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AL-SHAJARAH

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SYED AHMAD KHAN'S TWIN OBJECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL REFORMS IN BRITISH INDIA
Muslim Advancement and Hindu-Muslim Unity

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Abstract

The primary aim of this article is to discuss the twin objectives of Syed Ahmad Khan's (1817-1898) religious and educational reforms during the British colonial rule, namely Muslim socio-cultural advancement and progress and the realisation of Hindu-Muslim unity. This study shows that Syed Ahmad's approach to educational reforms was non-sectarian, but his special emphasis on Muslim education was dictated by the social fact that the Muslim community was backward compared to the Hindus and, moreover, they were suppressed by the British colonial rulers.   Syed Ahmad is portrayed here as an advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity. His strategic approaches to the realisation of this unity were through education, both formal and informal. Formally, he built schools, colleges and universities that were meant to provide modern education and foster harmonious Hindu-Muslim relations. His informal education platform was civil society organisations in which he collaborated with Hindu leaders to promote intercultural understanding and communal solidarity. He also used his public office as a platform to serve the interests of all Indians. The article concludes with a suggestion on the need to revisit the issue of the significance of Syed Ahmad for both his and our times, particularly in the light of the inter-communal conflicts that ravaged present-day India.

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Introduction

Thematically, this article is a continuation of our essay on Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) that appeared in the previous issue of this journal.[3] The focus of discussion in that essay is Syed Ahmad's views on Hindu-Muslim relations in India as documented in his writings and speeches. The essay's conclusions[4] strengthen the portrayal of Syed Ahmad as a great believer in the idea of Muslims and Hindus as two distinct communities and cultures, but which by virtue of their many commonalities and complementarities shaped by Indian history could and indeed should live together in peace and unity within the framework of a single Indian nation (*qawm*). He was indeed a prominent advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity throughout his life and he worked hard towards the realisation of collaborative social works between the two communities, especially in the field of education. Notwithstanding his life-long commitment to the vision of a pluralistic India in which "Hindus, Muslims, Christians and those who reside in India" enjoy a "common citizenship"[5] and "may unite together for the common goal,"[6] Syed Ahmad was known to have adopted varying strategic partnerships with Hindus in response to changing challenges.

In the post-1857 Indian Rebellion phase of his life, he devoted more time and energy to further the advancement of Muslim education because as he saw it, Muslims were more backward than Hindus in education, and yet the British colonial rulers being suspicious of Muslim loyalty in the wake of the Rebellion gave more

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[3] See Md. Yousuf Ali and Osman Bakar, "Issues of Hindu-Muslim relations in the works of Syed Ahmad Khan," *Al-Shajarah* 25, no. 2 (2020): 315-333.

[4] Ali and Bakar, "Issues of Hindu-Muslim relations in the works of Syed Ahmad Khan," 332-333.

[5] Syed Ahmad, *Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid: Ta'limi Maqalat* (Lahore: Majlis Tarraqi-i-Adab, 1963), 160.

[6] Shan Muhammad, compiled and edited, *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Bombay, 1972), 267.

educational support, incentives and opportunities to the latter. His increasing devotion to Muslim education became more visible after his return from England in 1872. Impressed by what he saw of England's educational institutions especially at the tertiary level (1869-1872), he was determined to provide a modern education for Indian Muslims, a big dream that led to his launching of the historic Aligarh Movement centred in Aligarh. [7] The jewel in the Movement's string of achievements was undeniably, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College[8] that he established in 1877 and patterned after Oxford and Cambridge universities. There was another important factor that led him to give greater priorities to Muslim education rather than to generally address the problems of Indian education without making any distinction between the needs of the Muslim and Hindu communities. This factor was the new development that saw the agitation of the Hindus of Benares against the Persian-Urdu script in favour of the Devanagari-Hindi. Apparently, Syed Ahmad viewed the sectarian agitation as an obstacle to Hindu-Muslim unity, an issue which we will discuss later.

The Twin Goals of Syed Ahmad's Educational Reforms: Muslim Advancement and Hindu-Muslim Unity

Syed Ahmad was committed to both Indian Muslim socio-cultural advancement and to building a pluralist and progressive nation state in modern India. He considered modern education as the best path to realising both goals in the context of British-ruled India. Moreover, he saw modern education as perhaps the most important platform for developing better Hindu-Muslim relations. As a good illustration of his conviction in the emancipatory power of modern education, he founded Western-styled schools, colleges, academic bodies, scientific societies and cultural institutions in India, all of which were

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[7] On this Movement see M. S. Jain, *The Aligarh Movement: Its Origin and Development, 1858-1906* (Agra: Sri Ram Mehra and Co., 1965); and Begum Naz, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1992), 24-25.

