

## ***Comment***

# **Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim Nationalism**

***Sharif al Mujahid\****

Within a brief span of some fifty years between 1880s and 1930s, three most outstanding Muslim leaders who had so enthusiastically started out as staunch Indian nationalists, ended up finally at the threshold of Muslim nationalism. In the ultimate analysis, their paradigmatic shift from one end of the political spectrum to the other was responsible for Muslims carving out for themselves a separate destiny and an independent state of their own out of India's body politic. They were: Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-98), Allama Iqbal (1876-1938), and Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah (1876-1948). Jinnah became the founding father of Pakistan, Iqbal the poet-philosopher and ideologue, and Sir Syed, though hardly perceptible at the time, the founder of Muslim nationalism.

In laying its foundations in the inhospitable, indeed hostile milieu of 1880s, Sir Syed, though by no means consciously, made possible the emergence of Iqbal as the passionate articulator of Muslim India's most cherished hopes, aspirations and yearnings, and of Jinnah as the political craftman to translate them into a viable power-sharing mechanism, to carve out for that nationalism a territorial abode, and ensure for it an existential career. Hence, but for Sir Syed and what all he did during 1860s-90s, there would have been no Iqbal and no Jinnah – in the sense we know them, in the sense that they occupy their respective niches in our national pantheon. And since it was Sir Syed that had initiated the educational, intellectual, ideological, cultural and political trends and engendered tendencies that laid the groundwork for a Muslim renaissance in India, eventuating in the demand for, and the emergence

---

\* Prof. Sharif al Mujahid, an HEC Distinguished National Professor, has co-edited Unesco's *History of Humanity*, Vol. VI and *The Jinnah Anthology* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn., 2012) and edited *In Quest of Jinnah* (2007), the only oral history on Pakistan's founding father.

of, Pakistan, it is evident that but for him there would have been no Pakistan as well.

Yet, it must be said that in doing what all he did he was not too conscious of the trends he was initiating, of their full implications, or what they would eventuate in. Like other leaders called upon to give a lead at forking points on the historical road, Sir Syed, in the first place, was primarily reacting to the environment, to the cultural and ideological challenges of his day in the light of the influences he had received from the historic sphere which had in the first place moulded and shaped his own personality. As Karl Marx says, 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted by the past'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as Plekhanov, one of the foremost theoretician of orthodox Marxism, points out, 'the activities of individuals cannot help being important in history', nor can the individual be considered a *quantite negligeable*.<sup>2</sup> And certainly Sir Syed, who bestrode the Indo-Muslim scene like a colossus in late nineteenth century colonial India, was by no means a negligible quantity.

Hence, *a la* Sydney Hook's 'event-making' man, he also exerted his influence upon the historical level, thereby creating 'a fork in the historical road' and leaving 'the positive imprint of his personality upon history – an imprint that is still observable after he has disappeared from the scene'.<sup>3</sup>

## I

Like Iqbal and Jinnah, Sir Syed had initially considered both Hindus and Muslims as one *qawm* ('nation'), arguing that 'the word *qawm* is used for the inhabitants of a country, even though they have characteristics of

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970), 1:398.

<sup>2</sup> Georgi Plekhanov, 'The Role of the Individual in History', in Patric Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1959), pp.141-47.

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (Boston: Beacon Press 1956) p.157. Hook delineates his typology of an event-making vs an eventful man in history as follows: 'The *eventful* man in history is any man whose action influenced subsequent developments along a quite different course than would have been followed if these actions had not been taken. The *event-making* man is an eventful man whose actions are the consequence of outstanding capacities of intelligence, will, and character rather than of accidents of position . . . a hero is great not merely in virtue of what he does but in virtue of what he is'.

their own'.<sup>4</sup> Again: 'By the word *qawm*, I mean both Hindus and Muslims. That is the way in which I define the word nation (*qawm*). In my opinion, it matters not whatever be their religious beliefs, because we cannot see anything of it; but what we see is that all of us, either Hindus or Muslims, live on one soil, are governed by one and the same ruler, have the same sources of our benefits, and equally share the hardships of a famine. These are the various reasons why I designate both the nationalities that inhabit by the term "Hindu" – that is, the nation (*qawm*) which lives in India'.<sup>5</sup>

