

Progress and the Educational Philosophy: Parallels between Syed Ahmed Khan and John Dewey

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Abstract

This paper evaluates Dewey's conception of progressive education by drawing parallels with Syed Ahmed's modernist approach to the educational philosophy. Both Dewey and Syed Ahmed are the strong adherents of progress and they believe that sound educative process plays a vital role in the development of a meaningful society, a society where one realizes that one is capable to explore knowledge in various directions which may lead one towards progress. Dewey being a pragmatist believes that progress means respect for an individual, receptivity to change and high regard for science. In Dewey's view progress can be attained by developing the culture of education. For this reason, he thinks that education is a continuous process of reconstructing one's experience as it leads to intellectual growth and in turns ensures progress. Dewey's belief is rooted in instrumentalism and not in the revealed text as conceived by Syed Ahmed. For Dewey ideas having cash value are like instruments resulting out of the consequences of actions. Dewey believes that education is synonymous with progress or growth and the process of growth never ends. It means that the most important factor in the process of education which one needs to understand is one's ability to adjust with the ever changing society. Dewey is emphasizing upon such an educational system which does not limit one to deal with some specific goals rather enables one to attain progress in a broader perspective in a given situation. Syed Ahmed being a Muslim modernist believes that progress as warranted by Islam, means intellectual growth and ability to adjust in the ever-changing world without deviating from the word of God. He thinks that it is possible only if one has a courage and insight to reinterpret the revealed truth by utilizing one's faculty of reason to march along the lines of progress. Syed Ahmed believes that true self-esteem consists not in performing rituals but in attaining knowledge of the revealed truth with the help of reason and experience. It reflects Syed Ahmed's purposive attitude towards knowledge which prepares one to live a life according to that knowledge.

This paper draws parallels between John Dewey and Syed Ahmed Khan's educational philosophies with special reference to their conception of progress. Both Syed Ahmed and Dewey are the strong

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adherents of progress and they believe that proper educative process plays an important role in the development of a meaningful society, a society where one realizes that one is capable enough to explore knowledge in various directions which may lead one towards progress. Syed Ahmed being a Muslim modernist leaves no stone unturned to establish that Islam does not bar one to attain progress. Progress as warranted by Islam, means intellectual growth and ability to adjust in the ever-changing world without deviating from the word of God. Syed Ahmed thinks that it is possible if one has a courage and ability to reinterpret the revealed truth by utilizing one's reason to march along the lines of progress with other nations. There is no harm in borrowing from other cultures without compromising one's own religious identity and cultural norms. Meaningful interaction between the Muslim community and the British empire may bridge the gap between the two communities in two ways. One is to revive the crumbling image of the Muslims as a community to sustain their intellectual worth and the other is to make colonial masters realize that Islam is not against progress if one does not transgress the limits set down by God. It reflects Syed Ahmed's pragmatic approach and its worth for progressive society. Syed Ahmed's progressivism is not confined to this world as he firmly believes in the existence of God and the revealed truth as the ultimate sources of knowledge.¹ Dewey being a pragmatist believes that progress means respect of an individual, receptivity to change and high regard for science. Syed Ahmed, like Dewey, believes that intellectual growth and self-esteem are the keys to progress as these two things are essential to revive the crumbling image of the Muslim community. Intellectual growth and self-esteem consists not in performing rituals but in attaining knowledge of the revealed truth with the help of reason and experience. Here Syed Ahmed appears to emphasize upon the role of self-understanding in an educative process.² It reflects Syed Ahmed's purposive attitude towards knowledge which prepares one to live a life according to that knowledge. In Dewey's opinion progress can be attained by developing the culture of education. For this reason, Dewey thinks that education is a continuous process of reconstructing one's experience as it leads towards intellectual growth and make progress possible. Dewey's idea of progress is rooted in instrumentalism rather than in the revealed text as he conceives ideas as instruments resulting out of the consequences of actions. For Dewey, education is synonymous

¹ Syed Ahmed Khan, *Tahdhīb al-Ikhlāq*, Vol. 2 (Lahore: Munshī Mohammed Fadluddīn, 1895), p.51.

² *Ibid.*, p.52.

with development or growth and the process of growth never ends. It means that the most important factor in the process of education which one needs to understand is one's ability to adjust with the ever-changing society. It implies that Dewey is emphasizing upon such an educational system which does not limit one to deal with some specific goals rather enables one to attain progress in a broader perspective in a given situation. Dewey says:

When it is said that education is development, everything depends how development is conceived. Our net conclusion is that life is development, and the developing, growing is life. Translated into its educational equivalents, this means (1) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; it is its own end; and that (11) the educational process is one of continual reorganizing, restructuring, transforming.³

