Chapter LXXX

RENAISSANCE IN INDO-PAKISTAN (Continued) SIR SAYYID AḤMAD KHĀN AS A POLITICIAN, HISTORIAN, AND REFORMIST

A

INTRODUCTORY

Born of a distinguished family of Delhi in 1232/1817, Sayyid Aḥmad was brought up under the care of his mother and went through the customary schooling. He started his literary career in 1273/1856 when he began to write for his brother's journal, *Sayyid al-Akhbār*. After the fashion of the time he took to composing poetry but the hobby did not hold his interest for long. The death of his father in 1254/1838 sent him out into the world in quest of a living. His first occupation was a petty job in a civil court under the East India Company at Delhi. He earned promotions by sheer merit and served first at Agra and then at Fatehpur Sikri. In 1263/1846, he was sent back to Delhi at his own request. Before coming to this place he had compiled a few tracts on such diverse subjects as history, science, theology, and civil law, dealing with them each in a distinctly medieval spirit. In addition to his official duties at Delhi, he re-read intensively a number of medieval Muslim classics, sat in the company of prominent poets and men of letters, practised medicine for some time, and busied himself with the first round of his researches in history which culminated in the *Āthār al-Ṣanādīd*, a work which would do credit to any professional historian. After seven years' stay at Delhi his employers transferred him to Bijnaur as a civil judge. The rising known as the Mutiny of 1273–74/1857 broke out while he was stationed there. The rulers foisted the responsibility for this on the Muslims and singled them out for a fierce vendetta. The Muslim losses by way of seizures, confiscations, and malicious persecutions were colossal. In Sayyid Aḥmad's own words: "Scores of illustrious families were laid low. Theirs is a harrowing tale. I was heedless of my personal sufferings, grievous though they were. I was shocked at the afflictions of my people. . . . I was seized with despair. I lost all hope of Muslims' 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. . . ."[1]

Sayyid Aḥmad viewed the Mutiny as an outcome of racial misunderstanding and administrative blunders. After the outbreak had been quelled, he

[1] Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Majmū'ah-i Lectures*.

threw himself heart and soul into the task of bringing about a better understanding between the British and the Indians, and between the British and the Muslims. His thought-provoking book on the causes of the revolt and his commentary on the Bible belong to this period. He anticipated his educational work by setting up two schools in the cities of Muradabad and Ghazipur. In 1281/1864, he founded the Scientific Society, almost the first learned body in Northern India. The periodical of this association, *The Aligarh Institute Gazette*, was noted for its sober tone, objective reporting, and scrupulous avoidance of cheap journalistic tricks—qualities rare in early Indian journalism. Three years later, Sayyid Aḥmad found himself involved in an unedifying wrangle with the protagonists of Hindi who were determined to do away with Urdu as the language of the law-courts in Upper India. This together with his visit to England in 1286–87/1869–70 gave a fresh orientation to his ideas and a new direction to his efforts and he dedicated himself to the social and intellectual regeneration of the Indian Muslims.

On his return to India Sayyid Aḥmad brought out his magazine, the *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, with the sub-title *Mohammedan Social Reformer*. This bright periodical had a chequerred career and ultimately its publication ceased in 1311/1893. Sayyid Aḥmad himself was its principal contributor. The essays that he wrote for it are universally acknowledged among the classics of Urdu literature. They examined the foundations of Muslim society and subjected Muslim institutions to a powerful searchlight. Whereas Bentham inquired into the utilitarian bases of institutions, Sayyid Aḥmad applied to them the test of reason and religious sanction. The *Tahdhīb* gathered round itself a select and highly discriminating readership which shared Sayyid Aḥmad's zeal for reform. It countered on the one hand the forces of scepticism and irreligion unleashed by Western influences, and on the other beat down the firmly entrenched opposition to Western education. Towards the end, Sayyid Aḥmad devoted himself more and more to the Muḥammadan Anglo-Oriental College which was an imaginative educational experiment intended to develop into a character-building residential institution. The College produced a unique community of alumni and in due season Aligarh became the political and educational capital of Muslim India. The cognate organization, the All-India Muḥammadan Educational Conference, founded by Sayyid Aḥmad in 1304/1886, became a lively forum for the discussion of social and educational questions and proved to be an important factor in promoting Muslim solidarity in the sub-continent.

Sayyid Aḥmad resolutely declined to be drawn into politics. "Educate, educate, educate . . ." was his watchword. His decision to hold aloof from the political movement has been often maligned and caricatured as a counsel of political reactionism. The misunderstanding arises primarily from an attempt at studying his ideas out of context and disregarding the circumstances of the times. A more realistic appraisal of his political creed in the context of contemporary events is urgently called for. Be that as it may,

Sayyid Aḥmad's political testament prevented the absorption of the Muslim community into Hindu nationalism and finally resulted in the partition of the Indian sub-continent into its Hindu and Muslim zones. He was knighted in 1305/1888, and after a long intellectual and political career passed away at Aligarh in 1315/1898 at the ripe age of eighty-one.

