

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan: An Architect of Muslim Nationalism in Colonial India

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Abstract

Person dies however personalities live once and for all. Sub-continent always remained a safe haven for the invaders as it always welcomed to every new ruler. Britain East India Company came for the purpose of trade in India. However, after analyzing the political landscape of the Sub-continent then, they made their mind to grab the whole slice. They came as trader and became the master of the Sub-continent. Consequently, in 1857 British completely occupied the whole of Sub-continent and emerged as sole political power in undivided India. The Independence war proved to be very unfortunate event for the Muslims, as it opened new door of miseries. In this time of crisis, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's charisma proved to be a beacon of light for the Muslims. He outlined a clear road map for those who were suffering a lot in the hands of Britain. Furthermore, Sir Syed greatly contributed for Muslim Nationalism in United India. In order to keep pace alongside Hindus in all aspects of society, economy and political spheres, he held an opinion that Muslims should need to change their course of action. In order to this, they should mold their ways towards modernization and embrace western style of learning. There is a lot of Scholarly works has been done on the role of Sir Syed in Muslim Nationalism in India. However, the gap which has been found that how did Sir Syed educational efforts solely help Muslims to understand Britain policy of ruling them through periodic constitutional amendments. It has examined the role of Sir Syed MAO College, Aligarh in rising Muslim Nationalism and how it took legitimate position in late nineteen century. It has also looked at that how Sir Syed influenced Muslim Nationalism in India and how he helped Muslims to become more politically conscious. The qualitative method of research has been adopted. Moreover, the Primary and Secondary method of data collection has applied to collect data.

Keywords: *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Colonial India, Aligarh, Nationalism, Independence*

Introduction:

In the middle of 19th century, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was a major force behind the promotion of Muslim nationalism in India. He was a well-known Muslim scholar and reformer who pushed Muslims to have a modern education and attempted to bridge the gap between the

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Muslim community and the British colonial authorities. He strove to establish a feeling of solidarity and identification among Muslims in India, believing that modernity and education were crucial for the advancement of the Muslim community. Aligarh Muslim University was established as a result of Sir Syed's attempts to encourage modern education among Muslims, and it later became a hub for the intellectual and cultural rebirth of the Muslim community which led the Muslims to political awareness and understanding British Political amendments to rule over them. He also underlined how important it was for Muslims to maintain their religious and cultural identities while simultaneously embracing contemporary knowledge and technology and adjusting to the changing circumstances. His efforts led Muslims to have their own homeland, Pakistan.

While moving towards educational influence of Sir Syed it is important to discuss the overall scenario and condition of Muslims at his time. After War of Independence of 1857 British government analyze the situation in a way that Muslims of Subcontinent held responsible of 1857 catastrophe. As a result, the Muslims experienced various forms of discrimination and persecution. Prominent Muslims received prison sentences or were executed. The Muslim owners' possessions were seized. During the rule of the monarch, Muslims did not receive significant posts. In 1871 a book named "The Indian Musalmans" by Sir William Hunter, which provides an information about the miserable conditions of Muslims after 1857 war of Independence. Despite the fact that his views were limited to Muslims in Bengal, however the situation for Muslims in the remaining regions of India remained unchanged.³ William Hunter explained Muslim Condition in Public Service in words like:

"For the Position of three classes of Government Assistant Engineer there were Two Englishmen and 14 Hindus and no Muslim and for sub engineer there were 24 Hindus and one Muslim. In upper subordinate department there were 22 Hindus and not a single Muslim. Eventually, all kinds of jobs, upper and lower rank, had been taken from Muhammadan, and given to men of other ethnic backgrounds, especially Hindus. Yet another census conducted in 1871 found that just 92 Muslims, 711 Hindus, and 1338 Europeans were among the 2141 people employed by the Bengal Government".⁴

³Hassan, K. (2012, June 16). *Pakistan Studies*. Retrieved from <https://pak-studies4bcomi.blogspot.com/2012/06/condition-of-muslims-after-war.html>

⁴Ibid

The aforementioned details make it abundantly evident how horribly miserable the Muslim population in post-war India was. The British were anti-Muslim and did all in their power to prevent them from rising again. Along with such catastrophes, Muslims also hesitated to study European fields of study. They were still not ready to give up their long-standing traditions and habits. Obtaining a contemporary knowledge was seen by them as going against what they believed in. They chose to stick with Persian since they detested the English language. However, they had been unwittingly giving the Hindus the upper hand by doing this and gradually opening the pitch. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan made the initial diagnosis and correction of this slow deterioration in the standing of Muslims as a group.

