

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

During the latter part of the nineteenth century Sir Syed Ahmed Khan of Delhi wielded such a vast influence on India in general and Muslim India in particular, as a great educationist and a reformer, that one is apt to lose sight of the fact that he was a great literary man first and everything else afterwards. From one point of view modern Urdu literature owes more to him than to any one man of his generation. His own work, as an eminent writer of Urdu prose, is important, both as regards its quality and quantity, and therefore his direct service to Urdu literature is as valuable as that of any of his contemporaries; but what further entitles him to our gratitude is the service he has indirectly rendered, by collecting round him a galaxy of brilliant scholars, who shone as writers of good Urdu prose and poetry, under his sympathetic and inspiring guidance. He was, as it were, a maker of literary men and responsible for the creation of a new school of Urdu literature.

He tried to improve the tone of Urdu literature and his efforts met with considerable success. As one born and bred in Delhi, he spoke the purest language of Delhi homes. When he began to write he tried to write a simple and unartificial style, which appeals immensely to a reader by its

directness and effect. He completed the work which Ghalib had started by introducing a simple and natural style in Urdu prose and giving up the ornate and stilted manner of writing, which prevailed before.

It is not necessary to give here at great length the story of his interesting and useful life. Two excellent biographies of Sir Syed have been written, one in English, by Col. Graham, and the other in Urdu by Maulana Hali. Hali has aptly called his book *Hayat-i-Jawid*, or "Life Everlasting," meaning to say that people who live the life that Syed Ahmad Khan lived, earn immortality and leave behind an undying name. The book is a fitting tribute to the memory of the deceased Syed, paid by one of his sincerest admirers and friends, who had numerous opportunities of personal contact with him. Any one desiring to have full information about the life of Sir Syed should read the *Hayat-i-Jawid*.

It is sufficient for the purposes of this sketch, to state briefly that Syed Ahmad Khan was born at Delhi on the 17th October 1817, in a family known for its learning. His mother's father, Khwaja Farid-ud-Din Ahmad, was a remarkable man. He was known as a great mathematician and, after a varied career, was appointed as a Minister by Akbar Shah II in 1815. He tried for some time to improve the finances of the tottering kingdom of the Moghals, but the retrenchments effected by him made him unpopular and he had to retire from the position. Syed Ahmed Khan's mother was the eldest daughter of Khwaja Farid-ud-Din. On the father's side Syed Ahmad

Khan belonged to a Syed family that had long been settled at Hirat, from where his ancestors moved to India, probably in the time of the Emperor Shah Jahan. His grandfather, Syed Hadi, was a high officer in the time of Alamgir II. Syed Ahmad Khan's father, Mir Muttaqi, did not accept office in the Moghal court but had always easy access to it. He was famous as an expert archer and swimmer, and as in those days both these accomplishments were highly prized by the nobility and gentry of Delhi, he had many pupils who learnt marksmanship and swimming from him. Syed Ahmad Khan also learnt the same from his father. The early education of Syed Ahmad Khan was not very regular and complete, even according to the standard of education prevailing at the time, but it was fairly extensive. He began reading the Quran with a lady teacher, then read some elementary books of Persian with a teacher named Maulvi Hamid-ud-Din and then studied Arabic for some time. He studied mathematics with a maternal uncle of his, who had inherited a taste for it from Khwaja Farid-ud-Din. He also studied astronomy for a short time. He studied Yunani medicine with Hakim Ghulam Haidar Khan, a well-known physician of his day. His career as a student, however, ended when he was eighteen or nineteen, though upto the end of his life he continued to be a student, adding to his stock of knowledge by self-study. In his youth he came in contact with some of the famous poets of Delhi like Ghalib, Azurda and Sahbai and often joined their literary circles. The grounding he thus got in various branches of learning stood him

in good stead in after life.

In 1838 he entered Government service as a reader in the Court of the Sadr Amin at Delhi. He went to Agra in 1839 as Naib Munshi to the Commissioner, and rose to the position of a Munsiff in 1841. After serving as a Munsiff at various places, he was transferred to Delhi in the same capacity in 1846. There he saw an opportunity of reviving his studies formally under able teachers and acquired a fairly advanced knowledge of Arabic, thus equipping himself for his work as a commentator on the Quran and as a defender of Islam against attacks from hostile critics.