At times he also waxed eloquent about the factor of common territory, exhorting, 'O! ye Hindus and Muslims? Do you live in any country other than India? Don't you get cremated on or buried under the same soil? If you do, then remember Hindu and Muslim are merely religious terms – the Hindus, the Muslims, and even the Christians constitute one nation by virtue of living in the same country'.<sup>6</sup>

A master of imagery, he described India as 'a beautiful bride blessed by two attractive eyes – the Hindus and the Muslims. If they maintain enmity or hypocritical (*nifaa*) relations with each other, [the bride] will look one-eyed. So! Inhabitants of India, do as you will – make this bride cross-eyed or one-eyed [or preserve both her eyes]'.<sup>7</sup>

Despite all this, he also harboured a Muslim nationalist strand *a la* Iqbal, though. He told Nawab Muhamamd Abdul Latif's (1928-93) Calcutta-based Mahomedan Literary Society (f.1863) in 1872 that it was the love of the Muslim nation that had inspired him to undertake a comprehensive programme of educational, cultural, social and political uplift of the Muslims. During 1870-71, he adopted the Tunisian motto on patriotism replacing 'native land' in the first verse and 'country' in the second one by 'nation'. Thus adapted, his motto read as follows:

<sup>4</sup> Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 'Talim aur Ittefaq' *Maqalat-i-Sir Sayyid: Taqdiri Maqlat* (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1963), p.160 cited in Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.244.

<sup>5</sup> Syed Iqbal Ali, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan ka Safar Namah-i-Punjab*, Aligarh Institute Gazette Press, 1884, pp.160-61.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.161; see also Hafeez Malik, *op.cit.*, p.245.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *ibid.* Syed Tufail Ahmad, an old Aligarhian, uses excerpts from Sir Syed's speeches during his Punjab tour (1884) to flaunt the view that Sir Syed was a staunch nationalist until Principal Beck of the M.A.O. College, stepped in to deflect him from the nationalist path. See *Musalmanon ka Raushan Mustaqbal* (Badayun: Nizami Press 1939), pp.288-312.

Love of the nation is part of Faith.

Whosoever strives for the progress of his nation really endeavours to raise the honour of his religion.

In India's case, he believed that the native land and the nation were not synonymous.<sup>8</sup> He considered Islam, *a la* Iqbal, as a culture-building and nation-building force, and to him religion constituted the basic ingredient of the concept of nationality. Consider, for instance, the following excerpts from his various discourses.

Some reflection is required to grasp the nature of Muslim nationality. From time immemorial, communities have been held together by ties of common descent or common homeland. The Prophet Muhammad obliterated all territorial and ancestral conventions and laid the foundations of a broad and enduring kinship which comprehends all those who subscribe to the formula of faith . . . This tribe divine assimilates all human beings, regardless of colour or place of birth.<sup>9</sup>

We Muslims should hold religion in our right hand and worldly pursuits in the left . . . In Islam alone lies our salvation [he told a gathering of Muslim students at Lahore]. I use the word community to include all Muslims. Faith in God and His Prophet and the proper observance of the precepts of the faith are the only bonds that hold us together. You are irrevocably lost to us if you turn your back upon religion. We have no part or lot with transgressors or derelicts, even if they shine like the stars of the firmament. I want you to dive deep into European literature and sciences, but at the same time I expect you to be true to your faith.<sup>10</sup>

Describing the aims of Aligarh education, he told the Mohammadan Educational Conference:

Internal solidarity is the first requisite of our national well-being. It is essential for us to practise Islam. Our youth must receive instruction in religion and its history alongside English education. They must be taught the postulate of Islamic brotherhood, which is the most vital and intimate

---

<sup>8</sup> *Maqalat-e-Sir Sayyid: Madamin muta'alliq Tahdhib-al-Akhlaq* (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1962), pp.42-53; Hafeez Malik, *op.cit.*, pp.231-32.