B

THE SAYYID AS A HISTORIAN

Sayyid Aḥmad had the intellectual make-up of a true historian and his entire thinking was coloured with a deep sense of obligation to the past. But he was seldom obsessed with it, and did not become, like Burke, one of its unreasoning worshippers. Indeed, he could distinguish between its healthy and injurious legacies. He viewed political and social problems in the light of history and his ideas bore a close resemblance to the findings of the historical school in political science. As a historian he was concrete and objective. His monograph on the history of the Mutiny in the district of Bijnaur, entitled *Tārīkh-i Sarkashī-i Bijnaur*, opens with the following observations about the responsibility of a historian:

"The contents of this book mostly deal with what I saw with my own eyes and did with my own hands. I have taken great pains to ascertain the truth of events and incidents beyond my own experience. Tampering with historical truth is a fraudulent enterprise. [It damages the truth and] its evil influence works for ever. Thus, the sinful irresponsibility of the historian becomes everlasting."

A *résumé* of Sayyid Aḥmad's historical writings must naturally begin with the *Āthār al-Ṣanādīd* which deals with the ancient buildings and historical monuments of Delhi and its suburbs. The city of Delhi is one of the oldest capitals and can boast of a hoary antiquity. It is the graveyard of dynasties and empires. Time has hallowed almost every bit of its territory. When Sayyid Aḥmad entered the field of historical research he was fascinated by the wealth of its unexplored archaeological remains. He personally surveyed some one hundred and thirty sites, measured their dimensions, transcribed their inscriptions, and reconstructed their original plans. He experienced considerable hardship in getting at the inscriptions located in different parts of the column of Quṭb Mīnār. The researcher in him was undeterred by hindrances. He tried heroically and managed to reach its height by the use of an ingenious but dangerous device. He also made a careful study of the mass of related historical materials in print as well as in manuscript and spun the data thus collected into a lively narrative of an almost encyclopedic range. While the account of the relics constitute the central theme of the book, some of its sections deal with the Fort, the aristocratic quarters, shopping centres, natural springs and the climate of Delhi, and the origin and evolution of the Urdu language. The first edition of the *Āthār* included the life-sketches of the celeb-

rities of Delhi, both dead and living, each as the heads of religious orders, poets, calligraphists, painters, and musicians. This part was omitted from later editions. The book was translated by a French Orientalist. The translation introduced Sayyid Aḥmad to the scholars of Oriental history in Europe. It is interesting to note that this clear narrative was poorly paragraphed, contained practically no punctuation marks from beginning to end, and was characterized by a certain lack of restraint in presentation. The book went through a second edition in 1270/1853, when its grosser flaws were eliminated. Its language was simplified and new materials introduced. Probably the only extant copy of this edition is to be found in the Panjab University Library, Lahore.

Sayyid Aḥmad next turned his attention to the *Ā'īn-i Akbari*, the principal source book for the colourful reign of Akbar who presided over an administration remarkable for its efficiency as well as its complexity. (The land-revenue system built up under the British was faithfully raised upon the foundations laid in the reign of this renowned monarch.) But the available copies of this classic were full of errors and were positively unserviceable for an understanding of an important epoch. Sayyid Aḥmad sought to establish the text of the great work. The job was undertaken at the request of a merchant prince of Delhi. He collected all the manuscripts within his reach and prepared his own version. To this he added a glossary of difficult phrases, unfamiliar names, and obsolete terms. Legends of the coins of different denominations were reproduced together with detailed particulars about the utensils, implements, arms, and jewellery current in Akbar's time. He also corrected, wherever he could, the inaccuracies of the author himself. All this represented an immense improvement upon the utility of the original work. But unluckily a good part of the manuscript together with its printed portions was destroyed during the Mutiny.

The reign of Fīrūz Shāh Tughlaq is another brilliant interlude in the annals of Medieval India. Fīrūz Shāh was the creator of what may be described as a welfare State, and his fame justly rests on a mild and humane administration. The record of Fīrūz Shāh's life and achievements was preserved by a contemporary named Ḍiā' al-Dīn Barni. Sayyid Aḥmad prepared a collated manuscript of Barnī's work after consulting the four available manuscripts, one of which belonged to the private library of the Mughul royalty and was highly prized for its authenticity. In the preface of the printed book Sayyid Aḥmad gave an extensive bibliography of the historical literature of the period and set down all that he had been able to gather about the life of Barni himself. The monograph, published by the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1279/1862, was encumbered with numerous printing errors for which, a high authority informs us, the responsibility must be fixed on the press and not on the editor.

Two other pamphlets reminiscent of Sayyid Aḥmad's family affiliations with the Court of Delhi deserve a passing mention. The first one, entitled *Jām-i Jam*, was a brief tabulated account of the kings of the House of Tīmūr,

beginning from the founder and ending with Bahādur Shāh II. The reign of each king was described under seventeen columns. It also carried a bibliography and was noticed in Elliot and Dawson's *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*. The second brochure catalogued the kings of Delhi from 1400 B.C. listing Queen Victoria as the 202nd sovereign in the chronological order.

A few years before the Mutiny Sayyid Aḥmad offered to compile a history of the district of Bijnaur, an offer heartily accepted by his official superiors. The self-imposed obligation led him, after a diligent search for materials, to the original records on the subject dating from the times of Akbar and Jahāngīr. This was an achievement by itself. The work was duly completed but was lost in the rising of 1273–74/1857, like some of his other works.

Jalā' al-Qulūb bi Dhikr al-Maḥbūb was a biographical account of the Prophet, old-fashioned but based on authentic sources, written to repair the deficiency of suitable reading texts at the annual birthday celebrations of the Prophet.

