

**Role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in Uplifting the Muslim
Education in United India: All-India Muslim
Educational Conference- A Critical Study (1886-1897)**

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Abstract:

In mid-19th Century AD, there were a small number of educational institutions, not enough to cater the need of the people. The Muslim majority provinces such as; Punjab, Sindh, NWFP (now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) and Baluchistan remained backward in modern education due to mistrust of British rulers. On December 27, 1886, a three-day gathering of those people who supported the Muslim education, met at Aligarh to lay the foundation of Muhammadan Educational Conference. Later, it had to undergo certain changes of nomenclature and was finally known as the All India Muslim Educational Conference. It was founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and aimed to solve the problems of education among Indian Muslims and to encourage the teaching of modern sciences and literature among themselves. Article in hand highlights the role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, among others, in uplifting the Muslim education in United India during 1886-97

Key Words: *The British, Sir Syed, Muslim Education, Conference, Muslim Community.*

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan realized that even though the Aligarh Muslim College had been founded, but the problem of Indian Muslims education was not being solved from long time. One college was obviously not sufficient to solve the social and cultural problems of the Indian Muslim community.¹ The main problem was the Muslims who had been scattered all over India, were usually quite unaware of the conditions of their brothers. There was no way in which people of different regions and provinces could come across and discuss with each other their ideas and views on national educational issues. It was feared that it should move in different directions

because the Indian Muslim community which till then had been rather conservative and inactive, had now begun to move.² The Muslims of different localities had adopted different schemes for their progress unless all the energies of Muslim society were united to make a concerted effort in one direction. For this purpose, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan thought that the interest of Muslims as a community would be better served if capable and competent Muslim personalities were to be assembled at one place and discuss the Muslims problems.³

It would lead understanding and unity among the Muslims of different provinces of India. The Conference was organized by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and its first meeting was held under the presidentship of Maulvi Muhammad Samiullah Khan.⁴ The numbers of delegates from various provinces were as follows:⁵

i.	United Provinces of Agra and Oudh	45
ii.	Punjab	2
iii.	Central Provinces	14

In addition, 150 students from M.A.O College also attended the first meeting. By choosing a solid way of education and progress through consultation while accommodating the views of others, Maulvi Samiullah in his brief inaugural address hoped that Muslims would get benefit from the Conference and declared. "No course is better as I understand than this congress".⁶ Performing the function of Secretary, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan proposed the establishment of the Conference by moving the first resolution. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan said; "In view of the all-round degeneration of Muslim education and to promote it in every possible manner through national unity and cooperation. It is in the fitness of things to consider these proposals and other related important matters. People of different parts of the country should come together under the name of Muhammadan Educational Congress".⁷ To avoid from going the way of the various Anjumans which had adopted different courses of action for Muslim education, the Conference aimed "Muslims from various provinces and localities should come together every year to think over the problems of their children and prosperity in general, and through exchange of their ideas with one another for the betterment of the community by mutual discussions and whatever are found to be the best and most practicable to be adopted".⁸

The main objective behind its formation was to provide the Muslims of British India with a forum for discussion in order to remove their doubts and fears about western education and to understand Sir Syed Ahmad's ideas along with sense of the priorities on the other hand. It was also necessary to gain the moral and financial support of the elite for Aligarh College. During Sir Syed Ahmad Khan Secretary ship, from 1888-1898, Aligarh College remained the constituency of the Conference. Other

objectives included,⁹ emphasis on the need for the inclusion of European sciences and literature in curricula the patronage of oriental languages and literature; the encouragement of indigenous institutions like *Maktabas* and *Madrasahs*. In order to fulfill these objectives of the Conference, two plans were adopted:¹⁰

