

SIR SYED AHMED KHAN: ILLUMINATING PATHWAYS TO PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND SOCIETAL ENLIGHTENMENT FOR MUSLIMS IN UNITED INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The Muslims of undivided India from all sphere of life suffered a lot at the hands of British, However, politically they endured severe setbacks after the upheaval of war of independence in 1857. In the light these circumstances, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan emerged as a staunch Muslim Nationalist and progressive Political thinker. He strived hard to rescue the Muslims from ultimate downfall. In the trek of upliftment of Muslims, he went on ratiocinative about the causes behind the Political decay and ruination the problem and its remedy. Soon, he reached to the conclusion “The main cause of Muslim political decay is ignorance and the only remedy is education”. The Nationalistic and Progressive political thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan can be divided into two phases earlier and later political phases. This research paper has attempted to examine Sir Syed's nationalistic and progressive political ideas and its significance for Muslims in India, which makes him to affirm his survival during the time of colonial forces. Furthermore, Qualitative method of study has been used to carry out this research to its final edge.

INTRODUCTION

The early decades of the 19th century constitute a water-shed in the history of Indo-Muslim political thought. The decline of Muslim political power which had begun in the early 18th century, reached its lowest point during this period as the tentacles of British imperialism spread far and wide in the country. After 1857 Mutiny Syed Ahmad appeared on the Indian political chessboard when, the British cherished a hostile attitude towards the Muslim community. The revolt of 1857 brought face to face with the changed realities of social and political life in India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who was a sub-judge in Bijnore in 1857 emerged from the ordeal not only as a loyal employee of the British Government but traumatized into a staunch Muslim nationalist¹. The political formulations of Syed Ahmad Khan were largely shaped by his nationalistic and political experience and which

were based on a careful and realistic appraisal of the contemporary Indian life and Society.

Sir Sayed persuaded 1857 that the British Raj was proved to be a source of maintaining peace between Hindus and Muslims, it didn't turn them into a single ethnic group with shared political goals. In reality, he observed that during the lapse of British control, Muslims and Hindus were living in the constant fear of one another. He saw that Hindus and Muslims were unlikely to try to close ranks during quiet times if, they could not even do so during an emergency. His separatist Muslim nationalism was further supported by three additional issues:

a)

The controversy of Urdu-Hindi.

b)

he method of representation in the Viceroy's legislative council, since the day when, the

constitutional reforms of 1861 provided seats to Indians.

c)

he later on the policies of the All-India National Congress”.

In the early years, Sir Syed stood for Hindu-Muslim unity. He advocated separation between religious and political matters. As a member of Viceroy's Legislative Council, he strove for the welfare of both Hindus and Muslims. In 1884, he made it clear that “by the word *qawm*, I mean both Hindus and Muslims. In the first Phase, Sir Syed's political and Nationalistic approach is characterized by Loyatism, which basic parameters were five the 'fear', 'hope', 'appreciation', Progressivism 'and 'pragmatism'². In the Second Phase he works only for the Muslims community and emerge as a Muslim Nationalist. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan in his whole political career had dealt with three major segments of society, the Muslims the Hindus and the English.

Early Political ideas of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan:

The GFI Graham's in the first chapter of his book "Life of Syed Ahmad Khan". defines rebellion in the following sense (i) fighting against the nation's established government; (ii) going against the authority's orders in an effort to undermine it ultimately; (iii) aiding those who oppose the authority; and (iv) engaging in internal civil war among the subject peoples without regard to the applicable disciplinary laws. He claims that not a single one of these things was absent from the people during the dreadful days of 1857, and the affair constituted a major uprising.

