

**From Antiquary to Social
Revolutionary: Syed Ahmad Khan
and the Colonial Experience**
By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

It is an honour to deliver the Annual Sir Syed Memorial Lecture at Aligarh Muslim University, the institution which should stand as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's lasting contribution to the development of a modern India. Conscious though I am of the honour, I am also beset by doubts and fears about my suitability as a recipient of that honour. I am not a specialist of Syed Ahmad Khan's literary work and social and theological thought, thought which, incidentally, I regard as a high point in the history of ideas in Islam. My interest in and knowledge of Syed Ahmad Khan's life and works do not much exceed the level of a reasonably well-informed student of modern Urdu literature.

The only privilege that I can claim is that as a boy I was practically nurtured on Syed Ahmad Khan and Akbar Ilahabadi (1846-1921) whom my father admired greatly and didn't at all see any dichotomy in admiring two very nearly diametrically opposed personalities. And this reconciliation of opposites was quite par for the course for people of certain Indian generations, because Syed Ahmad Khan and Akbar Ilahabadi too greatly admired each other. Syed Ahmad Khan had successfully canvassed for Akbar Ilahabadi being posted to Aligarh so that he could freely enjoy his friend's company. In 1888, when Akbar Ilahabadi was promoted Sub-Judge and transferred to Ghazipur, Syed Ahmad Khan wrote him a congratulatory note saying that though he was sorry for Akbar (he addressed him as Munshi Akbar Husain Sahib) to leave Aligarh, yet he was happy for a Muslim to become a Sub-Judge with a long prospect of active service in the judicial department.¹

Throughout his life Akbar Ilahabadi was a bitter critic and a very nearly implacable enemy, of Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist ideas. His hostility to Syed Ahmad Khan wasn't

¹ Syed Ahmad Khan, *Maktubat*, Vol. I, p. 43.

because of what Muhammad Ali Siddiqi characterizes as Akbar's "cynicism" and his tendency to "view the truth through the spectacles of his own prejudices."² Akbar's hostility to Syed Ahmad Khan flowed from a deeper and more vital source: he did not approve of Syed Ahmad Khan's educational, theological, and political ideas and schemes and believed that Syed Ahmad Khan had caused incalculable intellectual and spiritual harm to the Indian Muslim community.³ Muhammad Ali Siddiqi goes on to say that Akbar Ilahabadi developed soft feelings for Syed Ahmad Khan after 1894.⁴ Yet we see Akbar Ilahabadi making a collection from friends and acquaintances in 1891 for the Building Fund of the M. A. O. College.⁵

I digressed a little to mention these transactions because Syed Ahmad Khan, for a vast majority of Indian Muslims until at least the second quarter of the twentieth century, was a saviour, a sage, a political-social leader of tremendous credibility. His theology didn't enter into the matter at all. My father came from a family of strongly Deobandi Maulavis, but Syed Ahmad Khan's so called *nechariyat* (atheism) counted for nothing in their eyes, just as it counted for nought in the eyes of my mother's family who were strongly anti-Deoband in both theological and political matters. My grandfather's theological moorings were in Deoband. Nonetheless, in 1914 he sent his second and perhaps the brightest son to the M. A. O. College to read for his B. A. and Law degrees. And this brings me to my second claim to some privilege in talking about Syed Ahmad Khan: Maulavi Mufti Muhammad Isma'il (1803-1888), a great-grandfather of my mother's, was among Syed Ahmad Khan's friends during the latter's tenure in Banaras from August 1867 to April 1869 and again after his return from England. Mufti Sahib wrote a few tracts on Islam in refutation of the Christian Missionaries at the request of Syed Ahmad Khan.⁶

I began with two apparent digressions, but they actually contain one of the main points of my essay. Syed Ahmad Khan made many enemies and many friends and admirers. Ali Bakhsh Sharar Badayuni (1821-1885) is an example of a consistent and acrimonious enemy, just as Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914) is an example of a hero-worshipping follower and friend. Sharar's venomous unfriendliness didn't

² Siddiqi, P. 47.

³ For some details of Akbar Ilahabadi's views on Syed Ahmad Khan's reformist agenda, see my *The Power Politics of Culture: Akbar Ilahabadi and the Changing Order of Things*.

⁴ Siddiqi, pp. 50-52.

⁵ Syed Ahmad Khan, *Maktubat*, Vol. I, p.44.

⁶ Maulavi Abdul Qadir, p. 32.

prevent any of his direct clan from gaining the benefits and advantages of an Aligarh education, and Hali's acceptance of Syed Ahmad Khan's mild politics didn't stop any of Hali's direct clan from becoming Congressmen or Marxists.

Syed Ahmad Khan's general popularity across the board of Indian Muslim society suggests two things: First, the Indian Muslim was generally able to separate the founder's theology from his educational policy and was willing to obtain education at the M. A. O. College so long as it didn't preach atheism or try to convert its pupils to Christianity. Second, Syed Ahmad Khan gave to the Indian Muslim a sense of grand purpose and a strong and convincing signal for turning in a new and salubrious direction. Syed Ahmad Khan thus gave him a feeling of self-worth, and a hope for a return to the state of self-confidence which had been lost apparently forever in the aftermath of what Syed Ahmad Khan described as "The Indian Rebellion", and not "The Indian Mutiny" or "The Indian Treason", the preferred term with the English government.

