

GREAT ACADEMIC EFFORTS OF SIR SYED AHMAD

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Abstract: *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (17 October 1817- 27 March 1898) was the founder of Anglo- Mohammedan Oriental College which was later on converted into Aligarh Muslim University in 1920. He lived his entire life as a humanist to maintain a balance between tradition & modernity and religion & science. Like many other great reformers of the time, Sir Syed was a great visionary who diverted the attention of muslims towards the need of modern language and scientific education instead of having faith in meaningless customs and traditions. His primary aim was to create good institutions for educational, cultural and social development of muslims. He was truly a man of substance and collective intellectual. Aligarh College and the Muslim Educational Conference are the valuable gifts of Sir Syed which he gave to his community. These institutions and Conferences scattered the light of knowledge in the past as well as influencing intellectuals till the day and will continue to do so in the years to come, unhindered. Sir syed's efforts for muslim- education served double purpose. It helped muslims to get good jobs to raise their status in the society. Therefore one can say that education was the most important aspect of Sir Syed's services done for the muslims of India.*

Key Words: *Muslim Leader and Reformer, Western Knowledge, Scientific Education, Aligarh Movement, Educational Institutions, Progress of Muslim Community.*

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was one of the great visionary and reformers who devoted his entire life for welfare of Muslim community. He was a talented Muslim leader who had immense love for Islam. His supreme interest was intellectual development of his people through modern education. Interest of country and community was dearer to him rather than anything else. This great emancipator of Indian Muslims was born in Delhi on 17th October, 1817. He was born during a period when Mughal Empire was on its decline and East India Company was acquiring more power and strength.

Sir Syed's family both on the maternal and paternal side had close contacts with the Mughal court. His maternal grandfather, Khwajah Farid was a wazir in the court of Akbar Shah II. His paternal grandfather was a mansab in the court of Alamgir II. His father Mir Muttaqi had been close to Akbar Shah since his childhood. Sir Syed's mother Aziz-Un-Nisa who was herself a virtuous lady instilled the qualities of character and discipline in her son. As a young boy Sir Syed was different from other boys as he had an extraordinary physique. He was expert in swimming and archery. He received education according to the old system and learnt to read the Quran at home. After completing a course of Persian and Arabic he started the study of Mathematics. Later on he studied some popular books on medicine but he left the study on the way. At the age of 18 his formal education was ended but then he started gaining practical knowledge by attending literary gatherings of the city.

When his father died in 1838 he was just 21 years old. It was the age when he decided to pursue a career. He joined East India Company in a court of law. In 1839, at the age of 22 he was promoted to the post of Naib Munshi and in 1841, he became the Sub- Judge of Bijnore, U.P. In 1858 he was again promoted and appointed as Sadar-Us - Sadar at Muradabad. In 1967 he became judge of small cause's court.

Sir Syed was a kind of leader who contributed his life and worked to rejuvenate the depressed Muslims of that particular period. To guide the destiny of oppressed Indian Muslims. He established various educational institutions. In 1859 he opened Gulshan School in Muradabad and in 1863 he opened Victoria School in Ghazipur. In 1864 he established a Society of Scientific Knowledge in Ghazipur which translated various English books into Urdu language. This society also issued bilingual journal in Urdu and English. Thus, Sir Syed had propagated a method of translating important modern books of English in Urdu so that Muslim community could have knowledge of English sciences. He motivated the members of his community to acquire education so that by studying these translations they can understand the expansion and progress, western countries have been done. He was very well aware of the fact that bright future of his community entirely depend on their western learning.

During the war of independence he saved lives of many Englishmen so British government had honoured him with the title of 'Sir'. After the war of independence, Muslims of India were going through a critical phase. Due to strict instructions of their religion and stern behavior of the Britishers they hated English language and English culture. Muslims started keeping their children away from schools. It became a drawback for them as it unconsciously hampered their progress. Sir Syed understood not only the practical need of English education for his community but also the intellectual challenges that faced the Islamic learning. He tried to convince the Muslim scholars of his time to

study English because at that time knowledge of modern arts and sciences was only available in English language. For this purpose he faced stiff oppositions of contemporary Muslim scholars as they were against the belief that Muslims should adopt modern sciences. Sir Syed did not lose his courage but confidently tried to convince them. He argued that in past, Muslims studied Greek language and then they learnt Persian language, then what is the reason behind their intolerance and insensitiveness towards English language. He wrote at one place, "Persian, at its early stage, was the language of...fire-worshippers but Muslims have adopted it in such a manner that it has now become their language. How can religious prejudice come in the way of learning English language, in the light of these facts?"