According to Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the primary reason behind the uprising was the lack of Indian members in the Upper Council, which was in charge of the nation. He began by talking about the entry of his compatriots into the British Parliament, which he believed was both unfeasible and would not advance India's interests. However, “there was absolutely no justification for Indians' exclusion from their nation's legislative council”.⁴

“It is from the voice of the people only that Government can learn whether its projects are likely to be well received, and this voice alone can check errors in the law and warn us of dangers before they burst upon us and destroy us”. He narrates how the Government continued to pass laws which were regarded by the Indians to be repugnant to all they

held dear. At length came the time when all men looked upon the English government as slow poison, a rope of sand, a treacherous flame of fire. There was no man to reason with them, no one to point out to them the absurdity of such ideas.....Why ? Because there was not one of their own number among the members of the Legislative Council. He goes on to say that although there are difficulties in the way in which the “ignorant and uneducated natives of Hindustan should be selected to form an assembly like the English Parliament but whatever the difficulties such a step is not only advisable but absolutely necessary”.⁴

As may well be gathered, there were bickering among Sir Syed Ahmad friends who said that a brochure like “The Causes of the Indian Revolt” should never be printed and published at all, and one of them, Rai Shankar Das, actually begged him to burn all the copies he had, But Syed Ahmad Khan had the pamphlet printed, sent a copy to the India Government and 500 copies to members of Parliament. There were men in the Government of India, like the Foreign Secretary Mr. Cecil Beadon, who began to consider him as a fire-brand but even they had to change their opinion when it was known that the book was not published in India at all. It was significant that couple of years after the partial publication of the “Causes” brought the first Indian Council Act of 1861 where Indians were admitted for the first time in the Governor-General's Legislative Council.⁵

Along with his plea for the inclusion of Indians in the Councils of the Crown he had tried to prove that the Revolt of 1857 was not the work solely of the Musalmans but of irresponsible members of the whole Indian community. This idea he further propounds in a series of pamphlets called “The Loyal Muhammadans of India which he published in 1860. As Sir Syed's Urdu biographer, the great poet Hali says “whatever articles, brochures and books written by Englishmen one opened, they were found to be full of calumnies against the Musalmans,”⁶ and Syed Ahmad Khan began to publish in a serial form the episodes in the life of those who had stood by the British during the dark days of the Mutiny. This should not lead us to think that he had digressed one jot from his pan-Indian outlook, and when, he began to consider that the panacea for the ills of India was education and nothing but education he was thinking only in terms of Indians. He said once-to Col. Graham that the

socio-political diseases of India may be cured by this prescription and his first attempt to fulfil this purpose was to open a school at Muradabad as early as 1858 which was to specialise in Modern History⁷. In 1864 he had made up his mind that Indians must first be educated and their ignorance obliterated in order that they should be useful to their country, and by education he meant instruction in modern arts and sciences. He was a Sadr Amin at Ghazipur when he inaugurated the Translation Society which was to develop into the Scientific Society of Aligarh. The work of the Translation Society, as its name suggests, was to have important books on literature and arts translated from English into Urdu and thus to bring Indians not knowing English abreast with modern thought. A short time afterwards he founded the new Ghazipur School, which, by the way, still exists, as in his opening remarks referring to the recent promulgation of the Indian Council Act of 1861 he said: "Gentlemen, the decision of the British Government that natives of India should be eligible for a seat in the Viceroy's Council both rejoiced and grieved me. It grieved me because I was afraid the education of the natives was not sufficiently advanced to enable them to discharge the duties of their important office with credit to themselves and benefit to their country. The appointment of natives to the Supreme Council was a memorable incident in the history of India. The day is not far away, I trust that Council would be composed of representatives from every division or district and thus the laws which it will pass will be laws enacted by the feelings of the entire country. You will, of course, see that this cannot come to pass unless we strive to educate ourselves thoroughly".⁸

Urdu-Hindi language controversy:

Sir Syed started his political careers as an Indian patriot who fearlessly, though with some moderation, championed the Indian cause through the press and the platform. However, the later political developments in the country, specially the rival Hindi movement started at Banaras, obliged him to change his views. The stark realities of the political front disillusioned him and, being a realist, he could prophesy that Hindus and Muslims, having different cultures could not unite together. In fact, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a major event happened that was going to alienate the Muslim community and make it grow more

communal than before. It was the Urdu-Hindi language controversy. In 1867 a section of Hindus began to believe under the propaganda of Babu Shiv Parasad that Urdu was not satisfying their needs and began to work for its replacement. Babu Shiv Prasad, who was himself an Urdu writer, termed Urdu as a symbol of Muslim rule in India and its heritage. He asked the Hindu members of the Scientific Society to replace Urdu by Hindi as the language of translation in the Society. He along with some other Hindu members of the Society also demanded the publication of the Society's journal in Hindi, instead of Urdu. The Hindu leaders of Banaras resolved that, as far as possible, the use of Urdu language, written in Persian script, should be discontinued in Government courts and should be replaced by Hindi language, written in Devanagiri script. Sir Syed used to say that this was the first occasion, when he felt that it was now impossible for the Hindus and Muslims to progress as single nation and for anyone to work for both of them simultaneously. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan words were: "During these days, when Hindi-Urdu controversy was going on in Banaras, one day I met Mr. Shakespeare who was posted there as Divisional Commissioner. I was saying something about the education of the Muslims, and Mr. Shakespeare was listening with an expression of amazement, when at length, he said, 'This is the first occasion, when I have heard you speak about the progress of Muslim alone. Before this you were always keen about the welfare of your countrymen in general'. I said: 'Now I am convinced that both these communities will not join wholeheartedly in anything. At present, there is no open hostility between the two communities, but on account of the so-called educated people, it will increase immensely in future. He, who lives, will see. Mr. Shakespeare thereupon, said, 'I would be sorry if your prophecies were to be true'. I said, 'I am also extremely sorry, but I am confident about the accuracy of this prophecy'.⁹

By 1870 several organizations of the Hindus came into existence. The Barahmans of Banaras, who enjoyed considerable influence on Hindu society by special virtue of their social standing in anti-Urdu campaign. In the opinion of this group of Hindus, Urdu was the language of Muslims and hence, it only represented Muslim culture rather than Indian culture. This instigated a sharp controversy and cultural rivalry between the Hindus, who wanted to

gain a national status for the Hindi language, and the Muslims, who opposed the national character of Hindi and defended the Urdu language. In a meeting organized by anti-Urdu, Hindu activists on 27 September 1868, one prominent leader, Babu Madhuk Bhattacharjee, argued that “Hindi should be the language of the country since of all the languages spoken in India, Hindi occupied the first place”.¹⁰

Sir Syed assumed that the question of language was fundamental and if a mock divide was made between the two communities and he started Aligarh Institute Gazette with the intention to educate his people about the politics and society of England and the rest of the world, but during these years almost all the articles published in the gazette were related to Urdu-Hindi controversy. While in London, Sir Syed wrote a letter to Mohsin-ul-Mulk on April 29, 1870 in which his complete focus was on Hindi-Urdu controversy. He expressed that, “Hindus are roused to destroy the Muslims’ (cultural) symbol embodied in the Urdu language and the Persian script. I have heard that they have made representation through the Hindu members of the Scientific Society that the Society’s Journal should be published in the Devanagari rather than in the Persian script, and that all translations of books should likewise be in Hindi”. He believed that this “proposal would destroy co-operation between the Hindus and the Muslims” as “Muslims would never accept Hindi and if Hindus persistently demanded the adoption of Hindi in preference to Urdu it would result in the total separation of the Muslims from the Hindus.” To him, “it would open an unending vista of split and strife between Hindus and Muslims and the rupture would never be healed”.¹¹

The Urdu-Hindi controversy changed Sir Syed’s mind considerably. The repudiation of Urdu by the Hindu zealots paved the way for the birth of a subjectively conscious Muslim community in British India. For Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the Urdu-Hindi language controversy played, in effect, a crucial role in making him reconsider his outlook on Hindu-Muslim unity in South Asia. At the same time many Hindus were also using the language as a vehicle of expression and adopted it as their language. However, Sir Syed’s stand against replacement of Urdu by Hindi led to a controversy which was soon communalized.