Sir Syed Educational Efforts and Illumination for new Generation:

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan is praised as an inspirational leader who was instrumental in preserving British Indian Muslims and their culture throughout the difficult years after 1857. In addition, he was among the first and most well-known proponents of the Two-Nation Theory, which eventually served as the theoretical basis for the establishment of Pakistan. He shared his opinions about education on a variety of topics, including the growth and development of the human psyche. A man without education is just like a rough piece of Marble which a Sculptor needs work to remove its unevenness⁵

To highlight individual positive traits getting good knowledge is important.

He started to write a number of texts and essays as well as delivering several speeches to foster goodwill between British and Muslims in an effort to dispel the prejudices held by the British about Muslims. In his treatise "Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind" authored in 1859, Sir Syed emphasized that the British bore the same responsibility for the Indian Revolt as did Muslims and Hindus.⁶

He also stated that the primary reason of the 1857 insurrection was the British government's policies. Sir Syed sent it to be published without any delay. After receiving 500 copies in a matter of weeks, Sir Syed sent it to British parliament without hesitation. He then penned Loyal Mohammadans of India in an attempt to alter the British administration's unfavorable perception of Muslims. Wherein he also detailed the 22 Loyal Muhammadan who gave their lives during the 1857 uprising to preserve the lives of the British.⁷

⁵ Junaid Ali Jalbani, M. R. (2021). Great Struggle of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan to uplifting the Muslims in the feild of Education after 1857 revolt. *Ilkogretim Online - Elementary Education Online*, 2021; Vol 20 (Issue 5), pp. 6437-6442.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid

In 1859 a school was setup by Sir Syed in Moradabad which initiated a way for Muslims to know about modern education through Persian and English teaching. Other than that he established Scientific Society in Ghazipur in 1864 solely for the purpose of translation of Modern English knowledge into Urdu and Persia. He also became successful in publishing a bilingual journal with the name of Aligarh Institute Gazette to establish a cordial relation between Muslims and white man.⁸ After these preliminary measures, he went for the establishment of Mohamadan Anglo-Oriental School in 1875 which turned to be an English and modern educational learning center for Muslims. The educational pattern of Oxford and Cambridge Universities was implanted in MAO High school. It was basically a blend of Western and Eastern education. It was upgraded in College in 1877 and later on it was upgraded into a university in 1920.

In 1886 Sir Syed established All Indian Congress afterwards its name changed into Conference. Its inaugural meeting was conducted in MAO School in December 1886. There were 161 representatives from different areas took part in it. The main objectives of AIMC were to arrange higher education for Muslims, Promotion of religious education in English medium, and to help Ulema to spread religious Knowledge. For a decade, he served as the secretary of AIMEC, tirelessly carrying out its objective and because of this Platform Muslims were able to showcase their attributes with fervor and zest. These efforts of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan set basis for Muslim Intellectual and educational development. It helped Muslim Community of India to understand Political, educational, Constitutional and Social Changes in India under British rule.