The man-knowledge relationship: Syed Ahmed and John Dewey

Before exploring the details of John Dewey and Syed Ahmed's educational philosophies, it may be viable for one to have some idea regarding their conceptions of man and knowledge, as their educational philosophies seem to be based upon both of them. While developing his epistemology Syed Ahmed critically evaluates Ibn Rushd's conceptions of man and knowledge. Syed Ahmed seems to be in agreement with Ibn Rushd with respect to the aim of *Sharīah*, which is twofold: one is to attain knowledge of the truth (*'ilm-e-haqq*) and the other is to practice that truth (*'amal-e-haqq*). With respect to the former Ibn Rushd explains that there are two kinds of knowledge, one is imaginary (*tasawwuratī*) and the other is certain (*tasdīq*). Keeping the latter in mind Ibn Rushd describes three kinds of people determining their varying methods of attaining knowledge. First, the passive listeners (*khutabī*) who are, according to Ibn Rushd, absolutely unable to use their reason to understand the interpretation (*tā'vīl*) of the Qur'ānic text. On the contrary, they are solely dependent on others preaching with respect to the matters concerning their faith. Second, the dialecticians (*jadlī*), who habitually believe that the best way to develop one's understanding of the Qur'ānic text is to follow a dialectical method in which one enters into the process of argumentation as a result of which all such claims would be eliminated for which one does not find any justification. Third, the rationalists (*burhānīyyūn*) who are capable of interpreting the Qur'ān by using their rationality and wisdom as they know that they can

³ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), p.59.

understand things by their own with clarity and depth. Ibn Rushd is of the opinion that most of the people are the passive listeners and the dialecticians and few are the rationalists. He believes that the aim of the Qur'ān is to convey its message to the common people and also not to ignore the rationalists being able to discover the meaning of the revealed text by interpreting it.⁴ Syed Ahmed claims that Ibn Rushd's classification of man as the passive listeners, the dialecticians and the rationalists leads one to interpret that everyone is not entitled to understand the revealed text in its true spirit and only few people are skilled scholars (*rāsikhīn fī'l-ʿilm*) being capable of exploring the interpretive meaning of the revealed text. Such a classification of man undermines the potential of those who fall in the category of the passive listeners and the dialecticians as classified by Ibn Rushd. Syed Ahmed is of the opinion that Ibn Rushd's analysis of man in relation to knowledge gives an impression that Islam is a religion which compels one, who wishes to understand the meaning of the revealed text, to accept the principles of Islam without giving any satisfactory explanation and do not accommodate those who want to do away with their doubts by developing a better understanding of the revealed text in order to practice it in a more meaningful manner. Syed Ahmed supports his view with the verse 54 of *Sūrat al-Mā'idah*:

Fighting in the Way of Allah and never afraid of the
reproaches of such as find fault.⁵

It means that those whose hearts are filled with the love of God are well aware that the connotation of the term (*jī'hād*) is not only confined to (*qitāl*) and in the broader sense it refers to continuous struggle in order to develop one's understanding of the revealed text which leads one to strengthen one's faith and moral purification and shape up one's life in accord with the will of God. It means that one is supposed to explore the meanings of the Qur'ānic text in depth by utilizing one's rational faculty to the extent granted by God and should not hesitate to express it with courage.⁶

Another problem with Ibn Rushd's argument is that it minimizes the possibility of establishing the supremacy of Islam by limiting its

⁴ Syed Ahmed Khan, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (Lahore: Dost Associates, 1998), pp.635-37.

⁵ For all of the English translations of Qur'ānic verses I have referred to 'Abdullāh Yūsuf 'Alī's *Text, Translation and Commentary*, Vol. 1, two volume edition (Lahore: Sheikh Mohammed Ashraf, 1969).

⁶ This interpretation of the said *sūrah* is supported by Amin Ahsen Islahi's *Tadaburi Qur'ān, Volume 2* (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 2004).

scope particularly for the skilled scholars as mentioned above. Such an approach is not helpful in establishing Islam as a universal religion. Syed Ahmed explains:

One more thing to be noted is that when one has got himself found in doubt regarding any issue of Islam whether one is a scholar (*‘ālim*) or an ignorant (*jāhil*) person then we, instead of interpreting the issue in order to make the one be able to get rid of one’s doubt, make one admit the issue without investigation as one may not be from amongst the skilled scholars (*rāsikhīn ft’l- ‘ilm*). In this case, the faith of the one will be highly superficial in that the one will apparently say yes to the faith without believing in it by heart. Besides, the faith is not something that can be attained through lip-service only rather it is an earnest conviction that does not take roots into one’s heart until and unless the doubt is to be removed from it.⁷

In Syed Ahmed’s view, in this world, whether, scholar or ignorant there are two kinds of people: First, those who believe each and everything in Islam to be true without inquiring whether they are against the reason or out of context. Such people require no reasoning and understanding for their faith. Second, those who do not blindly accept those issues which are susceptible to doubt instead offer reason for their being true or false. Unlike Ibn Rushd, Syed Ahmed is of the opinion that one is supposed to explore all the possible interpretation of the revealed text and should not hesitate to discuss it with the people irrespective of their being ignorant layman or skilled scholars.⁸

Syed Ahmed draws his concepts of man and knowledge upon his interpretation of *Sūrat al-A‘rāf* in his *tafsīr-ul-Qur’ān*. According to his interpretation of Islam man is a composition of body and soul and the essence of man’s soul are Will (*Irādah*) and Reason⁹ (*ta‘aqqul*) which distinguishes man from all other creatures. Syed Ahmed argues that the soul and its essence are not knowable with the help of direct evidence (*‘ainī dalīl*) but with reference to the analogical evidence (*qayāsī dalīl*)

⁷ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, p.638.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.638-39.

