

## Indian Muslims must re-read Syed Ahmad Khan

As we celebrate the 200th birth anniversary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the founder of Aligarh Muslim University, as an alumna I realize that although women's education was not part of his vision at the time, the University over the last several decades has played a pivotal role in the education of Muslim girls. For his time, Sir Syed was a modernist and progressive thinker. As the remnants of Mughal rule crumbled with the debacle that was 1857 and Indian Muslims began to be seen as the perpetrators of the uprising and therefore against the British, Sir Syed realized that education was the key for their rehabilitation.

Not any education, though, not the madrasa-led religious education that was a byword in small towns and big cities, but an English education that would allow Muslims to win government jobs and thereby expand their influence inside the newly powerful British India. That is why Sir Syed's legacy is so immense. He played a critical role, at a historic juncture, in the life of the Indian Muslim community. In the aftermath of the 1857 uprising, Muslims were disfranchised, thrown out of their homes in Shahjahanabad and generally looked upon with suspicion.

In 1859, Sir Syed first established a Farsi Madarsa in Moradabad, but soon changed track. Since English was the language also of science and technology, and therefore a method to keep in step with the outside world, in 1863 he opened the Victoria School in Ghazipur, where he was posted. Here, apart from science and history, English, Urdu, Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit were also taught.

The following year, in 1864, he established the Scientific Society in Ghazipur for translating English, Persian and Arabic writings into Urdu. Significantly, Sir Syed was quite willing to take on the religious clergy, which opposed scientific education, and was even called a kafir for his pains. He was ridiculed and ostracized but he forged ahead. As Akbar Ilahabadi noted in his famous, and adulatory, verse: Saiyyad uthe jo gajatt le kar to laakho'n laaye Sheikh, Quran dikhaata phira, paisa na mila. Syed rose, Gazette in hand and got lakhs in donation The Sheikh kept showing the Quran and got not a penny

"Call me by whatever names you like. I will not ask you for my salvation. But please take pity of your children. Do something for them (send them to the school, lest you should have to repent," he would say.

So committed was he that he even performed a skit on stage and recited a ghazal of Hafiz to collect funds for the college. His other friends even sang songs and enacted short plays.

In the first edition of the journal 'Tehzeeb al-Akhlaq' in 1871, he wrote: "The objective of issuing this journal is to persuade Indian Muslims to adopt a complete degree of civilized culture, so that the hatred with which the civilized (cultured) nations view them should go away and they may also be said to be exalted and cultured nations of the world."

This journal was aimed at the social reformation of Muslims. Sir Syed believed that "ijtihad" (re-interpretation of tradition according to changing times) was the need of the hour, while "taqlid" (copying and following old values) should be given up.

Irfanullah Farooqi in an interesting article writes that, "He categorically insisted that the reputation of Islam depended on the doings of Muslims. These doings did not have to do with prayer and fasting as much as with compassion, kindness, and a genuine drive towards maintenance of a healthy social order."

Farooqi also writes that “tehzeeb, according to Sir Syed, was a perpetual endeavour. According to him, there was no end to moral progress. In this regard he was directly borrowing from Islam where it is categorically specified that a believer must strive ceaselessly to improve his or her conduct till the last breath.”

This is especially important today when the reprehensible acts of a handful of Muslims who indulge in acts of terrorism are confused with Islam.

As Sir Syed advised, Indian Muslims have to stop playing the victim card. As we face new challenges and are increasingly being made to feel the “other”, the only way out is to go back to educating ourselves, and a scientific education at that.

In fact, Yogi Adityanath’s government, by insisting on the introduction of NCERT textbooks and making study of math and science compulsory is doing the community a big favour. In 1875, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was founded, which gave way to Aligarh Muslim University, whose motto is “to preach the gospel of free enquiry of large hearted tolerance and of pure morality’

Sir Syed’s vision was of a strong India with Hindus and Muslims being “the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan.”

He said, “O Hindus and Muslims! Do you belong to a country other than India? Do not you live on this soil and are not buried under it or cremated on its ghats? If you live and die on this land, then, bear in mind, that... all the Hindus, Muslims and Christians who live in this country are one nation.”

In the bicentennial year of this reformist, nationalist and propogator of scientific thought we must take up the cause of education once again. Why is it that a community which accounts for 14% of the country’s population only has 4.4% students enrolled for higher education? Simply devoting time to religious studies is not the way forward.

As he said, “Look forward, learn modern knowledge, do not waste time in studies of old subjects of no value.”

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