Britain's Constitutional Reforms in India: Muslim Perspectives and Responses:

After 1857, Britain had practiced different Constitutional experiments to control the Political voices of the Indians. To understand all these Political and Constitutional changes, there was a necessity emerged for the Muslims to get an awareness about the Modern and Western education. In 1858, the first British Government of India act was reinforced which gave full control of all the lands of East India Company to British government. The Secretary of State for India was given the authority of the Company's Council of Directors. Being part of the

⁸ Mehboob, Khuleed Bin. *Services of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan for Educational and Social Uplift*, February 21, 2021. <https://cssprepforum.com/give-an-account-of-the-services-of-sir-syed-ahmed-khan-for-the-education-and-social-uplift-of-the-muslims-of-the-sub-continent-for-css-pm>.
Mohibullah, S., & Sarparrah, M. J. *The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms* (1919).

premier's cabinet-level officials, this Secretary of State was to be a British Representative for Parliament. A fifteen-member board intended to support him. Additionally, he became a liaison among the Indian authorities and the British parliament back home. In addition, he could assign covert emissaries to India without seeking approval from his advisory group. Another Constitutional change occurred in 1861, with the name of Indian Council Act of 1861. It brought some changes in the Committee of Governor General. A fifth member was appointed to the Committee to assist with its executive tasks. For the home, military, law, revenue, and finance departments, there were now five members. A portfolio system was introduced by than Governor General Lord Canning, which gave a separate portfolio to every department. He further nominated three Indians in his Council.

Response from Indian Muslims:

Then, at that point the Muslims were not in a condition of understanding all these political and Constitutional moves of Britishers as they were lacking in modern education and not convinced to be a part of educational system which was introduced by Britain. That was the time when two ideological streams in Muslims came as a response to Western dominance and Culture and it brought a confrontation between traditionalist and modernists. The first one took a hardline persona and claimed to revive Islam by restoring its core principles. They generally disapproved all developments made by Western civilization and adopted a stance of opposing British, or at the very least, resisted working under imperial rulers. The primary manifestation of this traditional value system was Deoband Theological School established in 1867 by Muhammad Qasim Nanantawi. As a traditional educational establishment, they aimed to bring back the impact of Muslim clerics among middle class educated Muslims. With the passage of time its stature expanded to the level that it left India and surpassed the AL-Azhar University in Cairo and became the 2nd largest institution in Muslim World.

On the other hand, contemporary scholars advocated for a shift in perspective about the social standards of colonial rule in order to avoid the Muslim minority becoming permanently alienated. As a result, they started advocating for British education and asked for imperial security in return for fidelity to the Crown. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was one of the most important modernists who established the Aligarh College in 1875, which served as the primary manifestation of modernity. In contrast to Deoband, its function was to provide Muslim elites access to Western education so they could compete for government positions.

His educational philosophy, which was primarily influenced by the theory of discrimination, provided the intellectual underpinnings for the emergence of Islamic nationalism.⁹

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan realized the fact that if Muslims did not accept the change, their fate would be like Spanish Muslims 500 years ago. In the earlier phases, he advised Muslims from not getting take part into Politics because of their inadequate knowledge about British way of working. He observed that Muslim are facing challenges including their economic disempowerment, Political and Social marginalization, existential threat to Islam in India due to rise of Hindu Nationalism, Their Cultural and religious isolation, and Sectarianism. He realized that reclamation of Political power would not serve Muslim interests in British India and a fresh strategy was needed. Therefore, he stressed on Muslims to accept colonial masters as their rulers and try to figure out the ways to work together and prosper in new environment. He highlighted the fact that Muslims had to adjust to the British system in order to survive and advance. This includes taking part in contemporary schooling, picking up an understanding of English, and working in managerial and professional capacities. Through this approach, Muslims might establish a presence in British Indian society, impact policy choices, and make valuable contributions to a range of disciplines.

Sir Syed's Vision: A Road Map for Advancing Indians Muslims:

After finding these issues Sir Syed attempted to take Muslims toward advancement, Self-determination, and adaptability. Sir Syed views were based on practical comprehension of altered social and political conditions of India under British rule. His aim was to provide means to Muslims for thriving in contemporary society without compromising their religious and cultural identities. He made a comprehensive plan by including following points:

- He realized very early that Political war with British would not be realistic option for Muslims of India. He promoted their participation in political and managerial roles as mean of fostering positive ties with Colonizers. This strategy was initiated by him to protect Muslims benefits and give them voice in descions that directly impacted Muslim community. They may rise to the heights of power and participate in national government by siding with colonial government.
- He advised Muslims to stay away from Indian politics in general and especially from Congress as he presumed that it was primarily Hindu-centric and would not safeguard Muslims Interests in India. His advise to Muslims was to stay somewhere apart from

⁹ Baltar, E. (2017). The origins of Muslim nationalism in British India, *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, pp 55-65.

larger Political movement and concentrate on their own unique requirements and issues. This was basically a calculated move to safeguard Muslims unique identity and interests instead of total detachment.