Sir Syed had great faith in English language and he strongly believed that anti-religious ideas, futile and senseless prejudices and skepticism could be effectively countered if Muslim youth were taught modern sciences through English language along with Arabic studies. Sir Syed believed, "...nothing in Islam and its belief is against reason and science." He encouraged the Muslim scholars to study the challenges produced by modern philosophy. He emphasized that it was demand of the period to study two forms of knowledge in comparative terms. He reasoned, "It is therefore necessary that the evils, defects and weaknesses of modern philosophy are pointed out with arguments and evidences or Islamic beliefs and religious views are identified with European philosophical ideas to find similarities between them" Sir Syed Ahmad was the first Muslim leader who realized the gravity of situation that ignorance of English language and lack of modern knowledge is the cause of Muslim's continual downfall. He explained to the members of his community that there is no harm in adopting Western Sciences and in learning English language if it raises you to the heights of success. He had a firm belief that acquisition of knowledge of science and technology is the only solution for the problem of Muslims.

Sir Syed Ahmad started his career as a writer of Urdu language in 1847 at the age of 23 by writing an important book 'Monuments of the Great' (Asarus Sanadeed) on the antiquities of Delhi. This book was an archaeological masterpiece providing ample information on countless historical monuments built in Delhi during the long Muslim-rule. An important pamphlet 'The Causes of Indian Revolt' (Asbab-E-Baghawat-E-Hind) was also written by him during that period. He also wrote on the life of Prophet Muhammad and a modernist commentary on the holy Quran.

During 1869 to 1870 Sir Syed visited England and there he acquired knowledge of British system of education and on the pattern of British boarding schools prepared a plan to set up a great educational institution 'A Muslim Cambridge of his Dreams' in India. On his return he set up a committee for this purpose and started an influential journal 'Tehzib-ul-Ikhlāq' (Social Reform), in which popular manners, beliefs and traditions of European life had been discussed and justified. In this magazine he has projected the moral shortcomings and social-evils scattered in the contemporary Muslim society. The only mission of Sir Syed Ahmad's life was reinterpretation of Muslim ideology so that it can reconcile tradition with Western education and science so that it can become an asset in the development of Muslim community. He himself has written that; "Ijtihad (innovation) is the need of the hour. Give up taqlid (copying and following old values)... We should not (by remaining ignorant and illiterate) tarnish the image of our able leaders." In this process Sir Syed wrote a commentary on holy Quran in which he explained Muslim religion on scientific and logical terms. In this prospect he has written; "Do not show the face of Islam to others; instead show your face as the follower of true Islam representing character, knowledge, tolerance and piety." Time to time his views in appreciation of Muslim religion and the holy Quran appeared in his journals, 'The Mohammedan Social Reformer' and 'Aligarh Institute Gazette'.

In May, 1875 Sir Syed was posted in Aligarh when he founded Mohammadan Anglo oriental (M.A.O.) high School at Aligarh. Later on in 1877 Lord Lytton, the British Viceroy himself laid the foundation stone and gave it the status of a full-fledged college. This college rendered great services imparting modern education to the Muslims. In 1921, after the death of Sir Syed, this M.A.O. College was raised to the standard of a university. Later on this was named as Aligarh University and since then it is promoting the educational cause of millions of Indians especially Indian Muslims and promoting a complete curriculum embodying both western and oriental studies.

Sir Syed always dreamt about this college to act as a bridge between the old and the new systems and to offer various courses in medical, engineering, science and languages. Thus, Sir Syed Ahmad's greatest achievement was his Aligarh Movement but his main concern was to spread education and to establish educational institutions in each and every corner of India. His favourite quote was: "A true master is one who must have the holy Quran in one hand and the science in the other." He in 1886 founded an 'All India Muslim Educational Conference' which generally used to organize its meetings at several places and provided a significant platform to the Muslims of India to discuss several complications and issues regarding their education and progress. The primary aim of this conference was to open a number of educational institutions in country. The branches of this educational conference were there in various cities and towns so that it can report the educational needs of the Muslim students. This conference was called annually at various important cities of India so that with its help the message of modern education can be spread far and wide in the country.