⁹ I have used the terms Reason and Will with capital letter in connection to Syed Ahmed in order to emphasize that Reason plays a supportive role in the understanding of revealed text which is its chief purpose. Will on the other hand assumes sound knowledge of the revealed text and helps one to implement God’s system on earth.

as the former contradicts the law of nature (*qānūn-e-qudrat*)¹⁰. That is to say, Syed Ahmed intends to establish that man is so constituted by God that he is naturally unable to understand the essence (*māhīyyat*) of soul as such and any such effort or claim contradicts the law of nature. On the other hand, one may cognize about the soul by using analogical evidence, at least, for two reasons: First is due to one's firm belief in the word of God and it is mentioned in the Quran by God that soul exists. In this connection Syed Ahmed refers to the verse 85 of *Sūrat al-Asrā*:

They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say:
‘The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord: Of
knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O
man!)’.

Man being a possessor of finite intellect is unable to acquire knowledge of soul as such as mentioned by God Himself in the above *Sūrah*. The apparent meaning of the soul here is that it is a vital living force which makes life possible. The constructive or interpretive meaning of the term soul here is that it is used in the sense of God's revelation and the purpose of such an articulation is to point out that as the life of human body is dependent upon soul likewise the life of soul and reason is dependent upon God's revelation. It means that God wants man to excel in terms of knowledge and any effort in this regard is not against the will of God.¹¹

It implies that the pursuit of knowledge in the sphere of revealed sciences may help one to realize that the diction of Qur'ān is such that it encourages to contemplate upon those issues which need some reflective thinking such as, the nature of soul without transgressing the limits set down by God. Second is based upon empirical evidence, as Syed Ahmed has explained that it is a common experience that those who are committed to explore knowledge are more likely to enhance their intellectual level by attaining knowledge to the extent granted by God. Hence due to one's power of reasoning one may be able to transform oneself into an educated and civilized person which is one of the chief concerns of Islamic education. Syed Ahmed's conceptions of Will and Reason and the possibility of analogical evidence about them leads one to interpret two important aspects of human life in the context of self development. One is theoretical and the other is practical. The former is guided by human Reason and the latter by human Will. Reason helps one develop one's understanding of the revealed text and thus fulfills the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.650-51.

¹¹ This interpretation of the said *sūrah* is supported by Amin Ahsen Islahi's *Tadaburi Qur'ān*, Vol. 4 (Lahore: Faran Foundation, 2004).

theoretical aspect of one's life as it helps one cognize things according to their merit as willed by God. Will is an ability to work in accord with the directives of Reason about the issues concerning practical aspect of one's life, which is to say, drawing from the theoretical understanding of life, Reason provides solid foundations required for the ideal code of conduct. This theory-practice dichotomy is the essence of Syed Ahmed's educational philosophy and prepares one to develop such an insight which helps one to live an enriched and meaningful life. Here it is important to mention that Syed Ahmed is not a rationalist in the strict sense of the term as for him ultimate source of knowledge is the revealed text and not reason and is not willing to replace revelation with reason in any case. Syed Ahmed is not supporting such a rationalism according to which reason has absolute and independent status and is entitled to give rational explanation about everything as it has been conceived by French rationalist philosopher Rene Descartes. One may for the sake of clarity bestow Syed Ahmed's epistemic approach as bounded rationality according to which the reason is a supplementary source in the process of cognition hence the chief function of reason is to understand the meaning of revealed truth and one is not supposed to go beyond the limits set down by the law of nature.¹² In other words the function of reason is that it is bounded by the revealed truth and does not have any absolute or independent status apart from revelation. It reflects that man's rational faculty is a gift of God and is therefore subject to the will of God and one cannot cognize things for which one is not naturally capable of. So Will along Reason ensures clarity and provides a road map to live a purposeful and meaningful life in accord with the will of God which is a prerogative of man. It gives an impression that everyone is naturally endowed with a potential to develop oneself intellectually and morally but in reality very few have courage to take such a pain. Syed Ahmed argues that humans are superior to non-humans as the making of the latter is such that they are capable of performing limited and uniformed acts as their survival depends upon fulfilling some of their instinctual needs. They do not require any educative process like man as the concept of intellectual growth and decline does not apply on them. On the contrary, man being a possessor of reason with a desire for intellectual growth and satisfaction is capable of performing diverse actions as one requires an educative process which may help one to actualize one's potentialities.¹³

In order to understand Syed Ahmed's conception of reason and

¹² Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, p.650.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.650.