Local Self-Government

The educated Indians were demanding a representative council ever since the passage of the Act of 1861. The demand meant that elections would be held on the basis of general franchise. On 12th January, 1883, in the course of a discussion on the Central Provinces Local Self-Government Bill, Sir Syed fervently objected to the introduction of the principle of joint electorate in India. On the eve of introduction of the Local Self-Government Bill he threw light on the multi-ethnic, multi-culture and multi-religious character of India and asserted that time was not ripe for introduction of a simple representative government in India. In fact, Sir Syed favored the system of elections based on separate electorates which was later on incorporated in the Montague-Chelmsford Reform, and opposed the system of representation by common electorate. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan observed, “The system of representation by election means the representation of the views and interest of the majority of the population, and, in countries, where the population is composed of one race and one creed, it is no doubt the best system that can be adopted”¹².

Sir Syed has nowhere given a detailed treatment of the nature and character of the local government and its merits. But in his speech on the Local Self-Government Bill, he categorically states that this type of government is the essential mark of civilized society. Further he discussed that the system of local government also helps in developing in man a capacity for administration and bringing them into contact with local problems and it helps to develop in them a political sense. Sir Syed is convinced that by participating in the work of local government, people will start taking an active interest in the day to day administration of their country. But on account of the conditions as they prevailed in India in his time, Syed is opposed to the introduction of this system. His opposition is mainly grounded on the same reasons as those on which he opposed the introduction of representative government in India.¹³ Sir Syed was apprehensive of assimilation and domination of minority by the majority.

Sir Syed’s Attitude towards Indian National Congress:

Sir Syed’s differences with the Congress were so serious that they ultimately changed the course of history. His differences with the Congress arose because of his loyalism to the British and also

because of the great role the European staff of Aligarh College played in the politics of the country. His rift with the Congress was of his conviction that the West was also far ahead of the East that until the East caught up with the West any agitative politics of the Congress was not desirable. It would be more suicidal to the Muslims, who were not on par even with their own countrymen, much less with the European.

When the Indian National Congress was established in a session held at Bombay in 1885, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan remained aloof. Surendranath Banerjee, founder of the Indian National Conference which later merged with the Congress, had written to Sir Syed Ahmad that “no assembly of national delegates would be complete without his (Syed’s) presence,”¹⁴ as he was by this time probably the most prominent public figure in Northern India. But Syed Ahmad and the Aligarh Institute Gazette kept silent over the matter. Three theories that advanced the change in Sir Syed’s ideas. One was Sir Syed’s own assessment that too much involvement in agitative politics was not in the best interests of the Muslims. The second was the influence of two Muslim leaders of Calcutta, Syed Ameer Ali and Abdul Latif, who thought democracy would adversely affect the Muslims. The third theory was the role of Theodore Beck, the principal of Aligarh College, through whom the British arm-twisted Sir Syed. Beck was a symbol of British paramountcy both in intellectual and political areas, and a staunch supporter of Muslim recovery. A few think that if Beck was not there, Muslims would have joined the Congress. He realized that the British interests would be served better if Muslims were kept away from Hindu. When Banerjee came to Aligarh, Beck expressed the opinion that the British would knock all of government jobs, if competitive examinations were held in India. He wrote in the College magazine, that the Congress leaders were ‘no better than ungrateful school boys dealing with subjects for above their comprehension and like ill-bred creatures biting the hands that fed them’.¹⁵

Sir Syed for the first time expressed his opinion about Congress only when he was invited to attend the second session of the party at Calcutta. He refused to attend the session and also to become member of the party. In defence of his decision he wrote an article in Aligarh Institute Gazette on November 23, 1886, in which he opined that, “If at any future time there should be a parliament with