Contrary to the culture of sycophancy and genuflecting before the colonial English authority promoted by the British and freely adopted by the Indians at that time, both Syed Ahmad Khan and his high-profile and brilliant son Syed Mahmud strived to conduct themselves as if they were equal to the English. The incident of the Agra Durbar of 1867 was quite well-known to the Indian community, and not just the Muslims. Syed Ahmad Khan had stayed away from the Durbar because Indians had been given seats inferior to the English. A medal was to be conferred on Syed Ahmad Khan at that Durbar. Williams, the Commissioner of Meerut was later deputed to present the medal to Syed Ahmad Khan at Aligarh railway station. Williams broke protocol and showed his pique at having to do the task under duress and said that he was bound by Government orders, or he wouldn't be presenting the medal to Syed Ahmad Khan. Syed Ahmad Khan accepted the medal, saying that he wouldn't have accepted the medal, except that he too was bound by Government orders.⁷

Syed Ahmad Khan hosted a dinner at Banaras in 1872 to honour Syed Mahmud when he returned from England after having been called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn. Alexander Shakespeare, Commissioner of Banaras, presided. While responding to Shakespeare's toast, Syed Mahmud spoke of his wish

⁷ Hali, pp. 52-54 (of pt. 2).

[T]o unite England and India socially even more than politically. The English rule in India, in order to be good, must promise to be eternal; and it can never do so until the English people are known to us as friends and fellow subjects, than as rulers and conquerors.⁸

The *Pioneer*, where report of this dinner was published, doesn't record the alarm that Shakespeare and other Englishmen present must have felt at this. But Syed Mahmud had made his point. And he made it again when, on becoming a High Court Judge at Allahabad (1882) at the young age of 32, he submitted a Memorial to Government to the effect that since he was English except in name and parentage, he should be treated on par with British judges. (Syed Mahmud's English contemporaries said that his mastery of English idiom was of an incredible precision.)⁹

In 1875, Maulavi Mushtaq Husain (1841-1917), who as Intisar Jang Vaqar-ul Mulk became a high official in Hyderabad and a prominent Indian Muslim much active in the affairs of the M. A. O. College was a Tahsildar in a district whose Collector routinely objected to his taking a short recess for afternoon prayers. Mushtaq Husain sought Syed Ahmad's advice. Here is what Syed Ahmad wrote in reply:

Namaz is obligatory upon us from God. We may discharge it ill or well, given the infamy of our actions, but were someone to say, do not do the namaz, we won't stand it for a moment. Such talk is impossible even to be heard. In my belief, not doing namaz is just a sin which can be expected to be pardoned by God. But not to do namaz, or postpone it because of someone's behest is in my view a sin which will never be pardoned. You ought to have in the beginning itself adopted a course of conduct that wouldn't have let things to come to such a pass. And if you didn't do it at that time, then why this abject begging and flabby entreaty now? It was absurd and contemptible to plead, 'Please at least grant me leave, my honorable sir!' 'You may suitably dock my pay if you please!' To hurl your resignation at him was the thing to do, and to have said plainly, 'I will obey the command of my magnificent Lord, God the Omnipotent, and not yours.' So what would have been the consequence? You wouldn't have had a job? You would have starved to death?

⁸ Lelyveld, 2004.

⁹ Lelyveld, 2001.

That would have been an extremely good consummation. Peace be upon you.¹⁰

It must be remembered that a Tahsildar may have been a minor functionary in the general scheme of things, but his was a job highly regarded and universally prized in colonial India. Quitting such a job, and that too on the 'meagre' issue of afternoon prayers would generally have been considered to be something caused by a softening of the brain. For Syed Ahmad to have given such advice and for Mushtaq Husain to have accepted it were both acts of high moral courage and prove, if such proof were at all needed, that Syed Ahmad gave to the Indian Muslim a sense of worth and self-respect otherwise rare at that time.

Syed Mahmud was obliged to resign his judgeship (1893). Syed Ahmad Khan issued a long statement to an Urdu newspaper on that occasion, asserting that the main reason why Syed Mahmud couldn't continue in the service was that the English rob their Indian civil servants of their "self-respect". He said:

In my opinion the time is not yet, and will perhaps never be, that our European friends who are the conquerors of this country and who have the ascendancy and superiority natural to the conqueror, and Indians, who are the vanquished and are held in the contempt natural for the vanquished, can both sit together on the same bench and function with equal honour and pride, suitable to the rank that they both hold. If the Indian maintains his self-respect¹¹ which he should, were he to answer the demands of honesty and good breeding, then the life of both parties continues to be hard and bitter....It is not at all a secret now that there is the difference of black and white between how the English treat their own community and how they treat others....[Syed Mahmud] gets no pleasure in positions of power. Rather, he looks down upon power and considers it knavish to feel pride in a job with the Government.¹²

If there ever was an assertion of self-respect, dignity, and refusal to be browbeaten by an arrogant master-race, it was here. Never mind the blasphemous views that Syed Ahmad Khan was alleged to profess, or did profess. That was between him and his God. What was here and now was a new hope for regaining some of the moral ground lost since 1857. It was a hope that Deoband did not seem to provide.

¹⁰ *Maktubat*, Vol. II, pp. 274-75.

¹¹ English in the original.

