

# Reconciling Tradition with Modernity: A Journey of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Vision from the Revolt 1857 to Aligarh Movement

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### ABSTRACT

The monumental status of Sir Syed in terms of his vision to shake the complacency of his nation, undoubtedly, remains unparalleled. With the multifarious aspects of his personality, he penetrated deep into the realms of his nation and worked as a torchbearer to bring out her ills vis-à-vis backwardness and cope with the transitional modern world's challenges. He was a visionary, a vigorous reformer who painstakingly carried out his mission of dragging out his nation towards enlightenment and erected the antidote in the form of convergence between tradition and modernity. His experience of the West had developed his grand personality which he shared with his tireless efforts to edify his nation towards prosperity. Modern education was a preoccupying force with his thought process which he believed would fuel the dead nerves of his people. His incredible although oblique manner of rescuing his Muslim brethren from the British wrath around the revolt of 1857 was foundational to pave way for his grand mission. His manifesto in this regard called "The Causes of the Indian Revolt" was a great influence. Sir Syed foreran the idea of modernity within the established Muslim tradition and did succeed in forming a huge force which carried his legacy to ensure his dream of Muslim renaissance in the subcontinent. The formation of Mohammedan Anglo Oriental College (MAO) was a revolutionary step towards materializing his vision. But, did his dream come true to the fullest? What did Sir Syed's revivalist streak vis-à-vis Muslim renaissance mean for the idea of nation during the pre and post-independence era? These are the questions, besides highlighting his enlightening vision, which the present paper will try to study.

**Keywords :** Sir Syed's legacy, Renaissance, Vision, Minority, Upliftment, Nation.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Born on 17<sup>th</sup> October, 1817, in an eminent Syed and a learned family of Delhi, Sir Syed had a worthwhile exposure of both traditional as well as modern education from the early stage of life which accordingly helped him to develop his unprecedented vision. He had tasted the sense of Islamic tradition from the renowned scholars of his era and subsequently, multiplied his wisdom with his academic career in the field of law the profession later on was incredible in the development of his reformative leadership. Moreover, he lively witnessed the expansion of the colonial occupation on the subcontinent. The decline of the centuries old Mughal Empire was a vivid experience. Sir Syed staunchly disregarded the past empires as despotic sans any dynamics in governance and prosperous vision. In his Speech at the Scientific Society he, at the very outset blatantly stated:

Gentlemen, if we look back upon that period of India's history which was passed by her under a despotic Government, we find kings or rajas possessed of unlimited power and authority over their subject-millions, and we know their Governments, instead of being guided by the laws of reason and justice, were carried on according to their arbitrary will, their caprices, or their passions. (Mohammad, *Writings* 116)

His belief was shaped by the western advancement in which he wanted his nation also to flourish hence he was not so much odds with Britain. He effortlessly tried to emancipate his nation while drawing benefits from the British Empire.

### Journey from the Revolt 1857 to Aligarh Movement:

The degeneration of the nation as a whole and more particularly the Muslims was a driving force behind the ache which swept Sir Syed's heart and made him to work strenuously towards the upliftment. With his

rational understanding and analytical power, he envisioned his nation's downfall in complacency towards the changing contours of the modern world. He firmly believed that it is the backwardness in terms of modern education which has led the nation into the depths of darkness.

His magnificent vision got exploited at the stroke of the Revolt 1857, the devastating phase in the history of Indian sub-continent. He was a leader with a difference, having keen insight regarding the upliftment of the Muslim minority under the beleaguering English rule. The rising tide of the Revolt 1857 stimulated the wrath of Britishers who in turn started wreaking havoc on the natives with their chief subject none other than the Muslims whom they out rightly considered the prime movers of the revolt. This was the moment which created an utter unease for Sir Syed who in turn worked tirelessly to reconstruct the image of Muslims among the colonial circles. This tumultuous and anarchic situation had the nightmarish impact on him. The fact he himself avers, "After the Revolt of 1857, I was grieved neither on account of the plunder of my house nor on account of the loss of property that I had suffered. What saddened my heart was the misery and destruction of people." (qtd. by Umar Hashmi 4) The overwhelming destruction caused by the revolt even in terms of the slaughter of his own close relatives besides thousands of nationals did not deter his courage to come out from this predicament and guide his battered people towards the relieved future. The situation though was seemingly hopeless but with his vision coupled with the unwavering energy he transformed the entire situation, as remarks Inder Kumar Gujral (April 1997-March 1998) the 12th Prime Minister of India paying accolades to Sir Syed:

