

SOME IMPORTANT FACTORS IN THE POLITICS OF SAYYID AHMAD KHAN

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Sayyid Ahmad Khan still remains one of the controversial figures in the history of this subcontinent. He loved to call himself a radical and his opponents fiercely attacked his religious opinions and social ideas. Criticism of his politics, subdued at first, became vociferous in the succeeding generation. Some non-Muslim journals of influence went so far as to denounce him as a traitor to the country. It is still customary for some persons to make oblique references to his work and opinions. It is, however, very difficult to understand the man if we disregard the circumstances of his times. Nor should we mistake the essence of his argument for the trappings in which it was presented.

That Sayyid Ahmad Khan was an exceptionally talented man who wielded an overwhelming influence in shaping the course of events, will not be seriously denied. As a seeker after knowledge, he was curious about many things under the sun and looked far ahead than most of his contemporaries. He had practically no knowledge of English, yet the dissemination of Western education among the Muslims became his mission in life and he continued to wage a determined fight against the inertia and opposition of

his own community. History and religion were his favourite studies. Both went a long way in giving him his perspective and aims. As a social reformer, he was impatient of outmoded conventions and effete institutions. In a very real sense he can be described as the Bentham of Muslim society who freely questioned the utility of inherited usages. He was also a journalist who used his pen for indoctrination. His speeches and writings show him as a preacher par excellence.

To begin with, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was very well adjusted to the Muslim society of the day. He had received the traditional Muslim education in his younger days and was a learner and a researcher in the fields of history and theology on traditional lines. It was the War of 1857 that brought out the rebel and the reformer in him. The stresses and strains of post-1857 years rapidly aided his intellectual development. In the course of his studies he acquired familiarity with the doctrines of English Utilitarians and gave much thought to political theories of John Stuart Mill on liberty and representative government. That he accepted some of his ideas and rejected others is dear from his writings. His thinking was also coloured by the provocative advances of contemporary biological sciences. As a man of action, he developed strong opinions and held them with tenacity. Towards the end he grew self-opinionated and could not stand any interference with his plans.

One of the factors consciously shaping Sayyid Ahmad's political views was that Britain, the ruling power in the

subcontinent, stood at the height of its destiny in the later half of the nineteenth century. Its industrial might was unchallenged. Politically, it was on the top of the world, and militarily it was held to be invincible. The freedom of thought and expression allowed to the Queen's subjects in England did not probably exist elsewhere. The political framework of British democracy, as we know it today, was incomplete. Universal adult franchise was far off and the "multitude" could still be described as "swinish" in the course of debates on the Second Reform Bill.

Great Britain's hold over the subcontinent had been strengthened with time and improvement of communications. The structure of government evolved after trial and error appeared to meet the requirements of governing an Asian dependency for an indefinite period. Political movements in the subcontinent were sporadic and did not attract much popular attention. The rulers practised racialism in its crudest form. "Natives" were denied access to clubs, restaurants and public parks frequented by men and women of the ruling tribe, who seldom cared to hide their contempt for the subjects. They were even demonstrative about it.

The Muslims had been rapidly losing ground in trade, professions and administration even under the East India Company. They suffered heavily in the War of 1857 and were subjected to ruthless suppression after it had ended. On their own part, they were unreconciled to the new order. In sheer sullenness,

they chose to stand away from the rulers, from their schools and from other Western cultural influences.

The suggestion confidently advanced by P.J. Griffiths that the Muslims themselves were responsible for their sufferings is too naive to be accepted. It ignores the vast influence that an economically powerful ruling community can exercise over the lives of poor and backward subject people.

The rampant racialism of the day, the gravely provocative and aggressive policies of the British rulers towards their Muslim subjects and Muslim refusal to see anything good in the Western way of life, left little hope for conciliation between them and the rulers. Sayyid Ahmad Khan became the spokesman of the Indian Muslim community after 1858, but his freedom of initiative was severely restricted. His job can be compared to that of the leader of a defeated army. It fell to him to chart a feasible course for his community within the limits imposed by the situation. A successful rebellion against Britain or a continued boycott of everything British would lead nowhere. The Muslim community must adjust itself to the changed environment created by British conquest. Its political rehabilitation should begin with loyal acceptance of British rule. Sayyid Ahmad Khan himself, at times, exaggerated, to the point of crudity, in professing loyalty to the British. Some of his public utterances would appear to be strange and undignified today, but it has to be pointed out that the creed of loyalty for him was a means and not an end in itself. This was

the only way of saving his community from disaster at the hands of a revengeful Caesar.

It is also pertinent to bear in mind that Sayyid Ahmad Khan took a sustained interest in the affairs of the Muslim world and was familiar with the intellectual and reform movements in Turkey and Egypt. Yet he was careful not to show excessive interest in outside Muslim communities. Muslim India alone was his constituency and his frame of reference.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ingrained conservatism is largely explained by early conditions around him. Coming from an aristocratic family, he had been a frequent visitor to the royal residence at the Red Fort and had even received a high-sounding title from the last Mughul king. He was proud of his high pedigree and reproduced, in one of his books, his genealogical table connecting his own family with the Prophet. In his speeches and writings, he lamented the sad plight of the Muslim families that had once rolled in luxury. He did not feel happy at the children of the well-born families mixing and slanging with street urchins. He condemned the racial arrogance of the British rulers as it was mostly visited on the well-born. He appears to mention with no small pride how in England he felt exalted at meeting the highest in British society, "Lords and Dukes including".

