

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan

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Critical moments in history are like earthquakes. They manifest themselves as convulsions releasing the pent up stresses of generations. When the tremors are over, they leave behind a legacy, which becomes a prelude to the next major event. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-1858 was one such event. With it medieval India died and in its wake grew social and political movements that paved the way for the emergence of the modern nations of India and Pakistan.

India was the first country where Muslims were faced with a challenge to define their interface with two global civilizations from a position of political weakness. European arms and diplomacy had smashed their power. The Sepoy Uprising confirmed this loss of power. The initial response of the Muslims to this debacle was to stay aloof from the British, to shun their language, institutions, culture and methods. Withdrawal only increased their isolation and set them behind in the race for political and social re-awakening. At the same time, the Hindus whom the Muslims had dominated for 500 years appeared poised to dominate them. The changing relationships were most acutely felt in the Gangetic plain, in the populous region extending from Delhi to Calcutta. And it was this region that set the tone for the interaction between the Muslims, the Europeans and the Hindus in the years to come.

What was the appropriate relationship between Islam and Christian Europe? The legacy of the Crusades in the Mediterranean region was not an encouraging one. In the 7th and 8th centuries, the Muslims conquered vast areas of the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and southwestern Europe and displaced Christianity with their own faith. In a counter thrust, during the 12th and 13th centuries, the Christians wrested Spain and Portugal from the Muslims and in the succeeding centuries, completed extirpated Islam from the Andalusian peninsula. The English thrust at India in the 18th century was primarily mercantile and motivated by economic domination. Nonetheless, the history of interactions between Islam and Christianity did not provide a framework for a mutually satisfactory accommodation.

With the large Hindu population of India, the situation was somewhat different. In the 8th century, Muslim armies, after their swift advance through Persia, had paused at the Indus River. For 500 years thereafter, the Indus River roughly defined the geographical boundary between Muslim dominions and northern India, which was dominated by the Rajputs. The situation changed when Muhammed Ghor captured Delhi in 1192, and from that date onward until the arrival of the British, the Indo-Gangetic plain was ruled by successive Muslim dynasties. Some of the Muslim monarchs, such as Alauddin Khilji,

Muhammed bin Tughlaq and Jalaluddin Akbar, treated their Indian subjects fairly. Most were content to collect taxes from Hindus and Muslims alike and made no attempt either to facilitate the spread of Islam or to deter it. Except in the northwest and the northeast, Islam remained a super-layer on a fossilized Hindu society. The two great communities continued to coexist but did not co-mingle. The powerful Islamic message of equality of man ensured that the Muslims were not submerged in the Hindu caste matrix, yet the rigidity of Hindu society was too tenacious for Islam to displace Hinduism.

Sufic Islam tried to bridge the gap between the various communities of India. The Sufis arrived in the Indo-Gangetic plain at about the same time they emerged in Central Asia and North Africa. The spiritual and physical space of the Sufi *qanqahs* was secular in which men and women of all faiths were welcome. With their emphasis on love, brotherhood, service and openness to local culture, they convinced a large number of Indians to accept Islam so that by the turn of the 19th century, Muslims constituted roughly a quarter of the total population of the subcontinent.

The numerical inferiority of the Muslims was compensated by their political and cultural dominance. Only in the field of economics did the Hindus fare better. The far-sighted among the Muslim monarchs found it wise to accept the services of Hindu ministers to rationalize their tax collection systems. With the advent of British rule, the advantages that the Muslims had enjoyed were chipped away. Political and military ascendancy was the first casualty. Bengal (1757), Oudh (1765) and Mysore (1799) fell one by one. Some of the potentates, such as the Nizam of Hyderabad, found it more expedient to accept the protection of the British than to fight them.

The second front was economic. The thriving manufacturing industry and the trade guilds of Bengal were ruined by the deliberate policies of the Company who saw Hindustan as a vast market for its goods. Where industry faltered, usury crept in. Since interest was forbidden in Islam, the Muslims stayed away from usury. Hindu moneylenders had no such taboo and they moved in as credit suppliers for the impoverished masses.

