

## Some Muslim Modernist Developments in the Indian Subcontinent: A Brief Overview

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By the nineteenth and the early twentieth century Muslim Ummah found itself face to face with modern Western culture. Europe (in particular, Britain, France and Holland) had penetrated and increasingly dominated much of the Muslim world from North Africa to South East Asia (the French in North Africa, the British and French in the Middle East and South Asia, and the Dutch and British in South East Asia) and forced the Muslims to taste the bitterness of defeat at its hands by losing their political and cultural sovereignty. For the first time, the Ummah was confronted by such a power that threatened its entire civilization. Although, previously Muslims were defeated in the eleventh century and lost Bait-ul-Muqaddas (Jerusalem) to the leaders of the first Crusade, no Muslim scholar questioned the self-sufficiency of Islam or its capability to renew itself. Its lands were occupied by the foreign armies yet no perception of decline, or the need to borrow from the enemy was ever poignantly felt as an exigency. Neither the crusades, instead were forced to retreat nor did the Mongol invasion of Islamic territories persisted rather the Mongol conquerors embraced Islam. Western imperialism precipitated a religious as well as political crisis. It eclipsed the institutions of a Muslim state and society—the Sultan, Islamic law, and Ulama administration of education, law and social welfare. Its penetration into the Islamic societies, financially, militarily and

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industrially, changed both the historical context and the intellectual perspective of many Muslims. The Muslim religious leaders and politicians began to perceive their societies, as being in a state of decline in comparison with various European nations.

From its earliest days, Islam possessed a tradition of revival (*tajdīd*) and reform (*islah*). Muslims had been quick to respond to what was regarded as the compromising of faith and practice. In succeeding centuries, a rich revivalist traditions expressed itself in a variety of concepts and beliefs in the lives and teaching of individual reformers, and in the activities of a host of movements. Medieval period of Islam produced a number of scholars and thinkers, who contributed to the development of Islamic thought considerably by using their *ijtihādi* capabilities. There were traditional scholars as well as the scholars who had philosophical bent of mind and both of these groups responded to the critical situations of their times. The prominent among them were Imam al Ghazzali (1058-1111/450-505) and Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1329/ 661-728), both throughout their tenure, did their utmost to rebut the challenges confronting Muslim society. Later on, likewise, the religious doctors, Shaykh Abdul-Haq Muhaddith of Delhi (b. 1551) Shaykh Ahmad of Sarhind known as Mujadid-Alf-i-Thani (971-1034/1564-1624), Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1792) in Arabia, Shah Wali Allah of Delhi (1703-1762). Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (1786-1831) and Shah Ismail Shahid (d 1831) were scintillating personalities, who made remarkable contributions in reforming Muslim societies of their respective times. So there has been a continuity of reform and revival.

In the Indian subcontinent, the assiduous attempts by Shah Waliullah, Shah Abdul Aziz, Sayyid Ahmad Shahid, Shah Ismaiel Shahid and others to resuscitate and vivify Islamic faith and power in the subcontinent did not fully materialize to overcome challenges faced by the Muslims on the internal and the external fronts. According to Mawlana Mawdudi (1903-1979) they failed to assess the causes of emerging power of the West which by then had unleashed.<sup>1</sup> However, their sustained and relentless perseverance to uphold *Sharī'ah* and efforts to dispel

ignorance and perpetual resistance against the heretic and devolutionist tendencies set out a model for future revivalists and reformists to carry on the struggle, keeping in view the experiences of the past and the changing circumstances. While the pre-modern revivalist movements in the subcontinent, such as that of Shaykh Abdul Haqq Muhddith of Delhi and Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi upto the time of Shah Waliullah were primarily internally motivated. Islamic revivalist Sayyid Ahmad Shahid and Shah Ismail Shaheed was a response both to the continued internal weaknesses and to the external political and religio-cultural threat of colonialism in their own perspective.

By the nineteenth century British increasingly dominated the subcontinent with the result the internal breakdown of Muslim society was exacerbated by the growing threat from their presence and imperialist designs, which precipitated a religious as well as a political crisis. A variety of responses emerged from Muslim self-criticism and reflection on the cause of the decline. Their action spanned the spectrum, from withdrawal and rejection to adoption and cultural synthesis. Owing to different cultural and historical reasons the tussle here in India between the East and the West had developed in such a manner that it could be tackled only in two ways; by opting out unequivocally for Islamic way of life on grounds of faith and conviction or by choosing, once and for all the Western way of life on grounds of material progress and prosperity.<sup>2</sup> Most of the 'ulama advocated total withdrawal, noncooperation, or rejection of the West or any borrowing from this culture. This movement of 'ulama finally culminated in the establishment Darul 'Ulum Deoband (1866). Their main objective in founding the Madrasah at Deoband and other places was preservation and perpetuation of religion and culture. In their opinion religious consciousness, religious education and religious sentiments could help the Muslims to reconstruct the world according to their liking. If religion, which was the basis of their Islamic existence was lost, all hope of reconstruction would also be lost.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, it is important to keep religious consciousness alive among the Muslims lest they should be carried away by the strong current of Western culture that was to flourish in the wake of the British dominations over India. Darul 'Ulum