Sir Saiyad's vision and his laborious efforts to meet the demands of challenging times are highly commendable. The dark post 1857 era was indeed hopeless and only men like Raja Mohan Roy and Sir Saiyad could penetrate through its thick veil to visualize the Nation's destinies. They 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. I offer my homage to Sir Saiyad for his vision and courage that withstood all obstructions both from the friends and the foes. (qtd by Farooqi)

Sir Syed's visionary analysis never allowed him to accept the genuineness of the revolt. He envisioned the consequences. He knew that his Nation lives in deplorable conditions and they are not in the position to fight against the great British regime. He, thus stood firm to generate a cordial atmosphere under the light of which he protected the lives of many English civilians during his posting in Bijnor. Britain entirely blamed Muslims for the chaos. The image of Muslims was already that of a rebellious community as before the arrival of Britain, Muslims were the rulers. Hence, after the decline of Mughal Empire Muslims were subjected to the height of estrangement and hostility. The revolt created a huge rift between the British Empire and Muslims. Besides, thousands were butchered their lands were also confiscated. The image was terribly degraded to the most. This was the most distressing moment for Sir Syed. He lively witnessed this debilitating period in the history of the Muslims of Sub-Continent. In the opening pages of his essay *The Loyal Mohammedans of India* Sir Syed gives an account of the wretched state of Muslims:

I have...read the various works that have been written upon the Mutiny and Rebellion, and in all do I find the most bitter denunciations against the Mohammedans, who are freely represented as being everything that is vile, treacherous, and contemptible. There was no prickly thorn in those awful times, respecting which it was not said that it was planned by a Mohammedan: there was no fiery whirlwind that was not raised by a Mohammedan! (Mohammad, *Writings* 35-36)

He averred that a lot of misunderstandings have taken course regarding the actual causes of the revolt. He, thus anxiously worked towards the welfare of his nation. The primary step in which he thought was to do away with the mistrust of Britain about the Muslims. It was this motivational force which urged him to clear the misunderstandings all around. Thus, in *Causes of the Indian Revolt 1857* (Asbab-e-Bagawat-e-Hind) published in 1859, he tore away the veil over the reality linked to the revolt. He detailed the causes which led to the mass uprising. His close ally *Maulana Altaf Hussain Hali* in his biography "Hayat-e-Javed" writes in this direction:

As soon as Sir Syed reached Muradabad, he began to write the pamphlet entitled *The Causes of the Indian Revolt (Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind)*, in which he did his best to clear the people of India, and especially the Muslims, of the charge of Mutiny. In spite of the obvious danger, he made a courageous and thorough report of the accusations people were making against the Government and refused the theory which the British had invented to explain the causes of the Mutiny. (Hali and Mathews 92-95)

He outrightly rejected the British claim regarding the conspiracy of Muslims to rebel. Instead he countered by directing towards the misgovernance of the regime. In this essay Sir Syed challenged the British regime by putting forth drawbacks of the empire itself. He said:

The primary causes of rebellion are, I fancy, everywhere the same. It invariably results from the existence of a policy obnoxious to the dispositions, aims, habits, and views of those by whom the rebellion is brought about...As regards the Rebellion of 1857, the fact is, that for a long period many grievances had been rankling in the hearts of the people. In course of time, a vast store of explosive material had been collected. It wanted but the application of a match to light it, and that match was applied by the mutinous army...The manner in which the rebellion spread, first here, then there, now breaking out in this place and now in that, is alone good proof that there existed no widespread conspiracy. (Mohammad, *Writings* 15)

Sir Syed exposed the discrepancies of the government towards the natives. Moreover, Sir Syed enlisted the causes of the revolt, as:

1. "Ignorance on the part of the Government of the condition of the people, of their modes of thought and of life, and of the grievances through which their hearts were becoming estranged.
2. The passing of such laws and regulations and forms of procedure as jarred with the established customs and practice of Hindustan, and the introduction of such as were in themselves objectionable." (Mohammad, *Writings* 15)

