

Muslim Modernist Thought: A Study of the Contribution of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan

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ABSTRACT

Modernity like many other concepts is a social phenomenon, an analytical instrument to describe and analyze social reality, and also a norm and an ideology by which reality as such as valued and judged. Modernity is a way of thought and of living in the contemporary world and of accepting change, as part of political and cultural processes by integrating new ideas into society. There are several forms of responses from Muslims to the concept of modernity which are mainly grouped into two: the reformist/modernist and the fundamentalist. The present paper is an attempt to explore the response of one of the great Muslim modernists, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, to the concept of modernity.

Key Words: Modernity, West, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, *Ijtihad*, *Taqlid*

1.1 Introduction

“In the sixteenth century CE, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim.” With this statement, the comparative historian Marshall Hodgson suggested that at the dawn of the modern era Islam was the most vital civilization in the world and that it held a hegemonic potential over east and west. Hodgson called this Islamic Civilization ‘Islamdom’, in analogy with Christendom, which is different from Christianity intended as a religion. Islamdom was the civilization that had inherited and creatively recombined the cultural characters and the political specificities of a vast and more ancient geo-cultural unit, the Irano-Semitic area. According to Hodgson at exactly the time of inception of the modern era Islamdom reached the zenith, not only of its political power but also of its cultural creativity.¹

This particular strength of Islamic civilization at the dawn of modernity did not suddenly evaporate West-European powers affirmed their supremacy in long-distance maritime trade and discoveries particularly with the opening of the

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transatlantic routes and the creation of colonies in the east and west of the enlarged globe. The specific ways of blending power and culture that constitute a civilization continued to bring fruits well into the modern era in the case of Islamidom's three different, yet equally flourishing empires; the Ottoman in a large area covering and administrating Anatolia, the near and Middle East, North Africa, the Balkans, and other Europeans regions; the Safavid, in Iran; and the Mughals, in South Asia. Their models of centralized control of territories and population, and styles of ruling and administration partly survived the traumas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, during which Western Europe turned around the power balance with the Muslim world and gained a hegemonic position over the euro-Mediterranean area and into the Eurasian depths.² The age of European expansion and extension penetration and dominance –euphemistically called the age of discovery by Europeans –began in the 16th century but came to the finishing point (end results) in the 19th and 20th centuries. So by the 19th century, the balance of power had shifted towards Europe and much of the world formed itself subjugated to European imperial powers, demonstrating its political, economic, and military importance and challenging the veracity of Islam itself. It was during this period of European colonial expansion that modern Islamic thought emerged. The European penetration and the decline of Muslim supremacy and predominance in 19th century precipitated the crisis that defined the responses of Muslim intellectuals to European Modernity.

1.2 Meaning of modernity

Modernity like many other concepts is a social phenomenon, an analytical instrument to describe and analyze social reality, and also a norm and an ideology by which reality as such as valued and judged.³ Modernity is a way of thought and of living in the contemporary world and of accepting change, as part of political and cultural processes by integrating new ideas into society.⁴ The concept typically refers to the post-traditional post-medieval historical period, one marked by the move from feudalism (or agrarianism) towards capitalism, industrialization, secularization, rationalization, the nation-state, and its constituent institutions, and forms of surveillance.⁵ Charles Pierre Baudelaire is credited with coining the term “modernity” (modernite) to designate the fleeting, ephemeral experience of life in an urban metropolis. Modernism as opposed to medievalism believes in the sovereignty of reason and repudiates every authority that cannot stand the test of reason.

How do Muslims respond to this modernity? There are several forms of response, but are mainly grouped into two: the reformist/modernist and the fundamentalist. The modernists are those modern knowledgeable Muslims whose mission, according to Dr. Mir Zohair Hussain⁶ is: (a) to define Islam by bringing out the fundamentals in a rational and liberal manner; (b) to emphasize, among others the basic ideals of Islamic brotherhood, tolerance and social justice; and (c) to interpret the teaching of Islam in such a way as to bring out its dynamic character in the context of the intellectual and scientific progress of modern world.⁷

Modernists – being opponents of *Taqlid* and proponents of *Ijtihad* – disagree with the traditionalists who believe in the dogma of *Taqlid*. Instead they hold the view that Islam is a progressive, dynamic and rational religion in which the inhibiting dogma of *Taqlid* holds no place and lay much emphasis on the restoration and exercise of *Ijtihad* and are against the belief that gates of *Ijtihad* are “closed”. For them law must be carefully revised in order to be flexible and adaptable enough to incorporate modern political, economic, cultural, social and legal conditions. For example in the South Asia, Sir Sayyid tracing his intellectual heritage to Shah Waliullah Dehlvi (india, 1703-1762, an Islamic scholar and reformer who worked for the revival of Muslim rule and intellectual learning in south Asia, during a time of waning Muslim power) argued that the Quranic world view was entirely compatible with science and rational thought. He categorically dismissed the beliefs that the gates of *Ijtihad* were entirely sealed a millennium earlier and denounced the inhibiting force of *Taqlid*. For him, *Ijtihad* was not an exclusive right of a privileged few Ulama, but the right of all devout and enlightened believers to interpret the Quran in the context of the prevailing environment. Through his writing and institution-building, he endeavoured to meet the challenges of modernity by appropriating western education and ideology while giving new direction to Muslim social, educational and religious ideals.⁸

1.3 The Emergence of Islamic Modernism

Islamic modernism is a moment that has been described as the first Muslim ideological response⁹ to the cultural challenges which attempts to reconcile the Islamic faith with modern values regarding nationalism, democracy, civil rights, rationality, equality, and progress. It has historically had different schools of

thought moving in many directions.¹⁰ The movement emerged in the 19th century as a response to European colonialism, which pitched the Muslim world into crisis.