¹² *Maktubat*, Vol. I, pp. 139-40.

Seemingly, Syed Ahmad had a solution which gave the Indian Muslim a chance to get somewhat even with the material world without having to let go of the hereafter.

This seems to me to be the reason why a community even more broad-based than that of the Indian Muslims, I mean the literate and literary community of Urdu speakers throughout the sub-continent, let Syed Ahmad Khan demolish the old-established notions about the nature of their literature. Furthermore, they accepted without demur Syed Ahmad Khan's agenda to refashion Urdu literature after the English model. If our old literature was effete and decadent and if it would help us regain our self-respect were we to reject that decadent literature and embrace a new regime, so be it. The Urdu community felt much more comfortable with Syed Ahmad Khan on Urdu literature than the theological circles could ever be with his notions and pronouncements on the reality of miracles, the existence of angels and jinns, and the origins of the battle of Badr.

2.

Historians and scholars of Urdu literature generally agree that the "Aligarh Movement" in Urdu literature brought a healthy change in Urdu literary culture, particularly in its prose. All agree that the Movement wrought, in fact, a revolution in Urdu literature and the reverberations of that revolution can still be felt by writers and readers alike more than a hundred years later. This Movement of which Syed Ahmad Khan (popularly known in the Urdu world as "Sir Syed", but in English I prefer Syed Ahmad Khan) is universally regarded as the unofficial head hasn't yet been studied in the post-colonial context. Again, however, there is consensus among historians of Urdu literature that the Movement did nothing but good to Urdu literature. Ali Jawad Zaidi, for instance, speaks of "the new prose which flourished under the benign shadow of the Aligarh movement"¹³. Elsewhere, Zaidi says:

It was Syed Ahmad Khan, who collected a group of writers to popularize a style, marked by clarity, simplicity, intellectual honesty, and modernity of speech. It was a vigorous prose. Through his journals, he also helped the evolution of new criticism, which had thrown up pioneers like Mohammad Husain Azad and Hali.¹⁴

One need not attempt here an analysis of words like "intellectual honesty" and "vigorous prose" or comment

¹³ Zaidi, Ali Jawad, p. 207.

¹⁴ Zaidi, Ali Jawad, p. 236.

upon the air-brushing of names of many eighteenth-century secular and religious writers who too exemplified “vigorous prose.” Suffice it to say that Zaidi is looking at Urdu literature and its history through nineteenth-century eyes, eyes that were dazzled by the bright lights of the revolution heralded by Syed Ahmad Khan. The great Shibli Nu’mani, not the most ardent of Syed Ahmad Khan’s admirers, conceded in his obituary of Syed Ahmad Khan that Syed Ahmad “did have before him some excellent examples of Urdu prose, especially Mir Amman’s *Chahar Darvesh* which was composed in 1802”¹⁵ but Syed Ahmad Khan’s achievement was much greater:

All the great achievements of Sir Syed reflect everywhere the aspect of reformation¹⁶ and improvement, but among the things that turned from a mere dust-mote to a blazing sun due to the improvements effected by him there is Urdu literature¹⁷ too. It was only because of Sir Syed that Urdu has achieved the capability to strike out from the realm of love and loving and to express ideas from the realms of governance, politics, ethics and morals, history, and in fact from all other fields, and it can do so with a force, effectuality, concision or amplitude, simplicity and clarity, as has not yet fallen to the fortune of its mentor, Persian.¹⁸

It is clear that Shibli’s sub-text here is that Syed Ahmad Khan converted Urdu from being the language of mere poetry to a language of prose, especially “vigorous” prose. And this remained the received perception about three decades later in Ram Babu Saksena and even a century later in Ali Jawad Zaidi. Saksena says that Syed Ahmad Khan, “collected around him a devoted band of workers whose activities shaped the course of the Urdu literature¹⁹” and though he makes Syed Ahmad Khan seem like a construction engineer, it is clear that the term “literature” for him means “prose” and nothing else. He goes on say:

Sir Syed’s style is vigorous, direct and simple. It does not boast of literary beauties and he was not a stylist in any sense of the word....He gave a deathblow to the highly involved ornate and artificial rhyming

¹⁵ Shibli Nu’mani, p. 58. The author called it *Bagh o Bahar*, though it was popularly known as *Chahar Darvesh*. The actual date of *Bagh o Bahar*’s composition is 1801. It was first published in 1804. (Khan, pp. 44-51), but these are minor details and don’t affect the argument.

¹⁶ English in the original.

¹⁷ English in the original.

¹⁸ Shibli Nu’mani, p. 57.