knowledge one should refer to his views concerning man and knowledge with its limits. He argues that it is not possible for a man to know the nature of reality as such (an indication that man's reason is finite). In other words man is designed by God in a manner that he is unable to know things as God knows them. For instance God has stated about soul in the Qur'ān and man believes that it exists as it has been said by God but it is not further explained what soul is in itself. Beside this Syed Ahmed believes that there is nothing wrong with man's rationalist attitude even towards those things whose knowledge man cannot acquire in a truer sense as it is human reason which after a thoughtful consideration distinguishes between what is knowable and what is unknowable in the light of revealed text.¹⁴ From this one can imply that the will of God is an ultimate determinant that what a man ought to know and what not ought to know or naturally beyond one's power of understanding. Syed Ahmed being a modernist appears to have firm belief that human reason and empirical attitude plays an important role in the attainment of knowledge. He seems to establish that one may refer to one's rational and empirical faculties to understand the meaning of revealed truth which is an ultimate source of knowledge and is rooted in the word of God instead of science, culture, reason and experience. He goes with reason, science, culture and experience as far as it is not going to challenge the authority of God. Here it is important to mention that Syed Ahmed's conception of reason is limited as it reflects that it cannot go beyond certain boundaries drawn by God. It implies that the chief aim of human life is to comprehend the meaning of revealed truth in order to sustain the true spirit of Islam which in turns leads man towards enlightenment and progress. Proper understanding of revealed truth is the basis of all success and progress in the world and the hereafter. Man is created in such a way that he is capable of achieving excellence by exploring knowledge in various fields, such as, revealed sciences ('*ulūm-e-ilāhīyyah*) in general and rational sciences ('*ulūm-e-'aqlīyyah*) in particular to a great extent.¹⁵ In my view Syed Ahmed being a modernist seems to establish that the role of reason in the understanding of revealed text is of high importance as it would help one develop self-understanding and prepares one to practice one's life in accordance with one's knowledge. In other words first-hand knowledge of the Qur'ān and its rational understanding may help one to do away with all those views based upon heresy and superstitions. Syed Ahmed's emphasis upon the importance of attaining knowledge in the field of rational sciences

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.639, 646, 649.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.650.

(modern education) reflects that he wants to make one realize that through cultural interaction on social and intellectual plane one may be able to come across various situations which may help one develop a critical and rational insight towards things.

Dewey, on the other hand, while writing on the position of man in the making of things and the possibility of knowledge claims that the major problem with the traditional philosophies such as Greek and the medieval was that they regarded individual to be a channel through which a universal and divine intelligence operated. He believes that the identification of the mind with the individual self and of the latter with a 'private psychic consciousness' is comparatively modern.¹⁶ It implies that for Dewey the purpose of acquiring knowledge is not to fulfill the wish of some divine intelligence through man which exists beyond one's sensory experience and the basis of acknowledging such a reality is mere speculation. Dewey believes that 'political' and 'economic individualism' after the sixteenth century paves the way for an emphasis upon the rights and duties of the individual rather than upon divine intelligence in achieving knowledge for himself.¹⁷ He further says:

Knowledge is won wholly through personal and private experience. As a consequence, mind, the source and possessor of knowledge, was thought of as wholly individual. Thus upon the educational side, we find educational reformers, like Montaigne, Bacon, Locke henceforth vehemently denouncing all learning which is acquired on hearsay, and asserting that even if beliefs happen to be true, they do not constitute knowledge unless they have grown up in and been tested by personal experience. The reaction against authority in all spheres of life, and the intensity of the struggle, against great odds, for freedom of action and inquiry, led to such an emphasis upon personal observations and ideas as in effect to isolate mind, and set it apart from the world to be known.¹⁸

From the above citation one may infer that Dewey emphasizes upon the need to reconstruct knowledge in the pragmatic perspective keeping in view the evolving social system and the possibility of growth in order to benefit from it to a greater extent. Any effort to distance knowledge from practice is not likely to serve the purpose of knowledge as in his view

¹⁶ John Dewey, *op.cit.*, pp.340-41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.341-42.

knowledge in order to be meaningful must be result oriented. Dewey is of the opinion that process of mental growth and self knowledge largely depend upon free inquiry and critical analysis which ultimately paves the way for constituting true knowledge by way of private experience. While expressing his views on knowledge Dewey has gone to such an extent that he claims that any belief if happens to be true depends upon private experience rather than any authority or tradition. Here Dewey is trying to make one realize that any effort to pursue knowledge about such a world which exists beyond one's experience is in vain.

Dewey being a pragmatist does not believe in the absoluteness of ideas and claims that ideas being relative are like instruments one may use for one's benefit or for such a knowledge which is beneficial in terms of worldly life. Dewey is least interested in testing the validity of ideas as they are (as such) in reality, as he believes in the pragmatic worth of an idea. For this very reason his philosophy deserves the title of 'Instrumentalism'.¹⁹ Dewey being interested in the fruitfulness of ideas believes that 'Participation in, rather than preparation for life, became the watchword of education'.²⁰ It means that the aim of education is to prepare one for such a social life where one learn in the process of living itself by using one's intelligence and is not supposed to behave like a passive observer as an isolated individual. Dewey being a pragmatist believes that knowledge largely depends upon practice, which is to say, any idea in order to be meaningful must have some cash value or pragmatic worth as for Dewey actions are prior to theory. Dewey seems to be least interested in any absolute ideals or claims that there is no separate domain of knowledge existing independent of the apparent world which one needs to discover in order to live a meaningful life. Dewey seems to establish that there are no fixed beliefs that exist in some other world and the quest for certain knowledge for which philosophers are striving since the time of Socrates is merely a deception as for Dewey there is no distinction between thought and action as conceived by traditional philosophers.²¹ Emphasizing upon the importance of pragmatic principle Dewey is inclined to establish that thinking arises out of the problems and needs of the practical life and such a thinking may leads one towards mental growth and progress. Hence to achieve the said goal one needs to develop strong social ties which enable one to interact with each other in a more fruitful manner.