Tārīkh-i Sarkashī-i Bijnaur is a history of the Mutiny in a particular sector. This is, in fact, an uninterrupted day-to-day diary maintained by Sayyid Aḥmad which goes into great detail about the military and related events that took place in the district of Bijnaur between May 1857 and April 1858. He recorded all that he witnessed and preserved all that he wrote amidst the death-dealing conflagration. The fact that he had numerous enemies about him and lived in hourly peril of his life and yet kept calm enough to make regular entries in his journal, is significant. One has to be a historian to the marrow of one's bone to enter into the stream of history with a stoic indifference to one's personal circumstances.

Risālah Asbāb-i Baghāwat-i Hind is an outstanding contribution to contemporary history. It has been written with a sense of perspective which almost invariably eludes those who chronicle the happenings they have lived through. The pamphlet represents an important landmark in the evolution of Sayyid Aḥmad's mind. His former concern with history was in the nature of a disinterested intellectual and cultural pursuit. But the horrifying and humiliating consequences of the Mutiny taught him, consciously or unconsciously, to resort to history for more practical ends. One of these new motivations was to promote accord between the rulers and the ruled.

The British rule in India has a credit as well as a debit side. However admirable the qualities of the British mind, it has been too sensitive about its own prerogatives and too much off the balance to make a fair estimate of the intensity of Indian feeling and sentiment. No alien rule can be popular, and even when the British acted with the best of motives they earned little or no gratitude from the subject populace. Like all foreign masters they were prone to dwell glibly on the benefits and blessings of their own domination, but their claims were summarily dismissed by the Indians as mere hypocrisy. Some members of the ruling class who thought over the matter felt exasperated at the want of "appreciation"; others never bothered about questions of human psychology and declared bluntly, like Sir Micheal O'Dwyer half a century

later, that the dominion in India had been carved by the sword and that it could not be retained by the faint-hearted. Sayyid Aḥmad knew the British well enough and when he sat down to record his own views about the causes of the Mutiny, the psychological factor was uppermost in his mind. But this was not all. In order to provide his readers with a panoramic view of the catastrophe he gave due weight to the sociological, economic, and historical factors in formulating his view. The product exhibits a robust sense of proportion and the skill of a craftsman in making use of the raw materials of history. The book would show that Sayyid Aḥmad had almost an intuitive grasp of the techniques of scientific history-writing which were being developed in Europe about this time.

In *Risālah Asbāb-i Baghāwat-i Hind*, Sayyid Aḥmad spotlighted the errors of the administration of the East India Company and brought home the manifold Indian grievances against foreign rule. He called attention to the utter futility of a system of law-making which operated, so to speak, in a vacuum, unconcerned with the state of society; the unrestrained and irritating proselytizing zeal of the Christian missionaries who followed in the wake of the conquest; the well-founded popular suspicion about the Government's planning a wholesale conversion of the Indians to Christianity; the mistaken zeal of the Company's functionaries in helping missionary propaganda; and the mortal injury that all this inflicted on the pride of a people deeply attached to their religious creeds. In the economic sphere the Company rule had created financial and fiscal monopolies. The local industries had been crushed out of existence to create a market for British imports. A high-handed revenue settlement in Upper India and the escheat of freeholds had caused widespread misery. The disbandment of princely Courts and armies had restricted the scope for Indian talent. The officials of the East India Company showed little sympathy for the people over whom they ruled. They loved to assert their authority and savagely suppressed all manifestations of discontent. Sayyid Aḥmad explained all this without mincing words and attributed the outbreak to the ferocity of the British rule. Viewed differently, it was a powerful plea for humanizing the administration and making it responsive to the urges of the people.

Vast tracts of the country were subjected to declared or undeclared martial law in the months following the suppression of the Mutiny. Ruthlessness of the rulers was proverbial. Freedom of expression and opinion was unthinkable. It was an act of cold courage to have drawn up this indictment. Any Englishman who read it was likely to brand it treasonous and inflict the direct chastisement upon its author. Sayyid Aḥmad had the pamphlet printed in a limited number and was on the point of sending it to the Viceroy and members of the British Parliament when some of his friends dissuaded him from the course. But Sayyid Aḥmad disregarded the friendly pressure though he experienced some difficulty afterwards in clearing himself of the charges of disloyalty brought against him by his British critics.

Dr. Hunter's *The Indian Musalmans*, published in 1289/1871, was avowedly intended to pave the way to a better understanding of a "persistently belligerent" class of Asiatic subjects (i.e., the Indian Muslims), to bridge "the gap between the rulers and the ruled" and, thus, to safeguard the British power in India against the "chronic peril" facing it. Basing his assertions on the evidence adduced at successive State trials, he concluded that there was a close causal connection between the Wahābi activities and the perennially disturbed state of the North-Western Frontier. The underground movement, he went on to say, was skilfully organized, and its leaders arrogated to themselves all functions of sovereignty over their constituents. The ties which bound the members of the secret order were of extraordinary toughness and endurance. The central office, located at Patna and controlling the permanent machinery throughout the rural areas for spreading disaffection, sent out a multitude of lonely, melancholy, and wandering zealots carefully indoctrinated with treason and equipped with extensive literature on the duty of waging war against the British. An uninterrupted stream of money and ardent recruits sworn to extirpate the infidel flowed towards the frontier.