Turkey was one of the first Muslim countries¹¹ where modernity surfaced, with major shifts in scientific and legal thoughts.¹² The Turks were the first among the Muslims to be confronted with the challenge of this nature and the whole of the Islamic world was eager to see if they could offer a lead to the rest of the Muslim countries by the way they acquainted themselves in that hour of trial. It was a pioneering role Turkey had been called upon to play willingly or unwillingly, with the entire Islamic society ready to follow its lead. The intellectual and cultural and also to some extent, the political and spiritual future of the Muslim world rested upon the course the Turks were to choose.¹³ This challenge was faced by two classes of men in Turkey. The orthodox Ulama, who were ignorant of the new developments and of the change the world around them had undergone. They showed little awareness of the intensity and magnitude of the threat the growing strength of Europe was spelling out of Turkey. The Ulama had opposed even the military and other rudimentary reforms Sultan Salim 3(1789-1807) and successor, Sultan Mahmud (1807-1839), had introduced towards enabling Turkey to stand its ground, politically and militarily, against the emerging European powers.

The other section comprised the section of young intelligentsia which was educated in Britain, France, and Germany. They were fired with the unbounded desire for slavish imitation of Western social and cultural ideals and materialistic forms of life. They wanted that maturity of outlook which could promote an objective assessment of the western philosophy of life. They were ill-equipped to discover its weaknesses and to determine critically which of its attributes could be useful for Turkey and which of them did not blend properly with its genius and tradition and benefit its historical role. The leadership of this new generation was in the hands of teachers and army officers who also were not distinguished for cultural depth or understanding. On the whole, they represented such elements of Turkish society who had been driven to an acute intolerance of all that was ancient and traditional due to the intellectual stagnation of the Ulama and the hideous moral and social degeneration of the conservative class,-their slothful indifference, narrow mindedness and their shameless hypocrisies and the transparent contradiction between their words and deeds. Added to it was the dismal spectacle of all-around

misery and poverty.¹⁴ Provoked by the colossal injustice of their surroundings and the rank incompetence, obduracy and mental rigidity of the privileged classes and religious leaders, the keen and sensitive young Turks had set their hearts on demolishing the existing pattern of things and bringing about a total westernization of Turkey as quickly as possible.¹⁵ This Islamic modernism in Turkey generated a series of novel institutions, including schools that combined Islamic education with modern subjects and pedagogies, newspapers that carried modernist Islamic ideas across continents, constitutions that sought to limit state power and social welfare agencies that brought state power into even more sectors of social life. The key figure in the Turkish modernist movement was Namik Kemal, the editor of a journal called “Freedom”. His goal was to promote freedom of the press, the separation of powers, and equality before the law, scientific freedom and reconciliation between parliamentary democracy and the Quran. Another figure was Zia Gokalp who said “in order to defend our freedom and independence against Europe, we have to conquer the civilization of the Europeans.”¹⁶

Turkey became the leader of modernism and westernization in the east. The progressive sections of Islamic countries took it up as their model and Kemal Atatürk as a personification of nation advancement and freedom. Turks published books on astronomy, biology, scientific concepts and many newspapers for Muslim revival. The Turkish revolution had produced a deep impression universally on Muslims and went a long way in determining their attitude towards the problem posed by western civilization. The next country to become the scene of cultural confrontation between the east and the west was India.¹⁷ Many modernists came to the surface to shoulder the responsibility in India like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Iqbal etc.

Yet these challenges also provided an opportunity, according to modernist Muslims. By realizing modern ideals, Islamic society could not only survive but thrive as well as recover the original ideals of their faith. “All new things are hardly blameworthy. On the contrary, most innovations are praiseworthy,” wrote Rifa’ al Tahtawi (Egypt, 1801-1873).¹⁸ Not all the modernists fawned so enthusiastically over European civilization, some distinguished between aspects worthy of adoption and these to be rejected. Rida, for example, concluded that “all that we need to acquire from Europe is its scientific achievements, technical skill and advanced industries.

The acquisition of these aspects does not require all this amount of westernization.¹⁹ Yet these critics embraced the ideals of modernity even as they berated Europeans for failing to live up to these ideals. Thus Islamic modernism began as a response of Muslim intellectuals to European modernity, who argued that Islam, science and progress, revelation and reason, were indeed compatible. They did not simply want to restore the beliefs and practices of the past; rather they asserted the need to 'reinterpret and reapply' the principles and ideals of Islam to formulate new responses to the political, scientific and cultural challenges of the west and of modern life.²⁰

1.4 Pioneers of Islamic Modernism

Although Islamic modernism is often simply presented as a response to the challenge of the west, in fact, its roots are both Islamic (its revivalist tradition) and western (a response to European colonialism). Islam possesses a rich long tradition of Islamic revival (*Tajdid*) and reform (*Islah*). Throughout the ages, individuals and organizations undertook the renewal of the community in times of weakness and decline, responding to the apparent gap between the Islamic ideal and the realities of Muslim life.²¹ As with all things a return to the fundamentals of Islam- The Quran, The Life of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the early Muslim community- offered the model for Islamic reform.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, revivalist leaders and movements had sprung up across the Islamic/ Muslim world. In other words in diverse circumstances, Muslims initiated various revival and reform movements in the 18th and 19th centuries stretched across the Muslim world. From North Africa to south and south East Asia, Muslim responses to colonialism and imperialism were conditioned, both by the source of threat and by Islamic tradition- ranging from holy war (*Jihad*) to emigration (*Hijrah*), non-cooperation to adaptation and cultural synthesis. Some Muslims ranging from secular to Islamic modernists pursued a path of accommodation to harness the west's scientific and technological power to revitalize the community and to regain independence. That is, Muslim views of the west and the responses to its power and ideas varied from rejection and confrontation to admiration and imitation. And in the words of John L. Esposito, four diverse responses to the West took shape: rejection; withdrawal; secularism and westernization; and Islamic modernism.²²