¹⁹ Robert R. Rusk, *The Doctrines of the Great Educators* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd, 1962), p.287.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.288-89, 298-99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.288.

While emphasizing upon the importance of socialization through education Dewey opines:

If we eliminate the social factor from the child we are left only with abstraction; if we eliminate the individual factor from the society, we are left only with an inert and lifeless mass. Education, therefore, must begin with a psychological insight into the child's capacities, interests and habits. It must be controlled at every point by reference to these same considerations. These powers, interests and habits must be continually interpreted—we must know what they mean. They must be translated into terms of their social equivalents—into terms of what they are capable of in the way of social service.²²

It entails that Dewey is in favor of such an educational system which facilitates one to enhance one's intellectual capacity and promote an urge to attain distinction in various spheres of life. For this very purpose Dewey gives due place to all sorts of educational activity which proves to be a milestone in the attainment of progress. One who realizes that education is the major source to cultivate human resource into human capital through socialization is more likely to achieve one's objective. Being a pragmatist, Dewey believes in such an education system, which motivates one to actualize one's potentialities to their optimum level through social interaction in order to live a successful life. Keeping this aim in view Dewey seems to be of the opinion that education is a social activity in which individuals consider themselves as social unit and always prefer the good of society over their personal good. By doing so they are likely to attain their personal good through the process of socialization.

Progressive education

For Dewey progressivism means respect for individuality, high regard for science, and its receptivity to change should be well harmonized with the environment in which it was created.²³ Syed Ahmed distinguishes between education (*ta'lim*) and training (*tarbiyyat*). By education he means a process in which one discovers the hidden potentialities (*andrūnī qawah*) naturally ingrained by God in man and to train means to groom one in such a way that one would be able to perform various

²² John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, introduction and annotated by Martin S. Dworkin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971), p.22.

²³ Carrol Atkinson & Eugene T. Maleska, *The Story of Education* (New York/Toronto: Bantam Books, 1964), pp.86, 91.

functions in a meaningful manner according to one's potentialities. In other words education is a process in which one identifies individual differences (potentialities) and training is an effort to provide avenues to those potentialities.²⁴ It means that training without education is of no use as it does not help one to identify one's potentialities therefore one is unable to set the future course of action which is a big hurdle in the way of progress. It reflects Syed Ahmed's progressive attitude towards education. An overall impression one gets from Syed Ahmed's *Tahdhīb al-Ikhlāq* is that he seems to establish that Islam never bars one to live a successful and meaningful life in the worldly sense but one is not supposed to transgress the limits set by God. Thus a viable educational system is one which must emphasize upon the need to discover one's talent and helps one to act according to that talent in the process of socialization. It appears that Syed Ahmed's progressivism consists in knowing one's natural capacities in order to explore revealed knowledge and modern sciences. It implies that the revealed knowledge helps one establish such a viable system of education which enables one to serve at least two basic functions of education. One is to establish that there are absolute norms or principles which are immutable as they owe their origin in the word of God. The other one is to explore that Islam does support dynamism and progressive thinking provided it is not in contradiction with the will of God. This twofold aim of education may help one to actualize one's potentialities and consequently leads one towards a meaningful and purpose oriented life. It entails that Syed Ahmed like Dewey seems to establish that education should not be confined to reading books thus fulfilling its social function.

Conception of change is a vital theme of Dewey's educational theory. Education to Dewey is continuous 'reconstruction of experience', a chance to apply past experience to novel situations. For people being social animals learn well through active interplay with others and our understanding increases in a meaningful way.²⁵ For Dewey change can be directed through human intelligence. As one interacts with the environment in general and individuals in particular, one may have experience peculiarly of one's own differs from that of others. Dewey claims that with the 'advent of democracy' and 'modern industrial conditions' it has become difficult to predict about future civilization. It entails that it is not possible to prepare someone for the 'adult life' or for 'precise set of conditions'.²⁶ To prepare one for the future life means to

²⁴ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, pp.78-9.