This vivid portrayal of Wahābi transgressions against law evoked a sharp protest from Sayyid Aḥmad, who characterized the book as mischievous and unhistorical. In a lengthy review of *The Indian Musalmans*, he pointed out several inaccuracies in Hunter's statement of Wahābi tenets, and critically surveyed the history of the movement from 1239/1823 up to the publication of this book. The relentless trans-border hostility to British rule, Sayyid Aḥmad declared, could not be ascribed to Wahābi fomentations. It was largely prompted by the continued presence on the Frontier of a large, disloyal, and terror-stricken population (both Hindu and Muslim), who had fled from the British territory after the Mutiny to escape the wrath of the conqueror, sought asylum with the tribes and started life afresh amidst unfamiliar surroundings. There was nothing unusual in these migrants' receiving visitors and gifts of money from their relations in India. Finally, the tribal enmity against the constituted authority in the country to the east of the river Indus became a recurring phenomenon of Indian history. The expeditions sent in the past by the Emperors Akbar, Shāh Jahān, and Aurangzīb (all Muslims) had failed to subdue the over-refractory highlanders. Studying *The Indian Musalmans* and its review by Sayyid Aḥmad together, it would appear that he had the better of the argument and many fairminded Englishmen were convinced of the invalidity of Dr. Hunter's deductions.

It has been sometimes suggested that Sayyid Aḥmad disengaged himself from historical studies after the Mutiny and that he was engrossed more and more in the advancement of social reform and the preaching of political "quietism." But that is wide of the mark. It is true that the results of his later interest in history did not issue in big volumes. But numerous later articles from his pen deal with historical subjects, and a subtle sense of history pervades the rest of his writings. In one of his letters he spoke of the

unsavoury fruit of history. The phrase was interpreted to mean that an excessive contemplation of the past was likely to act as a dope and lead the people away from the task of reform and reconstruction. A careful study of the context, however, makes it clear that this was far from his mind. He only called for a rational approach to history and a proper evaluation of its bequests. It would be more appropriate to say that Sayyid Aḥmad discovered new uses of history. He informed one of his friends from abroad that the vilification of Islam and distortion of its history in the West were directly responsible for the political adversities of the Indian Muslims. A more objective approach to the past, he felt, would go a long way in conquering the deep-rooted aversion of the West for Islam and its followers. While the nostrum was sorely needed for the West, it was about as necessary for the Muslims themselves. As a people they had to rediscover their own identity and their own ideals. What can be done depends much upon what has been. History, thus, became an instrument of Muslim renaissance in Sayyid Aḥmad's hands. History, he was careful to emphasize, was not to be treated as a jumble of useless information crammed in dusty volumes but as a continuous and meaningful record of man, living in association with his kind and toiling for the satisfaction of his material needs. This could best be brought about by integrating history with sociology. Therefore, history had to be reapproached, refathomed, and rechronicled. Sayyid Aḥmad was probably the first man of letters in the Indian sub-continent to make out a case for the reformulation of historical values. The task has been going on steadily. Still a lot remains to be accomplished. The same cry is heard from different platforms and institutions even today.

Sayyid Aḥmad had his ideas not only on the content of history but also about its form. He made a sharp distinction between history and fiction: the two belonged to different departments of literature, each with a method of its own. Historical romance was fatal to history and fiction alike. The mere stylist must never be entrusted with the job of putting history into shape. He may be tempted to sacrifice accuracy for the sake of a few smart phrases. Sayyid Aḥmad did not have a high opinion about Macaulay's talent as a historian because he (i.e., Sayyid) did not look upon history as an affair of chiselled idiom. The historiographer, according to him, must cultivate the art of expressing himself in inornate and exact prose.

Sayyid Aḥmad's own contribution to history was not inconsiderable. But the inspiration which two prolific yet conscientious historians received from him is equally important. The first among them was Shibli Nu'māni, Professor of Oriental Languages at the M. A.-O. College, who came into contact with Sayyid Aḥmad while he was yet deeply imbued with the orthodox tradition. But he gradually outgrew his narrowness of vision under the liberalizing influence of the Master. In addition to a comprehensive biography of the Prophet, he wrote a series of works on some of the leading personalities of Muslim history such as the Caliph 'Umar, al-Māmūn, Rūmi, al-Ghazāli, and

the like, and set their achievements in a clear light. He had to undertake an expensive journey to Turkey and other Muslim countries in search of material for his volumes. Written in accordance with the principles of historiography laid down by Sayyid Aḥmad, Shiblī's works had a great vogue and constituted an important force behind the Muslim renaissance in India initiated by the Aligarh Movement. The other scholar to imbibe Sayyid Aḥmad's methodology was Professor Zakā' Allah of the Central Muir College, Allahabad, whose greatest achievement was a voluminous history of India. The preface of this work reaffirms the validity of Sayyid Aḥmad's thinking and the author hastens to impress upon his readers that a fruitful study of history should enable discerning minds to discover the laws of human development. Maulawi Mehdi 'Ali, better known as Muḥsin al-Mulk, reviewed ibn Khaldūn's "Prolegomena" in the *Taḥdhīb al-Akhlāq* and introduced Urdu readers to the theories of the medieval savant. This served to induce realism about the past among later Indian Muslim writers.