was not only response to the challenge of the Western knowledge alone, but the response to a whole gamut of challenges that were posed before the Muslims in the nineteenth century as a result of their exposure to the Western culture.<sup>4</sup>

A group of secularists blamed an outmoded tradition. They advocated the separation of religion and politics, and the establishment of modern nation-states modelled on the Western pattern. Islam should be at most restricted to personal life, and public life should be modelled on modern times set by Europe, an idea and technology in government, the military, education, and law. Another group of reform minded Muslims sought to respond to rather than react against the influences of Western civilization. They proclaimed the need for Islamic reform and sought to delineate an alternative to the Western secular adaptationism on the one hand and religiously motivated rejectionism on the other. Though, the record of Islamic modernism is mixed, most of them viewed Islam as a comprehensive guide for private as well as public and stressed the dynamism, flexibility and adaptability that had characterized the early development of Islam, notable for its achievements in law, education, and the science. They persuaded for internal reform through a process of reinterpretation (*ijtihad*) and selective adaptation of the Western philosophy. Science and Technology. Islamic modernism, what it is called, is a process of internal self-criticism. Thus they asserted to redefine Islam to demonstrate its relevance to the new situations.<sup>5</sup> In the subcontinent two men dominated the Islamic Modernist Movement, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) and Allama Muhammad Iqbal (1875-1938).

The British Government which was the most powerful representative and advocate of the Western civilization in the east was rooted firmly in India. It had brought with it a whole set up of modern ideas, institutions and techniques. The Indian Muslims on the other hand, were at the time a beaten lot, dejected, buffled and humiliated. The failure of the uprising of 1857 had given a cruel blow to their morale and prestige, as a result of which a host of new and terrifying problems had cropped up for them. There was ignominy of defeat, a complete turning of the tide, and the dread of the new masters. Multitudinous charges were being levelled against

Indian Muslims; they were being treated with suspicion and mistrust on all sides.<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of 1857 in the subcontinent, Muslim sullenness, their aloofness and suppressed hatred for the new order became more marked than ever. As a result of policy of isolation and self-sufficiency, advocated by many *ulama*, for many decades Muslims in the subcontinent lost ground in education, in the public service, and in general leadership in India. On the other side, they fell farther and farther behind their Hindu compatriots in the matter of education; for the latter were not at all slow to avail themselves of the new educational facilities, and to adapt themselves to the changing circumstances and the requirements of the new government.<sup>7</sup> Many Muslim leaders realized the gravity of the situation. For them the key to the whole situation was adaptation to the new environment, use of the new forces that had come into play, acceptance of new instrument of progress that had been created through English education.<sup>8</sup> Sporadic efforts were made in this direction in many places, but the concentrated efforts that won the field culminated in the person, was undoubtedly Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), a leading Muslim modernist of the subcontinent. He was convinced that the survival of the Muslim community necessitated a bold reinterpretation of Islam and the acceptance, not rejection, of the best in the Western thought.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, born of a noble Delhi family, received the usual orthodox education. He was a pupil of the famous erudite scholar Mawlana Mamluk Ali who was entirely a product of the Wali-ullahi school and traditions.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Sir Sayyid had received the influence of Shah Waliullah's thought in his early carrier of life, especially his revivalist tradition. In his first theological work, *Rah-i-Sunnat wa Radd-i-Bid'at*, this influence is recognizable. It was later he turned to more rationalistic interpretation of Islam. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's active career is marked by three clear cut phases; the pre-revolution period, 1838-57; efforts for educational and social reform, 1858-85; full fledged leadership of the Muslim community, 1886-1898. In the first period he was a conservative Muslim and his ideas and pursuits do not appear to be different from thereof other Muslims. He qualified for a subordinate position in the British Government for the post of Munsif, the lowest

judicial officer, and he rose steadily in rank and esteem. "His loyal and fearless service to the cause of British in 1857 had won him their favour".<sup>10</sup> During that period he wrote *Asār al-Sanadīd*, on the monuments and leading personalities of Delhi, first published in 1847, and also edited the well-known *Ā'in-I-Akbarī* of Abdul Fadl in 1856. He also edited another great historical work of medieval India in 1862 Ziya al-din Barani's *Tārīkh-i- Firūz Shāhi*.