Also, one of the primary causes Sir Syed believed was the lack of native representation in the legislative

council which in turn created certain 'misconstructions'. Sir Syed also detailed the fact that the Natives felt the threat on their religion owing to the consistent foreign religious and cultural intervention. The tactical imposition of missionaries over the natives was a determining stimulation for the wrath of the natives. They were distressed by the foreign policies and the utter disregard for the native religious and cultural tradition. Sir Syed viewed that it was a general public opinion that the missionaries and their intervention was entirely a state sponsored phenomenon. Thus, this pamphlet was immensely wrought with the national motive. Translated into English, it created a furor all over the official circles. Some of his well-wishers like *Rai Shankar Das*, the judge of Muradabad even suggested to burn all the copies of this pamphlet as it imposed a lively threat to Sir Syed's life. But Sir Syed's steel nerve couldn't bother for the sake of his nation and he blatantly stated that he wanted to bring all these serious issues into the notice of the British Empire without caring for the consequences. Primarily, it was taken as an open rebellious attempt by the people like *Cecil Beadon*, the then home secretary, who relentlessly negated its value and disregarded it as a recalcitrant attempt. But, afterwards, the motive behind this book was acknowledged by the English governance and subsequently applauded and sort as a logical manifesto. Besides, the suggestions of Sir Syed were considered genuine and the gap was eliminated and a lot of appointments of natives were made possible in high offices. Indian members were appointed in the viceroy council:

1. Maharaja Narendra Dev in Patiala
2. Raja Dev Narain in Banaras
3. Raja Dinkar Rao in Gwalior.

Besides, first time an Indian named Shambo Nath was appointed a High Court Judge in 1862.

Thus, Sir Syed's tireless efforts started paying off soon even in the political makeup of the colonial India. Besides, Britain acknowledged his multifaceted stature. On behalf of Sir Syed's protection of numerous English lives, he was offered huge estate, the annual income of which would have been in, lacs but Sir Syed denied all such luxurious for the sake of his nation. He never wanted such pursuits in the circumstances while his

nation was at the apogee of distress and misery. The only antidote to the entire dilemma he firmly believed was the modern education. With his dynamics, he penetrated deep into the realms of his nation and worked as a torchbearer to bring out the ills vis-à-vis backwardness and cope with the transitional modern world's challenges. Thus, the monumental status of Sir Syed in terms of his vision to shake the complacency of his nation, undoubtedly, remains unparalleled. He was a visionary, a vigorous reformer who painstakingly carried out his mission of dragging out his nation from the prolonged predicament overshadowed under the foreign occupation. His dynamics exposed his ailing nation to the enlightenment and erected the antidote in the form of converge between the tradition and modernity. He painstakingly tried to develop the modern sense among his brethren and urged them to shape their tastes with modern education without which, he believed, his nation can never come out of their wretched state of affairs or can never compete in the social or political spheres. Modern education thus, was a preoccupying force with his thought process which according to him would fuel the dead nerves of his people. His, was an urge to uplift his nation which he carried by overcoming every ordeal. He never favoured Muslim aggression on political matters because he knew this will never help their denigration. He wanted to uplift them through education and lead them to prosperity. He worked for the emancipation and progression. He had keenly studied the glorious past of Muslims and wanted to drive the attention of his brethren towards the same in order to reawaken them from their despondent state. With an extraordinary vigour to reform his nation, he started the mission by establishing schools at Moradabad in 1859 and in Gazipur in 1863 both during his posting. Moreover, the towering step was the foundation of the Scientific Society in 1864 in Gazipur with the motive to translate the western scientific or other literature into the vernacular languages in order to spread knowledge among the native common masses. All this was not sufficient to quench his reformative thirst. His dream was to emulate the splendid educational institutions of Europe, which kept on knocking his vibrant consciousness since his visit to England in 1869. A long stay of seventeen months was well enough to set a plan for a magnificent institution on the models of European Institutions. He strived to work out his experience to edify his nation towards enlightenment. Thus, an era

began in the form of Muslim renaissance at the formation of MAO College in Aligarh in 1875 to bridge the gap between tradition and modernity. With the same vision he started his grand mission while with his hard labour earning the support of the government. To liberate, uplift his brethren from the rituals and dogmas which restrict them to develop their outlook to face the modern world, was his defined motto. Hence, he foreran the idea of modernity within the established Muslim tradition and did succeed in bringing renaissance among the Muslims of the subcontinent. He wanted a reinterpretation of Islam and tried to harmonize it with the modern sciences in order to cope with the prevalent demands.