[8] MAO College was raised to university status in 1920 with the name AMU. On 22 December 2020 AMU celebrated its centennial anniversary that was attended by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi.

significantly run on a non-sectarian basis. Although he was very much concerned with and uncompromising in protecting the heritage and rights of the Muslims, he only opposed the acts of others that would maltreat Muslims. He was not known to have ever articulated any anti-Hindu sentiment or criticism in his writings or speeches. Not only that, his cultural approach to India's educational needs was always seen as inclusive in nature. The institutions he founded were open to all Indians irrespective of religion, race, ethnicity and caste. With respect to the MAO College itself, its affairs "were conducted on a strictly non-sectarian basis."[9]

To help bridge the widening cultural gap between the Hindu and the Muslim communities in India of his time and to promote a more harmonious relation between them, Syed Ahmad initiated reforms of the educational system. He argued that India as a nation should concentrate on the development of education for its growth. He believed that, more than any other factor, it would be education that could save the nation from what he perceived as its backward condition.[10] An educated human mind, he stressed, is like a grey marble block; without touching it, its beautiful form, its bewitching colours and its fine designs would remain concealed.[11] He warned his fellow-countrymen in a lecture delivered on the occasion of the Ninth Muhammadan Educational Conference that "Trade is not the job of ignorant Bedouins."[12] He therefore urged them to attain the best knowledge in order to expand trade and establish trading stations

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[9] Riazuddin H. Zubairi, *The Educational and Social Ideas of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Southern Illinois University, 1971), PhD thesis, 208, cited by Irfan Ahmed Shaikh & et al., 'Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): An Educationist and Reformer of South Asia,' *JPUHS* 29, no. 2 (July-December 2016): 113.

[10] During his address at the 9th Muhammadan Educational Conference (1894) Syed Ahmad Khan said, "There are people who think that our national cause will be the best promoted by discussing political affairs. I do not agree with that but regard the spread of education to be the only means for the promotion of the national cause. In these days, our nation should not strive for anything but the spread of education. When our country education will be sufficiently propagated then we shall have sufficient means to emerge from our backward condition." See Begum Naz, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Islamabad: National Book Foundation, 1992), 33-34.

[11] Quoted by J. M. S. Baljon in his book The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 2nd edition, (Lahore: Oriental Publishers, 1958), 43.

[12] J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 44.*

under the name of the Muhammadan and Hindu Company in London and other European cities.

In articulating his thoughts on the pursuit of modern education for both Muslims and Hindus, Syed Ahmad emphasised the importance of making the right decision in choosing the language(s) of instruction. His concern regarding the native languages as a medium of educational instruction has to be understood together with his broader issue of the pursuit of modern knowledge. In 1859, a year after the creation of the British Raj, he published a review of the state of instruction in Urdu and English in Indian educational institutions. He argued in the review that all Europeans and Arabs received instruction in their own languages. So, in India it is necessary to determine in which language 'instruction' should be provided. The review highlighted three main points. First, since knowledge is essential and textbooks are the basic sources of knowledge, it must be determined whether there are sufficient textbooks. If not, then instruction in the language in question would not be possible. Second, it has to be determined whether this language is suitable for writing textbooks. And third, it has to be ascertained whether or not studying the sciences in that language would result in swiftness of apprehension, sharpness of intellect, soundness of mind and powers of persuasion.

Syed Ahmad argued that at the time of the review, the Urdu language was not in a position to meet those three requirements. Hence, as he saw it, it was the duty of the government to completely change the education system of India. His firm conviction was that, given the circumstances of the time, the English language should be used as the instruction medium in the academic institutions. When he was serving as the Principal Sadr Amin or Subordinate Judge (*Sadr-al-Sudur*) at Moradabad,[13] he established a Persian *madrasah* where five languages were taught, namely English, Urdu, Persian, Arabic and Sanskrit.[14] For the purpose of advancing the cause of

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[13] Syed Ahmad was promoted to the post in July 1858 after serving as Sadr Amin at Bijnor.

[14] George F. I. Graham, *The Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (London: William Blackwood, 1885), 72; and J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 114-115.

scientific knowledge and literacy in Indian education, he founded a Translation Society in 1862 with the main task of translating scientific writings in English and other European languages into Urdu and Hindi. Two years later (1864), the society became transformed into the Scientific Society of Aligarh (SSA) as part of his ongoing effort to meet "the need for the Muslim community to learn the English language and to master the Western educational curriculum in order to ensure their upward mobility in social, financial, and political circles."[15] However, reviewing the SSA's progress twenty years later, Syed Ahmad made an admission during his 1884 lecture that it had failed to meet its goals.[16]

Consequently, notwithstanding this failure, it would be correct to say that since the 1857 Rebellion, Syed Ahmad was constantly thinking about the problems of education faced not only by the Indian Muslims but by all Indians. As he perceived it, the entire community was steeped in darkness, ignorance and prejudice.[17] Accordingly, he felt a need for substantial change in the whole educational system so that India could regain its lost splendour. To him, there was no alternative to develop any community in the subcontinent except by popularizing modern education and enhancing intellectual endeavour.[18] The most effective and easiest way of providing education to people, he argued, is through the use of their native language because that is how every nation acquired

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[15] Mohammed Badrul Alam, "Aligarh Muslim University," Arnold P. Kaminsky and Roger D. Long, eds., *India Today: An Encyclopaedia of Life in the Republic*, ABC-CLIO, 2011, volume 1, 26.

[16] Sayyid Ahmad, *Majmua'*, 1, 231.

[17] Referring to the Muslim community in particular, Hafeez Malik wrote: "They trusted neither themselves nor the British, who spared no efforts in crushing them. Consequently, despondency, sometimes amounting to sullen despair, took hold of the Muslims. They felt that as a nation they had no future in India. In this mood they sat back and watched the Hindus pass them by in the race of life." See his *Muslim Nationalism in India and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 207-208.

