

CHAPTER - IV

SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN : A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

One must have the knowledge of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's life and times and an idea of socio-Political and Cultural conditions in which he lived and worked. It is also important to study about his education and to analyse the influences working on him in order to arrive at the sources of his knowledge which will help us to understand the Aligarh Movement.

Moreover, any philosopher, thinker, reformer or leader of a nation is the product of his environment and he is bound to be influenced by the contemporary events and phenomena. These are highly interrelated. The present political, economic, social and cultural conditions are the result of a long process of development. The present is linked with the past and it will lead to some good or bad result. No leader, or thinker or reformer can escape the influences of the past.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the Principal architect of the Aligarh Movement, is one of the most dynamic and revolutionary personalities of the 19th Century. He was born on October, 17, 1817 in a noble, distinguished and respectable family of Delhi which traced its geneology to Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, in 36 generations.¹ Sir Syed's ancestors migrated to Herat because of the oppression of the Umayyads and

during the time of Shahjahan (1627-1658) his forefathers took the road to Delhi. Five generations before Sir Syed, Syed Mohammad Dost fought bravely in the Deccan under Aurangzeb (1627-1658) and earned the title of Bahadur. Syed Burhan's son, Syed Imad had two sons - Syed Hadi and Syed Mehdi. Syed Hadi was paternal grandfather of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. He was conferred the title of Jawad Ali Khan by Alamgir II. Later when Shah Alam came to the throne he added Jawad-ud-Dowla to his former titles. Sir Syed too got these title in addition to Arif-e-Jung. Sir Syed's father, Syed Mohammad Muttaqui² who retained the rank exercised considerable influence at the Mughat Courts.³ Sir Syed in his childhood stayed with his maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin mixed and played with the princes of the Royal Family and got an insight into the vanity of the last Mughals.⁴ His father died in 1838 and mother in 1857 at Meerut.

Much of Sir Syed primary education owe to his mother and maternal grandfather. Syed himself take notes of his education and says.

"I can remember my bismillah ceremony very well. It took place in the afternoon and many people had been invited. I was taken and seated in front of Shah Ghulam Ali who was the special guest, but when I saw such a huge gathering, I became very confused. A wooden state was placed before me and I believe it was Shah Sahib who told me to recite the opening words of the Quran-

Bismillah irrahman irrahim (in the name of Allah, the compationate, the merciful') I said nothing but just continued staring at him. He lifted me up on to his knee and said, come and sit with me and we'll recite together. We read the exordium and the first revealed verse of the Quran all the time reciting together".⁵

In this way, he initiated his education from the family saint, Shah Ghulam Ali and later entered into the maktab of Moulvi Hamid-ud-Din, a reputed Scholar who taught him persian text books for beginners such as Kalima, the Khaliq Bari, the Amadnama and later on he learnt Arabic, persian, Mathematics, logic Urdu from his mother, Khwaja Fareed-ud-Din, his grandfather; Nawab Zainul Abedin Khan, his maternal uncle; and so on.⁶ He was also interested in Medicine and he learnt it with Hakim Ghulam Haider, a well-known physian. He finished his formal study at the age of eighteen. But he retained and maintained his interest in reading and had the chance of meeting the famous scholars and poets of Delhi including Sahbai, Ghalib and Azurda. He was also attending and taking part in the meetings of the learned societies of the city. He developed his studies when he returned from Fathepur Sikri to act as Munsif in Delhi in the year, 1846.⁷

Sir Syed was highly influenced by his mother, Aziz-un-Nisa Begum, a kind, modest, God fearing and honest lady who taught him Arabic and Persian literatures and

shaped his mental make up. It is correct to say, "A good mother is better than a thousand teachers", His mother was very strict while teaching and she kept a cane in her hands whenever he went to her to recite his lessons.⁸

Besides his mother he was to a great extent influenced by his maternal grandfather, ~~Kh~~ Khwaja Fareed-ud-Din, who was a great scholar, well-versed in many sciences of the day, particularly mathematics. Apart from Scholarship, he combined the qualities of an administrator and a politician. The renowned Sir Syed's biographer Hali said that most of his political qualities he must have borrowed from his maternal.⁹