¹⁹ Saksena, Ram Babu, p. 269.

prose of the style of Zahuri and Bedil and showed the capacity of Urdu for matter of fact prose....He wielded Urdu prose with a mastery unknown in previous history. Hali, his Boswell, calls him the father of Urdu prose. Another remarkable quality is that he could expound the most intricate, complex and highly technical subject in simple and lucid language.²⁰

One can see that both Saksena and Zaidi are paraphrasing from Shibli, except that Zaidi casually says that Syed Ahmad Khan's journals also helped in the evolution of what he describes as "new criticism." Shibli also said that all [Urdu] writers of the day developed under Syed Ahmad Khan's direct influence, or were influenced by him, though from a distance, or some others cut their own path, but could not claim to have been entirely free from the benefit spread by Syed Ahmad Khan.²¹

Suraiya Husain extends Shibli Nu'mani's argument to say that the influence of Syed Ahmad Khan's thought and his prose writings can be seen in every [Urdu] literary work produced toward the closing years of the nineteenth century.²² Suraiya Husain may be overstating a bit, yet the fact is that Syed Ahmad Khan influenced a great number of scholars, and not on the literary level alone. Zafar Ahmad Siddiqi has shown that even Shibli himself, and Hamiduddin Farahi and Abul Kalam Azad who professed to disagree strongly with Syed Ahmad Khan in matters relating to theology and Qur'anic exegesis, actually adopted Syed Ahmad Khan's line in many important matters in that area.²³

What is not generally so well-recognized is the influence of Syed Ahmad Khan on the development and growth of the "new poetry" or "natural poetry" which became the dominant Urdu literary ethic of its time. Much of the first organized literary theory and criticism in Urdu arose to provide justification for that poetry. It is of historical interest, though not of relevance to us here, to note that the efforts of the late nineteenth century Urdu literary theorists and historians are the very first in India to produce what was then seen as "modern" and "westernized" literary theory and historiography.

Historians generally believe that the first moves in the project to reorder Urdu's literary morphology were made in Lahore where new style musha'iras began to be held in 1874 and Holroyd made his famous pronouncements about Urdu

²⁰ Saksena, Ram Babu, pp. 271-272.

²¹ Shibli, p. 57.

²² Husain, p. 283.

²³ See Zafar Ahmad Siddiqi's essay in English translation in A. A. Ansari, 2001.

literature being decadent and greatly in need of being rescued and revived. As Frances Pritchett notes, on 9 May, 1874, Muhammad Husain Azad delivered his lecture on the reform of Urdu poetry. Azad's lecture was followed by a speech from Holroyd who began by saying, "This meeting has been called to discover means for the development of Urdu poetry which is in a state of decadence today." Holroyd also "emphasized the usefulness of poetry as a teaching tool" and proposed the establishment of a new kind of *musha'ira*.²⁴

Frances Pritchett also notes, through Aslam Farrukhi, that Syed Ahmad Khan gave encouragement and support to Muhammad Husain Azad and quotes from a letter of Syed Ahmad Khan²⁵. She translates as follows:

Bring your work even closer to nature (*nechar*). The extent to which a work comes close to nature is the extent to which it gives pleasure.²⁶

In fact, there is more to this letter than what appears above. This letter is apparently in response to an earlier one from Muhammad Husain Azad, reporting on the new style *musha'ira*, enclosing a poem of his own, and seeking comfort and support from Syed Ahmad Khan in the new venture. In his reply Syed Ahmad Khan gave not only comfort and congratulations to Azad, he actually outlined a Reformist agenda. His letter thus needs to be translated more or less in full:

One of my extremely long-held wishes has come true with this *musha'ira*. I had been hoping for a long time for our poets to direct their attention to the narration of things as they are found in nature.²⁷ Your *masnavi Khwab-e Ann* ["A Dream of Peace"] arrived and pleased me very much. Without doubt you have given full rein to [the power of] poetry and the vigour of discourse. Still, it has much that is fanciful and unreal. Let your poetry incline yet more to nature. The more poetry inclines to nature, the more is the pleasure to be had from it. Do not fear the people's taunts and derision. It is essential that ideas are taken from English poetry and expressed in Urdu. This task is so difficult, let's see if there's one to do it. Up until now we have no ideas based on

²⁴ Pritchett, pp. 34-5.

²⁵ The date of this letter is now established as October 29, 1874. See *Matktubat*, Vol. II, p. 29.

²⁶ Pritchett, p. 38.

²⁷ The word "nature" occurs a number of times in this letter. In all the instances it's not a translation of some Urdu word. It occurs in English in the original.

nature. So what's there for us to express in that line?²⁸

There is no need to conduct an analysis of this text. It is clear that Syed Ahmad Khan disapproves of imagery, metaphor, and what may generally be described as imaginative writing. He wants Urdu poets to write "natural" poetry and also to write about "nature." He believes that both are found abundantly in English and the Urdu poet must take ideas from English poetry because all English poetry is by definition worthy of emulation and all Urdu poetry is by definition devoid of things that deserve praise.

We mustn't imagine that Syed Ahmad Khan's letter is perhaps the effusion of a moment inspired by the news given by Azad. A full two and a half years before this letter, Syed Ahmad Khan made the following judgement on Urdu poetry. In the issue of *Tahzibul Akhlaq* dated 1 Muharram 1289 (=March 11, 1872), he wrote:

There could be nothing worse or more defective than the art and practice of poetry as in vogue in our time. Themes there are none except of love and romance, and even those do not convey the better human emotions. Rather, the theme [of love] points to those evil emotions which are opposed to true culture and morals.²⁹

One can see that much of Hali's theory and Muhammad Husain Azad's fulminations against Urdu poetry (both of which came much later) are nothing but annotations of the above indictment. But Syed Ahmad Khan goes further:

The bad and defective practice of expressing far-fetched and abstract themes, and the codes for using simile and metaphor are now well established. These things do cause in our minds some kind of wonder or marvel; but they do not at all affect the heart, or our nature, or the human emotion which they are concerned with.³⁰

These points were elaborated to the full by Muhammad Husain Azad who also made much of Syed Ahmad Khan's charge that Urdu poetry was confined to love and romance alone. Nafis Bano says in an apologetic vein that Syed Ahmad Khan was not against all romantic and love-themes in Urdu poetry; rather, he wanted to retain them and also enlarge the scope of Urdu poetry. She quotes from the *Tahzibul Akhlaq* of "1292" in support of her

²⁸ *Maktubat*, Vol. II, p. 28.