Hindus and Muslims sitting on two sides of the House, it is probable that the animosity which would ensue would far exceed anything that could be witnessed in England”. He further argued that “the Mohammedans would be in a permanent minority and their case would resemble that of the unfortunate Irish members in the British Parliament, would have always been outvoted by the Englishmen”.¹⁶ Sir Syed was not only opposed to the objectives of the Indian National Congress but also looked upon the system of representative government demanded by the Congress as dangerous to the interests of the Muslims. In his Lucknow speech in December, 1887 Syed tried to prove that whatever system of election be adopted, there will be four times as many Hindus as Mohammedans, and all their demands will be gratified, and the power of legislation over the whole Country will be in the hands of the Hindus and the Mohammedans will fall into a condition of utmost degradation. To his co-religionists, Syed talked with note of caution that if they joined the Congress, nothing but national disaster lay in store for them. He wrote in The Pioneer on 2nd November, 1887, that the parliamentary form of Government was “unsuited to the country like India containing two or more nations tending to oppress the numerically weaker”. Syed argued that the Hindu population was four times numerous than the Muslims. Obviously, the system of representation on the basis of Universal Suffrage would be like a game of dice, in which one man had four and the other only one.¹⁷ Thus the system would lead to perpetual subjugation of the Muslims by the Hindus. Congress but also appealed to the Muslims to remain aloof from Congress. He considered those Muslims who joined Congress as “no better than hired men”.

Later Political Thoughts of Sir Syed:

Sayyid was the first to take the lead in 1888 in order to oppose Congress by founding the United Indian Patriotic Association, which aimed to unite the anti-Congress elements of Muslims and Hindus into a single front. While he was successful in persuading 51 Muslim organizations from across India to become members of the association, numerous notable Hindu rajas and maharajas also joined the group. On October 5, 1888, the United Indian Patriotic Association met in Town Hall in Delhi, with about five hundred Hindu attendees. Raja Shib

Prasad of Benaras gave Syed his full cooperation, and Theodore Beck was quite helpful in this regard. Both the Hindus and the Muslims could be members and patrons of the Association. The aim of the Association was to publish pamphlets in English and to acquaint the members of the British Parliament with the views of those Hindus and Muslims who opposed the congress and its policies. At the initial stage, the Association had some Hindu support but gradually, it developed into a purely Muslim organization. However, Syed's attitude towards the Congress impressed a large section of his co-religionists.

At the Muslim Educational Conference in December, 1893, another organization, the 'Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental Defence Association' of Upper India was formed. The Association had similar objectives like those of its predecessor but with one difference as it aimed to discourage popular political agitation among the Muslims. The main objectives of the Association were :

- (a)
 - o advance the political objectives of the Muhammadans by advocating their positions before the Indian government and the English people
- (b)
 - o forestall political and public unrest among Muhammadans; To provide backing for policies aimed at bolstering the stability of the British Government and the security of the Empire.
- (c)
 - o work toward maintaining peace in India and fostering a sense of allegiance among the populace.¹⁸

The policies of the Anglo-Oriental Defence Association were derived from Syed Ahmad's political programmes and the political experience of the Muslims of the 1870s and 1880s. Theodore Beck also played an important role in shaping its objectives. In 1896, the Association brought forward a memorandum for securing proper representation of the Muslim Community in the Elected Bodies, e.g. Legislative Councils, Municipal Boards and District Boards. Furthermore, it demanded separate communal electorates, with Muslims voting only for Muslims.

Conclusion

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a great social reformer, a Progressive political thinker, an advocate of the rights of Muslims and above all a staunch realist. He sought to establish positive relations between the British and Muslims to accomplish all the goals. He proved himself as a great nationalist; Sir Syed was a great nationalistic in a Progressive political sense. In terms of his outlook on politics, we discover that there is a clear difference in his beliefs in 1858 and 1859. In 1858, he was an outspoken advocate for political reform and parliamentary representative institutions for India, however in 1859, he had changed his mind. Early on, he supported Hindu-Muslim friendship in India, however, he was initially offended when the status of the Urdu language was questioned. Later, with the formation of the Indian National Congress, Syed Ahmad's political views abruptly shifted and he demonstrated a strong commitment to Muslim nationalism and a heightened awareness of the rights of his community. Sir Syed distinguished himself from others in the sense that he changed the circumstances in favour of his community. He had a multifaceted personality. His reputation stemmed from the fact that he was a true leader of men, drawing some of the most intelligent individuals of his day to surround himself and offering wise guidance during a pivotal moment in Indian history. Undoubtedly, he was the man behind the Muslim revival.

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