The other significant factor that influenced Sir Syed's life and Ideas was the religious environment of his family. He was benefited by the schools of Shah Abdul Aziz (dt.....) and Shah Ghulam Ali. His father was a devotee of Shah Ghulam Ali whom Sir Syed addressed as Dada Hazrat, and it was he who had given to 'Syed Ahmed' his name and taught him the first lesson.¹⁰

Apart from these, he was influenced by the Islamic Philosophers Shah Waliullah, Ibn Rushd, Al-Ghazzali, Rumi, Ibn Khaldun, Sadi, Azurda etc and Gladstone, Lord Ripon, Mill, Addison and Steele of the west also had influenced him. The thorough reading of these helped him in formulating his ideas. They formed his political and social ideas.

the Russians in Central Asia. Before the superior military power and shrewd political strategy of the Europeans, the Muslims who had retained primitive in terms of the scientific and technological advancement of the west, were reduced to helplessness in every sector of life."¹¹

Through the policy of colonialism and gun-boat diplomacy the Europeans destroyed the Islamic world. It was not the clash of religions but a clash of two cultures. The European were highly industrialised and politicised and militarily superior. They were attempting to find raw materials for their Industries, new markets for their finished goods, and new areas for their growing population. They also required fresh fields for the exhibition of their power and prestige. Their spirit of inquiry, love of exploration and quest for inventions and discoveries made them dominate the world and this was the out come of the steady growth of Europe since fifteen century.¹²

This scientific and technological advancement in Europe convinced Sir Syed who felt the Muslims should adopt the modern education and come out of the medievalism.

Sir Syed began his service career after the death of his father in 1838. His uncle, Khalilullah Sadr-e-Amin in Delhi court agreed to train Sir Syed in judicial matters and against the wishes of his family members, he entered British Service as Serishtedar in the Criminal Department in the Sadr-e-Amin's office at Delhi. In

February, 1839, he was transferred to Agra as Naib Munshi and there he mastered all rules and regulations, prepared a chart every official was to follow. In 1841, Sir Syed was promoted and appointed as a Munsif at Mainpuri and from there he was transferred to Fatehpur Sikri in 1842. The same year when he came to Delhi Bahadur Shah Zafar conferred on him the title of Jawad-ud-Daula Arif Jang. On the 18th February, 1846, he was transferred from Fatehpur Sikri to Delhi.¹³ On the 13th of January, 1855, Sir Syed was transferred from Delhi to Bijnoher as Sadre-e-Amin and he stayed till the outbreak of the First war of Independence in 1857.¹⁴ This great upheaval became a turning point in his life.

Apart from his official work, he developed his literary career writing on theology and history which revealed his profound understanding of religion and Islamic Civilization. First he wrote a booklet, 'Jame-Jam' containing the geneology of forty three different kings from Timur, the first great Mughal Victor of Central Asia, down to Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last of the Mughal Emperors in India. Then Sir Syed prepared a handbook of the rules and regulations prescribed in the Civil courts Intikhab-ul-Akhwin ('the Selection of the two brothers) which was intended to help the new entrants to the Judicial services the booklet 'Jilaul Qulub bi Zikrul Mahbub' written in 1839 deals with the birth, death, miracles and other events in the life of the Holy

Prophet for maulud. This had been written in accordance with the situation and condition. The other book 'Tahfa-i-Haoan' written in 1839 concerns the Shi'a accusations of Abu Bakr and Sir Syed criticised the shias and tried to refute their accusations. The next one is "Tahsilfi Jarr-up-Saqil" written in 1844, which contains an account of the five principles of mechanics.¹⁵ The most important publication was his Asar-us-Sanadeed, an archaeological history of the ruins of Delhi.

At the time of the First War of Independence (1857-58) he supported the British.¹⁶ Sir Syed saved the lives of many English men and women and gave them complete shelter even at the risk of his life. For this reason, he was highly praised by the English. Sir John Strachey was of the opinion that no man ever gave noble proofs of courage and loyalty to the British Government than Syed.¹⁷

He was loyal to the British and acted as the guardian of British interests in Bijnore. He struggled hard to maintain normalcy in Bijnore, when the whole of the District was in the grip of the rebels. He stayed there for more than a month after the British officers had left.¹⁸ For all these services he was awarded with an estate worth a lakh of rupees but Sir Syed declined to accept it.¹⁹

In fact, after the First war of Independence he was highly worried for the Muslim community which had suffered heavily. He became restless like that of a man a portion of whose house had caught fire and who was busy saving it.²⁰ Sir Syed expressed that his anxiety had made his hair grey and became an old prematurely.²¹ The devastation of the Muslim families was tremendous and no area of Indian life had remained untouched. Social, political, economic, cultural, religious all institutions were subject to a radical change. The destruction of their property was so great that Sir Syed lost all hopes for their rejuvenation.

