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## **Dreams and Destination: Exploring Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Reformist Agenda**

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**Abstract:** Sir Syed Ahmad Khan – a great social reformer and outstanding revolutionary figure who spent his whole life to erase the blots of obsolete customs, cultures, and rituals with the paint of modernity on his community. He worked diligently to improve the deteriorating situation of Muslims and to replace their orthodox attitude with a liberal one. The paper aims to focus on the role played by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan for the upliftment of Muslims during the colonial period of India. The central focus of this paper will be to show how during the times of stress and strain, he used his wisdom to replace the obsolete customs, cultures, rituals with the modern and how he fought bravely to overcome all these odds and stood the test of time. Besides this the paper aims to show his belief in the approval of new ideas and doctrines of dominant culture as necessary and not heresy if they help community to uplift and educate any community.

**Key words:** Sir Syed, Social reformer, Modernity, Imitation, Obsolete customs, Orthodox.

### **Introduction**

There is a saying 'one who is not taught by his mother, is taught by the others' though at the surface level it seems to be an easy proverb having least to offer us but if one looks at it meticulously it has one of the fundamental messages related to life. There is a word that has been repeated that is 'taught' at first it has a positive connotation meaning 'to educate' but second time it means 'taunt' that generally people get when they don't know how to tackle or behave in a situation. Its meaning is simple but its application or validity has not died till date. The proverb has relevance here. It fits the title and beautifully describes Sir Syed Ahmad Khan metaphorically who acted as a tutor and mentor to his community to save them from taunts. He understood it that once a community is left uneducated it is bound to see its bodies tumbling and heads bowing in front of other people where they will not be taught but 'taunted' and adorned with multiple negative epithets. He being a visionary saw what others denied to accept in frenzy. He was primarily



concerned “for the reform and education of his community in the modern sciences and in the English language” (Hasan 1077). Therefore epicentre of all his work was education based on modern lines. He was severely criticized by critics and “detractors who think that he became too pro-British, that he became a collaborator” (Campbell 27) and was labelled as antinational and anti-Islam. However “he acted selflessly in the interests of his people, striving to prepare the Muslim people, through its educational elite, to engage constructively with the new British government” (Campbell 27). However the courageous man took the daunting task on his shoulders and endowed education which could liberate, uplift and free the human being from the fetters of outdated customs, notions and dogmas.

After the decline of Mughal Empire Muslims began to feel the heat of alienation in India and lost “their learning, their culture and their position in Indian society” (Sherwani 327). Moreover revolt of 1857 created a huge chasm between Muslims and Britishers. Sir Syed’s vision and his laborious effort to meet the demands of challenging times are highly appreciable. He rightly believed that the past had its merits and its legacies were valuable but it was the future that a society was called upon to cope with. They viewed each other with great distress and disdain. A lot of personalities aroused among the Muslims who began to ponder over the deteriorating situation in order to find the panacea to the problem. Vast number of Muslims thought that the problem could be tackled by fighting against the Britishers. So they carried on the mission of resistance, not only by sacrificing their lives but also prohibiting them from emulating the West including their Education. While fighting the battle against the coloniser, Muslims not only lost their lives but also the weapon more important than the sword that was education which could have empowered them to fight their oppressor and uplift their status in the society. Among the voices of war and revenge arouse a man who spoke of Education as a foundation on which he build his super structure of his religion, social, and political ideas. For Sir Syed “the only way to bridge the wide gap and thaw the icy relations that existed between his coreligionists and the colonizers was to acquire western education” (Belmekki 171). Sir Syed “a visible symbol of Muslim regeneration, a catalyst of social and educational reforms” (Hasan 1077) had the conviction that Indian Muslims are completely unaware that mankind had entered a very important phase of its existence, i.e. an era of science and



learning which was the source of progress and prosperity for the British.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan alleged that “Indians [muslims in particular] 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” (Sherwani 311). He believed that it is only through education which will give carte blanche to the poor and backward Muslims of India. He played a vital role to buff up minority community of India, who were tarred and feathered and showed them the way to live a life of dignity and grandeur. His aim was that the benighted Muslims should come out in the actual world with the understanding of the modern education and with the understanding of Quranic principles of the human dignity that could liberate Indian Muslims from barbarism in which they have been living. Therefore, modern education became the pivotal part of his movement for the regeneration of the Indian Muslims, which brought a complete orientation in their lives. He tried to transform Muslim minds from medieval outlook to a modern one. He asked Muslims to seek western education learn English and acquire western knowledge of science and technology, without leaving their Islamic belief based on the Holy Quran and Sunnah but try to get away with traditional Islamic learning in their process of education. He said “Science shall be in our right hand and philosophy in our left; and on our head shall be the crown of "There is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his Apostle”” (qtd in Hasan 1077). To spread the education among the Muslims Sir Syed launched his education movements by setting up Gulshan School at Muradabad, Mohammedan Anglo-oriental School (MAO) at Aligarh in 1875 at the pattern of Oxford University. His efforts towards education and vision have been acknowledged by great personalities.