Sir Syed asked the Muslims of his time not to participate in the politics unless they got modern education because he knew very well that Muslims could not get success in the field of western politics without having any knowledge of their system. He was invited to attend the first session of the Indian National Congress but he refused to

go there. He established the Muhammadan Educational Conference so that muslims of India can get a platform where they could discuss their political as well as educational problems. Sir Syed is known as the founder of the two- nation theory in the modern era. The fifth session of Mohammedan Educational Conference was held in Madras in 1901 and it attracted the attention of Muslims community of South India. Like the other parts of India, Muslims of Madras also had an antagonistic attitude towards English education and were far behind their fellow countrymen in public service. In this conference Nawab Mohsinul Mulk Mohsinuddowla from Aligarh, as a speaker explained the academic efforts of Sir Syed, implemented in Northern India.

As a result, on 16th December, 1905 the management of the Chowk Masjid Madarsa was taken over and renamed as Madarsa – E- Mazaharul Uloom . Later on Janab T. Abdullah Sahib from South India visited Aligarh and did research on the educational development of that place. He got inspired by the works done by Sir Syed and with his help he prepared a plan to open a muslim school in Ambur. Later on many educational institutions came up in Tamil Nadu as a result of Aligarh movement. Today around 11 full – fledged Engineering colleges and hundreds of arts and science colleges, Higher secondary and elementary schools have been opened in different parts of Tamil Nadu. Numerous Muslim organizations like all India Islamic Foundation, Sadaq trust , The South India Educational Trust, The Muslim Educational Association of Soudhern India, Ambur Muslim Educational Society, Vaniyambadi Muslim Educational Society etc. are playing an important role in imparting modern education to Muslims as well as they are working as a whole to establish more Muslim educational Institutions . In this manner Sir Syed not only propagated the message of importance of modern education for muslims in northern India but also in southern India.

Sir Syed got retired in 1876 and then he spent his post retirement life for the progress of Aligarh College and Muslims of India. On 24th March, 1898 suddenly he became abnormally quiet and had a severe headache which further worsened. Medical aid also proved ineffective and he expired the same evening. He was buried in the compound of the mosque of Aligarh College. He was mourned by a large number of his friends and admirers living in South- Asia. Sir syed was a great educational reformer who became successful in his mission and gave a firm foundation of Aligarh College (M.A.O. Oriental College) which afterwards became Aligarh Muslim University which is meant for all muslims as well non- muslims students and has produced intellectuals in large numbers for example: Dr. Zakir Hussain (the former president of India), Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh, Dr. Syed Mahmood, etc.

Sir Syed was such an eminent personality who became immortal in the history of India due to his great academic efforts and his concern for the upliftment of oppressed muslim community of India. Dr. Allama Iqbal has praised him by saying, “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 through new knowledge and scientific education and he also worked for it.”

Sir Syed trained the muslim youths of his period not to become slave of meaningless traditions and customs. In 1873, in one of his public lectures at Mirzapur he encouraged the muslims of his period to act reasonably by saying, “A brave and a true wellwisher of his nation should himself enter the field, breaking the strong chains, so that others may also gather courage to come out of the captivity and prejudices.” By giving examples of people who broke customs such as- Christ, Martin Luther and Socrates he praised the efforts of the leaders who supported reforms and changes like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshav Chandra Sen and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. He was a true wellwisher of muslim community who had a rare combination of the qualities of an administrator, reformer, thinker, educationalist, journalist, writer, religious scholar, devoted family man and a humanist.

The former Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru has also paid his tribute to Sir Syed by saying, “He was an ardent reformer who wanted to reconcile modern scientific thought and education with religion by rationalistic interpretations and not by attacking basic belief. He was a man who was anxious to push new educations....” The relevance of this great visionary and reformer is felt even today. Sir Syed was such a personality who will always remain alive in our memory inspiring wise thoughts and absolute principles in the right Islamic thinking.

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