The Revolt was over and Sir Syed began to analyse the causes of the First War of Independence. He wrote a pamphlet *Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind* (The Causes of the Indian Revolt) in which he showed the following the causes:-

- 1) The laws and regulations passed by the Government were not suited with the established practices and customs of Indian.
- 2) Ignorance and misunderstanding the intentions of the Government by the Indians.
- 3) Lack of sympathy and the racial discriminatory policy of the Government.
- 4) Ignorance of the Government in connection with the needs and grievances of people.

- 5) No good management of the army and the non-admission of Indians in the Legislative council.²²

In response to the charges that it was a pre-planned conspiracy of the Muslim against the British, Sir Syed explained that the way in which the rebellion spread was itself a proof that there was no wide spread conspiracy. This was also not the correct view that the rebels in India had received any aid from Russia or Persia. He said that they had no knowledge about Russia. Moreover, Hindustan had remained silent and inactive during the wars of Russia and Persia and she was in the war there was no visible sign of stir whatsoever. Therefore it can be easily inferred that the charge of conspiracy was false and baseless.²³

Sir Syed was transferred from Bijnaur to Moradabad on the promotion to the office of Sadr-us-Sadur in April 1858. In the following year a special commission was set up and he became a Member of the Commission of Appeals to decide the cases of confiscation of property belonging to those who had been convicted of rebellious activities. He greatly helped and assisted the innocent.²⁴

Sir Syed wrote 'The History of the Bijnaur Revolt which contains the events from May 1857 to April 1858. He started a Persian Madarasa at Moradabad in 1859. Previously here there was no school. He gave his ideas on the medium of instruction which he thought there should be

both Urdu and English. He vehemently criticised the Government vernacular schools and advised them that the Indians should be educated in English too.²⁵

In May 1862, Sir Syed was transferred from Moradabad to Ghazipur where he founded the Scientific Society²⁶ in 1863 to make the Western education available to Indians in their own language. The main activity of the society was to translate some selected works of the western learning into Urdu. The Society was known earlier a translating Society.²⁷

The next job he did at Ghazipur was to lay down the foundation of a school there. Raja Haridev Narayan Singh was made its patron. In the school, instruction was given in five languages - Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit. The School now known as Victoria School still continues in Ghazipur upto high School level.²⁸

From Ghazipur Sir Syed was transferred to Aligarh in 1864. Here he did a number of jobs as we know that the Scientific Society could not function without him, so it was shifted from Ghazipur to Aligarh. The Sir Syed formed "The British Indian Association" to form a link between the parliament and the people of India and to inform the public grievances to the authorities in India. After that he set up Educational Committees all over North-Western provinces and Oudh to spread the modern education in every district and finally to promote the

main objectives - social, educational and political reforms - of the Scientific Society, he published 'Aligarh Institute Gazette'.²⁹

From Aligarh Sir Syed was transferred to Benares on promotion to the office of Judge of the Small Cause Court in April, 1867. Before leaving Aligarh Raja Jai Kishan Das was given the responsibility of the Society and he finished the unfinished work of Sir Syed.³⁰ The main task he performed was his petition to the Viceroy on behalf of the British - Indian Association of the North West provinces to set up a Vernacular University where all subjects of western learning - arts and sciences - would be taught to the Indians in their own mother tongue. The University would be on the model of Calcutta University where the honours degrees were awarded to those students who knew English only. Now the degrees should also be awarded to those candidates successful in the Vernacular examination. Sir Syed added that the Scientific Society of Aligarh would undertake the task of translating from English into Urdu.³¹ Moreover, he supported the homeopathic system of medicine and the unity of the Hindus and Muslims.³²

Sir Syed was highly anxious for the regeneration of the Muslim Community which was degenerated during the First War of Independence 1857. He realized that it was possible only when the Muslims would adopt the

modern education and mix with the English freely. He also thought that it could be made possible if he would have a thorough knowledge of all the principles and methods of education. The plans and objectives could be realized and materialized if he himself visited England to observe the reality of advancement of Europe. Secondly William Muir's book 'Life of Mohomet' agitated Sir Syed's mind as he levelled charges against the Prophet Mohammed. He thought it was his religious and moral duty to refute the charges.