<sup>9</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Majmu'a Lecture hai Honourable Doctor Sir Sayyid* (Sadhora: Bilali Press, 1892), p.130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.130.

part of our faith. An acquaintance with Arabic, or at least Persian, is necessary to counteract disruptive tendencies. Fraternal feeling within the group can be best fostered by a large number of students living together, eating together and studying together. If this cannot be brought about we can neither progress, nor prosper, nor even survive as community.<sup>11</sup>

## II

Among the legacies that Sir Syed had received from the historic realm, the two most potent were: (i) Islam, and (ii) the haunting memory of 800-year Muslim rule in India, and its heritage. Islam had provided Muslims with the basis and bases for a separate identity, and Muslim rule had endowed them with a distinctive Indo-Muslim identity. Thus Indian Muslims had become a distinct group both in relation to Hindu India and to the rest of the *ummah* or Muslim world. Muslim rule had also enabled them to develop a culture of their own, the Indic Muslim culture, of which the foremost symbol was the Urdu language, which significantly constituted the core cultural bridge between the Hindus and Muslims. All through Muslim rule, and even during British rule till the middle 1850s, their identity was supreme, ascendant, and never in dispute.

So was the Indic Muslim culture, which had enticed active participation from non-Muslim groups, especially the ruling and the intellectual elite. Thus Ranjit Singh's (d.1839) court language was Persian, and the most celebrated work of the Sikh period was *Zafarnama-i-Ranjit Singh*. With the displacement of Persian by English as the official language by the Macaulay's Minute of 1835 Urdu began serving as the language of administration at the lower levels and in courts and the common medium of communication in the Punjab, North-Western Provinces and Bihar.

Urdu was indigenous, having born in the Deccan, south of the Narbada (River), during Malik Kafur's occupation of the South in the fourteenth century. It was born out of a fusion of Persian and Turkish with the local *bashaa*—that is, as a result of the fortuitous confluence of the linguistic heritage of both Hindus and Muslims. It was also developed by both, to meet the prime need of a common or link language between them. And it was evolved at a leisurely pace during the next five centuries, to become the literary as well as the most widely spoken language throughout the country.

---

<sup>11</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Mukammal Majmu'a Lectures wa Speeches* (Lahore: Mustafai Press, 1900), p.51.

Its persuasiveness and popularity were indexed by, among other things, two developments. First while Babur (d.1530) and Jehangir (d.1627) wrote their *Tuzuks* in Chagatai Turkish and Persian respectively, the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar (d.1862), lamented his forced exile and poignant despondency in nostalgic Urdu verses. This means that by 1850s. Urdu had gained respectability as a literary language at the elite level. Second, with the introduction of lithography (which greatly facilitated printing of material in Urdu) in 1837, Urdu papers proliferated across the length and breadth of the subcontinent during the next two decades and became the most widely read papers, outstripping even the English language papers with their seventy-year old standing and tradition, not to speak of the Bengali and Marathi papers, confined respectively to Bengal and Bombay presidencies. It is a measure of its *lingua franca* as well as intercommunal or non-denominational status that the editorship and/or proprietorship of over one-third of the Urdu papers belonged with the Hindus.<sup>12</sup> Thus by 1857 Urdu had become the language of discourse not only at the elite and intellectual levels; it had also become the medium for diffusion of news and information, for debate and discussion at the popular level.

At the core of the legacies Sir Syed (along with the rest of the Muslim intelligentsia) had received from the historic realm was the romantic version of Muslim rule in India. It was their most prized possession in the corpus of their collective national memories, one they could neither ignore nor forget, especially in the disastrous aftermath of the 1857 Rebellion when for the first time in their thousand-year old encounter with India they had found themselves a subject race, with their power finally broken, their dignity outraged, their very existence at stake, and their sheer survival extremely doubtful. Nor could the Hindus, with