1. Holding the sessions of Conference regularly.
2. Setting up sub-committees.

The first object was to hold a session of the Conference every year at a suitable place, where the Muslims community was willing to take the responsibility of making arrangements for it. At this annual meeting, members of the Conference would announce any plan considered suitable for the advancement of Muslims education and after examination and discussion their proposals would be adopted or rejected by unanimous or majority vote. The second plan was to promote the aims of the Conference by setting up sub-committees, as possible, in every town or village. Wherever Islamic societies already existed, if the members agreed they would be expected from time to time to send written reports to the annual meetings of the Conference concerning the progress of schools, *Maktabas*, industries, trading and agricultural facilities and anything else which worry the Indian Muslims in the towns, villages and district of their own area. They would then be informed of any resolution which was passed by the annual Conference meeting, pertaining to their own problems and would be expected to do all they could to act upon, what had been decided.¹¹ From the very beginning the Conference was meant to be an assembly of the Muslims elite. An analysis of the members of the Conference in various sessions leads one to the conclusion that the large number of members belonged to the class which was styled as *Raees*, *Nawab*, businessman, lawyers and barristers at law. Quite a few were government officials also, the number of students of Aligarh College becoming the members of the Muhammadan Educational Conference were few in the beginning but it increased as they entered in various professions, was expected to become member of the Conference.¹²

Every old student, even though he might belong to any profession, was expected to become a member of the Conference. The number of members belonging to the teaching profession was very small. A galaxy of vigorous, enthusiastic, well-wisher and magnetic personality of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had got together at a forum, whose united force brought Syed Ahmad Khan's plan for the betterment of the Indian Muslim society through Conference.¹³

1.1 The Motives of the Conference

The Motives behind the formation of the Muslim Conference which was mainly the work of the Muslim elite of Northern India, were as follows:¹⁴

Role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in Uplifting the Muslim Education in United India

1. What should be the medium of instructions in education?
2. To extend the scope of Aligarh College to influence Muslims throughout India.
3. To provide scholarships for deserving Muslim students.
4. To compel the affluent Muslims society to influence their children for higher studies in England.
5. To point out the condition of Muslims education in various districts.
6. The improvement of religious education.

When the East India Company occupied Bengal in 1757, Hindus and Muslims maintained their own indigenous systems, deeply rooted in their traditions of learning because there was no organized state sponsored educational system in India. In the beginning, the British abstained from introducing western education. With the passage of time, however, they started thinking that what their policy and attitude should be towards the education of the Indian people. Indigenous education received some impetus in Bengal with the foundation of Calcutta *Madrassah* founded by Warren Hastings in 1781, and the Banaras Sanskrit School by Jonathan Duncan in 1792. The policy of encouraging oriental education led discussions between three groups.¹⁵

1. Evangelicals
2. Liberals
3. Utilitarian

Until 1823, the company did little for education due to its pre-occupation with and interest in the settlement of political and commercial affairs. In 1823, the British government appointed a General Committee of Public Instruction, which now continued the debate about the nature and the medium of instructions. The differences between the Anglicist and Orientalists attracted the attention of the government. The Anglicists held that western sciences and literature should be disseminated; among the Indian masses through the medium of English while Orientalists maintained that this be done in the vernacular languages. Macaulay, the President of the General Committee of Public Instruction, in his famous Minute, of February 1835, finally decided in favor of English as the medium of instruction and the promotion of western sciences and literature.¹⁶

In 1837, as an official and court language, the popularity of English increased, replacing Persian language. In 1854, Wood's Dispatch led the Government to adopt a more active education policy. Thus, in 1857, the Universities of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay were set up and the Department of Public Instruction was established consequently, the new educational system to get firm root, in India. The effects of the new system of education were felt differently by different communities.

For the Hindus it presented little problem; they took to English and western learning just as their ancestors had taken to Persian and later Urdu. However, the Muslims and especially the services families could not afford to take admission and to bear the expenses at government expensive school's as their fortunes depended on employment in government service, and towards the end of the century, jobs in government offices became increasingly hard for those who had not been studying in government schools. By 1870-71, only 14.5 per cent of the Muslims population in India was under instruction in schools, scattered over a few provinces.¹⁷

Table I
Muslims Education Growth in Different Provinces

Sr. No.	Province	Muslim Percentage
1.	Bengal and Assam	17.8
2.	Bombay	14.4
3.	Madras	4.4
4.	NWFP province and Oudh	25.3
5.	Punjab	34.9

Source: Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims, Politics of the United Provinces, Muslims 1860-1923* (London: Cambridge University, Press, 1974), 38.