In the second phase, the upheaval of 1857-8, which brought ruin on the Muslims of Delhi and the united provinces, was the turning point in Sir Sayyid's life. As he writes, "I was shocked at the affection of my people... I was siezed with despair. I lost all hope of Muslim's ever rising again and recovering their departed grandeur. I stood aghast at the tragedy. I could not stand Muslim tribulations. The gnawing agony aged me prematurely. I wanted to say good-bye to the country of my birth and settle down in a foreign land. However, ... I realized that I should not desert my post, but stand by my people in their ordeal and sink or swim with them." He felt a strong urge to lead and guide a regular movement to bring about a drastic change in the political, social and religious outlook of the Muslims. He was very much perturbed by the poor economic, social and moral conditions of the Muslims. At the same time the failure of revolution had convinced him of the need of new attitude towards life which alone would save community from complete destruction. He had developed a thesis regarding the ills of Muslim community and its remedies. His programme was aimed at "inducing Muslims to develop a higher degree of civilization, so that they may not be looked down upon by the civilized nations of the world and they, too may be held in high esteem and called a civilized nation."<sup>12</sup> For him, the panacea of all the ills lay in the acquisition of the Western knowledge and the genuine appreciation of its culture. He arrived at the conclusion that in popularizing scientific and modern education lay the solution of the main problems facing the community. But the British and the Muslim had developed mutual distrust and suspicion, so much so, that they were not ready to appreciate even the good points of each other. This vicious atmosphere of distrust and suspencion could be dispelled by bringing the two people nearer through an

understanding of each other's religion and society. His program of work was based on two fundamental concepts namely, educational and social reform and reconstruction of Islamic religious thought in the context of modern trends in civilization. To create a favorable atmosphere for the implementation of his projects co-operation with British government was absolutely necessary. Therefore he insisted that there must be a change of political outlook. Instead of regarding subcontinent under British rule as *dār-ul-harb*, he insisted that, even though it was not under the Muslim rule, it was to be regarded as *dār-ul-Islām*, because Muslims were perfectly free to exercise all the essential rites and ceremonies of their religion. Therefore, they must keep away from the politics of the country. Despite serious opposition, he plunged into the task of removing misunderstanding between the British and the Muslims. His treatise, *Asbāb-i-Baghāwat-i-Hind* (The Causes of the Indian Revolt) published in 1858 was meant to appease to British Government. He writes, "As regards the Rebellion of 1857, the fact is, that for a long period, many grievances had been rankling in the hearts of the people. In course of time, a vast store of explosive material had been collected. It wanted but the application of a match to light it, and that match was applied by the mutinous army."<sup>13</sup> He blamed misapprehension on the part of the people about the intentions of Government as well as the ignorance on the part of the Government of the conditions and grievances of the people. He criticized the un-commendable activities of the Christian missionaries and tells the Government that they were the main cause of disaffection among the people.<sup>14</sup>

To promote education and understanding of the Western thought, he started schools at Muradabad<sup>15</sup> and Ghazipur and tried to bring English works within the reach of his fellow countrymen through translation into Urdu. The establishment of Scientific Society in 1864 and the publication of a bi-weekly, *Aligrah Institute*, two years later, were vital steps taken by him to give a practical shape to his ideas. He also urged patronage of vernacular education and strove for the establishment of a vernacular department in Calcutta University. In 1869-70, he visited England, during his stay he compiled *Al Khutbāt al-Ahmaddiyah fi al-Arab wa al-Sirat*

*al-Muhammadiyah* (Essays on the Life of Muhammad (SAAS)) with a view to refute the charges made against Islam and the Prophet by the Western orientalist, particularly by Sir William Muir in his *Life of Muhammad* (1858). He studied the educational system of the West and was deeply impressed by its cultural and material progress. On his return to subcontinent he started Urdu journal entitled *Tahdhīb al Akhlāq* (Reform of Morals) to disseminate modernist ideas. Through it he and his co-workers conveyed their ideas on political, social and religious problems to the Muslims. It was not long before it became the chief organ of what has rightly been called the Aligrah Movement.