---

<sup>12</sup> Based on the lists given in Muhammad Atiq Siddiqi, *Hindustani Akhbar Nawisi Kampani kay Ahad mayn* (Aligarh: Anjuman-i-Taraqqi-i-Urdu, Hind, 1957), pp.439-68 and Samarjit Chakraborti, *The Bengali Press (1818-1868): A Study in the Growth of Public Opinion* (Calcutta: Firms K.L.M. Pvt. Ltd., 1976), pp.189-228, supplemented by Abdus Salam Khurshid, *Journalism in Pakistan: First Phase 1845 to 1857* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1964), pp.113-14; W.H. Carey, *The Good Old Days of Honourable John Company* (Calcutta: Quins Book Company, abridged edn., 1964), Chapter 10; Imdad Sabiri, *Tarikh-i-Sahafat-i-Urdu* (Delhi: Author, 1953), pp.104-296 and J. Natarajan, *History of Indian Journalism*, Part II of the Report of the [Indian] Press Commission (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1955), Chapter VII.

their elephantine memories. If Muslim rule in India represented a 'golden' age for Muslims, it meant the end of their 'golden' age in Hindu nationalistic collective memory. Thus when, as a sequel to the European Oriental studies, Hindu and Muslim traditions of the study of their own pasts came to be established, they came to develop 'in this process . . . separately their own mechanisms of revivalism and apologetics. In their emotional response to the history of Muslim India', says Aziz Ahmad, 'the . . . two processes of revivalism clashed'.<sup>13</sup> The two revivalisms, says Beni Prasad, 'stimulated each other, competed with each other, and became more and more different in outlook . . . Hindus and Muslims alike began to give up many practices which they had imbibed from one another and which had formed bridges between the two communities'.<sup>14</sup> Thus came into being two solidarities – a Hindu solidarity and a Muslim solidarity.

### III

The most consequential of these bridges in terms of building social solidarity and of developing a national consciousness and a national personality was the Urdu language in the Persian script; it had been developed jointly by both Hindus and Muslims, as noted earlier, without any distinction over the previous five centuries. That core bridge came to be scuttled when in the middle 1860s the Benaras Hindus began shifting their earlier emphasis on the use of Hindi as the exclusive language of north Indian Hindus 'to propaganda and pressure for its exclusive use, at the expense of Urdu, as the language of administration at the lower levels'. And to this end Babu Fathe Chand organized committees at various places with a central office at Allahabad – to plan, co-ordinate and direct the activities of the various bodies. Meantime, 'Babu Shiv Prasad, himself a writer of Urdu, pushed his dislike for the former Muslim rule in India and its heritage to the extent of pressing the Hindu members of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Scientific Society to replace Urdu by Hindi as the language of transaction in the Society', and its Hindu members demanded the publication of the Society's journal as well in Hindi, instead of in Urdu.<sup>15</sup>

Not inexplicably though, these demands jolted Sir Syed, for the first time. He considered them as 'the way to a rift', in a letter to his

---

<sup>13</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.260.

<sup>14</sup> Beni Prasad, *The Hindu-Muslim Questions* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1946), p.24.

<sup>15</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p.260.

collaborator and friend, Mehdi Ali Khan (Later Muhsinul Mulk) from London on 29 April 1879. 'If it comes to be', he warned, 'it would open an unending vista of split and strife between Hindus and Muslims. The rupture would never be healed . . . . The two communities would be irrevocably rent asunder'.<sup>16</sup> Hindi's protagonists' anti-Muslim bias became all the more evident when they chose to be the main opposition to Sir Syed's plans for a Muslim University.<sup>17</sup>

Earlier, in 1867, when the demand was raised for replacement of Urdu by Hindi at the lower levels of administration in Bihar and the North-Western Provinces, Sir Syed, in an interview with Shakespeare, the Commissioner of Banares, had for the first time called Hindus and Muslims as 'two nations', expressed a 'prophetic regret' that they would not seriously work together for a composite growth, and spoke of the separate political evolution of Muslims. Even so, Sir Syed's politically eclectic approach towards the Hinds underwent a paradigmatic shift much later – in 1885 when he finally realized that the Hindus, instead of heeding his warnings, continued to mount pressure for an acceptance of their linguistic demands and that the British official policy had been increasingly receptive to the pressure of Hindu agitation from early 1870s. First, in Bihar Urdu was officially supplanted by Hindi as the written medium of recording in law courts; then in 1872-73 it was replaced by Hindi in the subordinate offices in the Central Provinces and in the Darjeeling district of Bengal; next in 1881 the exclusive use of Hindi in Devanagari script replacing Urdu with its Persian script altogether was introduced in Bihar. Meantime Hindu agitation for a similar change in the North-Western (later United) Provinces had built up several fold. The climax would come in 1898, the year of Sir Syed's death, when Sir Anthony McDonnell, the NWP governor, would not only order replacement of Urdu by Hindi in the lower courts of that provinces, but also showed an incredible insensitivity to Muslim educational institutions like Aligarh and the Nadwat-ul-Ulama.<sup>18</sup>