Sir Syed started his journey for England on the 10th April, 1869 at the age of fifty two with his two sons - Syed Hamid and Syed Mahmud. There he was highly charmed and attracted by the European civilization. He wrote to his friend soon after his arrival in London." The natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in Education manners and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is to an able and handsome man".³³

He maintained a diary throughout the entire journey, which is very interesting. He noted anything of interests and made comments on all for the use of the future traveller. He always wrote down the ideas relating his own mission. He observed in Bombay that the rich appointed private tutors for their children at home instead of opening the public schools for all. He praised the parsees

for their refined culture and then excellent command of Urdu highly impressed him.³⁴

Sir Syed's visit to England and staying there for one and a half year was very significant in his life where he saw the secret of power of the British and formulated an Educational plan and Scheme for the Indians to follow in their foot steps. He also observed that almost everybody tried to do something for the Welfare of the People but in our country people looked to the Government for the fulfilment of even their small needs. There he got an idea how the educational, social, cultural and political life of the Indian Muslims should be shaped. He admitted that the people of India were really far behind those of Europe almost in all matters. There was a vast difference between the east and the west. Therefore, he made a plan how to remove the disparity. The most important job he did in London was to refute the charges levelled against Prophet Mohammad.³⁵

While Sir Syed was in England he met a number of honourable personalities that changed and developed his insight and outlook. He met Lord Lawrance, former Governor-General of India; the Duke of Argyll, the Minister of Indian Affairs, who was patron of the Aligarh Scientific Society; Lord Stanley of Alderley, former British Ambassador to Constantinople, who had a good knowledge of Islamic Culture. He also met Thomas Carlyle with whom he talked

for a long over Heroes and Hero worship and about Prophet Muhammad.³⁶ Sir Syed was asked to attend a meeting of the Civil Engineers Society followed by dinner at Greenwich on 13th of July 1869. There he addressed a gathering of England's most famous engineers on the subject of engineering. The Daily News of 21st July 1869 reported that Sir Syed made a most competent and interesting speech and he was cheered and thanked by the whole assembly. He was made an honorary member of the Athenian Club, the most prestigious Club of literary persons.³⁷

After staying seventeen months in London and visiting a number of educational centres and institutions, he returned to India with a number of educational plans and schemes and more enthusiastically than ever he started his educational movement known as Aligarh Movement.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The following epitaph is engraved on the marble plate of Syed's grave showing his lineage from Hazrat Hussain:

(1) Fatma Zahra, (2) Amir-ul-Momineen Ali Ibn Abu Talib, (3) Imam Hussain, (4) Imam Zainul Abedin, (5) Imam Mohammad Baqar, (6) Imam Zafar Sadiq, (7) Imam Musa Kazim, (8) Imam Ali Musa Raza, (9) Imam Mohammad Taqi, (10) Syed Musa Mir Raqi, (11) Syed Ali Abdullah Ahmad, (12) Syed Mohammad Arj, (13) Syed Mohammad Ahmad (14) Syed Ahmad, (15) Syed Musa, (16) Syed Ahmad, (17) Syed Mohammad, (18) Syed Ali, (19) Syed Jafar, (20) Syed Muhammad, (21) Syed Isa, (22) Syed Abdul Fateh, (23) Syed Ali, (24) Syed Yar Hussain, (25) Syed Kazimuddin Hussain, (26) Syed Jaffar, (27) Syed Baqar, (28) Syed Musa, (29) Syed Sherfuddin Hussain, (30) Syed Ibrahim, (31) Syed Hafiz Ahmad, (32) Syed Aziz, (33) Syed Mohammad Dost, (34) Syed Burhan, (35) Syed Muhammad Ahmad, (36) Syed Mohammad Hadi, (37) Syed Mohammad Muttaqui, and (38) Syed Ahmad.