²⁵ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, p.21.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

develop one's physical and mental capacities in such a way that one would be able to adjust oneself according to the changing circumstances. On the other hand, to me it appears that Syed Ahmed's conception of change consists in developing such a social fabric which allows one to incorporate others views and criticism. He was of the opinion that the revival of the Muslim community is dependent on its effort to adopt modern education (*jadīd ta'lim*) by evaluating its various aspects on the grounds laid down by God.²⁷ It entails that Syed Ahmed's conception of change or intellectual transformation consists in adopting rational sciences as a specialized discipline. It may help one to sharpen one's reasoning skills to develop better understanding of the revealed text by interpreting it in the light of reason in order to explore the depth of its meaning and to update oneself according to the emerging trends in the society. One may attain this aim by giving up ritualistic form of living as it contradicts the very essence of religious teachings and bars one to achieve progress in the real sense of the terms. While highlighting the social function of education Dewey says that individual is a social being and the process of education is social in nature and there is an organic relationship between an individual and the society. Dewey in his educational philosophy wants to establish that true education must originate in relation to a form of life. For Dewey the 'school life' should gradually proceed out of the 'home life'; the former should take up and continue with the activities which the child is already familiar with. School is a social Institution whose aim is to simplify existing life. Due to the complex nature of present life it is difficult for a child to avoid confusion and distraction, which may often lead him towards disintegration or undue maturity. The chief purpose of examination is to testify the fitness of child for social life. Further he says that most of the educational systems fail because they neglect this fundamental principle of the school as a form of community life. On the contrary, they considers school a place for imparting information, where certain lessons are to be learned or where certain habits are to be formed.²⁸ It entails that success of progressive society depends upon healthy social institutions, such as school, for they are the torchbearers of progress.

Dewey opines that to be progressive an education system needs to recognize individual differences among children. This principle states the need to explore child's psychological aspect in the process of education. It focuses on the importance we give to the interest of child, for if one will not identify the bent of mind child possesses it would be

²⁷ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, p.78.

²⁸ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, p.23-5.

difficult to select the area of studies for him.²⁹ This problem is very common in some societies where parents often do not consider the interest of the child, which is impediment to the progress of society in general, and individual in particular. This compulsion suppresses child's talent and causes confusion in his mind. For Dewey ideas are like instruments and can be utilized for the benefit of man in terms of their fruitful consequences. In other words education is 'reconstruction' or 'reorganization' of experience which enhances the meaning of experience and in turn increases one's ability to set the pace for the course of subsequent experience (actions).³⁰ Syed Ahmed on the other hand, believes in the objectivity of revealed truth and for him progressivism depends upon objective understanding of the revealed text. Syed Ahmed's approach is not rooted in a belief according to which fruitful outcome of certain actions constitutes knowledge. In other words for Syed Ahmed ideas are prior to actions. Syed Ahmed claims that progressive society is one which possesses an ability to accommodate new ideas through cultural assimilation or by any other means with out compromising its own cultural identity.³¹ From the above lines one may infer that cultural interaction on material and intellectual plane should aim at enriching one's attitude of mind which prepares one to understand things in a broader context through shared meanings to lay down firm epistemic foundations to explore knowledge in order to attain progress. This claim assumes that one's conception of truth always plays a vital role in the smooth functioning of an educative process as it determines the true nature of knowledge one ought to attain.

Commenting on the possibility of moral development in an educative process Dewey says that the present education system neglects the unity of practice and thought which is one of the most important factors concerning one's moral development. For, thoughts have meanings discovered through practice and active participation in the process of living. For this reason school as a social institution is supposed to link with home and all other institutions of the society³². It implies that active participation accompanied by interest in an educative process constitutes knowledge. It reflects Dewey's concern for the role of experience in the process of learning. In other words Dewey seems to convey that moral training can be imparted by shaping one's mind to

²⁹ Carrol Atkinson & Eugene T.Maleska, *op.cit.*, p.86.

³⁰ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, pp.89-90.

³¹ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, pp.345-46.

³² John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, p.24. Also see Carrol Atkinson & Eugene T.Maleska, *op.cit.*, p.86.

enter into a moral relation with others which helps one to unite one's practice and thought. Unlike Dewey, in my view Syed Ahmed seems to establish that in order to develop one's moral character one cannot rely upon such a moral theory which relies for its content upon some acts likely to be performed in the future. Contrary to Deweyian conception of morality, one in order to live a moral life must have faith in God as meanings are already given in the form of revealed text and not to be discovered through performing certain actions as conceived by Dewey. It entails that by exploring the truth of revealed text one may come to know the true meaning of moral life which leads one towards moral purification. Here Syed Ahmed seems to necessitate morality with faith and not with fruitful consequences of actions. Hence, if one lives a moral life as ordained by God it might prove to be a source of salvation in this life as well as in the life hereafter.³³

In Dewey's view education is a continuous reconstruction of living experience that is not confined to the walls of classroom.³⁴ It means that education is a life long activity and the process of education never ends. Thus any attempt to prepare students for the future in the popular sense of the term would be an activity in vain. Further he says:

The teacher is not in the school to impose certain ideas or to form certain habits in the child, but is there as a member of the community to select the influences which shall affect the child and to assist him in properly responding to these influences.³⁵

From the above citation one may infer that in this ever changing world it is very difficult to assert something about the future, so the aim of every teacher is to sharpen the adaptive skills of one's pupil, this may help one cope up with the changing circumstances in a meaningful way. Syed Ahmed seems to be in agreement with Dewey regarding the role of teacher in child's upbringing. In his view God has given different abilities to different people and it is the responsibility of every individual to discover oneself in an educative process hence the aim of teacher is to identify different potentialities among the students and to prepare them for future challenges.³⁶ In my view, unlike Dewey who believes that one cannot teach one according to some precise set of conditions, Syed Ahmed seems to establish that one can prepare students for the future as Islam provides the code of conduct in a form of revealed text which one

³³ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, pp.93-5.

