

## *Notes*

# **Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Historical Writings**

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Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was interested in history and history-writing. His areas of interest were Islamic and South Asian history. In this essay, we examine certain relevant facets of this interest and its manifestation.

There are a vast number of studies on the life, achievements and goals of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan [1817-1898]. His essays have been collected from his journalism in 18 volumes by Muhammad Ismail Panipati<sup>1</sup> and his other writings, lectures and letters have also received editorial attention. A useful tool in this regard is the compilation titled *Kitabiyat-i-Sir Syed* made by Ziauddin Lahori.<sup>2</sup> As this paper focuses on Sir Syed's historical writings, we may mention here a recent doctoral thesis of Syeda Jabin Zehra on this very topic.<sup>3</sup> As a matter of fact, any and all of Sir Syed's writings be they on education or religion now come under the ambit of history but our narrower focus will be on those writings that deal with history as history alone though they may also admit of other classifications.

Sir Syed's historical debut was made in 1840 with the publication of *Jaam-i-Jam*.<sup>4</sup> This was an invaluable index to 5000 years of Indian history supplying the names of various rulers of India, their dates of birth and death, the names of their fathers and even their mothers. Sir Syed was also the first Muslim to use numismatics as a source of history. This extended essay was later expanded into a full book titled *Silsilat-ul-Muluk* [1852] at the request of Edward Thomas who used it as a source for his *Chronicles of the Pathan Kings of Delhi*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> M. Ismail Panipati [ed.], *Maqalat-i-Sir Syed*, 18 Vols., Lahore: 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Ziauddin Lahori, *Kitabiyat-i-Sir Syed*, Lahore, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Syeda Jabin Zehra, *Sir Syed ki tarikh navisi* (Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Department of Islamic History, University of Karachi, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Originally printed in Agra in 1840.

<sup>5</sup> Originally printed from Delhi.

After this, in 1842, Sir Syed wrote a brief biography of the Holy Prophet titled *Jazb al-qulub fi dhikr al-mahbub*.<sup>6</sup> This was based on the *Mudarij al-nubuwwah* of Shaykh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Delhvi. Later, Sir Syed revised parts of the book as he became more and more source critical.

The monumental *Asar al-Sanadid* [1847] was a remarkable and indeed encyclopedic account of the monuments, mosques, tombs, pleasure gardens, bridges and other places of historical interest in Delhi and its environs.<sup>7</sup> The fourth chapter is especially interesting as it gives a brief biographical account of the scholars, poets, saints, artisans, calligraphers and musicians that lived in Delhi in previous ages. A friend of Sir Syed, Arthur A. Roberts, took the book to England and presented it to the Royal Asiatic Society whereby the Society conferred membership on Sir Syed.<sup>8</sup> The translation of the same book was made by Garcin de Tassy from Paris in 1862.<sup>9</sup>

Sir Syed was a member of the Archaeological Society of Delhi with the Resident, Sir Thomas Metcalfe, as President. In that capacity, Sir Syed examined the composition and ingredients of the bricks composing the various structures of the Delhi monuments and wrote a learned paper titled *On the bricks employed in different ages in India* [in Urdu]. Sir Syed also presented two bricks to the Society's museum in October, 1852. The article was translated into English and contains the important observation that the ages of monuments can be deduced from the changes in the strength and colour of their bricks. Certainly, Sir Syed's natural curiosity led him to make such useful discoveries on his own.<sup>10</sup>

His interest in history led him to the edition of important historical works of medieval India. The *Ain-i-Akbari* – an administrative gazetteer of India at the time of Emperor Akbar [r. 1557-1604] — was packed with important information in several areas. This he edited in 1855. The next work was the *Tarikh-i-Ferozshahi* that was critically edited and published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in its *Bibliotheca Indica* series. Sir Syed himself edited and printed at his own press the famous

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<sup>6</sup> Originally printed from Delhi.

<sup>7</sup> Originally printed from Delhi.

<sup>8</sup> Amadeo Maiello, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, Naples: 1973 (Originally a thesis submitted to the Oriental Languages Institute, Naples, Italy).