²⁹ *Maqalat*, Vol. X, p. 47.

³⁰ *Maqalat*, Vol. X, p. 47.

contention.³¹ The actual issue that she quotes from is dated 1 Muharram, 1292 (=February 7, 1875), and the passage in question doesn't advocate retention of the old themes. It is, in fact, a celebration of the new *musha'ira* of May 1874. Syed Ahmad Khan said:

A great shortcoming in the literary arts of our language was that its poetry was incomplete. The poets had devoted their lofty resolution to romantic *ghazals* and *vasokht* poems, and panygerics, and short *qit'a* poems of the pangs of separation and story-telling *masnavis*. I don't say that those themes shouldn't have been touched. No, they too are excellent themes and are very useful in the search for newer themes and for giving expression to the ingenuity of the poetic temperament. But the deficiency was that our language had nothing else. Themes of the other kind, which indeed are the true themes, and are related with nature, weren't there...That day of 1874 when the *musha'ira* of natural poetry³² was established in Lahore will always be remembered in the history of the literary arts of Urdu language.³³

The prophecy indeed came true, but not before the greatest excesses were committed on Urdu literature by Syed Ahmad Khan's cohorts. Here is Muhammad Husain Azad almost deliberately elaborating upon the above passage. No translation can reproduce the malignant beauty of the original, but the sense is clear enough:

It is an unhappy state of affairs that our poetry has become ensnared in the toils of a few trifling ideas: that is, romantic themes, carefree drinking of wine, creating illusory colors and scents without the rose or the rosegarden, bewailing the calamity of separation, delighting in imaginary union, feeling an aversion to the world, and on top of this experiencing the oppression of the heavens. And the outrageous thing is that if we want to speak of some real matter, we express that very idea in metaphors—the result of which is that we can do nothing. My friends! I see that the exhibition hall of arts and sciences is open, and all the people have been displaying the handwork of their literature. Don't you see on what level our language stands? Yes—you can clearly see—she lies on the doormat!³⁴

³¹ Nafis Bano, p. 303.

³² "Nature" and "natural poetry" are English in the original.

³³ *Maqalat*, Vol. X, p. 120.

³⁴ *Ab-e Hayat*, p. 103.

I will conclude this part of my essay with one more quote from Syed Ahmad Khan. It's from the same issue of *Tahzibul Akhlaq* (February 7, 1875) from which I quoted above. Here he adopts an uncharacteristic triumphalist and derisive tone:

Indeed, the New Urdu has inspired life in our national language. Whatever magical spells Mir and Dard and Zafar may have wrought in Urdu poetry, well they might have; Mir Momin (sic, Amman) of Delhi may have narrated some tale in polished language, well he might have. All this couldn't have been more eloquent, more interesting and more idiomatic than a bedtime narrative told to the children by a toothless crone.³⁵

It seems clear that Syed Ahmad Khan was out to give a big inferiority complex to the Urdu community, and that community cheerfully accepted the gift because it came, paradoxically enough, with the gift of self-respect, and a sense of purpose and self-worth.

3.

In 1842, Bahadur Shah Zafar revived upon Syed Ahmad Khan the title of Javad-ud Daulah, conferred upon Syed Ahmad's grandfather Syed Hadi by Emperor Shah Alam II in about the middle of the eighteenth century. The Emperor added to it the additional title of Arif Jang. These titles didn't mean much but their conferment was symbolic of Syed Ahmad Khan's incorporation into the nobility of Delhi. This was something which was not in the power of the English. Syed Ahmad Khan was twenty-five years of age at that time and had developed into a historian and antiquary with an active interest in sufism as well as mechanics, geometry and astronomy. His interest in astronomy, though, didn't persuade him to accept that the earth revolved round the sun and in 1848 he wrote a short tract in refutation of the theory.

Already in 1847 Syed Ahmad Khan had produced his first major text. It was *Asar-us Sanadid*, his great antiquarian text on Delhi. Erudite, accurate, and compiled at occasional but real physical risk to himself, the four-volume work stands as a lasting monument not only to the author's industry but also to his sense of culture and history and his realization, well ahead of his times, of the need to record and preserve as much as possible of the monuments of Delhi and their inscriptions. It also contained a large section on the sufis,

³⁵ *Maqalat*, Vol. X, p. 115.

men of learning, and poets and artists of contemporary Delhi.