³⁴ Carrol Atkinson & Eugene T. Maleska, *op.cit.*, p.86.

³⁵ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, p.24.

³⁶ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, p.24.

is supposed to refer in one's course of life. For Syed Ahmed the said ideal can be achieved by giving up false conventionality (*taqlīd*) and by highlighting those internal powers given to man by God which helps one in the avoidance of evil and leads one towards higher form of life in accord with the divine command.³⁷ Highlighting the importance of discovering natural good among children Syed Ahmed says that one should take care of children at the tender age as some of the habits (*'ādāt*) acquire at this stage may become the part of their nature if not controlled at the right time.³⁸ It implies that man by nature has been created good by the creator and if receives proper education and training is likely to attain progress in various spheres of life; on the other hand if one is habituated to false things by acting against the word of God, one is likely to crumble down. Following the spirit of Syed Ahmed's educational philosophy being serious about man's progress, one is suppose to develop such a viable system of education which must allows one to utilize one's natural talent ingrained by God to its full extent. Dewey like Syed Ahmed realizes that formation of habits at the tender age plays an important role in the development of man. Dewey in his major work *Democracy and Education* explains that the habit is an ability to use natural conditions as a means to ends. In addition, it is a source to have an 'active control of the environment' through control of the 'organs of action'. Education is a process through which one learns how to transform the environment instead of adjusting passively by acquiring certain habits prevailing in the society.³⁹ Here Dewey is asserting that man is able to resist against all odds of the society which are detrimental for self knowledge and progress. In this context Syed Ahmed realizes that there always exists a conception of good among the habitants of any society which helps one to distinguish between good and evil and sets the pace for educative process for a meaningful life. Arguing against the theory of cultural relativism he believes that truth is not cultural specific but absolute (good in itself) hence no one is supposed to follow things merely on the basis of unreasonable conventionality and habitually.⁴⁰ Syed Ahmed opines that man being endowed with rationality must deliberate freely without any bias in the making of knowledge and should not take things for granted.⁴¹ Man can transform environment by analyzing and identifying those ills and

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.24-5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.57-8.

³⁹ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, pp.54-7.

⁴⁰ Syed Ahmed Khan, *op.cit.*, p.4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

interpolations which has made inroads into Islam due to lack of acumen and unreasonable conventionality. He feels that there is an urgent need to reinterpret Islam in the light of reason in order to restore its true spirit which helps one to survive with dignity and leads towards progress.⁴²

Dewey in his pioneer work on education '*Democracy and Education*' seems to strengthen the social aspect of education. He states that one should take cognizance against increased personal independence as it may decrease the social capacity of an individual.⁴³ It implies that in some sense social goals are equivalent to intellectual goals. From a social standpoint, a diverse and rich social fabric denotes power rather than weakness; as it involves interdependence. In other words one should realize that man being a social animal cannot live in isolation. Society is a place where individuals exchange favors and services on reciprocal basis according to their capacities and skills. It reflects Dewey's pragmatism and his concern for the process of socialization in education as he is trying to accommodate pluralistic feelings in his educational philosophy. For those nations which do not think for their well-being and progress are less likely to achieve distinction in any fields.⁴⁴ It implies that Dewey is not in favor of those schools where child gets to know things according to some of the established norms of the past which are no more relevant in the present-day society. It implies that school is a place which helps a child in the process of socialization where one is likely to get every chance to develop one's critical insight. This will help one to analyze and evaluate things while coming across to others in life. It means that the aim of progressive education is to develop one's rational faculty which enables one to sharpen one's analytical skills and decision making power.

In Dewey's view habit is an ability to use natural conditions as means to ends. It helps one to control one's environment actively. But education does not consist in acquisition of certain habits which help one to adjust with one's environment. 'The environment is thought of as something fixed, providing in its fixity the end and standard of changes taking place in the organism; adjustment is just fitting us to the fixity of external conditions'. This is what sometime refers as 'passive adjustment' by Dewey which he criticizes on many occasions. This adjustment is simply a confirmation with the environment and hinders the process of growth and change which is the most important factor in

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁴³ John J. Stuhr, *Classical American Philosophy, Essential Readings & Interpretive Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press (1987), p.378.

⁴⁴ Carrol Atkinson & Eugene T. Maleska, *op.cit.*, p.86.