<sup>9</sup> S.M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim Civilization and the Birth of Pakistan*, Lahore: 1987, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Iqtidar H. Siddiqui, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Approach to History and History Writing", *Sir Syed Centenary Papers*, Karachi: 1998, 120.

autobiography titled the *Tuzuk-i-Jahangiri* in 1863-64. As C.W. Troll writes: "Sir Syed Ahmad's critical edition of Diya ul-din Barani's 1862 work and the one brought out in 1864 are further proofs of the his pronounced interest in historical writing".<sup>11</sup> These important works reflect the "high noon of empire" of the Muslims in the subcontinent. However, Sir Syed was critical of the indifferent attitude of Muslims towards their glorious past as presented in his inaugural address to the Scientific Society on 9 January 1863 where he said:

My countrymen are ignorant of the historical events of the past and unable to draw any lesson from them for the future. They have no idea how the small nations of the world have made progress and become great like the big shady trees. They have no knowledge of great nations that once thrived like a huge blossoming fruit tree but faded and perished. As regards the histories written in Asia, they suffer from verbosity and do not give information about events of cultural significance. For these historians, historiography means the mentioning of dates of the accession or death of individual kings, the battles they fought or the territories they seized. They do not attach importance to the description of causes responsible for the rise and fall of civilizations.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Syed also encouraged his friend and biographer, Altaf Husain Hali, to compose his famous *Musaddas* describing the history of Islam, its peaks and troughs in simple, appealing language in Urdu verse. At every stage, the lessons drawn from great events in history are highlighted.

The Mutiny [1857] marked a watershed in Sir Syed's professional and academic life. He was totally shattered by what he saw as a futile attempt to shake off an invincible foreign yoke with disastrous consequences for the Muslims. He resolved to serve the British through his remaining life with loyalty and to bridge the gulf that yawned between them and those who they regarded as the perpetrators of the evil event.

His major post-Mutiny writing consists of the *Tarikh Sarkashi-i-Bijnore* and the *Asbab Baghawat-i-Hind*. In the first book, he gave an eyewitness account of the rebellion in Bijnore from May 1857 to April 1858 when he was posted there. As he was an active participant in the events he describes, this is not only a first-person account but is also a

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<sup>11</sup> Clive Troll, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: reinterpretation of Muslim theology*, Karachi: 1979, 194.

<sup>12</sup> Siddiqui, 123.

first-hand account, especially of the negotiations he conducted with the rebel Nawab Mahmud Khan of Bijnore for the safe conduct of British prisoners. The book is a basic source of information on the Mutiny and gives authentic knowledge of day-to-day negotiations. The conclusion gives his historic judgement on the whole sordid business. Sir Syed interprets the defeat of the Indians at the hands of the British as a punishment from God for acting ungratefully. This is how his twisted dialectics presented the picture to a gullible public.<sup>13</sup>

In the second book that deals with the Mutiny and its causes, the first edition was surreptitiously printed from 'Benares' which in fact was a substitute for London in 1873 long after the Mutiny. When the English version became popular, the Urdu version was printed.<sup>14</sup> This has been endlessly been discussed and debated. Sir Syed states that the attempts of the British to interfere in long-established customs of the Indians and their insensitivity to matters of Indian import rendered them indifferent to the mass of anti-British feeling that was being promoted by such actions. Missionaries and their brutish methods made both Hindus and Muslims suspicious of British intentions. In addition, heavy taxes, confiscation of property, lack of jobs, ignorance of the socio-cultural ethos of the people they ruled — all fostered a supercilious attitude based on contempt and degradation of their subjects. It does not blame the British squarely for all these lapses but urges patience on the part of their subjects. It is like giving a Papal pardon to the perpetrators of Auschwitz. The *Khutbat-i-Ahmadiyya* of 1870 published in English translation while Sir Syed was in London<sup>15</sup> was a series of essays on the life of the Holy Prophet [PBUH] It was originally intended to refute the malicious and untrue statements contained in the book *Life of Mahomet* by Sir William Muir, Governor of the North-West provinces in India. The essays are prefaced with a critique of the sources used both by Sir William Muir and himself with his own preferences highlighted. Strangely, he feels that the *hadith* which comprise the basic information about the Holy Prophet's life does not come upto the level of the later sources viz. the books of *tarikh* and *sirah* whose authors freely used the *hadith* for information supplied in their books. He is prejudiced against all marvelous accounts and paranormal occurrences reported in the *hadith*. Unknowingly, his approach makes the books which he prefers also seem weak as their authors do not share this prejudice with him. But although