[18] In the words of G. F. I. Graham, a close friend of Syed Ahmad and his earliest biographer, his motto was "Educate, Educate, Educate." He quoted Syed Ahmad as saying, "All the socio-political ills of India may be cured by this treatment. Cure the root and tree will flourish." See Graham, *The Life and Works of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, 70.

knowledge, just like the Arab people who used Arabic language and the European people who used their respective languages. Therefore, Muslims in India should use their own language in order to master the knowledge in different disciplines.[19] It was in light of this conviction that Syed Ahmad became passionate in defending the role of Urdu as a language of instruction. His well-known argument was that Urdu being an authentic Indian language was a common legacy of Hindus and Muslims, which is central to the cultural integration of the two communities.[20]

Fundamental Problems in the Indian Educational System

As viewed by Syed Ahmad, there were four main fundamental problems that afflicted the Indian education system of his time.[21] First, there was a lack of religious education in government schools and colleges. Second, there was widespread belief that the new (colonial) education created disbelief in one's own faith. Third, there was unwarranted prejudice of the Muslims against the study of English. Fourth, the government educational system was defective. Lastly fifth, there were problems of habits, customs and manners of people and the lack of religious knowledge. In response to these issues, Syed Ahmad proposed two streams of education. The first stream is what he called the general or conventional education that would be available to all classes of people. The second stream would incorporate certain changes to the existing education system administered by the government. The Education Committee formed by the government also made the recommendation that the Muslim community would provide and develop their own educational system in which modern education would be available for their children, whilst preserving their culture and religious beliefs. The proposals that Syed Ahmad made were in line with his struggle to revive the social, political and economic conditions of Indians in general and of

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[19] J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 44.

[20] Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *The Genesis of Muslim Fundamentalism in British India* (New Delhi: Eastern Book Corporation, 1987), 66.

[21] For a good discussion of Syed Ahmad's views on these problems, see Irfan Ahmed Shaikh & et al., "Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898): An Educationist and Reformer of South Asia," 104-112.

the Muslims particularly through modern education. His educational goals and strategy found general acceptance among the populace. He thus helped pave the way for universal education for Indians that was open to all castes, colours and creeds.

For the development of the community, especially for the Muslim community, his emphasis was to introduce English literature and science in the educational system.[22] Syed Ahmad's pursuit of modern education for India won both praise and critiques. The British recognised his leadership qualities and their trust in him proved useful to his educational reform initiatives. In 1864, he was elected Honorary Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of London in recognition of his scholarly standing. During his 1869-1872 visit to England, he met Queen Victoria who conferred on him the title of 'Companion of the Star of India,' and also the State Secretary for India. The visit convinced him of British superiority and efficiency in education. His visit to Oxford and Cambridge universities as well as to some other colleges inspired him to establish similar academic institutions for Indians. In 1873, he set up two committees for the education and improvement of the Muslim community, namely, the 'Committee Striving after Educational Progress of the Muslims' and the 'Fund Committee for a Foundation of a Muslim College.' On 24 May 1875, in commemorating with Queen Victoria's birthday, he opened the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental Collegiate School which was named MAO College two years later.[23] This College became a centre for knowledge and political movement, and a symbol of India's multireligious, multicultural and multilingual community. Syed Ahmad was wrongly blamed by critics for having established this institution only for Muslim education when in fact, its curriculum and its appointments of non-Muslim administrators proved that it was open to all Indians. Its main purpose was to establish a balanced community in order to understand each other's

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[22] For details, see Arshad Alam, "Syed Ahmad Khan and His Educational Ideas," *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 16, issue 1 (2019): 108-124. See also David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

[23] See Riazuddin H. Zubairi, *The Educational and Social Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, 107-108.

culture and develop harmonious Hindu-Muslim relations. As affirmed by Syed Ahmad himself:

> I am glad to say that in this institution both the brothers, Hindus and Muslims, get the same education……in this college, there is no distinction and restriction between Hindus and Muslims in terms of privileges. Only that man can claim a prize who deserves it by virtue of his own labour. Both Hindus and Muslims are entitled to get scholarships and are accorded the same treatment. I consider Hindus and Muslims as my two eyes. I do not even like to say this, because people will generally differentiate the two as the right eye and the other as the left. I consider Hindus and Muslims both as one and the same eye.[24]

His non-communal, non-sectarian and secular approaches to the running of the College were clearly visible. The first graduate of Aligarh was Sri Ishwari Parasad of Tehsil Khair and the first MA was Amba Parasad, both were Hindus. Sanskrit was given an honourable place in the College as a subject to be studied. Students who secured admission came from different communities with varied beliefs and practices, cultures, traditions, life styles and languages. Both Hindus and Muslims received prizes and medals equally and selections for recipients were done exclusively based on merit. They lived comfortably in peace and harmony in the same boarding house, shared their joys and experiences of daily life, dined at the same table, played on the same ground, and loved one another. These practices contributed to the harmonious Hindu-Muslim relations in the institution.[25] Furthermore, employees of the College had been appointed from all communities, especially among Hindus and Muslims, and also from among British citizens, without any discrimination. For instance, J. C. Chakraborty joined the teaching staff as a mathematician and Sri Baijnath as the second master in the

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[24] Shan Muhammad, *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan* (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications, 1972), 168.