Dewey's educational philosophy⁴⁵. Dewey believes that educative process must be dynamic and based upon pragmatic ideals which help one to adjust with the ever-changing society. He says:

It is commonplace to say that education should not cease when one leaves the school. The point of this commonplace is that the purpose of school education is to ensure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that ensure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling'.⁴⁶

This principle of Dewey implies that, the process of education should not be confined to educational institution only and one must learn how to reflect and decide in real life situations. It means that education is a social activity which ensures self-development and hence enable one to face the challenges of life and helps one to adjust actively in an efficient manner in an ever-changing society. In Dewey's view education is an important source of social transformation which leads one towards progress. He strongly opposes the narrow-minded teaching methods of his times and focuses upon the need to broaden child's outlook. He says it is not sufficient to enhance child's ability in 'reading' and 'writing', improvements in 'manners' and 'punctuality'. Education is something more than this.⁴⁷ It is the process in which one learns how to live according to the changes occurring in the society. This principle in Dewey's educational philosophy provides an impetus which emphasizes upon the need to develop child's social view in the process of education. This also helps to enhance one's interpreting skills, as interpretation requires sound understanding of social situation. In this regard Dewey quotes Horace Mann who says, 'Where anything is growing one former is worth a thousand reformers'.⁴⁸

Dewey thinks that restructuring in the method and curriculum of education is the result of changing social situation and is an effort to meet the needs of the new society which is in the process of formation. This is the new idea of education based upon experimentalism, which leads toward social reformation.⁴⁹ In Dewey's educational theory, social aspect of education is very strong. He believes that society is a place where individual lives in the form of group or community in order to

⁴⁵ John J. Stuhr, *op.cit.*, pp.379-80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.382.

⁴⁷ John Dewey, *Dewey on Education*, p.34.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.34.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.33-4.

protect their mutual interests which are usually common. Commonality in needs and objectives require a 'growing interchange of thought' and 'growing unity of sympathetic feeling.' He says:

The radical reason that the present school cannot organize itself as a natural social unit is because just this element of common and productive activity is absent. Upon the playground, in game and sport, social organization takes place spontaneously and inevitably'.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

The above discussion entails that there are some parallels between Syed Ahmed and Dewey at least for two basic reasons: one is that both of them are in favor of progressive education which is synonymous to intellectual growth. The other is their view that a civilized society is one where people realize that meaningful life depends upon diversified approach towards knowledge. Despite the similarities in their aims Syed Ahmed and Dewey both differ in their ways to attain the said objectives. Syed Ahmed appears to agree with Dewey concerning progressive education and for this reason they are in favor of healthy social environment which helps one attain progress in every sphere of human life-world, but they differ in their conception of progress as for Syed Ahmed it means to live a life according to the dictates of revealed text. Hence the understanding of the revealed truth is an assurance of progress, fulfilling the needs of this world as well as the world hereafter. Dewey's conception of progress on the other hand depends upon the success in this worldly life. Hence only those actions are good which bring fruitful consequence leading towards meaningful life. Syed Ahmed, being a modernist, opines that the process of attaining knowledge should not be confined to theological science and one is supposed to explore knowledge in the domain of modern science as it broadens one's perspective and provides an impetus for intellectual growth.⁵¹ It means he was in favor of such an educational system which must satisfy one's spiritual needs in the context of religion as well as one's worldly needs. Dewey's educational philosophy, on the other hand, is rooted in pragmatist conception of man for whom, knowledge in order to be fruitful must fulfill the needs of ever-changing society without referring to any kind of absolute ideal. For this reason he emphasizes upon the need to develop methods of problem-solving. If one learns how to solve problems one would be better fitted for living in the ever-

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.192-93.

changing world with its manifold perplexities and evernew problems. It appears that Dewey is presuming that even without knowing the specific nature of problem which may come across in life one could be trained to tackle any such problem. Syed Ahmed, on the other hand, has deeply analyzed the nature of man and argues that man being created by God as a rational being may explore knowledge in various areas by using his intellect. Beside this, it also satisfies man's natural urge for intellectual development. He is of the opinion that there is an intimate relation between faith and reason as rational explanation (wherever possible because of man's bounded rationality) may strengthen one's faith. Process of intellectual growth begins with reflective thinking and gradually helps one develop critical insight which prepares one to evaluate things with an open mind by utilizing one's cognitive faculties. The process of reflective thinking largely depends upon one's conception of metaphysical reality which regulates one's conduct of thinking and sets the pace for future progress. It implies an intimate connection between knowledge and practice. To put in Aristotelian fashion genuine knowledge must precede right praxis (action). The epistemic claim of Syed Ahmed and Dewey needs to be understood in the context of their conception of man. For Syed Ahmed man is not only a sensual being but there are spiritual aspect of one's being which need to be explored in terms of one's relation with God as a creator and should not be reduced to this-worldly life only. This approach leads one to interpreting progress as a means to understand the interpretive meanings of the revealed text and to live life accordingly. Dewey on the other hand evaluates man merely as a sensual being understood in terms of practical or worldly life only, as man is nothing beyond the sphere of this apparent life. It entails that Dewey's epistemology is leaning towards experimentalism and pave the way for radical pragmatism. Dewey's theory of progressive education consists of an idea that one, rather being trained in various disciplines, should preferably be trained to deal with various situations that one comes across. One learns to adjust in one's environment and develop means which may help to solve problems of practical life.