He did not take long to discover that he had been endowed by nature with a gift for writing and speaking. He was further favoured by Providence with a robust and enduring constitution and had a wonderful capacity for hard work. His first book that was published in 1840, when he was only a youth of three and twenty, working in a humble position in the Commissioner's Office, was a tabular statement in Persian, called the *Jam-i-Jam*, in which he gave an account of various royal dynasties from Timarlane down to Bahadur Shah, the last of the Moghals. This showed his acquaintance with history and ability to do research work. His next work was of a different kind. It was an abstract of Civil Laws for the use of Munsiffs. This book was in Urdu and was appreciated by Government, and on the strength of that, he was accepted as a candidate for Munsiffship. His early religious training then asserted itself and he published a pamphlet called *Jila-ul-qulub*, giving an account of the birth and death of the Prophet.

His versatility further showed itself in another direction by the publication in 1844 of an Urdu translation of a small book on mechanics. While at Delhi he also laid the foundation of his future work as a journalist, by frequently contributing to the *Syed-ul-Akhbar*, a paper which had been started at Delhi by his elder brother. The first work, however, of real value, from his pen, was the *Asar-us-Sanadid*, which gave an account of old Delhi and of the monuments of ancient times, with which the capital and its environments were studded. He had devoted all his leisure hours for a considerable period to the collection of material for this historical work and it was illustrated by plans and sketches of old buildings and by facsimiles of the inscriptions that were to be found on them. The spirit of devotion to this work, which characterised him at the time, may be judged by the fact that in order to decipher the more lofty of the inscriptions on the Qutab Minar, Syed Ahmad Khan used to get into a basket tied to two poles and placed in front of the part of which the inscription was to be deciphered. He himself describes the process which was adopted and the fear that the risky experiment used to excite in the mind of his friend Sahbai. He says:—

قطب صاحب کی لاث کے بعض کتبے جو زیادہ بلند ہونے کے سبب پڑھ نہ جاسکتے تھے۔ انکے پڑھنے کو ایک چھینکا دو بلوں کے بیچ میں ہر ایک کتبے کے محاذی بندھوا لیا جاتا تھا اور میں خود اوپر چڑھکر اور چھینکے میں بیٹھکر ہر کتبے کا چرچا اتارتا تھا۔ جس وقت میں چھینکے میں بیٹھتا تھا تو مولانا صہبائی فرط معیت کے سبب گھبراتے تھے اور خوف کے مارے ان کا رنگ متغیر ہو جاتا تھا۔

This book came out in 1847, and at once brought the author into prominence. Mr. Roberts, a European friend of the author, took a copy of the book to England and brought it to the notice of the Royal Asiatic Society, London, which expressed its appreciation of the book and desired that it might be translated into English. Syed Ahmad Khan brought out a revised edition of the book in 1854, with the addition of new and better plans and sketches, but most of the copies of the second edition along with the plans were lost during the Mutiny. Some of the plans subsequently recovered have been preserved in the Library of the M. A. O. College at Aligarh.¹ The second edition was not only an improvement on the first one, in outward appearance, but also in its reading matter. This book, however, was written in a cumbrous old-fashioned style and in that respect cannot bear comparison with the clear and lucid style of Urdu prose, which characterised most of the subsequent writings of the same author.

Before passing on to other literary productions of Syed Ahmad Khan, it may be mentioned that the famous French Orientalist, M. Garcin de Tassy paid the *Asar-us-Sanadid* the compliment of translating it into French, which translation was published in 1861. A copy of the translation was sent to the author. When the Royal Asiatic Society of London saw this translation they elected Syed Ahmed Khan an Honorary Fellow of the Society in 1864. Later on, when the Edinburgh University conferred on Syed Ahmad Khan the

1. It has since developed into the Muslim University.

honorary degree of LL. D. in 1889, in his absence, this book was particularly mentioned along with the *Khutabat-i-Ahmadya* as entitling him to that distinction.