[25] Shan Muhammad, *Writings and Speeches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, 162.

College.[26] Syed Ahmad reminded his critics that some famous colleges in many secular countries then like Keble and Hertford of Oxford University and Magdalene of Cambridge University, did not allow admission of non-Christian students[27] but India was different. Elaborating the aims of Aligarh education, he told the Mohammad Educational Conference that "internal solidarity is the prerequisite of our national well-being. It is essential for us to practise Islam. Our young generation must be guided by religion with English education and be taught the feeling of Islamic brotherhood, which is an intimate part of faith. Fraternal feeling within the group can be best fostered by a large number of students living together, eating and studying together. If this cannot be brought about, we can neither progress nor prosper, nor even survive as a community."[28]

In a speech on the subject of the advancement of India that he delivered on 27 January 1883 at Patna, he appealed emphatically to all well-wishers of India to strive together for the welfare, success, good life and well-being of all Indians. He argued that the prosperity of a nation would not be possible without the progress of education.[29] Educational progress was a favourite theme of his lectures and speeches. The purpose of his educational reformation was specifically to address the illiteracy of the Indian Muslims and to develop a sense of national pride and identity among them as citizens who would be able to enjoy equal educational opportunities. It is to be noted that although he was a strong advocate of modern Western education and scientific outlook, he appeared to be uncompromising in his loyalty to the ideals and values of Islam and the Muslim national identity. In his view, there was no conflict between Islam and modern education. He expressed his philosophy of education in the following words: "Philosophy will be in our right hand, natural science in our left hand" and "the crown of 'there is no god but

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[26] S. K. Bhatnagar, *History of the M.A.O College Aligarh* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 362.

[27] S. K. Bhatnagar, *History of the M.A.O College Aligarh*, 28.

[28] Sayyid Ahmad, *Mukamal Majmua Lectures wa Speeches*, ed., Muhammad Imamudin Gujrati (Lahore: Mustafa'i Press, 1900), 51.

[29] Sayyid Ahmad, *Mukamal Majmua Lectures wa Speeches*, Lecture at Patna, 27th January 1883, 132.

Allah' will adorn our head."[30] The Muslim national identity that he had in mind was the one shaped by this philosophy of education.

Education and the Pursuit of Intercultural Understanding

One of the major themes often repeated in Syed Ahmad's writings and speeches was Hindu-Muslim cultural symbiosis. In the face of new challenges confronting Hindu-Muslim relations under the British divide and rule policy, he took pains to emphasise that Muslims have been influenced by Hindu culture, habits and customs, and adopted them in their daily lives. Vice versa, Hindus too have also been similarly influenced by the Muslims.[31] In the context of the centuries-long Hindu-Muslim cultural symbiosis, he found it relevant to criticise British democracy as unsuited for Indian culture, if adopted without any modifications. But he thought 'cultural hegemony' could help Indians to be united. He thus appealed to the Hindu community to live together with the Muslims and accommodate the common cultural heritage between the two communities. For him, the most significant element in this common cultural heritage was the Urdu language:

> By living so long in India the blood of both has changed. Now the colour of both has become similar. The Muslims have acquired hundreds of customs from the Hindus and the Hindus have also learned hundreds of things from the Muslims. We mixed with each other so much that we produced a new language – Urdu – which was neither our language nor of neither of us.[32]

Syed Ahmad's pursuit of intercultural understanding was not limited

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[30] For a discussion of Syed Ahmad's educational approach to the shaping of the Indian Muslim identity, see Waseem Filza, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Identity Formation of Indian Muslims through Education," *Review of History and Political Science* 2 (2014): 131-148.

[31] Sayyid Ahmad, *Mukamal Majmua Lectures wa Speeches*, 140.

[32] Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *The Aligarh Institute Gazette*, 12th June 1897, reprinted in M. S. Jain, *The Aligarh Movement: Its Origin and Development 1858-1906*, 138. For another translation of the quoted passage, see Limaye Madhu, *Indian National Movement: Its Ideological and Socio-economic* (Sangam Books, 1989), 127.

to improving Hindu-Muslim relations. His vision of India's pluralistic society motivated him to also undertake studies of Christianity and conduct interfaith dialogues with Christians. His views on Christianity and its scripture, the Bible, may be of interest to contemporary students doing comparative studies of Islam and Christianity, and of Muslim-Christian relations not only in eighteenth-century British-ruled India but also in other Muslim lands ruled by Western colonial powers. His views on these issues are still relevant today, since some problems associated with these religious issues have changed little over the centuries. In Islamic religious history, there have been several Muslim perspectives on Christianity and Christians. Syed Ahmad's views on Christianity may be identified with one of these perspectives. He acknowledged the Bible to be a truly revealed book but without explaining the theological "mysteries" of the Christian religion and instead leaving the usual controversial questions about them unanswered.[33] He was primarily interested in showing the coherence of the Qur'ān and the Bible to prove his argumentation that both scriptures were divinely revealed.