In the emergence of Islamic modernism, it is evident that it called throughout the Muslim world for a reformation (*Islah*) and reinterpretation (*Ijtihad*) of Islam. Responding to the plight of Muslim communities and the intellectual and the religious challenge of the west, Islamic modernism sought to bridge the gap between Islamic traditionalists or conservative religious scholars, characterized by following and emulating the past blindly (*Taqlid*) and western secular elites, regarded as uncritical in their imitation of the west and insensitive to Islamic tradition. The blame for the backwardness and the plight of the Muslim community was credited to the Ulama's static simplification of Islam's classical formulations and their resistance to change; so Islamic modernists wished to produce a new synthesis of Islam with modern science. John L. Esposito, regarding this situation, claims:

“Islamic modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, like secular reformers were open to accommodation and assimilation; they wished to produce a new synthesis of Islam with modern sciences and learning. Thus they distanced themselves from rejectionist tendency of religious conservatives as well as western oriented secular reformers who restricted religion to private life and they looked to the west to rejuvenate state and society.”²³

The most prominent intellectuals who pioneered the modernist visions and agendas were Jamal al Din Afghani (1838-1897), Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) in the middle east, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1890), Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), Rashid Rida, Ali Shariati, Maulana Maududi, Hassan al Banna, Mustafa Kamal Atatürk etc. Despite some distinctive differences, each argued that Islam was a dynamic progressive religion that was made stagnant and moribund by the forces of history and the mindset of some Ulama. They identified the sources of Muslim weakness and asserted the compatibility of religion, reason and science; they reclaimed the glories of Islamic history, reminding Muslims that they had once been very strong, spawning vast empires and an Islamic civilization whose wonders included major achievements in science, medicine and philosophy. They set out to initiate a reformation, to boldly redefine or reconstruct Islamic beliefs and thought, to reform Islamic theology and law. At the same time, they emphasized Muslim pride, unity and solidarity to face the political and cultural threat of European colonialism. In the middle east, Jamal al din Afghani, who epitomized the concerns and program of Islamic modernism argued that reason, philosophy and science were

not strange to Islam, were not simply the products of the west, or as Adeed Dawisha writes, he argued that “Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by scientific reason, [it] was indeed the religion demanded by reason.”²⁴

1.5 Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: His Life, Thought and Reforms

1.5.1 Life

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, educational reformer and founder of Islamic modernism in India,²⁵ (often called after his two titles of honor Sir Sayyid) came from an ancient distinguished Muslim family of Delhi on 6 Dhu'l-Hijjah 1232/ 17th of October 1817. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was on his father's side a Hussaini Sayyid. His lineage can be traced back through generations to the Holy Prophet. The last Imam among his ancestors was Hadrat Imam Muhammad Taqi bin Imam Musa Riza. He called himself a Taqavi Sayyid. Sayyid's ancestors moved to Damghan, a famous ancient city of Iran because the Fatimid's were driven out of their homelands of Arabia and Iraq by the cruelty and oppression of Umayyad's and Abbasids. Later they took up permanent residence in Herat.²⁶

Sir Sayyid's father, Mir Muttaqi, was free in his manners and religious views. In the reigns of Shah 'Alam and Akbar Shah, he held the same position as his father had held before him in the Darbar-I Am and Darbar- Khas. Sir Syed visited special court sometimes accompanied by his father and sometimes alone. Mir Muttaqi was a follower of the mystic, Shah Ghulam 'Ali, whose Khanqah was renowned in the city of Delhi. Shah Sahib treated him like his own son. He married with Aziz un-Nisa Begum, the eldest daughter of Khwaja Faridud din Ahmad who had very good terms with Sayyid Hadi. He was an extremely courteous and honest man. When Bahadur Shah came to the throne and the organization of the court was completely changed, Mir Muttaqi stopped his visits altogether. However the allowance he received from the Red Fort and other tokens of esteem were continued as usual until his death.

Sayyid's mother was largely responsible for his early education and the formation of his character. She was pious, religious and kind lady having foresight and great wisdom. Sir Sayyid's elder brother was Sayyid Muhammad Khan. His sister Safiyat-un-Nisa begum, who died at an advanced age, was a distinguished and outstanding lady.²⁷ She had made a study of various religious works and Hadith in the original Arabic.

Sayyid was born as a third child and fed by Hatim Ali Khans mother (his cousin) and later by his own mother. There was nothing outstanding about him but his radiant health and physical strengths. It appears rather that he developed his intellectual powers gradually by continuous training, hard work and continued application.²⁸ He was brought up by a lady called Man Bibi, an old servant of the family for whom he had deepest affection. His upbringing was not so strict that he was not allowed to take part in games nor so lax that he could play where and whom he liked. Sir Sayyed was alert artful and sometimes quite naughty.