In vain did Sir Syed remonstrate that the official linguistic policy was causing a deep schism between Hindus and Muslims, dividing them linguistically, making strangers out of neighbours, thus far integrated into a social solidarity by a common tongue, and promoting ethnic

<sup>16</sup> Shaikh Muhammad Ismail Panipati (ed.), *Maktubat-i-Sir Sayyid* (Lahore: Majlis-i-Taraqqi-i-Adab, 1959), p.103.

<sup>17</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p.260.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.261; see also Abdul Hamid, *Muslim Separatism in India: A Brief Survey 1858-1947* (Lahore: OUP, reprint, 1971), pp.37-38.



chauvinism. What is most significant is that not only did none of the authoritative Hindu leaders heed Sir Syed's remonstrations but that the Congress, when it came to be organized in 1885 in the name of an Indian 'nation', took no stance on these divisive official measures or on the disruptive Hindi agitation. On the other hand, several delegates to the Congress sessions were in the forefront of that agitation, and during the 1890s, meetings of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan used to be held in the Congress pandal after the closing of the Congress sessions. The question is: If the Congress did consider Muslims as part of an integrated Indian 'nation', why did it ignore these divisive official measures and the Hindu agitation for supplanting Urdu by Hindi? All through its history the Congress had accused the British of going in for a 'divide-and-rule' policy, but this earliest attempt to divide Hindus and Muslims linguistically failed to draw the Congress' ire. Was it because it patronised Hindu chauvinism and hurt Muslim heritage and sensibility?

#### IV

The Urdu-Hindi controversy was, of course, a core issue but there were other equally consequential factors as well that caused the watershed in Sir Syed's thinking by 1885. Foremost among them were the Gladstonian reforms of 1880s, the introduction of representative institutions in India beginning with the Local Board Bill (1883), and the Congress demand for representative government and elective bodies. The educational backwardness and economic penury of the Muslims, Sir Syed felt, disabled them from going in for political agitation at that time. And political agitation for a representative government would surely invite British retaliation, especially against the Muslims since the residue of British hostility from the days of the 1857 Rebellion might re-ignite lingering British suspicions against them.

Nor could the Muslims in their parlous state of educational and economic backwardness and numerical inferiority compete with Hindus in elections, pure and simple. The Muslims would have one vote to Hindus' four votes. 'It would be a game of dice in which one hand had four votes and the other only one', argued Sir Syed.<sup>19</sup> Hence he stood for

---

<sup>19</sup> Sir Syed's Lucknow Speech, 28 December 1887, see Sharif al Mujahid, *Muslim League Documents, 1900-1947*, Vol.I (Karachi: Quaid-i-Azam Academy 1990), p.195. In one of his articles Sir Syed wrote: 'Having carefully gone through the [clearly explained] opinions of John Stuart Mill, I am convinced that where the majority vote is the decisive factor in a political system, it is essential for the electors to be united by the ties of race, religion, manners, customs, culture and historical traditions. In the

equal representation for Muslims and Hindus in the North-Western Provinces, for separate (communal) electorates and weightage, and for nomination where the Muslim quota was not filled in through election. Though not perceived at the moment, these proposals served as the blueprint for the Muslim proposals at Simla in 1906, and eventually sowed the 'seed of Pakistan', for without separate electorates there would have been no Pakistan.

But these demands were by no means anti-Congress or anti-Hindu. Surendranath Banerjee, thrice Congress president, had demanded proportional representation for Bengal in 1880s. And Sir Syed got the device of nomination introduced to rectify the injustice to Muslims under the elective system in the Local Board Bill (1883) in the Supreme Legislative Council two years before the birth of Congress.