His attitude towards female education provides another example of his innate conservatism. He gave no importance to the education of women, which, he said, could very well wait till men had been educated. True, he changed many of his opinions in the

course of a long life, But in this sphere he remained prisoner of his early ideas.

The terrible experience of the War of 1857 left a permanent scar on his soul. It also gave him a purpose and sense of direction in life. He was deeply agonized by the sufferings of Muslim aristocracy, and, at one time, decided to quit the land of his birth. But he soon abandoned this idea and decided to share the difficulties and trials of his community. He was a practical man with an unflinching eye for the essentials of a problem. He was persuaded that it was not a practical proposition to challenge the new order. The Muslim community must bow to the logic of the situation and accept the inevitable. The Muslims had better devote themselves to the study of Western sciences, try to understand the British mind and proclaim unreserved acceptance of British rule. This was a bitter pill for most of his co-religionists to swallow, but he persevered with his mission. In order to overcome Muslim prejudice against Christians or Christian prejudice against Muslims, he wrote a commentary on the Book of Genesis to bring out the basic identity of Islam and Christianity. He wrote a pamphlet citing respectable authorities to show that Islam did not prevent the Muslims from dining with Christians in India's caste-ridden society.

Sayyid Ahmad's judgments on questions of religion and theology proceeded more from political considerations than from an unbiased study of the subject itself. Some points that emerged from his studies in this field were as follows.

The Muslim and Christian faiths are very close to one another. They have a common background and hallow a long line of Prophets mentioned in their respective scriptures. The doctrine of Jihad is the most misunderstood doctrine of Islam. The Muslims can engage in Jihad only in exceptional circumstances. The circumstances of British rule in India do not permit the Muslims to take up arms against their rulers. Islam teaches its followers to be faithful to those who bear rule over them. The cynic, who brands it as political theology, is not wholly wrong.

A constitutionalist by temper, Sayyid Ahmad Khan condemned the racialism of the rulers, pleaded for equality before law for all classes of British subjects and emphasised the need for amicable relations between different religious communities. The anti-Urdu campaign of some Hindu leaders of Benares started in 1867 came as a shock to him. The object of the Hindu attack was to dislodge the Urdu language from its established place as a medium of instruction in schools and as the language of law courts in upper India. Sayyid Ahmad Khan reacted immediately and took a decisive stand. It was at this stage that he was filled with despair about the future of Hindu-Muslim relations at the persistent Hindu belligerency on this front. He even spoke of Hindus and Muslims parting company "for ever" without, perhaps, being clear about the implication of his own words.

Another great influence in the life of Sayyid Ahmad Khan was his visit to England during 1869-70. Here he divided his time between meeting persons of importance and preparing his

refutation of Sir William Muir's *Life of Mahomet*. He was overwhelmed by the immensity of Britain's wealth, by the courtesy and dignity of the man in the street and by the system of education at Cambridge. Education, he saw, was a wider proposition than he had thought before. He was greatly impressed by the corporate student life at Cambridge with its immense potentialities for character-building. He expressed his admiration of the civilised life in England in phrases that were often irritating to readers at home.

It was in England that he conceived of a movement of social reform and of a plan for Muslim education. The Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College, Aligarh, was started after a full-fledged inquiry into the existing state of education and an appraisal of Muslim attitude towards the school system established by the British. The report of the inquiry is a powerful indictment of a merely imported education.

Started in 1875, the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College became the centre of a vigorous community life in which games, debates and other extra-curricular activities figured prominently. Rules required the management to employ a number of Englishmen on the teaching staff. Sayyid Ahmad Khan thought that the presence of Englishmen was essential to the running of this residential institution which was one of its kind in the country. The association of Englishmen with the College was a decided advantage in some respects, but it also produced a crop

of difficulties in the long run. These difficulties were intensified as political consciousness grew.

The principal factor that gave a political complexion to the Aligarh movement was the creed of the Indian National Congress. The founder of the Indian National Congress, A.O. Hume, and its early leaders were full of the British Liberal philosophy of the day. They demanded representative government for the country and claimed to speak even for those who did not share their ideas. However, the application of British Liberal ideas to the Indian society of 1885 was premature. A homogeneous society is the first requisite of success-full representative government. Social contrasts, religious differences and cultural disparities do not provide a congenial soil for the democratic experiment. Sayyid Ahmad Khan understood all this clearly and expressed his views incisively. He argued that the factors making for the success of representative government in England were absent from India. Representative government of the Western pattern would be fatal to Muslim interests as it would inevitably lead to majority rule. Majority rule is dangerous in a country where majorities and minorities are separated by social and cultural barriers. The hostility of the Hindu majority towards the Muslim minority was based on historical reasons. The very memory of Muslim rule was irritating to the politically-conscious sections of the Hindus. A majority conscious of its power and embittered against the minority is not likely to use its authority with wisdom or restraint. Majority rule will be indistinguishable from tyranny in the Indian situation.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan stated all this with his characteristic vigour and the political philosophy of the Aligarh movement was founded on these propositions.

To sum up: Aligarh has been criticized for a multitude of sins. It failed to produce a genuine academic atmosphere.

For its emphasis on games, it came to be looked upon as a nursery of gamesters. The religious instruction that it gave was mechanical, lifeless, rooted in the past and unadapted to the times. Administrative framework left room for clash of personalities. There is substance in all this. But, above all, Aligarh was a leveling agency. It was here that young men with a variety of backgrounds, social, economic and geographical, from all over the subcontinent, developed a common outlook and a habit of looking at the Muslim problem of the subcontinent as a whole. This laid the foundation of a way of thinking that ultimately led to the emergence of Pakistan.