It appeared that with the exception of the NWFP and Oudh the growth of Muslim education was slow, similar to other provinces. However, the position with regard to higher education was quite different. According to the statistics provided by the official reports of Public Instruction for the year 1886-1887, very few Muslims were receiving instruction as compared to the Hindus in various colleges of the following major provinces.

Table II
Number of Hindu and Muslim Scholars Receiving Instruction in 1886-1887 in Arts and Professional Colleges

Sr. No.	Provinces	Hindus	Muslims

Role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in Uplifting the Muslim Education in United India

1	Bengal and Assam	2273	138
2	Bombay	1058	60
3	Madras	2929	54
4	NWFP province and Oudh	1054	129
5	Punjab	327	131

Source: Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference: It's Contribution to the Cultural Development of Indian Muslims, 1886-1947*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001) p, 3.

Muslim indifference towards adopting modern education endangered in them a feeling of hatred against the British nation. During the war of Independence 1857, the conservatism of the Muslims kept them away from government schools and colleges which distrusted parents and they continued to send their children to the traditional *Maktabas* and *Madrasahs* where the curriculum reflected the closeness of the link between education and religion. Most of the course was rigidly confined to religious teachings and at some places, rudimentary arithmetic history and geography. Elaborating the actuality of the problem, Syed Ahmad Khan pointed out before the Indian Education Commission in 1882 that most of the Greek sciences of Logic, Philosophy, Astronomy, and Geography were translated into Arabic, accepted by the whole Muslim community without hesitation, and with slight modification and alterations, they gradually found their way into the religious books. So in the course of time these sciences were identified with their religion, and acquired a position by no means inferior to that of the sacred traditions of faith.¹⁸

Apart from Syed Ahmad Khan, other leading Muslims were also convinced that nothing but only English education can raise them to the scale of civilization. Vigorously, supporting the cause of English education in a Memorial presented to the Punjab Government on 17, April 1872, Abdul-Rahim Khan, Medical Fellow and Member of the Senate of Punjab University College, Lahore, therefore, desired the reservation of certain number of stipends for deserving Muslim students to enable them to pursue higher education.¹⁹

Earlier, Muslim attitude towards modern education was noted with concern by the public instruction department Bombay, in one of its observation on the

state of education for the year 1868-69, pointed out that nothing can be clear then that the government system of instruction has not succeeded in securing the sympathies of the people in the province, mainly because of the large proportion of Muhammadans in Sindh, people never supporting the government system of instruction. In August 1871, in a Resolution the government of the Earl of Mayo regretted that the Muslims withheld their active cooperation from the education system and lost its material and social advantages. In 1882, the Education Commission suggested a number of measures to inspire Muslims by accommodating their special needs in relation to education.²⁰ Thus the Bombay government expressed its concern that Muslims formed the bulk of the population in Sindh, but because they lagged behind in education, they were ruled by the minority of Hindus who filled most of the appointments in the administration not only in Sindh, but also in the other provinces as well there was a notable differences in the proportion of appointment held by Hindus and Muslims because of the former's lead in modern education over the latter. In 1886-87, Hindus and Muslims percentage of the total appointed on judicial posts was as below:

Table III
Hindus and Muslims Percentage on Executive and Judicial Posts in Different Provinces

r. No.	Province	Hindus Percentage	Muslims Percentage	Muslim population of these Areas
.	Bengal	83.7	8.5	31.2
.	NWFP, Oudh	50.21	45.1	14.4
.	Punjab	51.3	39.9	51.31

Source: Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference, its contribution to the cultural development of Indian Muslims*, p. 4.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was tracing the cause of the Muslims' aloofness from modern education, pointed out the following reasons:²¹