Divided under ten headings, there were 118 persons listed here. Syed Ahmad Khan said in his introduction:

Though people might believe that patriotism would have guided me in writing the account of the personages of this city, ...the fact is that the people of this place are such as would perhaps not be found in any other land. Every individual here is the aggregate of a thousand qualities and a bouquet of hundreds of thousands of accomplishments. Every one has a fondness for learning and for the arts and they have the taste for study, be it day or night.³⁶

Javad-ud Daulah Syed Ahmad Khan Arif Jang became Sadr Amin (or *Sudder Ameen*, in the British spelling of those times) at Bijnore in 1855 by which time he was finishing his highly scholarly, very well researched and illustrated edition of Abul Fazl's *Ai'n-e Akbari*, itself an extraordinarily difficult book. Having finished the work to his satisfaction, and believing that Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib was a person who would appreciate his labours, Syed Ahmad approached the great Ghalib to write a *taqriz* (in the convention of the times, a laudatory foreword) for it. Ghalib obliged, but what he did produce was a short Persian poem castigating the *Ai'n-e Akbari*, and by implication, the imperial, sumptuous, literate and learned Mughal culture of which it was a product. The least that could be said against it was that the book had little value even as an antique document. Ghalib practically reprimanded Syed Ahmad Khan for wasting his talents and time on dead things. Worse, he praised sky-high the "sahibs of England" who at that time held all the keys to all the *a'ins* in this world.³⁷

Needless to say, Syed Ahmad Khan didn't accept the *taqriz*. Volumes I and III of the *Ai'n-e Akbari* came out from Delhi in 1272 AH (=1855-56). The second volume could not be completed in time. The manuscript and the press on which it was to be printed both perished in the aftermath of 1857.³⁸ His History of the district of Bijnore, much liked by his District Magistrate and sent by him to the Lt. Governor

³⁶ *Maqalat*, Vol. XVI, p. 212.

³⁷ The word *a'in* can mean all or any of the following: character, convention, temperament, habit, rule, path, law (ecclesiastical or secular), creed, praxis, quality, intention, organization, management, system, decoration, beauty. (*Lughat Nama-e Dehkhoda*). There are about eighty meanings in all. These meanings seem to have developed over the centuries. Most were available to Abul Fazl; all were available to Ghalib.

³⁸ Hali, p. 55 (of pt. 1).

at Agra for approval before publication, was also destroyed during the turbulence at Agra in 1857.

Bijnore brought Syed Amad Khan much closer to the English than had been the case so far. He now was the senior Indian official in the district and in fact the administration of the district became his responsibility when the English fled Bijnore in 1857. Syed Ahmad Khan also negotiated the surrender of Nawab Mahmud Khan to the English after the cessation of hostilities. The human, administrative and diplomatic experience of Bijnore and Moradabad stations during 1855-1858 apparently triggered the transition from Javad-ud Daula Syed Ahmad Khan Arif Jang to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan Bahadur, K. C. S. I.,³⁹ LL. D., (Edinburgh), Life-trustee Secretary, M. A. O. College, Aligarh, and much else besides, and author of *Khutabat-e Ahmadiyya*, *Tafsir-ul Qur'an* (in seven volumes), and much more.

The disorganized and unplanned and basically inefficient conduct of the Rebellion, the resilience of the English, their greater mastery of military technology and resource management, the misery and humiliation and near total destruction of the rebel population, especially the Muslims, after their defeat, obviously hastened the process of mental change in Syed Ahmad Khan.

Indeed, the transition may have begun, almost unperceived by Syed Ahmad himself, in 1854 when he reissued the *Asar-us Sanadid* but omitted the entire section (chapter 4) dealing with the personalities of Delhi. No one knows exactly why he did it. It is said that the advice to omit the chapter came from Edward Thomas, civil servant in the service of the Company, and a historian.⁴⁰ The reason for this advice is not clear. Asghar Abbas says, "The reasons given by some historians for the excision of chapter 4 are quite far-fetched. The truth is that this chapter was taken out because of translation difficulties."⁴¹

The "far-fetched reasons" alluded to by Asghar Abbas imply that Syed Ahmad Khan apprehended inviting displeasure of the English by speaking about people like Shah Abdul Aziz and Imam Bakhsh Sahba'i in glowing terms. But this is plainly untenable. Shah Abdul Aziz was long dead (d. 1824), and Sahba'i hadn't done anything till then to incur the

³⁹ That is, Knight Commander of the Star of India. Syed Ahmad was already a C. S. I. (Commander of the Star of India), the K. C. S. I. was conferred upon him after he was knighted.

⁴⁰ Javed Ali Khan, p. 170. I am grateful to Prof. N. R. Farooqi for pointing out this text

to

me.

⁴¹ Asghar Abbas, p. 6.

wrath of the English. Suraiya Husain believes that “at that time, the Wahhabi movement was very strong and the Wahhabis had been charged with political crimes and they were liable to censure and displeasure. Thus a number of the ulema and famous personalities of Delhi too had become objects of the displeasure. Syed Ahmad Khan thus thought it expedient to take out the chapter from the second edition.”⁴² While no evidence has been offered by Husain for her conclusion, Asghar Abbas’s view that translation difficulties obliged Syed Ahmad Khan to omit chapter 4 is equally untenable. No one is obliged to translate a book in full. Nor is the author expected to discard chunks of his text just because they defy translation. The original and the translation have different target audiences and one need not be believed to be dictating to the other.