1.5.2 Education

Sir Sayyid's education started with Bismillah ceremony by Shah Gulam Ali. After this, he began to read the holy Quran and it was by a lady from a noble family who observed strict purdah. After reading Quran Molvi Hamiduddin taught him usual Persian text books like Kalima, Khaliq Bari and Amal Nama. After his death other people taught him Gulistan and Bostan of Shaikh Sadi. He then went on to study Arabic in which he read such works as the Sharh-ul-Tahzib, the Yabzi, the Sharh-ul-Mulla, the Mukhtasar Maani and the Muattawal ma anaqulutu. He was about 18 when he finished his formal studying, but maintained his interest in reading.

When Sir Syed began his career, he was sent first of all to the High Court in Agra. He was married at the age of 18. In 1838, the year in which sir Sayyid's was nearly twenty two years old, he decided to enter the service of the British government because the allowances which Sir Sayyid's family received from the fort were stopped immediately after the death of Muttaqi. Later in 1838 he was appointed as deputy Munshi in Agra by Robert Hamilton. At Agra Sir Sayyid composed a chart, in Persian entitled, Jam I Jam (the cup of Jamshed). This work was published in 1840 which included a brief account of 43 emperors of different houses. In the same year Sir Sayyid qualified the examination for pertaining to Munsif court and in Dec 1841, he was appointed as Munsif in Manipur and then transferred to Fatehpur Sikhri where he remained as Munsif for four years. Sir Sayyid managed to acquire a magnificent house which had once been the Khwabgah of Emperor Akbar. At this stage Sir Sayyid published the following three works:

1. "*Jilaul Qulub bi Zikrul Mahbub*" (written in 1839). This small booklet deals with the birth, death, miracles and other events in the life of the Holy Prophet (pbuh.)²⁹

2. “*Tuhfa-i-Hasan*” (1839); this is in fact an Urdu translation of the 10th and 12th chapters of the Persian work, *Tuhfa-i-Isna Ashariya*. In this work he criticized the Shias and tried to refute their accusations.³⁰
3. “*Tashil fi Jar us Saqil*” (1844). This is an Urdu rendering of the Persian work, *Miyar al Uqal* written by the scholar Bu Ali.³¹ The work is itself a translation from Arabic. It contains an account of the five principles of mechanics.

At this time, Sir Sayyid was given his hereditary titles by the emperor by Bahadur Shah and thus Sir Sayyid’s full title at this time was Javvad-ud Daula Sayyid Ahmad Khan Arif I Jang. In 1846 Sayyid came from Fatehpur Sikhri to Delhi and remained there for next eight years until 1854 when he was appointed Sadr Amin at Bijnaur. In Delhi during the period Sayyid consulted various preachers like Maulvi Navazish Ali, late Muhammad Faizul Hassan and Maulana Makhsusullah and made a thorough study of works on jurisprudence like *Misl I Qudusi*, some *Qasidas* like the *Shashi*, *Sharah I Vaqaye* of the *Saba I Mullaqa*, *Hadith* from *Mishkat*, *Jami I Tirmizi*, several parts of *Shaih Muslim* and *Quran*. Apart from these works Sayyid (as he confessed himself) read nothing else with the aid of a teacher. Now that Sir Sayyid was stationed permanently in Delhi he planned to develop a newspaper, *Sayyid-ul-Akhbar*, which had managed by his brother and decided to do some research into the building of the city and its surrounding districts and thus completed the first edition of *Asar us Sanadid* within the space of one and a half years.

This work was translated in English and French and it was on the basis of this translation that he was made an honorary fellow of the royal Asiatic society on 20th of June 1864. In Delhi he wrote various papers and booklets also. Some of them are:

Favaidul Afkar fi Amalul Farjar, *Qaul I Matindar Ibtal I Harkat Zamin* (1848), *Kalimatul Haqq* (1849), *Rah I Sunnatdar Radd I Bidat* (1850), *Namiqadar Bayan I Masala I Tasavvur I Sheikh* (1852), *Silsilatul Muluk* (1852), and *Aghaz I kimiya I Saadat*.

In 1854 and 1855 in Bijnaur he completed the works like second edition of *Asar us Sanadid*, *Zila I Bijnaur Ki Tarikh*, and revised edition of *Ain I Akbari*. In 1859 Sir Sayyid founded a Persian madrasa in Moradabad with English as medium of instruction in schools. He revised the work, *Tarikh I Firozshahi*, wrote the commentary “*Tabinul Kalam*” of the first 11 chapters of the *Genesis* and of the first

five chapters of the Gospel according to Saint Matthew. The commentary found enemies and critics on all sides. He was the first Muslim to undertake such a task. On one hand the Muslim Ulama objected because the sir Sayyid had rejected the idea that the text of Bible had been falsified. On the other hand, because he had proved that there was absolute agreement between pure Christianity and Islam and considered that the very fundamentals of present day Christianity- the trinity, the expiation of sins and the rejection of the holy prophet, Muhammad- were false, the commentary also proved unacceptable to the Christians.

A decisive change of his life and outlook was effected by the Indian revolution, known as mutiny (1857). The unhappy outcome of it, especially for the Indian Muslims decided him to work for the future of his compatriots, in the first place by earnest attempts at reconciliation between the British and the Indian Muslims, who, rather than Hindus, were considered to have been the actual rebels. He wrote two treatises to calm the resulting passions, viz, *Asbab Baghawwat Hind*, 1858, and *Loyal Muhammadans of India*, 1860-1. He blamed both sides and in his opinion the mutiny was caused by the Indian peoples misunderstanding of English rule as well as the government's ignorance of the conditions of the ruled.³² Keeping aloof from political agitation he sought the upliftment of his nation with spiritual means derived from 19th century European model of life. He knew that without widespread education in India the progress of nation was impossible. He therefore founded a scientific society at Ghazipur where he started the translation of the best works of Indian literature and the most useful English works. Here Hindus, Muslims and British people worked together. Sayyid began a journal for the scientific society which later developed into the *Aligarh gazette* which always remained a valuable instrument for social reform, political and religious reform. He founded a school in Ghazipur in 1864 and in the same year was transferred to Aligarh.