1. Political tradition
2. Social customs
3. Religious beliefs

4. Poverty

In addition to these meager resources, a feeling of pride for the glories of their past rulers of an empire, the ruin of their scholastic classics and the confiscation of many of their religious foundations in 1828. The neglect of providing separate means of Education, were other important factors put to the Education Commission by leading Muslims. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had already arrived at this conclusion ten years earlier, whatever the reason given to the Education Commission as to why Muslims objected to the education imparted by the state, in the report of the Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among the Muhammadans society in India.²² In December 1871, the object of forming the committee was to investigate the cause preventing the Muslim society from availing itself adequately of the government educational institutions and to provide ways and means by which it might be reconciled to study western arts and sciences. It offered three prizes with first being Rs.500, second; Rs.300; third, Rs.150 for the best three essays in this subject. The essay writers were to answer the following questions:²³

1. Why was the proportion of Muslim students in government schools and colleges less than that of Hindus?

2. What was the cause of the decline of oriental learning?

3. Why the education of modern sciences not introduced among Indian Muslims?

Thirty two essays were received a report of three hundred and twenty pages was prepared, pointed out the following causes:

1. In government institutions, the absence of religious education.

2. It was producing disbelief in faith because of the effects of English education.

3. The various prejudices of the Indian society.

4. The corruption of morals, politeness, and courtesy; did not fulfill the basic needs of society and the habits and manners of the Muslim society.

The Education Commission, however, did not approve the 'prejudice' that to read English was unlawful and forbidden by the laws of Islam or that it produces 'disbelief' in faith.²⁴ Syed Ahmad Khan had himself experiences in the work of the Scientific Society which he had founded in 1864, to translate western science and literature which was an inadequate solution.²⁵ This experience had taught him that it was impossible for the nation to learn modern sciences through translated books only because of its little value for the cause of higher education.²⁶ Expressing similar views in a message sent on the eve of the inauguration of the Scientific Society, Maulvi Abdul Latif Khan, an elite of Bengal and founder of the Literary Society, Calcutta said,

"We must keep in mind that these arts and science are not to be learnt by means of translation only but must also be learnt in the original language".²⁷

In the report prepared by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the Commission decided to establish a model institution in order to impart an acceptable education, based on the Anglo-oriental studies.²⁸ Under the circumstances, providing a general instruction for an All India character was necessary to discuss the educational problems facing Muslims and to determine such suitable and practical measures in order to boost their moral and intellectual development.

In fact Sir Syed sincerely believed what to be propagated and the government knew that he was not pretending. Due to this reason Mr. Kempson, the Director of Public Instruction, NWFP, pledged his cooperation and assistance within his authority when in 1863, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan announced his plan to found a literary Society during his address at Ghazi Pur.²⁹

The Duke of Argyll was the first English Duke who encouraged the Society founded by an Indian gentleman.³⁰ The Lieutenant Governors of the Punjab and NWFP accepted the vice patron-ship of the Scientific Society. Responding to the request made by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in 1865, the NWFP government agreed to purchase the publication of society worth 500 rupees annually.³¹ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was granted leave along with some facilities from the government when he decided to accompany his son Syed Mahmud,³² who was awarded a scholarship to pursue higher studies in England. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan sold his library and pledged his bungalow to meet traveling and accommodation expenses.³³ It was during the visit that he succeeded in getting an insight into English system of education and also became aware of Muslims outside India.³⁴ But first major break-through in government policy towards Muslim education, mainly brought about an impact of the writings of W.W. Hunter and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's contacts came from its Resolution of August 7, 1871, which made some special observation about Muslim education, going on to express a desire for a systematic encouragement and recognition of oriental literature and vernacular languages in education institutions, the appointment of qualified Muslim English teachers and grants in aid, so that Muslims might create schools of their own. In the light of the comments about his resolution received from various provincial governments. The Government of India arrived at the conclusion in another resolution of 13 June 1873, that the state system did not attract the Muslims to the higher ranges of our educational course or to point out which studies impress the real cultural and fit the young men for government service and open professions. It promised to diminish the inequalities in the distribution of state aid and to place Muslims upon a more sound footing with the general community through the whole course of public instruction.³⁵