- He thought that Muslims Social and Cultural coherence depended on maintaining their unique character. He stressed that they should embrace contemporary knowledge and principles while still being proud on Muslim history. Sir Syed promoted the idea of striking a right cord between Muslims beliefs and flexibility, urging them to continue being uniquely Muslims yet engaging with rapidly evolving global community. With this strategy he wanted to make Muslims proud and united.
- He noticed that there are several social and cultural customs which are impeding the advancement of their community. Sir Syed promoted honest self-evaluation and doping as a way out to antiquated traditions and behaviors which were limiting Muslims. He upheld with the fundamentals of Islam as well as emphasized on the value of reason and integration of contemporary education. Modernization of some of Muslims customs would allow them to show that they are flexible and dedicated to advancement.
- He points out that education is a key to economic development. He thought that if Muslims wanted to participate in contemporary economic issues they needed to be exposed to British education and had to adopt English as a medium of education. With this they might obtain jobs in managerial, legal and commercial sectors.

Essentially the goal of Sir Syed's strategy was to help Muslims in India to overcome their obstacles. His main goal was to enable Indian Muslims to prosper in ever-evolving political and social environment through their interaction to colonizers, by upholding their unique identity, accepting contemporary knowledge, and enhancing social and cultural customs. By combining practical thinking, adaption and dedication for the maintenance of Muslim traditions and history Sir Syed vision paved the way for Muslim advancement and Success.

Transformative Legacy and Impact of Sir Syed's efforts:

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan revolutionized Muslim by establishing modern educational institutes which provide integration of Islamic principles and Western education and equipped Muslims with necessary abilities to prosper in a dynamic global environment. This emphasis for learning cut across denominational barriers and advanced societal ability to learn. Now with this Muslim masses were getting educated. They were historically a major source of upper and middle level administrative processes; therefore their involvement in education was

significant on a worldwide scale. However, they primarily enrolled in traditional private schools since their transition to the government education system happened gradually in 1881, just 17.7% of Hindu pupils attended private schools, compared to around 43.7% of Muslim students. The connection remained 39.7% and 13.2%, respectively, after twenty years.¹⁰

In late 1860, the percentage of students enrolled in contemporary elementary and secondary school was only proportionate to their demographic weight; this proportion in higher education did not exist until nearly three decades later. This makes it possible to see the significance of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's academic endeavor as well as the critical role that the Aligarh College played in advancing the political ambitions of Muslim leaders. The Muslim deficit in Western learning had resulted in administrative domination by the upper classes of Hinduism in Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, where British rule had started about a century earlier. Thus, a failure in the United Provinces heightened elite Muslim concerns about the political fallout from delaying modern education. Because they were used to their historical supremacy, they perceived fall not in the sense of demographic ratio but rather in the level of historical interest engagement. As a result, the percentage of Muslims employed in government posts across the Country rose from 34.8% to 47.7% between 1881 and 1921.¹¹

Muslims Response to British Constitutional Changes Post 1893:

After engaging themselves with western education, Muslims started understanding the political changes in British India. Now they were in a better position to understand Politics and new constitutional changes done by British to control their rule in India and now they were able to fight for their constitutional rights. There were a lot of Muslim leaders who graduated from Aligarh like Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar, Abdur-Rab Nashtar, Maulana Shaukat Ali, and Maulvi Abdul Haq, the first two Prime Ministers of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan and Khawaja Nazimudin and the President of India Dr. Zakir Hussain.¹²

As a result of this political consciousness Muslims of India in 1893 established Mohamadanal Anglo-oriental Defense Association and their aim was the advancement in Muslim political interest and presentation of their perspective in front of British people and government. The organization was highly engaged between 1894 and 1896, and its demands