An equally crucial contributory cause which, indeed, served as a catalyst was the rise of aggressive Hindu revivalist movement. On the religious plane, it was represented by the most virulent, fundamentalist and missionary movement of the Arya Samaj, launched by Dayananda Saraswati (1827-83) in 1875; on the cultural plane by the Hindu Mela (Calcutta, 1867-70) which gave birth to the Bharata Varta National Society (f.1870), the Gaurakshini (cow-protection) Sabhas (f.1883), Hindi Shitya Sammelan (1870s), and Nagari Pracharni Sabha (1893); and, on the political plane, by the injection of the revivalist strand into the Congress by Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), the fire-eating, volatile Maharashtrian with a penchant for reviving the 'glory' of Shivaji (1627-80) and imposing a 'Hindu Pad Padshahi' over the entire subcontinent.<sup>20</sup> The prevailing revivalist, anti-Muslim environment was compounded by Tilak's Shivaji festivals, his programme of organizing the Hindu masses on a vast scale, training them in the martial arts (the proto-Sangathan movement), and 'evolving and celebrating parallel Hindu festivals, like that of the elephant-headed god Ganapat, which was modelled on the Muslim Muharram', the highly provocatively hymns of

---

presence of these factors, representative government is practicable and useful; in their absence, it would only injure the well-being and tranquillity of the land. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Akhri Mazamim* (Lahore: Manzil-i-Naqsh-bandiyya, 1898), p.46.

<sup>20</sup> For a delineation and significance of this term, see V.D. Savarkar, *Hindu-Pad-Padshahi or a Review of The Hindu Empire of Maharashtra* (Poona: Manohar Mahadev Kelkar, 1942). Savarkar was for long the President of the All India Hindu Mahasabha, the predecessor of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), during the 1930s and 1940s.

hate sung at these festivals,<sup>21</sup> and the bitterly aggressive tone of the Bengali Hindu press which chafed at even the Mahomedan Literary Society's demand for a generous grant of scholarships to enable the penurious Muslims to send their wards to school, and Syed Ameer Ali's (1849-1928) Central National Mohammedan Association's (f.1877) 1882 memorial to the Education Commission under W. W. Hunter.<sup>22</sup>

## V

The discussion above brings out one cardinal fact. Till about 1860s the Hindus had participated in the cultural heritage evolved during Muslim rule. Urdu was considered an Indian, and never a Muslim language, nor was the Persian script baulked at. The second source of controversy from late 1850s onwards was cow-slaughter. The Muslim 'right' to it had never been disputed till then. A third irritant was the increasing injection of Hindu revivalism into Congress policies and politics, chiefly by Tilak, and the Congress itself, even as the official Congress historian acknowledges, was wedded to the cause of 'Vedantic idealism' *ab*

---

<sup>21</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p.266; Abdul Hamid, *op.cit.*, p.30.

<sup>22</sup> For instance, when a resolution on the Report of the Education Commission in October 1884 laid down that in view of Muslim educational backwardness in some provinces, it was 'desirable to give them in some respects exceptional assistance' and that it proposed to give 'separate consideration' to the whole problem of Muslim education, *The Hindoo Patriot* (Calcutta) (24 November 1884) complained, 'The list then of the special classes who are to receive special state assistance is complete. It includes the Mahomedans, Eurasians, East Indians, Anglo-Indians, Aborigines, low caste, and other special classes, all, all, but the bulk of the Hindus who pay for the whole machinery of Government administration and education -- or in other words, those who contribute the most and have done most for self-help should be denied the helping hand of Government; and their revenue contributions and the savings to be affected by abolishing or reducing the educational staff of the colleges their children frequent must go to the benefit of the indolent, the discontented and the specially favoured. This is the upshot for which the Hindu population of India are to thank the Government and the Education Commission.' Cited in Sufia Ahmed, *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884-1912* (Dacca: Asiatic Press, 1974), pp.24-25, and Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, *Muslim Politics and Leadership in South Asia 1876-92* (Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History, Culture and Civilization, 1981), p.192.

