

Man of reason and compassion

Known for his rationalist approach, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's ideals are more relevant than ever before

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Come October 17, the two hundredth birth anniversary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, founder of Aligarh Muslim University, and there will be a number of commemorative events dedicated to his legacy. He was born on 17 October 1817 in an illustrious Delhi family, which traced its lineage to the Prophet, and which was known for its learning and erudition. The bicentenary celebrations started in the early months of the year and as the year closes there will have concluded a number of seminars, talks, papers and books on his work and his mission, not only in India but also in Pakistan, the Middle East, Europe and the United States of America, thanks to the vast alumni network of Aligarh Muslim University.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a man of many distinctions. A government servant, an aristocrat, an Islamic scholar, a journalist, an educationalist, he has left behind a vast canon of books and magazine and newspaper articles. He was a historian and archaeologist who could write with verve on the historical monuments of Delhi. In fact with his famous work "Asar-us-Sanadid", which was later translated into French, he heralded the tradition of Indian archaeology. He also collected rare artefacts, ancient idols of Hindu gods and goddesses and sculptures, and preserved them at a time when museums did not exist. His analysis of the causes of the revolt of 1857, a daring act in the context of its time, is still quoted by historians as one of the best studies of the event.

Pen for social reform

A munsif by profession, he was also a journalist who used his pen for social reform. "Tahzebul Akhlaq" (Social Reformer), a magazine founded by him, tried to awaken people's



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consciousness on social and religious issues in a very expressive prose. If Ghalib was the founder of modern Urdu prose, as Urdu poet and Sir Syed's biographer Altaf Husain Hali put it, Sir Syed was its pioneer.

Many of the issues faced by the Muslim community in Sir Syed's time still follow Muslims, though in different ways. Muslims still grapple with their educational backwardness, the debate on the relationship between Islam and modernity, meaningless discussions on small religious matters, the issuing of innumerable fatwas from all possible quarters, sectarian and communal violence and above all a kind of siege mentality that grips the community. His thinking on many of these issues can still provide some insights to the community.

If religion could divide and unite people in Sir

Syed's time, it still continues to perform this twin role. He was an Islamic thinker who was greatly interested in interfaith understanding. His was the time of intense missionary activity and Hindu reform movements. Sir Syed encouraged a process of dialogue and discussion on religious matters.

His "The Mohamedan Commentary on the Holy Bible" was undertaken to clear misunderstandings between the Christians and the Muslims. But there was no mistaking his love for the Prophet. The manner of the expression of this love is worthy of emulation today. When Sir William Muir, an Orientalist scholar and a prominent colonial administrator, published his famous work "The Life of Mahomet", Sir Syed was deeply hurt by Muir's representation of Islam and the Prophet. But Sir Syed also

showed the world how to disagree with an opponent in a civilised manner. There was no demand on his part for banning or burning the book, no incitement to violence, but no defeatist acquiescence either. Instead he responded Muir with his own book titled "Life of Mohammed", in which he took issue with each of the arguments of Muir. An oft-quoted letter written by him gives an idea of his sense of hurt but also of his commitment to write his own book in the face of great hardships: "My mind is a bit agitated these days. I am looking at Mr William's book about the Prophet and it has disturbed me. My heart is burnt to a cinder to see his prejudices and unfairness. I have made a firm resolve, and it was there since long, that I should write a biography of the Prophet. I don't care even if all my money is spent, and I am reduced to beggary."

That he was full of respect for Muir all through his text is because he was a democrat, a liberal, a peacemaker. In an essay he wrote, "Freedom of expression is the right of everyone...Suppression of opinions, be it for any religious fear, or the fear of community and tribe or the fear of being defamed, or the fear of the government-is very bad (trans. Hameedullah)."

Modern education was his long time solution for the ills of the community. He established his college on the model of Oxford and Cambridge. Modern education is still the answer to the problems of Muslim community. The Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College founded by him, which became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920, is rated one of the top-ranked universities in the country by all ranking agencies. But his call to the Aligarh students and faculty would have been, 'do more'.

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