¹⁰Baltar, E. (2017). The origins of Muslim nationalism in British India, *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, pp 55-65.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Farooqui, Mahmood. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and its Successors at Aligarh. May 17, 2022. <https://womendastangos.wordpress.com/2022/05/17/sir-syed-ahmad-khan-and-hissuccessors-at-aligarh>

were much the same as those of the Simla Deputation when it came to requests for favours.¹³ Muslim leaders from all over India decided to meet Lord Minto in October 1906 which was known as Simla deputation. While meeting they demanded for Separate electorate for Muslims in India. As a resultantly, British government gave four seats to Muslims on 21st October 1907, two of them would be fulfilled with nomination and two with general elections. Therefore, the request that only Muslim voters would vote for Muslim representatives was still in air.¹⁴ A few months after the Simla Deputation, the Muslim League was established, and in response, it called attention to this defined difference in thought. In March 1908 league offered its recommendation of nomination of 10 elected seats for Muslims.¹⁵ And because of their proper legalistic knock on the doors of Indian government Muslims got their demand of separate electorate fulfilled in Government of India act 1909, which was also known as Morley-Minto reforms. The establishment of separate electorates in 1909 had a role in exacerbating polarization process. This was because of the fact that Muslim league gained its political identity through autonomous sectarian participation. After 1909 Political activities by Indian Muslims increased. When the Muslim League chose self-government as its core belief in 1913, there were a number of factors that caused the three largest Indian populations to become uneasy. In 1914 British Joined the 1st World War. Now they need Indians support for their military endeavors and this was the best time for Indian Muslims to demand for their political and Constitutional rights so in 1916 Congress and Muslim league signed Lucknow pact which was based on desired demands of both Muslim league and Congress to British. Their demands were kept into consideration by British government because they wanted to ensure their support in war and in the act of 1919 Indians including Muslims got gradual integration into all government ministries and divisions and were being promoted to commission positions in the army. Like this, step by step Muslims fight for their Constitutional and political rights with Britishers peacefully, by deep assessment of whole scenario instead of non-acceptance policy or violence.

At later stages while maintaining its elite nature, the Muslim League moved far from Indian nationalism and embraced two nation theory flag that sparked the Pakistani separatist struggle and ultimately to the 1947 geographical split. Sir Syed Ahmed khan was the one who sowed

¹³ Malik, N. S. (2012). Formation of the All India Muslim League and Its Response to Some Foreign Issues-1906-1911. *Journal of Political Studies*, 19(2), 169.

¹⁴Hassan, M. (2021, May 07). *TRIBUNE*. Retrieved from How the Muslim League won Separate Electorates from British: <https://tribune.com.pk/article/97376/how-the-muslim-league-won-separate-electorates-from-the-british>

¹⁵ Ibid

this seed of political awareness through modern education in Muslims and with the help of this Muslims struggled against British for their political rights and independence on legal and political bases, instead of going for a full fledged war and eventually they got independence in 1947.

Conclusion:

A number of unique characteristics of the burgeoning Muslim nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th century mainly shaped its subsequent evolution. When Muslims of Sub-continent were living in blind alley Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's stature proved to be beacon of light for the Muslims of India. He chalked out a road map for the Muslims. According to his point of view Education could prove to be the best remedy for all problems. The influence and breadth of Sir Syed's efforts was immense. His idea that Muslims should adjust the conditions of British India without losing their distinctiveness guaranteed their continued existence and advancement. His contributions to education, cultural reinterpretation, political activism and harmony across cultures have established an imprint that has shaped contemporary Muslim thinking and self-determination, in addition to his peers. It is undeniably true that Muslims in the Sub-Continent procreate after falling behind in their educational progress. His educational reforms both defined the identity and articulated the sense of pride in the country. The basis for the intellectual and academic rebirth of Muslims in India was established by his services. His contributions and thoughts are still influencing the conversation of the Muslim community in India and beyond about contemporary schooling, religious understanding, and social changes.