Iqtidar Alam Khan adopts a more reasonable line when he says, “Apparently, the only conclusion to be drawn is that the reason for its [chapter 4’s] removal would have been the fact that this *tazkira* of the traditional style did not fully match the contents of a book with such a modern and modernist approach and method as the *Asar-us Sanadid*.”⁴³

It is much more likely that Syed Ahmad Khan himself, now more in contact with the English because, ironically, of the *Asar-us Sanadid* itself, and his posting at Bijnore, had begun to feel that the elites of Delhi didn’t actually count for much before the English, or in absolute terms even. And his opinion may have been strengthened by Ghalib’s poem on the *Ai’n-e Akbari*. The poem was unexpected, but it came at the time when Syed Ahmad Khan’s thought and feelings themselves were inclining toward change. Ghalib seemed to be acutely aware of an European[English]-sponsored change in world polity, especially Indian polity. Syed Ahmad might well have been piqued at Ghalib’s admonitions, but he would also have realized that Ghalib’s reading of the situation, though not nuanced enough, was basically accurate. Syed Ahmad Khan may also have felt that he, being better informed about the English and the outside world, should have himself seen the change that now seemed to be just round the corner.

We must also remember that chapter 4 wasn’t the only part of the text to be deleted for the second edition. The axe seems to have fallen on almost all the things in the text that didn’t seem to conform to English tastes. For example, Syed Ahmad Khan deleted a longish Persian verse

⁴² Suraiya Husain, p. 215.

⁴³ Iqtidar Alam Khan, p. 11. I am grateful to Professor Asghar Abbas for drawing my attention to this text and to Professor Iqbal Husain for making its copy available to me.

panygeric in praise of Metcalfe, the English Resident. He also removed all the *taqrizes*, including one from Ghalib and one from Navab Ziauddin Ahmad Khan, well known historian and poet. Also omitted were the account of the miracles of a saint of the Rifa'i order, and an anecdote about Syed Ahmad himself, also involving a hint of the supernatural.⁴⁴ These omissions indicate that Syed Ahmad was now more *au fait* with Victorian-English tastes and mores. This is confirmed, if somewhat obliquely, by Hali in *Hayat-e Javed*⁴⁵ and by Munshi Pyare Lal Shakir (1880-1956) who, in a short biography of Syed Ahmad Khan said about the second edition of *Asar* that Syed Ahmad Khan “revised the book and put it together anew. This time, the text has extreme simplicity and the narrative too is devoid of Asiatic hyperbole and extravagances.”⁴⁶

Ghalib's *taqriz* on *A'in-e Akbari* is a poem that is often referred to but has never translated in English or even Urdu. In view of the important part that it seems to have played in determining the future course of Syed Ahmad Khan's thought, I give it here in full. The translation is accurate if lacking the felicity of the original:

Ghalib's Taqriz on Syed Ahmad Khan Arif Jang's edition of A'in-e Akbari (not accepted by Syed Ahmad Khan for publication) (1855-56)

Good news my friends, this ancient book's door
Is now open, because of the Syed's grace and fortune,

1

The eye began to see, the arm found strength
That which was wrapped in ancient clothes,
now put on a new dress.

2

And this idea of his, to establish its text and edit the *A'in*
Puts to shame his exalted capability and potential,

3

He put his heart to a task and pleased himself
And made himself an auspicious, free servant.

4

⁴⁴ Asghar Abbas, p. 6. All the cuts were restored in a modern edition edited by Khaliq Anjum.

⁴⁵ *Hayat-e Javed*, pp. 55-56 (of pt. 1). Shakir's phrase "Asiatic hyperbole and extravagances" is an echo from Hali, except that Hali said, "cold, dull extravagances." He used a standard Arabic word *baridah* (=cold, dull, slow moving) which also could be read as Persian *bar-deh* (=giving or causing heaviness).

⁴⁶ Quoted by Ansarullah Nazar, p. 236.

One who isn't capable of admiring his quality Would no doubt praise him for this task,	5
For such a task, of which this book is the basis Only an hypocrite can offer praise.	6
I, who am the enemy of pretence And have a sense of my own truthfulness,	7
If I don't give him praise for this task It's proper that I find occasion to praise.	8
I have nothing to say to the perverse None know what I know of arts and letters,	9
In the whole world, this merchandise has no buyer. What profit could my Master hope from it?	10
It should be said, it's an excellent inventory So what's there to see that's worth seeing?	11
And if you talk with me of Laws and Rules Open your eyes, and in this ancient halting-place	12
Look at the Sahibs of England. Look at the style and practice of these, 13	
See what Laws and Rules they have made for all to see What none ever saw, they have produced.	14
Science and skills grew at the hands of these skilled ones Their efforts overtook the efforts of the forebears.	15
This is the people that owns the right to Laws and Rules None knows to rule a land better than they,	16
Justice and Wisdom they've made as one They have given hundreds of laws to India.	17
The fire that one brought out of stone How well these skilled ones bring out from straw!	18
What spell have they struck on water That a vapour drives the boat in water!	19

Sometimes the vapour takes the boat down the sea Sometimes the vapour brings down the sky to the plains.	20
Vapour makes the sky-wheel go round and round Vapour is now like bullocks, or horses.	21
Vapour makes the ship speed Making wind and wave redundant.	22
Their instruments make music without the bow They make words fly high like birds:	23
Oh don't you see that these wise people Get news from thousands of miles in a couple of breaths?	24
They inject fire into air And the air glows like embers, 25	
Go to London, for in that shining garden The city is bright in the night, without candles.	26
Look at the businesses of the knowledgeable ones: In every discipline, a hundred innovators!	27
Before the Laws and Rules that the times now have All others have become things of yesteryears,	28
Wise and sensitive and prudent one, does your book Have such good and elegant Laws?	29
When one sees such a treasure house of gems Why should one glean corn from that other harvest?	30
Well, if you speak of its style, it's good No, it's much better than all else that you seek 31	
But every good always has a better too If there's a head, there's also a crown for it.	32
Don't regard that Generous Source as niggardly It's a Date-Palm which drops sweet light, like dates.	33
Worshipping the Dead is not an auspicious thing And wouldn't you too think that it's	

no more than just words? 34

The Rule of silence pleases my heart, Ghalib
You spoke well doubtless, not speaking is well too. 35