It may be argued that as a public intellectual with a social agenda, Syed Ahmad's interest in religions other than his own was motivated by his idea of national unity rather than by theology per se. The quest for national unity generally speaking, no matter where it is pursued, presupposes the dominance of commonalities over differences. As an advocate of national unity, it therefore made a lot of sense for him to emphasise consistently the idea of commonalities that bound Hindus and Muslims, and now the idea of commonalities between Muslims and Christians. If he was truly looking for ways and means to strengthen Muslim-Christian relations, then he could not find a more powerful enabling factor than by appealing to scriptural commonalities in the Qur'ān and the Bible. More generally, he put forward his argument with great confidence that it would indeed be possible for Muslims to realise social integration with Christians, Jews and Hindus. He believed that national integration was possible, not limited only to social but also to some extent religious functions. One of his unifying concepts was 'love.'

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[33] Bashir Ahmad Dar, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Lahore: Institute for Islamic Culture, 1957), 91.

In his view, 'love' is the true motivation for reconciliation with other faiths. He referred to the Qur'ān's emphasis on love of one's community as well as of all humanity,[34] and also to Jesus Christ's exemplary practice of love when he called on his followers to show love even to enemies, which is universally recognised as a saintly attribute.[35] This selfless and universal love, he asserted, was an important factor for the early spread of Islam and it could again strengthen communal relations in the present and future ages. He believed that love with the attitude of sincere respect could generate and flourish healthy communal relations through empathetic encounters. He also puts forth that forgiveness is a moral necessity especially in communal life, although it is a difficult virtue to be practised.

In positing love as the fundamental basis of intercultural understanding in a pluralist society, Syed Ahmad may be standing on solid ground. It was not mere rhetoric or idealism without a basis when he spoke with confidence the possibility of Muslims living together in harmony with Hindus and Christians. He knew well that Islam and Christianity are two religions that share a common theological foundation of love. Therefore, he understood correctly that the two religions have many similarities in the idea of spiritual love. However, as far as Islam and Hinduism are concerned, he was speaking of love on another plane between the followers of the two religions. The love that bound Hindus and Muslims together was nurtured on a different plane, on the basis of the human brotherhood idea in general, and of Indian or motherland brotherhood (*vatani bhai*) in particular. This kind of brotherhood which served as a pillar of Syed Ahmad's conception of Hindu-Muslim unity, was based on the idea of a common Indian citizenry. He had to set aside theological issues when discussing Hindu-Muslim unity given the great contrast that separates the two religions in their belief structures. This observation is made notwithstanding the numerous

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[34] Sayyid Ahmad, *Ahkam-i-Ta'am Ahl-i-Kitab* (Aligarh: Aligarh University Press, 2011, 48-73.

[35] Sayyid Ahmad, *Tabyin al-Kalam fi Tafsir al-Tawrat wa'l-Injil 'ala Millat al-Islam* (Aligarh: Sir Sayyid Academy, 2004), 129. Hereafter this work will be cited as *Tabyin al-Kalam*.

spiritual encounters in Indian history between Hindus and Muslims such as between Hindu mystics and Sufis who were in search of common ideas and experiences in the spiritual realm.

Spiritually, Syed Ahmad found himself closer to his Islamic home when discussing about Jesus Christ and the religion of Christianity. In his work *Tabyin al-Kalam*, he talked about the Quranic abrogation rule that does not invalidate the forms of worship established by the earlier prophets such as prayers, fasting and any other revealed form of worship because these are eternal. [36] Admittedly, he had occasionally participated in Christian *'namāz'* (*ṣalāh*) and devotional gatherings thereby illustrating what he meant by "national integration was possible not only in social but also to some extent religious functions." And where appropriate, he had provided quotations from the Qur'ān and the Bible side by side in his writings.

With respect to interreligious dialogue in British India, Syed Ahmad was without doubt, a forerunner in establishing good relations with other faiths. He believed that the *Sharī'ah* of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) provides an exceptional universal guidance for human societies to flourish. He saw in the Qur'ān's affirmation of the teachings in the earlier prophets' books, a powerful rationale and basis for Muslim interreligious dialogue with the followers of other religions. Accordingly, he became interested in the early history of interreligious dialogues in Islam. That history as he had learnt it in his early education began with the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) himself, who was known to have received a Christian delegation from Najran in Medina. The Christians wanted to know about the new religion Islam taught by the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). They were invited by the Prophet (ﷺ) to offer their prayers in his mosque. As another example of early inter-communal understanding and solidarity between Muslims, the people of the book and the pagans, Syed Ahmad referred to the Medinan Constitution or Covenant authored by the Prophet that bound all the communities in Medina together in mutual support against common enemies.[37] Syed Ahmad wanted to

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[36] Sayyid Ahmad, *Tabyin al-Kalam*, Part II, 267.

[37] Fred M. Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 1-15.

highlight here Islam's communitarian spirit in the service of common interests to which Muslims should readily adhere.

Syed Ahmad's Civil Society Initiatives to Create India's Modern Knowledge Culture

Closely related to modern educational issues in India that were dear to Syed Ahmad's reform agenda was the issue of knowledge culture. He envisioned Hindu-Muslim intellectual collaborations in the creation of a common modern Indian intellectual culture that would help enhance the realisation of national unity, especially good communal relations between Hindus and Muslims. He was aware that for the purpose of creating such a culture, a common literary language was needed. In his view, Urdu would be the appropriate native language to play the literary role. It has been India's literary language for centuries. Moreover, in British India, apart from English, Urdu became the first official language in 1837. The Muslims generally saw Urdu in the Arabic-Persian script as a means to bridge the gap between the two communities in terms of creating social solidarity, developing a national consciousness and national unity. Many Hindus supported this Muslim view. Syed Ahmad himself fervently believed in the idea of Urdu as a national language that would play a unifying role in cementing healthy Hindu-Muslim relations. In pre-colonial Indian history, Urdu had contributed significantly to the development of these harmonious relations. But in Syed Ahmad's own time, the position of Urdu in Arabic-Persian script as a language of learning and medium of instruction was already challenged by several Hindu groups who wanted it to be replaced by Hindi in Devanagari (Sanskrit writing system) script.