Language was the third front. In 1835, the East India Company introduced English medium schools and replaced Persian with English in the higher courts. Persian, the *lingua franca* of Muslim Asia, was the court language of Delhi for 500 years. The displacement of Persian as the court language not only severed intellectual contacts between Muslim India and Persia, it also stripped the advantage that Muslims had enjoyed in education. The Hindus had nothing to lose by this change and embraced English education with open arms and moved to fill in whatever government positions were offered by the British to Indians. The educational gap between the Hindu and Muslim communities increased. This in turn augmented mutual suspicions, jealousy and social tensions.

The Sepoy Uprising of 1857-1858 released the pent up tensions between India and the British and proved to be a calamity for the Muslims. Defeat prompted withdrawal. It was the contribution of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan that he brought the Muslims of northern India from their cocoon and made them face the historical currents so they could participate in the molding of their own destiny. His response to the British and to the Hindus was markedly different. He foresaw, that British rule, no matter how entrenched it seemed at the time, was ultimately bound to disappear. But the Hindus were neighbors, living with the Muslims. Two global faiths, Islam and Hinduism, had arrived in India at different historical epochs and each claimed the same land as its homeland. In the dialogue to coexist and co-prosper, the adherents of the two faiths were largely unsuccessful and in their failure they left behind the legacy of partition and the accompanying holocaust of 1947.

In the aftermath of the Sepoy Uprising, the Muslim intelligentsia in northern India was decimated. Under the incessant hammer of British persecution, Muslims in the Indo-Gangetic belt recoiled from active participation in national life. Too proud to accept defeat at the hands of the “infidels”, mired in the glory of a bygone era, imprisoned in a paradigm of Persian-Arabic education, suspicious of an emerging Hindu educated class, exploited by money lenders and *talukdars*, they sank deeper into a despondency with each passing year. The British carried their vendetta into the succeeding decades. Open discrimination was practiced against the Muslims in government jobs. The result was a general decay in the economic and political status of the Muslims and an increasing gap between the Muslims and Hindus in education and social awareness. This chasm was to have a profound effect on the events that unfolded in the last quarter of the century when Sir Syed Ahmed Khan launched his educational reform movement (1875) and the Indian National Congress was founded (1885). Indeed, the increasing gap in the economic and educational well being of Hindus and Muslims had a decisive impact on the shape of the struggle for the independent nations of India and Pakistan.

The thrust of European arms and ideas evoked a wide spectrum of responses in the Muslim world. The Ottomans resisted this thrust until the resistance was destroyed during the First World War. In Egypt and Turkey the impact of European ideas influenced the reform movements of Muhammed Ali Pasha, Sultan Abdul Hamid and the Young Turks. In India it produced the reform movement of Syed Ahmed Khan.

In the dialectic between Europe and the Muslim world, Syed Ahmed Khan of India occupies a unique position. He was perhaps the first Muslim leader to contemplate the *possibility* of coexistence between the two global civilizations. Muslim reformers before him had either totally disregarded the European challenge (Shah Waliullah of Delhi, Shaykh Abdul Wahhab of Arabia and Shehu Dan Fuduye of Nigeria fall into this category) or were hostile to any accommodation with Europe. The initiatives taken by Sir Syed had far reaching consequences for the Muslims. He demonstrated the possibility of coexistence and cooperation between the European and Islamic civilizations, although in his own lifetime, with the British firmly entrenched in India, he could achieve no more than a supportive role for Indian Muslims.