C

THE SAYYID AS A REFORMER

The revolutionary changes, social and political, which came over the subcontinent in the thirteenth/nineteenth century disorganized the spiritual no less than the mundane life of the Indian Muslims. The central Muslim problem was one of adjustments to an adamant political dispensation. The process entailed a fight against the persistent antagonism between the Christian rulers and their Muslim subjects. The political rivalry between Islam and Christendom was a legacy of the past and began as far back as the second/eighth century when Muslim conquests in Europe and Africa brought the followers of the two faiths in close geographical proximity. The Crusades deepened the fissure. The European Powers felt the Turkish conquest of Constantinople as a thorn in their side. No wonder that the majority of European scholars looked at Islam through coloured glasses; they were loth to make a dispassionate study of its tenets and institutions and were content to repeat popular distortions about it. Such crudities which represented Muḥammad as an idol in the temple of Mecca and Muslims as blood-thirsty destroyers of the peace of the world and the cultures of its peoples gained wide credence. With such prepossessions, the rulers of the country were suspicious of Muslim loyalty towards the new order. There was much in Muslim thinking and conduct to confirm their misgivings. Consequently, the British would not feel secure unless they liquidated the Muslim menace. The Hindus who had lived under Muslim rule for many centuries and nursed real or fancied grievances against their former rulers were attracted by the opportunities for advancement provided by the change of masters. The leaders of thought among them discarded their ancient caste scruples and went forward to meet the British conquerors more than half way. The alliance was advantageous to both. The Muslims were slowly

crushed between the two pincers. The British ignored the very existence of Muslims and felt no qualm in sacrificing Muslim rights to advance Hindu interests. As Hindu subjects drew closer and closer to the British rulers, the Muslims drifted apart. In course of time the estrangement was complete and the two found themselves separated by an unbridgeable gulf.

Sayyid Aḥmad was a realist. He had been through the Mutiny and watched at close quarters the outcome of the conqueror's unappeasable wrath against the Muslims. 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 that their supremacy, along with that of the Western way of thinking, could not be challenged in any foreseeable 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 rancour 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, sought to establish that both Islam and Christianity were fed from the same spiritual spring. The identity of their history and family resemblance between their doctrines could be readily understood by anyone who studied and compared their contents. Sayyid Aḥmad also allowed, against the accepted Muslim belief, some sort of integrity to the existing Biblical text and showed that Christianity was a humanitarian religion which forbade all kinds of cruelty and all forms of wanton bloodshed. It would be interesting to note that this was the first commentary on the Bible in any Asian language. For obvious reasons the exposition found no favour either with Christians or with Muslims.

The Muslim society in India tabooed social intercourse with Christians under a mistaken interpretation of religion. In order to remove this social barrier, Sayyid Aḥmad wrote a pamphlet, entitled *Aḥkām-i Ṭa'ām-i Ahl-i Kitāb*, to explain that Muslim Law does not prevent Muslims from dining with Jews or Christians provided prohibited foods or drinks are not served.

Periods of transition are inevitably attended by confusion and perplexities. New education was a powerful ally of all *isms* opposed to religion and ethics. As Dr. Hunter had put it: "No young man . . . passes through our schools without learning to disbelieve the faith of his forefathers. The luxuriant religions of Asia shrivel into dry sticks when brought into contact with the icy realities of Western science."

There is nothing unusual in a conservative community rejecting all new ideas which threaten its homogeneity. The older generation among Muslims had no sense of direction. It scouted all current scientific ideas as incompatible with religion. While the Hindus took to the new education avidly, it stuck in Muslim throats. 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 the way to extinction. With his usual foresight Sayyid Aḥmad grasped the nature of the issue and devised a solution. In the

first place, he attempted a new synthesis of religious thought in Islam the central doctrine of which was that Islam was not opposed to the study of science and had nothing to fear from its impact; secondly, 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 a grounding in Western sciences. This was the basic principle of Aligarh education which brought influential elements in the Indian Muslim society into the current of modernism. If Aligarh did not develop on the lines envisaged by Sayyid Aḥmad, the failure cannot be ascribed to him. Though he said many hard things about the system of Muslim education received from the Middle Ages, it is unfair to suggest that he had set his heart on a total breach with the past. He advocated, for instance, the retention of self-perpetuating and inexpensive arrangements 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.

The proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries were giving an acute cause of anxiety to the Muslim society. The missionaries who had been allowed to settle down and pursue their vocation in the territorial possessions of the East India Company by the Charter Act of 1813 enjoyed Government patronage and used a variety of methods to secure conversions. The missionary ingress virtually became an invasion. They spread a network of schools where the Bible was placed in the hands of young pupils and its study encouraged by pecuniary rewards. Their hospitals gave free medicines to visiting patients along with doses of Christian teaching. The field behaviour of missionaries was arrogant, offensive, and aggressive. In the course of their preaching they freely entered into religious and theological disputations and indulged in intemperate language about founders of other religions and their teachings. Islam was an unfailing target of their platform invective. It was also vilified in leaflets and pamphlets. The Muslim youth was confronted with a mutilated presentation of Muslim history and doctrines to shatter his faith and breed a sense of inferiority in him. The core of missionary preaching was that Islam had outlived its day, that it could not stand scientific and intellectual scrutiny, that its appeal lay to the grosser impulses of human nature, and that it had kept the Muslim communities all over the world in a state of chronic backwardness. *The Life of Moḥammad* written by Sir William Muir, at the instance of a veteran missionary, amplified this thesis. The book based its argument on the information collected from a close study of some Muslim sources and was acclaimed as a great help to the missionary in his spiritual onslaught on Islam. Sir William had pointed to the institutions of divorce, polygamy, and slavery with the finger of scorn, though towards the end he was constrained to admit that Islam had "banished for ever many of the darker elements of superstition. . . . Idolatry vanished before the battle-cry of Islām; the doctrine of the Unity and infinite perfections of God . . . became a living principle in the

hearts and lives of the followers of Moḥammad. . . . Brotherly love is inculcated . . . within the circle of the faith . . . orphans to be protected, and slaves treated with consideration; intoxicating drinks prohibited, so that Moḥammadanism may boast of a degree of temperance unknown to any other creed."[2]