On his visit to England (1869-70) he was much impressed by the standard of the civilization of the ordinary Englishman. His thought was that the well-being of Muslims depended on two major factors- western education and an ability to understand and mix freely with the British otherwise it seemed to him that the Muslims stood little chance of making progress or of retaining a place of honor and respect in India . In Britain he wrote *Khutbat I Ahmadiya* which was a strong reply of the book "the life of Mahomet", by Sir William Muir.

Back in India he started a periodical "*Tahdhib al-Akhlaq*" with the object of educating the public by removing prejudices, aimed largely at reforming Muslim religious thinking and putting the Muslims back on the road to progress. Tahdhib al Akhlaq tried to do for India what Steetle and Addison had done for the British at the beginning of 18th century with their London magazines *Tatlar* and *Spectator*.³³ Sir Sayyid wanted to prove that the objections the Christians made that Islam barred the way to progress and civilization were unfounded. He felt that the Muslims had to acquaint themselves with the fundamental principles upon which European civilization was based and with the reasons for its success. His next and more admirable achievement was the establishment of a Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh (1878) modeled after Oxford and Cambridge. He instituted the Muhammadan educational conference (1886) which held annual meetings in various cities and afforded opportunities for exchange of thought and propagation of reforming ideas.³⁴ His loyalty to the British was rewarded by nomination in 1878 as a member of the vice regal legislative council and his appointment in 1888 to be a knight commander of the star of India. In 1889 he received an honorary degree from the University of Edinburgh.³⁵ On 27th of March Sir Sayyid breathed his last by reciting over and over again two verses of the holy Quran. In the times of India (29th of March 1898) an Anglo – Indian wrote of Sir Sayyid as;

He dreamed of raising Islam to the level it had reached in the twelfth Century, when it was the undisputed master of learning and philosophy.³⁶

1.5.3 Thought and Philosophy

Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan is the eldest of the five prominent Muslim modernists whose influence on Islamic thought and polity was to shape and define Muslim responses to modernism in the latter half of the 19th century. Like the other modernists of his time –like Sayyid Amir Ali (1849-1928), Jamal al-din Afghani (1838-1897), Namik Kemal (1840-1888) and Sheikh Muhammad Abduh (1850-1905), Sir Sayyid was deeply concerned with the state of Muslims in a world dominated by European colonizing powers.³⁷ Being an educational and political leader of Muslims, who were living under British colonial rule in India he developed the concepts of religious modernism and community identity that mark the transition from Mughal India to the rise of representative government and the quest for self-determination. In other words, Sir Sayyid surveyed the abysmal state of Muslim community in India after the Sepoy uprising of 1857, which resulted in formal British

colonial rule and the end of Muslim dominance in the Indian sub- continent. The sepoy uprising or the war of independence as Indian call it, was a crucial event in the history of Indian Muslims and it deeply influenced the evolution of Sir Sayyid's thinking. Most important, it convinced him that the best of western civilization could and should be assimilated by Muslims because the "pure" Islam taught by Quran and lived/practiced by Prophet was not simply unopposed to western civilization but was, in fact, its ultimate source and inspiration. To put in other words, the first two decades after 1857 witnessed Sir Sayyid's increasing preoccupation with the prevailing conditions of Muslims in India. He perceived Muslims as backward and in need of education. This period also saw an increasing degree of public involvement in educational and social arenas and Sir Sayyid undertook three major projects.

1.5.4 Sir Sayyid: Religion and Science Compatibility

Sir Sayyid believed in the compatibility of religion and science and considered natural law and divine law to be the same, because according to him revelation cannot be opposed to scientific actuality since an agreement between Gods word and work is essential. "..... Having by-passed the age old controversy concerning the eternity of the Quran, Sir Syed proceeded to down a more important and fundamental preposition that the Quran being the word of God, and the objective world as we know it being the work of God there could not be any contradiction between the two. This implied that the Quran had to be understood not only in the medium of the Arabic as spoken at the time of the Prophet (pbuh), but, also, is the light of the latest discoveries of natural sciences and conformity with them". Sir Sayyid was quite aware of the objection which such a stand naturally evokes. If the Quran is to conform to the scientific discoveries of each generation, which sometimes contradict the earlier discoveries, this will reduce the Quran to a plaything of various interpreters. But, says Sir Sayyid, "We are glad at this objection which we accept as glad tidings for we are convinced that the Quran accords with the actual reality. Being the word of God its great strength lies in the fact that at every level of our knowledge it provides us guidance in affairs in which it is meant to guide us. As the sciences go on progressing and when we consider matters in this light, we will find that the words of the Quran will still accord with reality. And if our earlier understanding has been proved to be wrong, the fault lies in our understanding and not in the Quran".³⁸ And this applies not only to the past,

Sir Sayyid leaves open the possibility that scientific developments in the future, too, even while contradicting many of our present day scientific postulates, will provide us with a newer and ever more profound understanding of the Quran.