The Muslim Nation's backwardness continued to receive support from well publicized statistics and elicited a good deal of official British solicitude. Mayo's education measures and Hunter's arguments about the Muslims backwardness attained on all India and government considered it important to support Muslims both socially and politically as the surest means of attaching them to their rule.³⁶ In these circumstances, some provincial governments took measure for the promotion of oriental literature. The NWFP government proposed to the Home government that it obtained the Persian and Arabic educational projects completed in Syria, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey through the Turkish and Persian consulates in Bombay and through the agency of French consulate in Algeria with a view of introducing them for the special education of Muslims. Meanwhile the NWFP government, with the approval of the home government, provided much help for the establishment of M.A.O. College at Aligarh. Sir William Muir the Lieutenant Governor of NWFP considerably encouraged the scheme by giving 74 acres of wasteland almost free of cost. As an exceptional item, an annual grant-in-aid of Rs.500 was approved. Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy (1872-76), granted Rs.10, 000 specifically for the scholars studying at Aligarh College. In addition, he wished to afford every encouragement in his power to the efforts made by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and other gentleman towards the promotion of education amongst Muslims in India, almost every Viceroy and Lieutenant Governor made occasional visits to the M.A.O. College and enhanced the image of the institution and the grandeur of its founder.³⁷

At this stage, however, these initiatives failed to make any durable impact on the community. Expressing its dissatisfaction over the statistical returns provided by the provincial reports stated in the Resolution of February 1882, the government decided to appoint an Education Commission under W.W. Hunter to investigate the problem of Indian education all over India. The Commission made 17 recommendations, concerning, special encouragement, for Muslim education.³⁸ Important among them were, recognition of Urdu, as the principal medium of importing instruction to Muslim children in primary and middle schools except where the community desired to adopt some other language. Liberal encouragement of higher education including the reservation of special scholarship and free education, employing Muslim teachers and inspecting organizers and the encouragement of Muslim educational associations. It invited the attention of the local government to the question of proportion in which state patronage is distributed among educated Muslims and other Indian society. The home government specially considered the Commission's recommendations about Muslims and declared its future policy in its Resolution of July 1885. This Resolution was a Magana Karta of Muslim education in India.³⁹

In spite of these special measures of the government, no considerable change was felt in the trend of the Muslims towards the English system of education. Most of the government's noble declarations existed on papers only on self-help and mutual cooperation existed on the part of the Muslim society, could produce a lasting impact, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan believed in the philosophy of self-help. The development of communication had also paved the way to establish contact with the people of the community, living in far flung parts of the country. This was only possible through a Conference. His continued efforts to promote cordiality between the rulers and the ruled and constant propagation of the superiority of European science and literature over oriental learning, led the government to concede his loyalty.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The removal of doubts and suspicions about western education and the government's moral support were among the main achievements of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan from the AMEC Platform. One could assume that the Conference was organized to popularize modern Education and to bring the traditional education more in line with the changing needs of the Muslim Society. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's conciliatory policy strengthened the relations between Muslims and the British Government in the perspective of the Mutiny of 1857. Thus conciliation between government and Indian Muslim society remained the cornerstone of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's policy ⁴¹ was unaffected by the attempt to revive the bogey of Muslim disloyalty, created in 1871, by Sir William Hunter in the Indian Muslim society. Most of the latter's allegations about Muslims loyalty were rebutted by India and Britain. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan questioned both his sources and interpretation, while in Britain, Sir Alfred Loyal, a fellow member of the Anglo-Indian groups, contested his observation by pointing out that Hunter had drawn his facts from the province of lower Bengal and applied his inferences to all India. The network of connections built up by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan provided him with the platform from which he successfully launched many of his social, educational and political initiatives, workable for future, which proved benefitting for the Muslims in the due course of time.

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