The Aligrah movement is so called after the College, Muhammadan Anglo-oriental College at Aligrah, which he started in the form of a school in 1875, the foundation stone was laid by Lord Lytton in 1877, and it started functioning in 1879 on the lines of the College of Cambridge.<sup>16</sup> It forms a landmark in the history of Indian Muslim education. The Aligrah movement is usually looked upon as an educational movement, but it was much more than that. It was a comprehensive reform movement, attracted to its orbit some of the most brilliant contemporary Muslims of Northern India. Prominent among them the Khawja Altaf Husain Hali of Panipat (1837-1914) the novelist, lecturer, legislator and educationist, Maulvi Nazir Ahmad of Bijnor (1836 - 1912), Mawlana Shibli Numani of Azamgarh (1857-1914) a young man who for sixteen years (1857-98) taught at the College. They all desired to make modern knowledge a living force among Muslims, as it was in their palmy days. The Aligrah school aimed at the practical and fruitful method of making Muslim mind eager for the best modern knowledge in science and art, and to dispel the false notion that it was in any way inconsistent with the Islamic religion.

Later, Mawlana Shibli fell apart from Sayyid Ahmad Khan because he did not agree with latter's interpretation of some of the fundamental doctrines of Islam. His only accord with his patron was the fact that the Muslims could not make much progress without modern education and not with his modern interpretation of Islamic thought. Shibli adopted a middle course between the views of the conservative section of Muslims who sometimes went to the extent of superstition



and those who could be called extreme rationalists. Shibli is essentially a historian and his contribution to modern Islamic thought is mainly based on the critical study of some of the most prominent figures in the history of Islam. In association with many ulama, especially Mawlana Muhammad Ali Monghyri (1846-1927) and others, he founded an organisation in 1893 called Nadwatul Ulama, which in 1898 as an Islamic theological institution of Darul Ulum Nadwatul Ulama at Lucknow. Established to serve as a bridge between the old world and the new and of working out a new system of thought that could be representative of the best in both the philosophies of life, Western and Islamic, or, in the words of its pioneers, which could be firm and unbending in the matter of fundamentals and liberal and flexible where details were involved.<sup>17</sup> In spite of numerous efforts the courses of studies in the Nadwatul Ulama could not go far from *Dars-i-Nizāmi*, especially in the area of theology. According to Aziz Ahmad, 'it was conceived as a middle of the road institution between the extremes of Aligarh's secularism and Deoband's rigid conservatism, 'produced a few scholars of considerable stature like Sayyid Sulayman Nadwi, but in its drift away from Aligarh modernism towards conservative orthodoxy, in time its scholars and their work becomes almost indistinguishable from those of Deoband.'<sup>18</sup>

The work done by Shibli Naumani in making the results of modern research available to the Muslim public in their vernacular calls for special mention. After his death it continued under the competent leadership of Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi in the institution, Dar ul Musannifin, which he founded in his native place Azamgrah in 1883. Since then the institute contributed a lot. The foundation of Dar al Musaunifin was laid on a rather moderate scale, but in course of time it became one of the leading centers of Islamic research in the subcontinent. Their research into the past history of Islam was not merely for the abstract acquisition of knowledge. They wished to spread knowledge in order that contemporary ignorance might be removed and contemporary life made more intelligent, fuller and richer. They aimed at teaching the teachers, especially the religious teachers whose shortcomings and narrowness were a scandal that leapt to the eye in Muslim subcontinent.

Despite the admiration of some aspects of the Western thought and civilization, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the first Muslim writer who started refuting the charges leveled against Islam and the Prophet (SAAS) by the Western orientalist like W.W.Hunter and William Muir. In that sense Shibli, Chirag Ali and Ameer Ali followed him. In spite of being a fervent admirer of the Western education, Sir Sayyid never ignored religious education. He in his letter to the members of the committee, Khazinatul Bida'at had requested them to prescribe a course of studies in theology to be compulsory study along with other subjects for the students.<sup>19</sup> According to Sir Sayyid the subjects to be studied in theology were: fiqh, hadith, tafsir, usul-i-fiqh, usul-i-hadith, usul-i-tafsir, 'ilm-i-aqa'id, ilm-i-kalam.<sup>20</sup> He also advocated the framing of a new course of studies, which should aim at increasing competence of written and spoken Arabic besides developing the knowledge of Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh etc. However, as far as the religious thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan is concerned he far exceeded the limits in presenting a modernized picture of Islam. On a number of fundamental issues pertaining to Islamic belief and practice he held views basically different from the orthodox interpretation; in his liberal interpretations of doctrines of Islam, he often would not accept even the rationalistic explanation put forward by medieval Muslim thinkers and philosophers. To him exercise of *ijtihad* was not simply to use reason to get back to original interpretations of Islam in the light of its revealed sources. The extent of his use of reason, the degree to which he reinterpreted Islam, and his borrowing from the West marked him off from revivalist of the previous century. He argued that, just as in the past Muslim theology had developed out of the need to respond to a social contrast, so the Muslim of modern India required a new interpretation of Islam to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and modern science: "Today we need, as in former days, a modern theology (*ilm al kalām*) by which we either render futile the tenets of modern science or [show them to be] doubtful, or bring them into harmony with the doctrines of Islam."<sup>21</sup> The reason was that he wanted to establish the principle of complete uniformity between the nineteenth century naturalism and Islam. Because of the influence of nineteenth century European