For him, as, between the words of god (scripture) and the work of God (nature) there can be no contradiction he believed that when there appeared a contradiction between a scientific fact and religious rule then the latter must be reinterpreted according to scientific evidence.³⁹

For religion Sir Sayyed says “..... it is true that religion plays a great part in making a people civilized. There are, no doubt, some religions which stand in the way of progress. It is our aim to judge where Islam stands in this regard.”⁴⁰

He was the staunch supporter of scientific knowledge and western education. The spread of western education among Muslims and the general enlightenment which the introduction of modern science brought about in the public was the greatest challenge. In one of his lectures he refers to the spread of doubt and misgivings in the hearts of the people about Islam.⁴¹ He says, while I am endeavoring to introduce these sciences among Muslims, it is my duty to defend the religion of Islam and to reveal its original bright face”. At another place he said, “Today we are in need of a modern ‘Ilm al Kalam by which we should refute the doctrines of modern science and undermine their foundations or show that they are in conformity with the articles of Islamic faith. But the important question was how to prove the validity of a particular religion in the face of so many claimants. He came to the conclusion that the only touchstone of a true religion can be this; if it is in conformity with human nature or with nature in general, then it is true. This would be clear proof that the religion in question has come from God, the author of nature both in man and outside.

1.5.5 Sir Sayyid on Nature

What is nature? Sayyid Ahmad khan interprets it in the sense in which the thirteenth/ nineteenth-century scientists interpreted it as a closed system of the universe which obeys certain laws of mechanics and physics and which is characterized by uniformity of behavior to which there cannot be any exception. All inorganic, organic, and human behavior is subject to these laws of mechanical laws. In one of his articles, he says, “In the beginning this knowledge of nature was

limited. But with the increase in knowledge, the sphere of nature has correspondingly increased and, thus, seems to have become co-extensive with what we find in the universe, what we see or feel, so much so that the actions and thoughts of man and even his beliefs are all different chains in the inexorable laws of nature. “But this mechanical conception of nature, as James Ward put it, is totally antagonistic to the spiritual interpretation of life, and therefore, cannot be upheld by a person who is advocating the truth of any theistic religion. In the writings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan we meet with both types of naturalism, mechanistic and anti-theistic on the one hand and teleological and theistic on other, and often criticism of his views on God and his relation to nature. He rightly said that if God is the mere cause of causes and cannot rise above the laws of nature and the absolute law of right and wrong, then he is God only in name, a being devoid of personality and all feelings of love and affection towards human beings. “God is really dethroned and all religious life becomes extinct. Prayer would become a cold attribute of perfunctory worship of a being whose arm is never stretched out in answer to prayers, whose ear is never open to the supplications of the penitents.”

If such is the case, then man has no need to look to God in time of suffering; he has only to get as much detailed knowledge of the laws of nature as possible and then adapt his life mechanically to the requirements of the external world and, thus, attain success in life in proportion to his efforts. This philosophy of life leads to the requirements of the external world and, thus, attains success in life in proportion to his efforts. This philosophy of life leads not to the broadening of human outlook but to the spirit of self-sufficiency and self-centeredness which is the enemy of spiritual life. Sayyid Mahdi refers to the verses 25-35 of the twentieth Surah of the Quran where Moses is said to have prayed to God for granting some specific requests, and the reply was “Granted is your prayer, O Moses,” in view of this episode Sayyid Mahdi ‘Ali rightly infers that Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s conception of God and function of prayer (du’a) does not accord with religious consciousness at all. He points out that if we accept this position, it will mean that man has no significant part to play in the world and everything is tied to the inexorable necessity of mechanical laws⁴²

1.5.6 Sir Sayyid and Reason

By reason, Sayyid Ahmad Khan means the empirical reason, to which the Quran appeals. He calls it human reason or *aql-I kulli*. “it is that inherent capacity in man by

which he draws conclusions on the basis of observation of objective phenomena or mental thinking processes, and which proceeds from particulars to generalizations and vice versa.....". It is the capacity of man which has enabled him to invent new things and led him on to understand and control the forces of nature; it is by this that man is able to know the things which are a source of his happiness and then tries to get as much profit out of them as possible; it is this which makes a man ask the ways and the wherefores of different events around him."⁴³

In a very illuminating article, "thoughts of man," Sayyid Ahmad Khan discusses the problem of reason in detail. After defining reason as above, he says that man is distinguished from animals on account of rationality, which imposes on him duties and responsibilities far in excess of those on animals. The main function of reason, according to him, is to acquire knowledge about the nature and reality of things. But this knowledge is intimately related with certitude (*yaqin*). "I fully realized," he says, "that without certitude knowledge is possible neither in the sphere of the world nor in that of religion....." "I come to the conclusion that reason alone is the instrument which can decide the matter, and bring about the necessary conviction. But is not reason fallible? Yes it is, and we cannot help it. As reason is used almost universally, so the reason of one man can be corrected by that of another and the reason of one age by that of another age. Without it nothing can be achieved."⁴⁴

1.5.7 Law making and Islamic jurisprudence

Much more radical is the approach of Muslim modernists towards the Islamic jurisprudence (*Fiqh*). It is recognized that our Muslim *Fiqh* was largely based on the *ijtihad* of certain legal experts and it is emphasized that just as they made their own *ijtihad*, Muslims of the present times are free to exercise their own *ijtihad*. It is also recognized that man made laws change with the change of time, and what the Muslim jurists thought and wrote for their own times is not eternally binding on the present time Muslims. Modern Muslim legislation should go back to the original sources, i.e., the Quran and the authentic Hadith. At the same time it is not denied that medieval Muslim jurisprudence contains some useful material for legislation, but this material will have to be re-valued. It is also stressed all legislation aims at the promotion of human welfare and that part of Muslim jurisprudence which does not satisfy the requirements of human welfare will have to be dispensed with.⁴⁵

Sayyid Ahmad Khan critically reviews the work done by the ancient jurists. In the *Khutabat* his attitude towards their achievements is appreciative. He explains in details how they derived rules and laws from the Quran and the Sunnah for the regulation of social, political, and religious life of the people. In view of the spread of Islam, it was necessary that the political and social life of the Muslim community should have been build up in accordance with the spirit of the holy Quran and the example set by the holy prophet. This magnificent work was successfully undertaken by our early jurists. But at present we must distinguish between what the Quran says and the rules and regulations which the jurists have formulated through inference.