His vision was applauded even by Jawahar Lal Nehru in his own way as:

Sir Syed was an ardent reformer and he wanted to reconcile modern scientific thought with religion by rationalistic interpretations and not by attacking basic belief. He was anxious to push new education. He was in no way communally separatist. Repeatedly he emphasized that religious differences should have no political and national significance. (qtd. by Farooqi)

Sir Syed did succeed in his mission, as since the formation of the college and then the establishment of the University in 1920 incalculable people have benefited from his grand agenda. His enlightening vision uplifted the minority, in social, educational and economical spheres. The institute ever since has produced high profile figures in the field of science, humanities and in every discipline including whatever the political representation of Muslims in the Country has been, so far.

Besides, the contribution on the global level especially in the middle-east is undeniable. The Alig fraternity or what in typical terms is called as 'alumni network' is an exceptional closely-knit community across the world placed on high-profile jobs or in the global business world. Thus, Sir Syed did his job by reawakening his brethren and by preparing the ground or future. He himself speculated his success in his speech in the foundation ceremony of MAO College back in the address presented to the Viceroy on January 8 1877 as:

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. (Mohammad, *Writings* 126)

After exhausting his unflinching vigour and enthusiasm Sir Syed breathed his last on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1898. He is buried in the left of the front of the Grand Mosque, Sir Syed Hall, Aligarh Muslim University.

In the entire educational fabric of India, the contribution of AMU has been phenomenal. Besides, it has attained the credentials to be one of the best universities of the country with global repute, in fact, under the Times Higher Education World University Rankings for 2018 it, “has topped among all the Indian universities...left Banaras Hindu University, University of Delhi, Jadavpur University, Punjab University, University of Calcutta and several other universities and institutes of national importance.”. (Siddhant, *Two Circles*)

#### **A Road Ahead:**

But, a deep analysis on the current situation of the Muslims in India provides a glimpse that there are still numerous feats to be achieved. There is a considerable margin of our society living in the shades of illiteracy. Sir Syed’s vision is immensely indispensable in the current times. The nation to a large extent is still languishing in the social, economic and educational development. The matter of introspection is, does the Alig fraternity really care for the great vision to situate their ideas to carry forward his great mission and legacy at the collective and individual level. In fact his vision is needed to be revitalized to cope with the worse kind of problems sickening our society. Our streets are still full of wandering children who are the subject of every kind of depravity. The menace of child labour is lurking even within or around this glorious institution. Just a random survey will show that half a dozen children in every canteen laboring tirelessly for a note of hundred. Comparatively speaking, within India, the circumstances of the Muslims in the field of education are still of a grave concern. The situation demands stalwarts shaped by the same vision to fulfill the unfinished agenda of Sir Syed. There is a dire need of the establishment of more and more schools in every locality to accommodate

these depraved children. Though there are such steps already taken like the commendable Al Noor Charitable Society established in 1998 by Salma Ansari the wife of the former vice-president and the ex-Vice Chancellor of AMU, Hamid Ansari...under which almost four schools are run like, Bapu School, Chahcha Nehru School, Al Noor Public School and Lal Qila Public School where hundreds of underprivileged children receive free education up to 8<sup>th</sup> grade, with every provision of free books, midday meals and free uniform. But, keeping in view the need, a lot more is needed to be done in this direction. Such initiatives should be taken in every state. Besides, who so ever is connected with this institution should work to carry forward the legacy of our great predecessor to contribute towards his dignified cause.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Therefore, the fact can be safely argued that it was the extraordinary wisdom, which Sir Syed had attained through the erudite atmosphere within which he grew up, which led him to penetrate the deep recesses of the miserable conditions of nation and work out the path to lead them. He selflessly devoted himself to the collective national cause and left no stone unturned to liberate the Nation especially his Muslim brethren from the shackles of complacency. Though he does not align himself strictly to the political concerns but with his apposite understanding of the political makeup of his country, he envisioned the better future of his nation. With the same wisdom he rescued his nation from the troubles of the British rule during the Revolt 1857. He had an unremitting urge to lead his nation to prosperity through modern education. Undeniably, he achieved his purpose and his dream came true at the establishment of the MAO College. His tireless efforts in this direction paid off after his death when the same college turned into Aligarh Muslim University in 1920 which ever since has been enlightening masses across the country and abroad.

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