Urdu in India, both as a spoken and written language, did not belong to a particular group or community, neither Hindus nor Muslims. It was the product of Hindu-Muslim association, concord, amity and social intercourse. It was born in India. Urdu contributed significantly to the development of harmonious relations between Muslims and Hindus. However, the newly emerging conflict over the status of Urdu as the national language, as alerted by Syed Ahmad, pertains to the script in use. Indians generally know that as spoken languages, Urdu and Hindi are almost identical by virtue of being

offshoots of the same parent language[38] but they are written in different scripts as just mentioned. Syed Ahmad was perturbed to see the new turn of events in the post-Mughal history of the Arabic-Persian Urdu script. In a letter dated 29 April 1879 to his friend and collaborator Mehdi Ali Khan in London, he warned that if Urdu was not recognised as a national language, it would open an unending vista of split and strife between Hindus and Muslims….and the two communities would be irreversibly rent apart.[39] Subsequent developments proved him right when following the replacement of Urdu with Hindi, both communities began to give up many cultures and practices which they had imbibed from each other and which had served as a bridge between them.[40] As Urdu became perceived in the eighteenth century by Hindus and the British rulers as an Islamic language,[41] the Urdu-Hindi controversy then transformed into a sectarian conflict. Syed Ahmad's dream of turning Urdu into the national language of modern India was thus shattered.

Syed Ahmad's second civil society initiative in the institutionalisation of a modern knowledge culture was establishing the Scientific Society on 9 January 1864 at his residence in Ghazipur. The Society published a weekly periodical *Aligarh Institute Gazette* (1866) and the monthly *Tehzeeb ul Akhlaq* (1870) to serve as intellectual platforms for Indians to express their views and feelings.[42] The Scientific Society has several objectives. First, to

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[38] According to Tariq Rahman, before the eighteenth century, the names Urdu and Hindi refer to the same language. One old name of Urdu was Hindvi, which is regarded as "the parent of both modern Hindi and Urdu." See Tariq Rahman, "Urdu as an Islamic language," *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 21 (2006): 101.

[39] Muhammad Ismail Panipati, ed., *Maktubat-i-Sir Sayyid* (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1959), 103.

[40] Beni Prasad, *The Hindu-Muslim Questions* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946), 24. According to Prasad, Syed Ahmad desired to establish an Urdu language university in Punjab, but the Hindu community opposed the idea and proposed to run it in Hindi language. See for details, Javed Ali Kalhoro, "Historical Evolution of the Educational System in the Pre-Partition Indian Subcontinent," *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture* xxxix, no. 1 (2018): 174-176.

[41] For a good discussion of the factors that led to the characterization of Urdu as an Islamic language, see Rahman, "Urdu as an Islamic language," 101-116.

[42] For a detailed study of the achievements of the Society, see S. Irfan Habib, "Syed Ahmad Khan and Modernization: The Role of Aligarh Scientific Society in the

spread Western knowledge through translations of science books from English into Urdu. Second, to translate works on arts and sciences from English and other European languages into Urdu and Hindi. Third, to publish valuable oriental works in order to awaken Muslims and Hindus about the development of Western education and its contribution. Fourth, to offer lectures on scientific subjects or others that are considered useful. Fifth, to educate future generations. Sixth, to integrate between religious and modern sciences with the view of protecting the faith of English-educated Muslims who were not well-versed in Islamic knowledge. Seventh, to advance the intellectual, social and moral well-being of the people. Eighth, to groom a new breed of Indian leaders. Ninth, to reform religious knowledge and to influence the government's decisions in matters related to the Indians.[43] Another purpose, as mentioned by Altaf Hussain Hali in his biography, was to build friendship and mutual understanding between Hindus, Muslims, Christians and other Indians alike.[44]

Another modern knowledge culture initiative from Syed Ahmad was the foundation of a printing press. He realised that the production, expression and dissemination of ideas on a large modern scale would require a printing press. It was through such enterprise that he believed the mind-sets of people could be changed. He

Mid-Nineteenth Century India," in Asloob Ahmad Ansai, ed., *Syed Ahmad Khan: A Centenary Tribute* (Delhi: Adam Publishers and Distributors, 2001), 214-231. See also Javed Ali Kalhoro, "Historical Evolution of the Educational System in the Pre-Partition Indian Subcontinent," 174-176; and Iftikhar Alam Khan, *Sir Syed Our Scientific Society* (Delhi: Maktaba Jami`a, 2000).

[43] David Lelyveld, "Disenchantment at Aligarh: Islam and the Realm of the Secular in Late Nineteenth Century India," *Die Welt Des Islams*, New Series, Bd. 22, no. 1/4 (1982), 85-102. See also Mohmed Carimo, "Education and Community Consciousness among the Muslims of British India," *Historia e Culture, Franca* 4, no. 2 (2015): 164.