Syed Ahmed Khan was born in 1817 near Delhi, into a distinguished family. He received his early education in the traditional disciplines of *Qur'an* and Hadith and was then exposed to an English education. When the Sepoy Uprising of 1857 broke out, he was employed with the Company as a civil servant in the “Northwestern Provinces”, as the area west of Oudh was then called. The carnage of the Uprising and the subsequent decimation of the Muslim intelligentsia left a major void in the Islamic community of northern India. The initial response of the community was to conserve and withdraw into its social cocoon. While the British viewed the Muslims with deep suspicion, the Muslims shunned the British as infidels and foreigners who had usurped what had been rightfully theirs. Hostility and resentment fed upon each other and it looked like the Muslims would miss the opportunity to be a part of the new order imposed by newcomers from the British Isles.

While the Muslims remained aloof from British administration, the Hindus, Parsis and other communities forged ahead in education and social development. The replacement of Persian by English as the language of the higher courts (1835) was resented by the Muslims but was welcomed by the other communities. They embraced English education much more eagerly than did the Muslims. In 1878 there were 3155 college educated Hindus as against 57 college educated Muslims. In a country, growing poorer by the year due to Company practices, government service was a major career path for poor people and the Muslims missed these opportunities. The situation was particularly acute in Bengal and

Uttar Pradesh. Since the fall of Bengal in 1757, all of the higher positions in civilian, military and judiciary service were reserved for the British. The more educated Hindus filled the lower positions that were open to Indians. The Muslims were practically shut out.

Syed Ahmed Khan saw the dangers in this isolationist posture. As long as mutual suspicion and hostility persisted between the Muslims and the British, the former would be excluded from participation in the political and social life of the country. Sir Syed visited England in 1870 and came back with a conviction that English education was a key to the advancement of the Muslims. In 1877 he established the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College" at Aligarh. The name of the college was self-descriptive and its orientation was decidedly western. It faced immediate hostility from the Muslim religious establishment. Mullahs denounced him as a "turncoat" and a "kafir". Undaunted, Sir Syed persisted. He invited a noted Englishman, Theodore Beck to serve as the first principal of the College. As hostility towards his efforts intensified in the areas around Delhi, he traveled throughout the Punjab in search of support and funds. Punjabi Muslims, who felt the British had recently liberated them from the Sikhs, welcomed Sir Syed with open arms and generously provided him moral and material support.

Aligarh College grew by the year and soon became a center for Muslim educational and political activities in northern India, although its doors were open to all communities and many distinguished British as well as Hindu professors served on its faculty. The college served as a magnet for young men and women from families of *zamindars* and peasants alike from all over India. It provided a boost to the Muslims in their competition with the other communities for government jobs. But it was in the political arena that its impact was most profoundly felt. Graduates of Aligarh University were in the forefront of the political struggle in India and their efforts were decisive in the struggle for Pakistan.

Economics was yet another area where the Muslims fell behind the larger community. Following the Battle of Plassey (1757), the manufacturing base of Bengal was destroyed by the discriminatory policies of the Company. The artisans and merchants, who were primarily Muslim, were economically ruined. The Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 imposed Hindu landlords on the Muslim population of Bengal. In 1858, following the Sepoy Uprising, when the *zamindari* system was reinstated by the British in Uttar Pradesh, the Hindus were the primary beneficiaries. Thus in the crucial area between Delhi and Calcutta, the Muslim economic condition went from bad to worse. Only in parts of the Punjab, Sindh and the Frontier areas, where the Pathans and some Punjabis had cooperated with the British, was there a remnant of Muslim landed aristocracy.

Given the educational, political and social backwardness of the Indian Muslim community, Sir Syed felt that its best option was to cooperate with the British. As long as mutual suspicion and hostility between the British and the Muslims of northern India persisted, the latter could not take advantage of any opportunities that a more cooperative environment might present. Accordingly, Sir Syed recommended to the Muslims that their interest, for the time being at any rate, lay in seeking a working relationship with the British. This position was at odds with that of the Hindu nationalists. Since the Hindus were far more advanced educationally and they were also the numerical majority, they could package the demands of their community in a "nationalist" terminology. For the Hindus there was co-linearity of a national and communal vision. This was not so for the Muslims. Except in the northwest and the northeast, they were a small minority in the great landmass of the subcontinent. The aftermath of the 1857-1858 uprising, the decimation of their leadership, their educational backwardness and their numerical inferiority ensured that they could not compete with the Hindus on equal terms.