Pt Jawaharlal Nehru eulogized him and believed that Sir Syed was an ardent reformer and he wanted to reconcile modern scientific thought with religion by rationalistic interpretations and not by attacking basic beliefs. He was in no way communally separatist. Repeatedly he emphasised that religious difference should have no political and national significance. Hindu-Muslim unity was very close to his heart. According to him the word ‘Quam’ (nation or community) mean both Hindus and Muslims. According to him whether Muslims or Hindus both are governed by the same rulers on the same soil. Both Hindus and Muslims breathe the same air, drink the waters of the



sacred Ganges and the Yamuna and eat the products which God has given to our country. According to Sir Syed while the Muslims have adopted numberless customs belonging to the Hindus, the Hindus too have been vastly influenced by the Muslim habits and customs. He tried to tighten the bonds of Hindu-Muslim unity and used the metaphor that Hindus and Muslims were the two eyes in Mother India's face as he says India is "a beautiful bride blessed by two attractive eyes, the Hindus and the Muslims. If they maintain enmity or hypocritical (nifaq) relations with each other, [the bride] will look one-eye" (qtd in Mujahid 89). He sought generous support from Hindu rajas and landlords for establishing what we today see in the form of Aligarh Muslim University. Some people blamed him for dividing the nation and creating a rift between Hindus and Muslims however it was not true rather "one of the myths of later Indian historiography" (96) according to Sharif Al Mujahid.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan emerged at a time when the status of Muslim community in India was at the lowest stage. He was deeply concerned about the status of Muslims of India who have been living in a state of deprecation for centuries. He felt an immediate need for the Muslims to come out from the clumsiness and bewilderment and acquire knowledge and proficiency so that their social, political and economic status could be maintained. After war of independence of 1857 the atrocities inflicted by Britishers upon the people of India in general and Muslims in particular rendered Sir Syed Ahmad Khan shell shocked. Britishers were of the opinion that the Muslims were the sole reason of war of independence of 1857 as a result of which they banned Friday prayers and replaced the language of Persian and Arabic with the English language. During this uprising "the British Colonial Government decided to point an accusing finger at the Indian Muslims alone as the *bona fide* fomenters, and consequently, they were subjected to a discriminatory policy that disfavoured them in every walk of life" (Belmekki 165). That is why Sir Syed "realized the urgent need to come up with a plan to modernize, as well as energize, the hitherto comatose Muslim community" (Belmekki 165). From his early days he was active in the cultural activities of the Mughal court. The death of his father in 1838 left his family in financial distress and he started to work in East India Company. During his entry into the East India Company he "realized the all round impact of British power in India" (Muhammad 63). His movement started after the revolt of 1857, which



“convinced him of the intellectual and industrial supremacy of Europe” (Muhammad 63). Colonial rule over India was fully established and the nation was greatly demoralized. Sir Syed suffered many personal tragedies in the revolt and “met with stiff opposition and encountered numerous difficulties in forefronting a liberal, reformist agenda” (Hasan 1077). He writes thus:

Gadar kai baad mujh ko na apna ghar lootnai ka ranj than na maalo asbab ki talaf hoonai ka. Jo kuch ranj tha, apnai kour ki barbadi ka tha, yakeen kijiyai iss gham nai mujhai budha kar diya aur mere baal safeed kar diyai. Yai khayal paida hua, ki nihayat na muraadi aur bai muravati ki baat hai ki apnai kour ko is tabahi ki halat mai choordh kai kisi goosh e aafiyat mai ja baithu. Mai nai hijrat ka irada taraq kiya aur quom ki balahi kai liyai judo jahad ki raha ikhtiyar ki. Mere gham khaar mujh ko issai manna kartai thai. Phir mai nai apnai dil sai poocha ki kour ko iss zamanai ki zarurat kai maakif talim dena aur Europe kai aloom ko un mai jaari karna kya islam kai barr khilaf hai. Mujhai jawab mila ‘Nahi’.

But Sir Syed was hopeful and said that:

. . . from the seed which we sow today, there may spring up a mighty tree, whose branches, like those of the banyan of the soil, shall in their turn strike firm roots into the earth, and themselves send forth new and vigorous saplings, that this college may expand into a university, whose sons shall go forth throughout the length and breadth of the land to preach the gospel of free inquiry, of large-hearted toleration, and of pure morality. (qtd in Muhammad)

After the mutiny, it was not the loss of my house or my property that I regretted. Whatever regret I had was over the destruction of my people. Believe me, this sorrow aged me and turned my hair white. It occurred to me that it would be highly shameful to leave my people in such a condition and settle in comfort myself. I dropped the idea of migration and started on the road to struggle for the betterment of my people. My well wishers discouraged me. Then I asked myself, is giving my people European education according to the lives against the tenets of Islam? I received the answer, no!