Sayyid Aḥmad wrote a refutation of this book under the title *Essays on the Life of Mohammed and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto*. This was a scientific historical study characterized by rigorous reasoning and can be rightly regarded as a specimen of the author's ripe scholarship. The materials needed for the work could not be found in India. Sayyid Aḥmad undertook a voyage to Britain where he studied in the British Museum and the India Office Library, sent for rare works from Turkish and Egyptian libraries and had numerous passages from the works of European scholars translated into English for his own use. The work proved costly. He had to sell his household effects and borrow heavily to meet the expenses of the publication.

Sayyid Aḥmad dug deep into the canonical literature of Islam. But he was no mere respecter of authority. He freely questioned the credentials of reputed commentators. In his way of thinking Ḥadīth did not furnish an adequate basis for the understanding of Islam. He held that the brilliant allegorical method of the Qur'ān made it plain that every age had to understand the Book in the light of its own requirements. Religion, Sayyid Aḥmad opined, had gathered a good deal of mass in its sojourn through time. It had been inextricably mixed up with the judgments of its exponents. It needed to be combed of all exotic ideas and placed in its proper perspective. In questioning sanctified opinions Sayyid Aḥmad emancipated the Muslim thought in India from the bondage of prescription and in this lies his monumental achievement.

Sayyid Aḥmad can justly be regarded as a maker of Urdu prose and the first real prose-writer in this language. Born out of the confluence of Persian and local Indian dialects, Urdu is a cultural heritage of Muslim rule in India. But it was as yet in a state of comparative infancy. Its thought had been enriched and mode of expression refined by a long line of illustrious poets. Its prose, however, was under-developed. Its intellectual content was small and its vocabulary could grapple only with a narrow range of subjects, like religion, history, and mysticism. Written in rhymed prose, the early Urdu books abounded in similes and metaphors and represented an unscientific and lifeless assemblage of facts with a strong didactic and other-worldly flavour. Most of the writers were old-fashioned Arabic scholars whose ponderous Urdu was beyond the comprehension of those unacquainted with that language. Their phraseology leaves the modern reader cold and sneering.

Sayyid Aḥmad worked a veritable revolution in literature. Primarily a reformer who wanted to raise his community to the intellectual level of the more advanced Western peoples, he sought to propagate his ideas through workmanlike, unvarnished Urdu prose. This purpose could be served only if

[2] Sir William Muir, *Life of Moḥammad*, John Grant, Edinburgh, 1912, p. 521.

the language was stripped of its medieval trappings and invested with a sufficiently sensitive and expressive vocabulary to absorb and expound all shades of meaning on different subjects connected with contemporary life. He made his first effort in this sphere by founding the Scientific Society at Muradabad in 1281/1864. The Society was later headquartered at Aligarh, where it 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. The translations issued by the Scientific Society are far more serviceable than the unreadable laborious work done later under princely auspices and at fabulous cost. As a writer Sayyid Aḥmad dealt with momentous issues of the day. He often wrote on controversial and debatable subjects and began them with a provocative statement. Master of a smooth and matter-of-fact style he never burdened his writings with unfamiliar terminology. His romanticism was very much subdued and was under the control of a conscious classicism. He seldom played with the feelings of his readers. He could enliven almost any subject that he chose for discussion and had all the qualities of penmanship which distinguish the true artist from a mere scribe. As he wrote he appeared to be engaged in an intimate conversation. By inimitable inductive methods he built up his arguments bit by bit with the help of shared experience leading the reader to his own conclusions and communicating to him his personal enthusiasm for social improvement. The galaxy of talent that surrounded Sayyid Aḥmad included renowned intellectuals who made valuable contributions to the Urdu language in history, criticism, mathematics, and even science. Sayyid Aḥmad made no direct contribution to poetry. With him, and after him, prose became a vehicle of awakening and instruction.

To sum up, before Sayyid Aḥmad's day Urdu was not much above the status of a dialect. It was he who transformed it into a language pulsating with life and capable of meeting the demands of a complex modern society.

An idea of Sayyid Aḥmad's notions 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 do not 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 his 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."[3]

"I wish to point out to my countrymen the futility of condemning and cursing our social heritage in the privacy of our conclaves. It is vain to look

[3] Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Maḍāmīn-i Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*.

for friends and supporters in the task of regeneration. One who wishes well of his people should come out in the open, break his own chains, and put heart into others to do the same."[4]

Sayyid Aḥmad himself lived up to these professions. He was fully imbued with the impatience of a zealot and the fervour of an iconoclast. At times he was forthright to the point of wounding others' feelings. In his reformist programme he included freedom of opinion, a critical approach to religion, the discarding of social evils imbibed from Hindu contacts, the elimination of the less desirable traits of human character such as flattery, insincerity and selfish individualism, proper observance of the cleanliness of person and environment, reforms of dress and manners of eating, the recognition of women's rights and the simplification of current forms of address in correspondence.