Here in this world your creed is to worship all the
Prophet's children,
Go past praising, your Law asks you to pray: 36

For Syed Ahmad Khan-e Arif Jang
Who is made up entirely of wisdom and splendour 37

Let there be from God all that he might wish for
Let an auspicious star lead all his affairs. 38

I don't need to dilate upon the poem's contents. It makes the pastness of the past extremely clear. The present and the future are here, and they are in the hands of the innovators, the technologists, the information-expeditors and controllers. Small wonder that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan never again wrote a word in praise of the *A'in-e Akbari* and in fact gave up taking active interest in history and archeology. He did edit another two historical texts⁴⁷ over the next few years, but neither of them was anything like the *A'in* a vast and triumphalist document on the governance of Akbar. The *A'in* was also the world's first anthropological text and gazetteer, and much else besides. In the *Asar-us Sanadid* Syed Ahmad quoted Amir Khusrau and other Persian poets with pleasure. After 1854, he continued to quote Persian poetry here and there, very sparingly, and just to make a point, not to give or derive pleasure from it. In 1847 he had said about the people of Delhi that every individual was "the aggregate of a thousand qualities and a bouquet of hundreds of thousands of accomplishments. Every one has a fondness for learning and for the arts and they have the taste for study, be it day or night."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ The *Tarikh-e Firuz Shahi* (1862), and Jahangir's Autobiography, the *Tuzuk-e Jahangiri*(1863).

⁴⁸ *Maqalat*, Vol. XVI, p. 212.

⁴⁹English in the original.

In around 1892 he wrote thus about Delhi:
Inauspiciousness and evil planetary effect still rains down on its Muslims, the dwellings of the Muslims, and the neighborhoods of the Muslims. Their temperament, their morals and manners, their customs and usages, their social⁴⁹ condition, all have changed so much that when sometimes I go to Delhi and happen to meet with someone, I feel astonished: what country and what land are they residents of? God took away everything that Delhi had. And that is the fate wrought by the Almighty, the Omniscient.⁵⁰

This calls to mind the anguished cry of Ghalib, lamenting the state of Delhi after the English retook the city in 1858:

Oh what do you ask! And what should I say? Delhi's life was in several things of moment: the Fort, the Chandi Chowk, the daily market around the Jama Masjid, the weekly excursion to the bridge over the Jamna, the annual fair of the flower-sellers. These five aren't there now. Tell me then, where is Delhi? True, there was some city of this name in the Indian kingdom.⁵¹

I went toward Rajghat, via the Jama Masjid area. From the Jama Masjid to the gate of Rajghat--no exaggeration--a vast wilderness...Now for the iron

49

⁵⁰ The date and addressee of this letter are not known. Apparently it was written at the time when there was a proposal to hold a meeting of the Muhammadan Educational Conference in Delhi. Since its name was changed from "Muhammadan Educational Congress" to "Muhammadan Educational Conference" in 1890, this letter should date from around that time. For change of name, see Syed Muhammad Ahmad, "Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, 1817-1898" in the Qrly. *Jamia*, no. 95, July-Dec. 1998, and Iqbal Husain, pp. x, 118-119. The change over from Congress to Conference almost certainly took place at the Allahabad meeting of the Congress in December 1890. For the letter, see *Maktubat*, Vol. II, p. 465. It is possible that the addressee of the letter was Khan Bahadur Munshi Ilahi Bakhsh about whom Syed Ahmad wrote in a letter dated July 14, 1892, as follows: "Although Khan Bahadur Munshi Ilahi Bakhsh and a few other friends are pressing me about Delhi, in my opinion arrangements cannot at all be made in Delhi. And as far as I can see, there are many reasons that indicate that God does not will for any thing conducive to the progress of Muslims to be done in Delhi. And none can fight with God's will." See Iqbal Husain, p. 153. The meeting, however did take place in Delhi.

⁵¹ Letter dated December 2, 1859 to Mir Mahdi Majruh. See Khaliq Anjum, Vol. II, p. 514.

roadway, the area from Calcutta Gate to Kabuli Gate has been levelled to the ground....In brief, the city has become a wilderness....By God, there's no city now. It's a camp, a cantonment. There's no city, no Fort, no Bazaar, no water-channel.⁵²

But that was 1869-60, the English military was still in occupation of the Jama Masjid and many other prestigious historical buildings of Delhi. Syed Ahmad Khan wrote his letter after 1891, perhaps in 1892. But it wasn't Javad-ud Daulah Arif Jang who was looking at Delhi then. It was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan Bahadur, K. C. S. I., and he never wrote a word about old buildings or cities or their citizens, past or present.

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Author's Note

All translations from Urdu and Persian have been made by me, except where stated otherwise.

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