I myself have visited at the grave of Sir Syed at Aligarh and observed it several times.

2. Generally the researches and writers have mentioned

- Syed Muttaqui father of Syed Ahmad but his actual name is Syed Muhammad Muttaqui as have been mentioned in Syed's Epitaph and in Sirat-e-Faridaiby Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. P.43
3. Muhammad, Shan Sir Syed Ahmad Khan : A Political Biography, Meerut : Meenakshi Prakashan, 1969, P. 43.
 4. Muhammad, Shan Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Bomaby : Nachiketa Publication Limited, 1972, Introduction, P. 1
 5. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-i-Javed, translated by K.H. Qadiri & David J. Matthews, Delhi: Idarah-i-Adviyat Delhi. 1979,P.23
 6. Ibid, PP.23-24 see also K.A. Nizami, Syed Ahmad Khan New Delhi, (Government of India, Publication Division, 1966),PP.27-30
 7. Ibid, PP. 24-25
 8. Khan, Syed Ahmad Sirat-e-Faridia, Agra : Mufed - e - Aam Press, 1896, P. 45
 9. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed (Urdu), Delhi: 1939, Part - II, PP. 2-3
 10. Ikram, S.M. Mauj-e-Kausar, Taj Company, Delhi, 1999, P. 78
 11. Ali, B. Sheik A Leader Reassessed : Life and work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Mysore:Sultan Shaheed Education Trust Publication, 1999, P. 57.

12. Ibid, P. 58
13. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed, (English translated)
Op. cit. PP. 29-32, also see Hayat-e-Javed (Urdu) Pt.1 (Tarraqui Urdu
Burean Board, 3rd Ed 1990) PP.42-45
14. Ibid, P. 39
15. Ibid, PP.31-32
16. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed (Urdu), Op. cit.Delhi,
1939, P.19
17. Graham, C.F.I. The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmad
Khan, London, 1885,P. 19
18. Philips, C.H. The Sepoy Rising of 1857, Delhi:
Souvernir, 1957, PP. 24-25
19. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed (Urdu), Op. Cit.
P. 1, P.69
20. Ibid, P. 70
21. Rahman, Noor-ur Hayat-e-Sir Syed , Delhi : Maktaba
Jamia, ND, PP. 12-15
22. Khan, Syed Ahmad Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind, Aligarh:
Muslim University Press, 1858,Reprin-
ted, P. 42.
23. Ibdi, P. 3
24. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed, (English translateed),
Op. cit. P. 57
25. Ibid, PP. 58-60
26. see for details, Muhammad, Shan, The Aligarh Movement,
Basic Documents, Vol. 1, Meerut:

Meenakshi Prakashan, 1978, PP.1-228,
also see the recent publication
in Urdu by Iftekhhar Alam Khan, Sir
Syed and Scientific Society, Ek Bajy-
aft, New Delhi : Jamia Maktaba, 2000,
PP. 164.

27. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed, (English translated)
Op. cit. P. 86, also see Bye Laws
of the Scientific Society (Printed
ast Syed Ahmad's Private Press,
Ghazeepore, 1864, P. 1
28. Ibid, PP. 86-87
29. Ibid, PP. 87-91
30. Ibdi, P. 94
31. Ibid, PP. 94-95
32. Ibid, PP. 98-99
33. Sir Syed's letter from London to Raja Jai Kishan Das
Bahadur, Secretary of the Scientific
Society at Aligarh, dated October
15, 1869, see Maktaeeb-e-Sir Syed
Ahamd Khan (ed) Hussain, Mustaq,
Delhi : Printing Press, 1960,
PP. 17-18
34. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed. (English translated)
Op. cit. P. 109
35. Ali, B. Seik A Leader Reassessed, Op. cit.P.93

also see Hali, Hayat-e-Javed (English translated) Ibid, P. 107,

also see Bashir Ahmad Dar, Religious thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1957, Introduction.

36. Hali, Altaf Hussain Hayat-e-Javed, (English translated) OP. cit. P. 112, also see B. Shaik Ali, A Leader Reassessed, Op. cit, PP. 93-94.

37. Ibid, PP. 113-114, also see B. Sheik Ali, P. 94.