In one of his articles, "Uncivilized Countries," Sayyid Ahmad Khan rebukes Turkey for her negligence in the matter of legal reform. He holds that backwardness and weakness of Turkey in his time were due solely to the obsolete legal code that was prevalent there. According to him, it is one of the causes of the decline of the Muslims that they are still following legal codes that were formulated to satisfy the demands of the bygone age. Every age presents new problems; and even though some old problems recur, yet their form is quite different and therefore, the solutions they demand must be totally new. Nothing old can fill the place of the new without adaptation and proper (amendment) amendment. The present age demands a totally new legal system pertaining to social, political, and administrative affairs. Unfortunately, the political decline of the Muslims, instead of giving rise to a spirit of critical appraisal of the situation and a demand for a dynamic adaptation to the new environment, has produced an attitude of passive obedience to a static ideal of *Taqlid*, i.e. blind allegiance to an authority which is no longer valid and useful in the new circumstances. Thus, according to Sayid Ahmad, the spirit of *Taqlid* in the sphere of jurisprudence produced the following evil consequences.

The modernists adopted the term *Ijtihad* (an Arabic term, literally meaning "exert" or "effort" and general translated as independent reasoning) - the intellectual effort of Muslim jurists to reach independent religio-legal decisions, a key feature of modern Islamic reform; also a technical term of Islamic law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah - as a rallying cry, transforming its meaning into the more general task of "rational interpretation" that they held to be incumbent

upon all educated Muslims. Historically, Ijtihad has been perceived as a concern primarily of the individual scholar and Mujtahid, whose doors were closed in 4th century AH and a long period of Taqlid followed. Later, post-colonial Islamic thinkers used Ijtihad as shorthand for intellectual and social reform and as a break from Taqlid or blind imitation of the past legal rulings. Sir Syed praised the broadening use of Ijtihad by Shah Wali Allah. He decried Taqlid which in his opinion was responsible for the decline of Islam. For Sir Sayyid, Ijtihad (innovation, re-interpretation with the changing times) is the need of the hour. Give up Taqlid (copying and following old values). He gave a call that the Muslims could not progress without acquiring knowledge of modern sciences and technology. He asserted the simple truth that knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of any nation; it belongs to the whole mankind. He maintained a valiant posture and succeeded in realizing the intellectual energy of Muslims and they started getting education of science. They rightly felt the need of Ijtihad. But, alas, Powerful lobby of Ulama overpowered them and opposed all attempts to move towards Ijtihad. In keeping with his rationalist mindset, Sir Sayyid stressed the importance of Ijtihad and a rational interpretation of Islamic religious sources and thought. He believed as well as considered this to be necessary, in order to make Islam acceptable to the new age and because he believed that Islam would not be understood by Muslims and appreciated by others unless it was presented in a rational way. He also stressed the importance of relying on the Qur'an and sifting the false Hadith from the reliable ones. He tried to remove "the corrosive elements" and accretions that he believed were seriously detrimental to Islam in his day.⁴⁶

1.5.8 Sir Syed as a Reformer

The revolutionary change social and political, which came over the subcontinent in the 13th/19th century this organized the spiritual no less than the mundane life of the Indian Muslims. Syed Ahmad was a realist. He had witnessed vast sections of Muslim aristocracy being either obliterated or utterly impoverished. He was convinced that the British had come to stay in India and their supremacy, along with that of the western way of thinking, could not be challenged in any force able future. The Muslims must, therefore, refashion their lives as Muslims if they did not, they would go deeper down into the morass of degradation. In his opinion the Christian-Muslim rancor was based merely upon mutual ignorance and prejudice. His effort to mediate between the two religions took the form of an unfinished

commentary on the bible which, among other things, sorts to establish that both Islam and Christianity were fed from the same spiritual spring.⁴⁷

Syed Ahmad brought out his magazine, the *Tahzib ul-Akhlaq*, with the subtitle Muhammadan social reformer. This bright periodical has a cheered carrier and gathered round itself a select and highly discriminating readership which shared Syed Ahmad zeal for reform. The cognate organization, the all India Muhammad educational conference, founded by Sir Syed in 1304 /1886 became a lively form for the discussion of social and educational questions and proved to be an important factor in promoting Muslim solidarity in the subcontinent.⁴⁸ “Educate, educate, educate” was his watch word. The other generation among Muslims had no sense of direction. It scouted all current scientific ideas as incompatible. The Muslim child who went to a west oriented school was deemed to have crossed the limits of the holy law and placed himself outside the pale of Islam. This was a way to extinction. With his usual foresight Syed Ahmad grasped the nature of the issue and devised the solution. In the first place, he attempted a new syntheses of religious thought in Islam the central doctrine of which was that Islam was not opposed to the study of science and nothing to fare from its impact, he conceived of a new system of education in which the responsibility for educating the coming generations would be thrown on the community itself and in which the scholars would receive instruction in Islam along with the grounding in western sciences. This was the basic principles of Aligarh education which brought influential elements in the Indian Muslim society into the current of modernism. Sir Syed saw the need for modern education in his community and devoted his energies to seeing to it that this need be met. He also recognized that the community would not be willing (and rightly) to have modern education, if this meant abandoning Islam. He therefore was scare full to provide a college in which both modern secular education and Islamic religious instruction would be simultaneously provided. Yet he also sensed that his own ways on religion, his own interpretation of Islam, and the endeavor’s which his own mind was making to synthesize and harmonizes his religious tradition with the spirit and knowledge of modernity, were unacceptable to most of his fellow Muslims. Accordingly, he concedes that in the new college, Islamic instructions should be provided by the recognized, i.e., the traditional-religious leaders of the community, in a traditional way. These, of course, were proponents of a traditional interpretation of Islam.⁴⁹ He advocated retention of self-perpetuating