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<sup>13</sup> Translation by Morris Denbo in Hafeez Malik [ed.], *Political Profile of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: A Documentary Record*, Karachi: 1982, 7-130.

<sup>14</sup> Reprinted in Malik, 131-83.

<sup>15</sup> Originally printed from London in 1870.

the ignorant and biased Europeans wrote books full of horrible calumnies against the Prophet, they do not come in for strong but justified criticism by Sir Syed. At one place, Sir Syed praises Gibbon for presenting a sympathetic picture of the rise of Islam in his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*; at another place he himself refutes certain ‘absurd’ claims made by Gibbon in the same context. The essays are twelve in number and contain some of the following topics:

- i. Historical geography of Arabia
- ii. the pre-Islamic Arab religions
- iii. whether Islam has been beneficial or injurious to human society
- iv. on the Holy Quran
- v. on the pedigree of the Holy Prophet
- vi. on the birth and childhood of the Holy Prophet.

The last work of a historical nature written by Sir Syed was a biography of his maternal grandfather, Farid Ahmad Khan, who served as prime minister to the Mogul Emperor Akbar Shah II. We have commented on two editions of this work – titled *Sirat-i-Faridia* - as recently edited in the journal *Pakistan Perspectives*.<sup>16</sup> It is an intimate and informal account evoking much of the socio-cultural ethos of Delhi as it existed in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The picture drawn by Sir Syed of his mother is especially delightful.

It may be useful to see whether Sir Syed planned or projected a ‘philosophy of history’<sup>17</sup> in his works. His earlier works were purely descriptive or narrative. His later critiques of religion i.e. Islam were based on his unique interpretation of it that one observes a set of assumptions at work. There is a ‘speculative philosophy of history’ employed as unwavering criteria to judge the events of a thousand years previously – all of which have to come up to the criteria of acceptability as professed by him or in accordance with later discoveries. Spiritual phenomena cannot be judged by material or scientific criteria. Sir Syed’s favourite assertion that the Quran is the ‘Word of God’ and the universe is the ‘Work of God’. Thus there cannot be any contradiction between the Word and the Work – both issuing from God. But any contradiction occurring would necessitate [according to him] a removal of the misunderstanding caused by a faulty comprehension of the Quranic text rather than by a scientific investigation of the cosmos for which the world may not have the facilities. Sir Syed is not concerned with the contradictions between Christianity and science or ‘nature’ but reserves his destructive criticism for Islam. It would be fair and proper not to

<sup>16</sup> Printed in *Pakistan Perspectives* 21, 2 (2016).

<sup>17</sup> See the discussion M.C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, London: 2010.

selectively apply the principles of judgement but to extend them to all aspects of material and non-material phenomena. Sir Syed ignores or is unaware that science is not immutable. Its laws are subject to change and variation and earlier facts are liable to be overthrown by later scientific discoveries.

In conclusion, we may cite two opinions of eminent scholars on the quality of Sir Syed's historical writing. Prof, Ali Mohsin Siddiqui writes: 'Sir Syed's dealing with controversial matters in historical writing exhibits not only his great knowledge but also his far-ranging vision'.<sup>18</sup> Secondly, Dr. Mahmud Husain writes: 'It is a source of wonder that a busy professional could find the time to write so much and when we examine his writing, whether from the point-of-view of elegance of style or devotion to the principles of historical writing, we see both its importance and value'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Sir Syed ki Tarikhi Tasnifat", in *Barg-i-gul, Sir Syed Number*, Urdu College Magazine, Karachi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, n.d., 183.

<sup>19</sup> "Sir Syed ba-haysiyat mu'arrikh", *ibid.*, 147.