[44] In 1869-1870 during his stay in London, Syed Ahmad wrote a pamphlet entitled *Strictures on the Present State of English Education in India,* in which he argued that the existing education system failed to achieve either popular mass education or the stimulation of intellectual creativity. See Mohammad Sajjad, *Movement for Modern Education in the Nineteenth Century* (Muzaffarpur, Bihar: Centre of Advanced Study in History, Aligarh Muslim University, 2006). Sajjad's article was a seminar paper he had presented on Sir Syed's Vision and Mission, 5-7 Nov, 2006.

therefore purchased print fonts not only for Urdu but also for Arabic, English and Hebrew so that he could produce a multilingual text. Intellectually, Syed Ahmad had a broad theological interest in many religions including Judaism and Christianity. One of his concerns was to establish the claim that the Bible and the Torah are fundamentally consistent with the Qurān which is true and eternal, and that the words of God revealed to all the prophets are true. He translated contemporary knowledge from English, Hebrew and Arabic into Urdu and Persian, through which he could propagate to the people ideas on the 'progress of learning and science.' It was this newly founded press that published the Aligarh Institute Gazette, *Tahzeeb-e-Akhlaq*, and Akhbar-e-Scientific Society. *Tahzeeb-e-Akhlaq*, an Urdu rendering of the Arabic *Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*, the title of the famous ethical treatise of Ibn Miskawayh (932-1030), appeared as an influential journal which covered various contemporary issues and a wide range of topics such as the British Parliament, the establishment of an Urdu university, promotion of village schools and the shortcomings of passenger facilities on the railways. Syed Ahmad himself contributed frequent essays and texts of lectures that covered a wide range of contemporary issues.[45] Though named after Ibn Miskawayh's treatise, the journal was actually modelled on Addison and Steele's *Spectator* and *Tatler*.[46] This journal was an influential mouthpiece of modernism which significantly shaped the development of Islam in the subcontinent.

Public Education, Civil Society and Communal Solidarity

In order to build a mutually compassionate relation between Hindus and Muslims, Syed Ahmad felt that inaugurating communal solidarity and harmony among them is indispensable for India's

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[45] David Lelyveld, "Syed Ahmad Khan," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History* (Oxford University Press, 7 August 2019), 6-12. After retiring from the journal works in 1877, he devoted his time to publishing his Quranic commentary with Arabic texts and Urdu translation. His publications and public gatherings attracted a big number of followers and participants to his ongoing debates on religious, literary, social and political issues.

[46] Osman Bakar, *Tawhid and Science: Islamic Perspectives on Religion and Science* (Shah Alam: ARAH PUBLICATIONS, 2008), 223.

advancement.[47] He realised that without Hindu-Muslim unity, the progress of India as a nation would not be possible. In helping to realise this important goal, he came forward to play a leadership role in the community both through civil society activism and public office. He thus sought to complement his initiatives for Hindu-Muslim unity through formal education in schools, colleges and universities with informal ones, namely civil society activities. One of these civil society initiatives was the formation of *The United Indian Patriotic Association*, which was a common platform for all Muslims and Hindus to achieve the objective of national unity. The immediate cause of the establishment of this organisation was the rise of Hindu nationalism. In 1890, Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), a noted political figure fighting for India's self-rule, joined the Indian National Congress and soon after advocated a policy of Hindu nationalism by reviving Ganesh and Shivaji festivals that were historically associated with anti-Mughal movements. Tilak also supported the cause of the anti-cow-killing movement. Syed Ahmad openly criticised the moves and strongly opposed them. He was able to enlist the support of fifty-one Muslim societies to join him in countering Tilak's brand of Hindu nationalism, and many prominent Hindus[48] including Rajas and Maharajas became members of the new body. On 5 October 1888, The Association organised a meeting in which more than five hundred Hindus participated. The event showed that Syed Ahmad's moderate approach to Hindu-Muslim unity gained wide support from both communities.[49]

During the period 1877-1883, Syed Ahmad worked in collaboration with various organisations such as The Indian National Association, founded in Bengal in 1876 by Sir Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925). The two leaders worked together to create a favourable environment in which educated Indians could discuss political developments in the country. Syed Ahmad supported Banerjee's

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[47] Riazuddin H. Zubairi, *The Educational and Social Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, 111-112.

[48] Among them were Raja Udai Partap Singh, Maharaja Pratap Misra, and Raja of Banaras.

[49] M. Yusuf Abbasi, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Reawakening of the Muslims," in Ahmad Hasan Dani, ed., *Founding Fathers of Pakistan* (Islamabad: Quaid-i-Azam University, 1981), 31-33.

initiatives wholeheartedly, full of zeal and vigour for the welfare of their countrymen. When the British colonial administrators decided to lower the age limit for Civil Service examinations which was a disadvantage to Indians, the two civil society leaders launched a protest and persisted until the government changed its decision.[50] Through his long experience in collaborative civil society works with many individuals and organisations over many decades, Syed Ahmad became more convinced than ever that unity, cooperation and team-spirit were vital means to accomplish the creation of a pluralist society that would embrace all religions, castes and tribes. He had a strong conviction that religion would not be a barrier to the pursuit of unity. Rather, he viewed religion as an ally of Hindu-Muslim unity and political cooperation.[51]