*initio*.<sup>23</sup> Under the impact of revivalist and ethnocentric movements, it were, thus, the Hindus that had withdrawn from participation in the mediaeval cultural heritage, from the informal arrangement on the issue of cow-slaughter, and from the age-old syncretic participation in Muslim festivals, and had sought to set up parallel, and rival, Hindu festivals – to name only three areas of controversy and conflict. To the Muslims, the first two moves were more galling. The first one because the disbandment of Urdu meant a disowning of the common mediaeval cultural heritage which held forth the prospects of developing a common ‘nationality’; and the second one because it signified an aggressive posture – the imposition of Hindu cultural ethos upon the Muslims without heed to their sensibilities, to previous practices, or to economic consequences. In any case, these Hindu moves were all divisive *ab initio* and *ipso facto*. Thus the Hindus were the ones to disturb the extant Indian cosmos in late nineteenth century India.

The most important consequence of this disturbance was that instead of developing a common nationality on the basis of active participation in a common cultural heritage, the Hindus and Muslims developed along separate lines, and the Muslims finally proclaimed their separate nationhood from a thousand platforms in 1940.

In conceptual terms, the Muslims, not only during Sir Syed’s day but during the next five decades, were basically and primarily reacting and responding to Hindu cultural ethnocentrism and its corollary in the political sphere – viz., unitarianism in terms of political and constitutional structures. Even some of their most constructive initiatives such as the founding of the M.A.O. College (1877), the demand for separate electorates (1906), the founding of the All India Muslim League (1906) and the Pakistan demand (1940) were, in a sense, a response, in the Toynbeeian analytical framework, to the challenges posed by Hindu ethnocentrism on the cultural front and unitarianism on the political and constitutional plane. In a large measure, then, Hindu ethnocentrism gave birth to the ‘two-nation’ theory and finally led to India’s partition in 1947.

In 1880s and 1890s when Sir Syed gave the initial lead to Muslims towards such a destiny, there was nothing like an Indian ‘nation’. Nor did the founding fathers of the Congress made such a claim. Sir Octavian Hume, the founder of the Congress, talks of ‘a

---

<sup>23</sup> See Pattabhi Sitaramayya, *The History of the Indian National Congress (1885-1935)* (Madras: Working Committee of the Congress, 1935), pp.21-22.

congeries of communities',<sup>24</sup> not a nation; Badruddin Tyabji, the (third) President of the Congress (Madras, 1887), affirms 'the existence of numerous communities or nations which had peculiar problems of their own to solve', and did not consider 'the whole of India as one nation';<sup>25</sup> Surendranath Banerjea titles his autobiography as *A Nation in the Making*, which he would not have if India was already a 'nation'. Hence the question of Sir Syed dividing a 'nation' does not arise. And no one had accused him as such during the late nineteenth century or the early twentieth century. Indeed, this is one of the myths of later Indian historiography.

## VI

To sum up, then. Sir Syed not only proclaimed Muslims as a nation in their own right, but also laid the foundations of Muslim nationalism in terms of the issues framed, propositions laid down, attitudes formulated, postures taken and the pattern of Hindu-Muslim relations cast. In order to provide sinews and muscles and blood to the concept of Muslim nationhood, he took a series of concrete steps which led to the birth of a Muslim renaissance, providing the requisite infrastructure for that nationhood. The more consequential of these steps included tearing down the sense of apathy, frustration, resignation and desolation in the aftermath of 1857 among Muslims, enlisting them for modern education, social reform and cultural regeneration, founding of schools, the M.A.O. College, and the comprehensive Aligarh movement, stout defence of the cause of Urdu, formulating the political demands on behalf of Muslims in the wake of the Gladstonian reforms (1880s), Bradlaugh Bill (1889), the Indian Council Act (1892) and the insistant Congress demands for representative institutions and elections, pure and simple, keeping Muslims aloof from the Congress and its demands, and the founding of the Muslim Educational Conference (f.1886) as the forum of Muslim intelligentsia on a subcontinental basis, to process, articulate, aggregate and press their demands and grievances (thereby donning the role of the Congress for Muslims), to spread the Aligarh message throughout the length and breadth of India and to foster communal consciousness and solidarity, thereby creating a pan-Indian Muslim community for the first-

---

<sup>24</sup> Sir William Wedderburn, *Allan Octavian Hume, C.B.: 'Father of the Indian National Congress'* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913).