D

THE SAYYID AS A POLITICIAN

Sayyid Aḥmad never presented himself as a politician. At the conscious level his life-work was primarily educational and reformative. It is usual to study his political views within a narrow sector and speak of them in colourful and hostile adjectives. It is, therefore, necessary to review his political doctrines in the context of problems facing him. This alone can make his thought intelligible. For one thing, Sayyid Aḥmad was often reticent on politics. But whenever he spoke he was far from polemical. His opinions were characterized by the same candour and empirical quality which permeated his discussion on social and religious questions. A recent Indian publication has pointedly stated that each one of Sayyid Aḥmad's major projects (i.e., the Scientific Society, the M. A.-O. College, the commentary on the Bible, the plea for social reform, the commentary on the Qur'ān) was inspired by political considerations and was, directly or indirectly, designed to lead to the *political* rehabilitation of the Indian Muslims. This view is correct if the term "politics" is meant to include all that it conveyed to the ancient Greeks. But if we choose the narrower meaning, the view, though arguable, is directly disputed by his friend and biographer, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥāli, who has explained at some length that Sayyid Aḥmad's love of religion alone supplied the dynamic for all his activities.

The best theoretical statement on Sayyid Aḥmad's politics is contained in a communication which he addressed to one of his English friends. He says, "I am a Musalmān domiciled in India. Racially I am a Semite: the Arab blood still courses in my veins. The religion of Islam in which I have full and abiding faith preaches radical principles. Thus, both by blood and faith I am a true radical. . . . Islam is opposed to all forms of monarchy, whether

[4] *Ibid.*

hereditary or limited. It approves of the rule of a popularly elected president; it denounces the concentration of capital and insists upon the division of properties and possessions among legal heirs on the demise of their owners. (In this way) even a mine of wealth would suffer countless subdivisions in the course of two generations. But the religion which teaches me these principles also inculcates certain other principles. First, if God wills our subjection to another race, which grants us religious freedom, governs us justly, preserves peace, protects our life and belongings, as the British do in India, we should wish it well and owe it allegiance. . . ."[5]

The latter part of this declaration has invited strongly worded and undeserved criticism. Some have spoken of it as a new version of the divine right of rulers. But it should be clear, as we proceed, that the loyalty of which Sayyid Aḥmad spoke was the loyalty of free men and not of helots. Sayyid Aḥmad throughout prided himself on his radicalism. But, generally speaking, the content of radicalism is relative to time and place. A radical of yesterday may be the conservative of today. But Sayyid Aḥmad's liberalism has an objective stamp which will be recognized by anyone who follows his opinions carefully.

In post-Mutiny India the ruling race, with rare exceptions, displayed abnormal racial arrogance. In part this could be attributed to the Mutiny which furnished a grim background to the era which it opened. Old memories rankled on both sides. The Indians soon reconciled themselves to British rule as to a decree of fate. But the British, drunk with the pride of conquest, were always squaring the past accounts with the subjugated populace. They treated their Indian subjects as half-savages and were quick and demonstrative in heaping indignities on their heads. All Britons deemed it a national duty to exact all external courtesies from the Indians they were forced to meet in the ordinary business of life. There were few points of social contact between the two. The ruling race lived a life of its own and behaved like an army of occupation. "Apartheid" was practised by rulers in India in an obnoxious form before it made its appearance elsewhere. Whatever his rank or birth, no Indian was allowed to enter restaurants, public parks, or railway compartments frequented by Englishmen. If he did so even unwittingly, he found himself rudely thrown out. The passage of time did nothing to soften the haughtiness of the ruling class. Sayyid Aḥmad reminded them of this weakness of theirs in 1294/1877 in these words: "For a whole century and more, you, gentlemen, have lived in the same country; you have breathed the same air; you have drunk the same water; you have lived on the same crops that have given nourishment to the millions of your fellow Indian subjects, yet the absence of social intercourse, which is implied by the word friendship between the English and the people of this country has been most deplorable."[6]

[5] Nūr al-Raḥmān, *Ḥayāt-i Sir Sayyid*, pp. 123–24.
[6] G. F. I. Graham, *Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan*, London, 1885, p. 188.

The controversy which centred round the Ilbert Bill (a legislative measure which sought to extend the jurisdiction of Indian magistrates and judges of a certain standing by investing them with the power of trying European criminals) called forth an aggressive and noisy agitation from the British community resident in India, who thought that the world would end if a white man was made to stand in the dock before a magistrate with a tanned complexion. Sayyid Aḥmad committed an irredeemable sin in their eyes by recording his vote in favour of the Bill. In the course of his speech before the Legislature, on the occasion, he made out a weighty case for equality before law and observed, "I am convinced that laws based on racial discrimination will prevent the growth of friendship and amity between our two peoples. Pleasant social life and political equality are born out of subjection to a uniform system of law. It is time that all subjects of the Crown, Hindus, Muslims, Europeans, Eurasians, should enjoy the same political and constitutional rights, and be subject to the same disabilities."[7]

Towards the end of his life, Sayyid Aḥmad grew pessimistic about the likelihood of Englishmen learning to conduct themselves differently. He gave expression to his despondency in an article, a part of which runs as follows:

"In my opinion the time has not yet come, and perhaps will never come, when our European friends, conquerors of this country . . . will condescend to sit on the same bench with a conquered and naturally hated Indian. . . . If the Indian wants to keep up his self-respect . . . his life becomes unbearable. . . . If an Indian desires to obey the dictates of his conscience . . . he cannot perform his duties. . . . It is no secret that the treatment which English people accord to their own countrymen and that which they accord to Indians are as different from one another as black is from white."[8]