The years following the Great Uprising saw the first stirrings of a nationalist movement in India. Most of the nationalists were English-speaking Hindus and Parsis. An English education gave the Hindus not only access to government jobs but enabled them to articulate their social and political aspirations. The

Indian National Congress was formed in 1885 by an Englishman Allan Hume to encourage Indians to provide input and feedback to the government on how the administration of the Raj could be improved. In later years, the Congress grew to be the most powerful political organization in British India and political demands grew to give political representation to the Indians. Sir Syed was concerned that the Muslims would be submerged in a vastly Hindu India should political initiative pass on to the Hindus. He articulated the fears of the Muslim community in these words:

“India, a continent in itself is inhabited by vast populations of different races and different creeds. The rigor of religious institutions has kept even neighbors apart. The system of caste is still dominant and powerful . . . In a country like India where caste distinctions still flourish, where there is no fusion of the various races, where religious distinctions are still violent, where education in its modern sense has not made an equal or proportionate progress among all the sections of the population, I am convinced that the introduction of the principle of election, pure and simple, for representation of various interests on the local boards and district councils would be attended with evils of greater significance than purely economic considerations . . . The larger community would totally override the interests of the smaller community and the ignorant public would hold Government responsible for introducing measures which might make differences of race and creed more violent than ever.”

Sir Syed opposed the participation of Muslims in the Indian National Congress as he was concerned that representative government based on a one man-one vote concept would leave the Muslims at the mercy of the more numerous Hindus. His fears were reinforced by the movement in 1867 to replace Urdu, a language that had evolved through a Hindu-Muslim linguistic synthesis, with Sanskritized Hindi. Sir Syed saw that education, at least western education, far from bringing the two great communities of the subcontinent closer together, was separating them further apart. As the movement to replace Urdu with Hindi gathered momentum, he wrote: “I am convinced that the two communities will not sincerely cooperate in any work. Opposition and hatred between them which is felt so little today, will in the future be seen to increase on account of the so-called educated classes.”

Sir Syed’s opposition to Muslim participation in the Indian National Congress was based on his conviction that the Muslims of his day were not ready to compete with the other communities in education and politics. The destruction of the manufacturing base in Bengal and Uttar Pradesh had eliminated the artisans and merchants who had formed the economic backbone for the Moghul Empire. The moneylenders and the talukdars, most of whom were Hindu, now took their place. The differences between the two communities were exacerbated in the aftermath of the Sepoy Uprising of 1857-1858. The British had singled out Muslim leaders for punishment. In Delhi alone, over 27,000 Muslims were hanged, with many thousands more in Meerat, Lucknow and Allahabad. With the introduction of English as the medium of instruction, Muslims had fallen further behind. Meanwhile, the Hindus had taken advantage of the new opportunities, had acquired education and were able to fill any positions offered the Indians. Sir Syed felt that the introduction of representative government at that stage in history would solidify the advantage of the Hindu community over the Muslims and would relegate the latter to a permanent handicap.

Sir Syed did not live to see the full impact of the reforms introduced by him. It was left to later generations to realize the benefits of his initiatives in education and politics. He passed away in 1898. Twenty-three years after his death, in 1921 Aligarh College blossomed into Aligarh Muslim University and became a magnet for Muslim intellectual activity in the subcontinent. The generations that came after him derived their inspiration from the legacy of Sir Syed and went on to carve out their own destiny. He stood tall among the reformers of the 19th century who gave a new lease and a new direction to Islamic civilization.

Some among the later generations would call him a revolutionary, some would label him an apologist, but there is no doubt that Sir Syed Ahmed Khan opened the door to communication between the Muslims and the Europeans. Until he came along, this door had been locked shut with a steel bar of mutual suspicion and hostility.

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