligarh Muslim University graduates in every field of activity in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Although Aligahr alumni celebrate its founder, Sir Syed, worldwide, I have never heard a talk about his mission of promoting science education. Sir Syed spent all his life improving Muslim Ummah's status by raising educational standards and bringing them out of shackles of western power and other oppressors. Unfortunately, Muslims are not making enough progress in realizing his dreams. To reiterate, Sir Syed emphasized:

"Acquisition of knowledge of science and technology is the only solution for the problems of Muslims; otherwise, Muslims will remain humiliated and rejected."

"Ijtihad (innovation, re-interpretation with the changing times) is needed to overcome taqlid (following old values) and to develop new ideas..."

He pointed out not to show what Islam preaches, instead "show your behavior as the follower of true Islam representing the character, education, knowledge, tolerance and piety, and selfless service to humanity."

"Education alone in the present context can empower Muslims and nothing else. Muslims can create a modern Islamic society only by promoting modern Education like Sciences, medical Education, engineering, teaching, management, etc. God has given the eyes to see and the mind to analyze. We must see what is happening around us and use our intellect to conclude. It is what Allah wants us to do. In short, we must develop a scientific temper among the people as the holy Quran says in different verses".

**Dr. Allama Iqbal says about Sir Syed**:

''The real greatness of the man (Sir Syed) consists in the fact that he was the first Indian Muslim who felt the need of a fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it.''This great visionary and reformer, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, will always remain alive in our memory, inspiring the right Islamic thinking to make progress in this world and regain the intellectual leadership that was part of Muslim heritage."

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