As a government servant, he used his position and common sense to instil cooperation between Muslims and Hindus, and to help them without discrimination. As a member of the Imperial Legislative Council for British India to which he was appointed for four years (1878-1882), he was active in championing the welfare of native Indians by airing their problems, safeguarding their rights and interests, and supporting their recruitment as employees on the basis of merit without discrimination. It is on record that as a Councillor, he had proposed several bills regarding the people's welfare for debates in the Legislature and its approval. For example, for the first time ever in Indian history, he proposed a bill for small pox vaccination that was to be made compulsory for all Indians. On 18 October 1879, he proposed a bill on the country's health facilities which he argued so convincingly that the Council readily approved it.[52]

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[50] W.S. Blunt, *India Under Repon: A Private Diary of Wilfrid Scawen Blunt* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1909), 1114.

[51] Tara Chand, *History of the Freedom Movement in India* (Delhi: Publication Division, 1992), vol. II, 358-359.

[52] Sayyid Ahmad, *Majmua Lectures wa Speeches*, 140, Quoted by H. K. Sherwani, *Studies in Muslim Political Thought and Administration* (Kazi Publications, 1990), 318.

Conclusion

Although numerous studies have been undertaken on the life and works of Syed Ahmad, we do not believe that will be the last word said on the subject or that there is nothing more to be added about his significance for his or our own times. Far from being irrelevant to contemporary Islamic civilisation, the national and global issues he faced, the goals he set for his community, society and country, and the approaches and strategies he adopted in the pursuit of these goals are still meaningful to present-day Muslim societies, whether they are majority or minority communities in their respective countries. The national issues of religious and cultural pluralism that Syed Ahmad confronted as discussed in this article, have become even more pressing in our times. In the history of modern India, present Hindu-Muslim relations are at their lowest ebb and could deteriorate even further, God forbid! Similarly, the global issues of Western colonialism that he saw and experienced have in essential terms remained the same today, albeit in different forms despite our many achievements in decolonisation.

Syed Ahmad's societal goals – shared social advancement and prosperity for all Indians and the simultaneous pursuit of Hindu-Muslim unity – were based on time-honoured principles of social justice. These goals therefore would continue to be appealing and inspiring to thinking people everywhere who are interested in securing peace and justice for their respective societies. Multicultural societies like Malaysia that are struggling to achieve intercultural peace may well sympathise with Syed Ahmad's societal goals. As for approaches and strategies to realise societal goals, these are usually conditioned by space and time. But even here his strategies and approaches have good lessons for today's leaders of religious communities who live and work within a multicultural social setting. When he saw the first few signs that Hindu extremism was creeping into the mainstream, he mobilised the forces of moderation within Islam and Hinduism to counter the extremist moves. His peaceful, non-sectarian and enlightened approach to the problems of Indian society will continue to be a source of inspiration not only for his countrymen, but also for other people faced with similar kinds of societal problems.

Syed Ahmad is best touted as a social and religious reformer. Many evaluations have been made about his performance and achievements as a leader. As his life and works continue to be studied by both Muslims and Westerners, we could expect to hear more of both appreciations and critiques of him, not only as a reformer but also in his dealings with Muslim-Hindu relations, an issue which is so important to our present times. But in revisiting the issue of the significance of the man, perhaps it would be appropriate to remind ourselves of the following: he lived to experience the fall of the Mughal empire to which he was spiritually attached and in its place the installation of the British Raj; he wanted to take Indian Muslims, who had just lost political power out of their jacket of educational backwardness, but out of his sense of justice he wanted to be fair to others especially the Hindus; he worked hard to bring Muslims and Hindus together to be in the web of Indian unity with the threat of Hindu extremism looming in the background, but at the same time the British also worked hard to separate the two communities through their "divide and rule" policy; and no less important was his balancing act to be at the same time both a nationalist and an appeaser, if not a supporter of the British colonial administration. Given these parameters that delineated his life and works, it would indeed be a delicate and challenging task of how to have an objective estimation of the successes and failures of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was said to belong to the thirty-sixth generation of the Prophet's descendants.

TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

	Ar	Pr	OT	UR		Ar	Pr	OT	UR		Ar	Pr	OT	UR
ء	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	ʾ	ز	z	z	z	z	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	b	b	b	b	ڑ	—	—	—	ṛ	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	—	p	p	p	ژ	—	zh	j	zh	م	m	m	m	m
ت	t	t	t	t	س	s	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ٹ	—	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	sh	ه	h	h	h¹	h¹
ث	th	th	th	th	ص	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	ṣ	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	j	ض	ḍ	ẓ	ż	ż	ى	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	ç	ch	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah			-a²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al³			
خ	kh	kh	kh	kh	ع	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ	ʿ					
د	d	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğ	gh					
ڈ	—	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	f					
ذ	dh	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k	q					
ر	r	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	k					

¹ – when not final
² – at in construct state
³ – (article) al - or 1-

VOWELS

		Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī	ī
Doubled	يّ	iyy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)	iyy (final form ī)
	وّ	uww (final form ū) uvv (for Persian)	uv	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	au	ev
	ى	ai or ay	ay	ey
Short	◌َ	a	a	a or e
	◌ُ	u	u	u or ü o or ö
	◌ِ	i	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh   گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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