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Being a member of East India Company he tagged Britain as ‘Takht-Nisheen’ and was of



the opinion that we can't compete with the Britishers in terms of technology. He believed that Muslims lag behind in all walks of life. The main reason for their weak status is their backwardness in modern education. Sir Syed's vision was to heal the wounds of Muslims. He believed that although we are living in a country which has achieved its freedom but truth is that we still need a healer who could cure our wounds. Let's propagate the movement called the Aligarh Movement "for the modernisation and rationalisation of the life of the Muslims" (Sherwani 328) and for creating a modern society with a scientific outlook. Its main issues were to uplift Indian Muslims through modern education and familiarize them with the Western arts and sciences, which would improve their social and political conditions. According to Gordon Campbell, "in Syed Ahmed's day, however these terms were used differently. The word 'science' simply meant 'knowledge', all sorts of knowledge; 'art', on the other hand, referred to technical skill, to the practical application of knowledge" (28). Thus for Sir Syed Western education was the only key to future prosperity for Muslims. That is why he laid the foundation of the Scientific Society on July 9th, 1864, at Ghazipur India. In order to fortify the down trodden Muslims of India he established a Madrasa in Muradabad in 1859, then a school in Ghazipur and Aligarh school in the year 1862 and 1875 respectively. In 1867 he visited England and was fascinated by the greatness and considerable refinement of the British social life which he believed was the result of the education of both men and women. He was also greatly impressed by Oxford and Cambridge and their standard of education. Thus the trip had a great impact on him and he resolved to form a Muslim Cambridge in India. On his return he setup a committee for this purpose and "on the models of the *Tatler* and *Spectator* [journals by Richard Steele and Joseph Addison] he started the *Tahzeeb ul Ikhlaq* and apprised the people of the great change that was undermining their social practices" (Muhammad 81) and to further the process of reform in Muslim community. Soon after his arrival from the Britain with a lot of ideas to reform the Hindu and Muslim communities, he established Mohammadian Anglo College in 1875. Later on in 1920 soon after the death of Sir Syed, it became Aligarh Muslim University fulfilling half of Sir Syed's dream. Only half, because his dream was an incessant progress of all Indians. His maxim was to continuously move forward breaking those norms and tradition which hold us back. Besides this, influenced by the British institutions and to further his mission he laid



down scientific society in 1864 with this aim to make Muslims competitive with Britishers in the field of modern education. The society translated major scientific works from English into Urdu so that it could reach to wide audiences. He also established All India Mohammadian Educational Conference in 1886. It was an annual conference where Muslim leaders from different continents assembled and discussed the educational problems related to Muslims. Sir Syed had a firm belief that the people who would be educated from these institutions would become leaders of the people in terms of liberating them from that kind of situation in which they have been thrown.

For the purpose of modern education he included Britishers including Lord Lyton who later on was given the privilege of inaugurating Mohammadian Anglo Oriental College. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan believed in the loyalty to Britishers in order to fulfill his aim of enlightening Muslims with the modern education. According to Shan Muhammad, Sir Syed believed that the “English were the most civilized rulers of India and Sir Syed wanted to emulate their qualities, not blindly, but to the extent which may make Indians more civilized and cultured” (68). He wrote *Asbaab e Bhagawati Hind* which was later on translated in to English as *Causes of Indian Revolt* in 1858 to remove the delusion between Muslims and Britishers who believed that Muslims are the sole purpose of revolt of 1857. W.W Hunter wrote a book *Indian Musalman* where he stated that Indian Muslims are disloyal to British government. To which Sir Syed wrote a review “Loyal Mohammadian of India” saying that Indian Muslims are not disloyal to Britishers and therefore eschewed their sturdy conviction. Therefore Sir Syed followed western standards and considered western education as the prime source of modernization, progress and development and that is why in the history of India’s transition from medievalism to modernism, Sir Syed stand out prominently as a dynamic force pitted against conservatism, superstitions, inertia and ignorance.

Thus to conclude Sir Syed prospered despite facing great opposition and today an educational hub – Aligarh Muslim University is quintessence of his dreams. It is up to us now to take it forward. Today with a living and breathing personification of his dream, we can’t sit back and rest, believing all works to be done, a lot remains. We have to go on moving from heights onto greater heights.

Mubtalaye Dard Koi Uzoo Ho, Roti Hai Ankh





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Kis Qadar Hamdard Sare Jism Ki Roti Hai Ankh

The eye weeps for the suffering of any and every part of the body, How Sympathetic it is to the entire body.

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