<sup>25</sup> Badr-ud-Din Tyabji to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, 18 February 1888, Tyabji Papers, Microfilm, National Archives of India, New Delhi, cited in Hafeez Malik, *op.cit.*, pp.283-84. Also see Tyabji's letter to *The Pioneer*, 2 April 1888 in Sharif al Mujahid, *op.cit.*, pp.214-15.

time since Islam's encounter with India. 'The chief importance of the [Aligarh] College', says Robinson, 'was that it was the base from which a UP Muslim elite group led a Muslim political party in the province and in India as a whole'.<sup>26</sup> To Kraemer, a sensitive but critical student of Indian Islam, the Aligarh-movement period was

one of the most fascinating periods in the dismal history of Indian Islam, and the background on which all modern developments and achievements, its relative strength and weakness, must be judged. Aligarh, with all the forces it organized, was the starting point of a slow awakening of the Moslem community out of its listlessness. It has been the most potent factor in the breaking down of the crushing feeling of backwardness and despondency, which is still [1931] a living sentiment in the Moslem community. It has mobilized the forces that changed the attitude of fatalistic acceptance to that of determined revolt.<sup>27</sup>

In his study of the Aligarh movement, Jain came to a similar conclusion: Sir Sayyid, during the course of a single generation, checked all the factors leading to decline and, by his Herculean efforts, set the Muslims on the road to progress . . . politically the Muslims were now organized as a solid block under the Aligarh leaders; and . . . they were 'restored . . . to a position of great importance and undoubted influence'. Sir Sayyid had further transformed the Muslims into a 'nation' on the basis of religious solidarity and provided them with a separate ideology.<sup>28</sup>

Hence Qureshi's contention that Aligarh gave the Muslim community a new hope, a new sense of mission. From the deepest despair it pulled the Muslims out into a new field of fruitful activity. . . . Indeed Aligarh was the cradle of the feeling of nationalism among the Muslims because it kept alive the idea of a well-integrated Muslim community in the subcontinent.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of United Provinces' Muslims* (Cambridge: CUP, 1974), p.126.

<sup>27</sup> H. Kraemer, 'Islam in India Today', *Moslem World*, XXI:2 (1931), p.158.

<sup>28</sup> M.S. Jain, *The Aligarh Movement: Its Origin and Development 1858-1906* (Agra: Sri Ram Mehra & Co., 1965), p.184.

<sup>29</sup> I.H. Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610-1947)* ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton & Co., 1962), p.242.

In perspective, then, what Sir Syed actually did in terms of laying the foundations of Muslim nationalism may be explained in terms of the Hegelian classic formulation of the relationship of a great man to his age: 'The great man of the age is one who can put into words the will of his age, tell his age what its will is, and accomplish it. What he does is the heart and essence of his age; he actualizes his age'.<sup>30</sup>

And Sir Syed's contribution to the 'two-nation' theory lay in his representing, to quote William Delthey, 'a type of interaction in which the individual receives influences from the historic sphere and is moulded by these particular influences while he in turn exerts his influence upon the historic level'.<sup>31</sup> Both these formulations explain what Aziz Ahmad calls 'the instinctive acceptance by the overwhelming consensus of Muslim India of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's policy of separatism in Indian politics . . . in sharp contrast to its simultaneous rejection of his opposition to pan-Islamism and the Turkish Khilafat, and to the generally accepted traditionalist criticism of his religious eclecticism'.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> George W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (London: OUP, 1942), p.295; see also Edward Hallet Carr, *What is History* (New York: Vintage, 1961), p.67.

<sup>31</sup> William Delthey, cited in Edgar Alexander, *Adenauer and the New Germany* (New York: Farrar, Strus & Cuddahy, 1957), p.17.

<sup>32</sup> Aziz Ahmad, *op.cit.*, p.265.