rationalism and natural philosophy on him and his belief that Islam is the religion of reason and nature. His main argument is that the Qur'an is the word of God and nature is the work of God; disparity between the two is unthinkable. "If that religion is in conformity with human nature... then it is true. This would be a clear proof that the religion in question has come from God, the author of nature both in man and outside. All creation including man is the work of God and religion is His word, so there cannot be any contradiction between the two."<sup>22</sup> In the naturalistic conception of existence there was no room for God as the creator of Universe, but Sayyid Ahmad Khan tried to present a theistic interpretation of nature. He attempted to prove the theory that "Islam is Nature and Nature is Islam", which was too vague to be accepted even by the most liberal-minded among the Muslims. His compulsion was to prove Islam was in total harmony with the laws of nature and therefore compatible with modern scientific thought. These premises, reason and the laws of nature, governed Sir Sayyid's interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah and his treatment of such questions as evolution, miracles, and the existence of angels; which includes a multi-volume commentary on the Qur'an.<sup>23</sup> There was a wide spread opposition to Sayyid's religious thought. Sayyid Jamal al-din al Afghani (1839-97) wrote in 1881 'the truth about the Neicheri sect and an explanation of the Neicheris', but later more widely distributed in Arabic translation under the title 'Refutation of the Materialist'. Its main target, though it does not mention him by name, was Sayyid Ahmad Khan, whose followers were known to their opponents as 'Neicheris' and whom Jamal-al-din attacked more directly in a series of articles published during the same stay in India. He poured scorn on Sir Sayyid both for his attempt at rational interpretation of the Qur'an and for his loyalty and promotion of British education among Indian Muslims. Likewise, Mawlana Qasim Nanawtavi (d 1880) founder of Deoband criticised Sir Sayyid. It is claimed the Mawlana Nanawati was not so much against the acquisition of Western knowledge as such as against Sir Sayyid himself because of his uncalled for interpretation of religious beliefs, his criticism of Arabic *madaris*, and his advice to Muslims to follow in the foot steps of the British.<sup>24</sup> Sayyid Akbar Hussain of Allahabad (1846-1921) eminent

poet had been caustic critic, whose satires on the Western civilization constitute a remarkable chapter in the History of Urdu poetry. He was not opposed to the Western education as such, but was to guard the Muslim youth against the temptations of accepting and adopting Western ways of life and ignoring the traditions of their own culture. Among the Sir Sayyids colleagues who to some extent followed him or made some contribution to the development of modern Islamic thought only Muhsin al-Mulk (1837-1901). Mawlana Altaf Husayn Hali and Chiragh Ali have been mentioned. Their contribution to religious thought was not of a positive character as education and politics were the main fields of their activity.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had been the traditionally educated Muslim who sought to make modern Western liberal thought Islamically acceptable. He looked westwards, and stood for the acceptance of the Western education and culture with its materliastic implications and a total and uncritical adoption of modern sciences along with all their faults and shortcomings. Convinced of the potentialities of the contact of the Western culture with Islamic way of life and suggested the ways and means to meet the challenges of modern ideas for the future developments of Muslim thought. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's real greatness lay in the breath of his vision. He was absolutely convinced of the truth of what he was preaching, but he never tried to force his views on others, nor did he lay the foundation of a new sect. In the M.A.O College, which he had established and which in course of time became the greatest educational institute of the Muslims in the subcontinent, his religious ideas were never preached or propagated. He is, therefore, praised and respected by the Muslims not as a religious thinker, but as a reformer and a political leader, and there is no doubt that in these fields his contribution constitutes one of the most important chapter in the history of subcontinent. He laid the foundation of modernism among the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent.

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In fact a beggining towards reform had alrady been made by the Muslims of Bengal under the leadership of Nawab 'Abd al Latif Khan, who had found the 'Muhammadan Literary Association in 1863, and in his effort he was later joined by Mawlana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (d.1873).
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