and in expensive arrangement for elementary education. In respect of female education his ideas were not much in advance of his times. He would first have the men educated and leave the problem of women's education to solve itself.⁵⁰

Syed Ahmad wrote a refutation of the book "the life of Muhammad" written by Sir William Muir and named it as "on the life of Muhammad and subjects subsidiary thereto" with the aim of limiting the influence of Christian missionary on Muslim community. Syed Ahmad can justly be regarded as the maker of Urdu prose and the first real prose writer in this language. He worked a veritable revolution in literature. Primarily a reformer who wanted to raise his community to the intellectual level of more advanced western people, he sought to propagate his ideas through workmanlike, unvarnished Urdu prose, by stripping of its medieval trappings and invested it with a sensitive and expressive vocabulary to absorb and expound all meaning on different subjects connected with contemporary life. He made his first efforts in this sphere by founding the scientific society at Moradabad in 1281/1864. The society published very readable translations of Standard English works on history, political economy, agriculture, mathematics and other useful subjects. The society also ran a weekly journal, the Aligarh institute gazette, in which appeared articles of popular interest on social, educational and scientific subjects. An idea of Syed Ahmad's notion about the mental and moral equipment of a social reformer and his duties and obligations can be gained from the following extracts taken from one of his best known essays:

"Most people believe that they can rid themselves of social evils by common action.....I don't subscribe to this view. The way to reform lies through discord and not through unity. Reformist ideals call for courage and perseverance of a high order. It is for the reformer boldly to violate the customs of this group....in this he will incur a lot of odium and popular disapprobation. But ultimately he will succeed and win converts. Though he provokes opposition in the beginning he is acknowledged a benefactor in the end"⁵¹

1.6 Conclusion

Sir Sayyid attempted to respond to the two fold challenge of western judgments and contemporary condition of Muslim community in India. From 1858 till his death in 1898, Sayyid Ahmad actively worked for a Muslim revival in educational, social, political and religious field. Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries he understood that the new challenges of western institutions could only be faced by

remodeling Muslim theories of religion and history on the bases of modern sciences. In promoting religious or Islamic modernism he drew inspiration from Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762) and emphasized on rational approach to Islam and devoted his life to modernizing the life of Muslims in the Indian Sub-Continent. For Baljon - presenting Sir Sayyid's overall picture, his political, social and educational work - his undaunted confrontation with modern thought was no less than a "revolution in Muslim theology", because he worked out, by it, a "modern vision of Islam".⁵² Aziz Ahmad and Fazlur Rahman⁵³ both have discussed Sir Sayyid's achievements as a religious thinker in the context of Islamic modernism and more specifically Islamic modernism in India. For Aziz Ahmad, Sir Sayyid is its first representative. His theological modernism, thinks Aziz Ahmad, "can be discerned as grappling with two broadly distinct problems: the rationalization of the minutiae of nonessential dogma and the liberalization of Islamic law.

For Sir Sayyid, Muslims needed to change the way they saw and responded to the modern world. Like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad 'Abduh, he called for a bold new theology or reinterpretation of Islam and acceptance, not rejection, of best in the western thought. In Esposito's words, he called for a new theology to respond to the modern change. He wanted to show that he was reclaiming the original religion of Islam, which God and His Messenger have disclosed, not that religion which the Ulama and the preachers have fashioned. His interpretation of Islam was guided by his belief that Islam was compatible with reason and the laws of nature and therefore in perfect harmony with modern scientific thought. He argued that Islam's teachings concerning God, the Prophet and the Qur'an are compatible with modern science, which involves discovery of the work of God in natural laws; in other words, Sir Sayyid argued that Islam is "in full correspondence with reason". Furthermore, he equated reason with understanding and considered it an acquired quality that enables human beings to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper. According to him, who used terms like understanding, reason and intellect interchangeably, the only criterion for a person having reason intellect, or understanding is behavioral rather than substantive. For Umar al-Din, Sir Sayyid presented "a new conception of Islam and laid the foundation of a new [Islamic] theology (*Kalam*). As in former [intellectual] movements Islam had been presented in the form of law, or in the form of philosophy, or again in the form of a Sufi system [of thought], in the same way Sir Sayyid, keeping in mind the scientific

spirit of the modern age, presented Islam in the form of a scientific theory".⁵⁴ The attitude of this great personality was not only theoretical; he was principally a man of action. By his scientific thinking and critical approach he became the first great thinker whose patterns of thought proved useful and fruitful. He reached to the conclusion that rejection of modernity will lead Muslims nowhere and thus suggested the ways and means to meet the challenges of modern ideas for the future development of Muslim thought and enlightenment of the Muslim community.

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