Sayyid Aḥmad's dealings with the British fail to corroborate the legend of "servility" assiduously circulated by an extremely vocal coterie of propagandists in the following generation. His opposition to certain policies of the Government was constant, consistent, and unsparing. He never hesitated to cross swords with insolent and ill-mannered bureaucrats and was impatient with the widespread habit of suffering official high-handedness meekly. He advised his countrymen not to put up with injustice and indignity even if it came straight from Caesar. Said he, "They [the Indians] have at present little or no voice in the management of the affairs of this country; and should any measure of the Government prove obnoxious to them, they brood over it, appearing outwardly satisfied and happy, whilst discontent is rankling in their hearts. You are in the habit of inveighing against various acts of Government in your homes—and amongst your friends, [but] in the course of your visits to [officials], you represent yourselves as quite satisfied with the justice and wisdom of the same acts."[9] Sayyid Aḥmad did not consider such a temper dignified or helpful.

[7] Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Majmū'ah-i Lectures*.
[8] Quoted in *Eminent Musalmans*, G. A. Natesan & Co., Madras, n.d., p. 35.
[9] Sayyid Aḥmad Khān, *Majmū'ah-i Lectures*, pp. 238–39.

The part played by the Urdu-Hindi controversy in shaping Hindu-Muslim relations on the political plane has often been overlooked. Sayyid Aḥmad was the first Muslim to sense the political implications of the linguistic wrangle. The dispute, the ashes of which have not yet been buried, forced itself on public attention in 1284/1867. The Hindus were determined to undo Urdu and have it replaced by Hindi as the language of the law-courts. They opened the front at Benares. Gradually, their demand gathered strength and momentum. The methods by which the friends of Hindi pursued their ends ripped open the wounds of the past and portended the inevitable conflict. Sayyid Aḥmad abandoned all hope of co-operation between Hindus and Muslims and read with uncanny sureness the writing on the wall. His oft-quoted letter, written from London in 1286/1869 in which he talked of Hindus and Muslims parting company for good, can be read as a veritable political prophecy about the 1366/1947 partition of the Indian sub-continent.

In 1295/1878 Sayyid Aḥmad was nominated as a member of the Indian Legislature and sat in this body for a little over four years. As a legislator he took his duties seriously and spoke practically on every bill that came up for discussion. He was the first Indian to introduce a private bill into the Legislature which eventually found place on the statute book. His speeches displayed a firm understanding of social questions underlying legal issues. He also interested himself in the waning fortunes of the once prosperous Muslim families and sought to arrest by legislation their increasing impoverishment. But his draft bill was not taken up on technical grounds.

The earliest political movements in India were local in character. But they soon coalesced under the auspices of the Indian National Congress. This body was actually founded by an Englishman, A. O. Hume, a retired member of the Bengal Civil Service, with the active encouragement of the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin. It was almost a Government-sponsored body and its relations with Authority were cordial in the earlier phase of its stormy career. The Congress met once a year and its annual festival of speech-making lasted for three days. Year after year, it passed resolutions demanding the introduction of Western electoral and representative institutions in India. As time went by, the influential reform movements in Hindu society were integrated with the political creed of the Indian National Congress which became the market-place of Hindu ideologies and the forum of Hindu aspirations. Sayyid Aḥmad counselled Muslims to keep away from the Congress for several cogent reasons. In education and enlightenment they were sadly behind the times and were not experienced enough for the game of politics. They had large gaps to fill and big deficiencies to make up; politics, at this stage, would prove a distracting pursuit and upset plans of educational reform and social uplift. There was nothing baneful in asking an educationally backward and economically poor people to attend to first things first. He further argued that no political movement in India could be depended upon to produce worthwhile results in the face of growing estrangement between Hindus and Muslims. Fruitful

politics could only be raised upon consensus of opinion. The conclusion is as valid in the fourteenth/twentieth century as it was in the thirteenth/nineteenth. Experience has taught the Muslims—if they are at all prepared to heed its warning—that consensus alone can give substance and reality to democratic forms and not a mechanical manipulation of the will of those in majority. Finally, India's size and racial and cultural diversities will always militate against the success of Western democratic institutions. He expressed this line of thought in one of his articles thus: "I seriously pondered over the suitability [or otherwise] of the representative system of government in India long before the Congress took up the matter. Having carefully gone through the [clearly expressed] opinions of John Stuart Mill, I am convinced that where majority vote is a decisive factor in a political system, it is essential for the electors to be united by ties of race, religion, manners, customs, culture, and historical traditions. In the presence of these conditions, representative government is practicable and useful. In their absence it would only injure the well-being and tranquillity of the land."[10]

The Muslim community could not agree to sacrifice its historic identity on the altar of a nationalism with which it had no affinities. That the Muslims formed a nation by themselves by virtue of their common adhesion to the Muslim faith, is the most recurring refrain of Sayyid Aḥmad's speeches and writings. A typical extract culled at random from an address to Muslim students at Lahore is as follows:

"I use the word *community* to include all Musalmāns. Faith in God and His Prophet and proper observance of the precepts of the faith are the only bonds that hold us together. You are irrevocably lost to us if you turn your back on religion. We have no part or lot with transgressors and derelicts even if they shine like the stars of the firmament. I want you to dive deep into European literature and sciences but at the same time I expect you to be true to your faith."[11]

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[10] *Idem*, *Ākẖiri Maḍāmīn*, p. 46.
[11] *Idem*, *Majmū'ah-i Lectures*, p. 308.

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