Having spent 8 years at Delhi as a Munsiff, Syed Ahmad Khan was promoted to the position of a Sadr Amin at Bijnore. While there, he compiled a history of Bijnore. He also edited and corrected the *Ain-i-Akbari* of Abul Fazal for publication. This edition was to be in three volumes and the editor had added an introduction containing a detailed review of the book. The first and the third volumes were printed and the second volume with a number of illustrations and sketches was ready to go to the Press, when the Mutiny broke out and this valuable material was lost.

From Bijnore Syed Ahmad Khan was transferred to Moradabad as *Sadr-us-Sadur* in 1858. Soon after that he brought out his book called *Tarikh-i-Sarkashi-i-Bijnore*, giving an account of the rebellion in that town. This was a work of local interest, but another little book, of Syed Ahmad Khan dealing with the Mutiny and published in 1859, was much more valuable and of general interest. This was known as *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind*, or "the Causes of the Indian Revolt." Small as the book is, it is very striking indeed. It required more than ordinary courage to write so boldly and frankly as Syed Ahmad Khan did, in the perilous days immediately succeeding the Mutiny, and he did so at considerable personal risk. He got 500 copies of the book printed, but he did not publish them in India, lest such publication may cause excitement or be mis-

understood. He kept one copy of the book with himself, sent another copy to the Government of India and all the rest he sent in a parcel to England, for distribution there among those interested in the matter. In the Council of the Viceroy the book was discussed, when Lord Canning and Sir Bartle Frere expressed their opinion in its favour as a book written with a desire to help the Government, while Mr. Cecil Beadon spoke strongly against it as a seditious work. An English translation of the book appeared in 1873 from the pen of Col. Graham. Barring the two copies alluded to above, there is no copy of the original book in India, but Maulana Hali has reproduced it or perhaps the greater part of it, as an appendix to the *Hayat-i-Jawid*, and Malak Fazl-ud-Din, Book-seller of Lahore, has since published a reprint of it.

This book has not only a historic interest for us, but is important from other points of view as well. Its style, though simple and impressive, lacks much of the elegance of the style later on developed by the author and by his contemporaries who collected round him. It presents here and there specimens of the old method of Urdu writing, imitating more or less the style of literal translations from Arabic. We read for instance:—

واسطے اسلوبی اور خوبی اور پائیداری گورنمنٹ کے مداخلت
رعایا کی حکومت ملک میں واجبات سے ہے۔

or

بادشاہان ملک غیر بجلی کمال اعتبار رکھتے تھے ہماری
گورنمنٹ پر۔

or

مثل نابود کر دینے علم عربی و سنسکرت کے اور مفلس و
محتاج کر دینے ملک کے۔

Such passages are, however, few and far between and the rest of the book is written in an easy flowing style, which it is a pleasure to read.

There is another feature of the book which is fascinating and that is the perfect candour, with which the author has expressed his opinions, some of which are as applicable to present day life as they were in 1859.

Syed Ahmad Khan edited and corrected the *Tarikh-i-Ferozshahi* for the Asiatic Society, Bengal, and this edition was published by the Society, in 1862.

He next directed his attention to a commentary of the Bible in Urdu, with some introductory chapters. He wrote a considerable part of this commentary, but this work remained incomplete. To this work M. Garcon de Tassy made a very appreciative reference in 1883.

Syed Ahmad Khan experienced a sad bereavement by the death of his wife in 1861. She died leaving three children. Two of them were boys, of whom Syed Mahmud, afterwards Mr. Justice Mahmud, was one. The Syed was asked by several friends to seek comfort in a second marriage, but he decided to pass the remainder of his life singly, as one wedded to the service of his fellow men and devoted to the spreading of learning among his co-religionists.

The works that have been noticed already were only an earnest of what was to follow and his main activity in the field of letters was really

to commence after this sad loss, when the cause of education and enlightenment grew from a favourite hobby to an absorbing passion in the mind of Syed Ahmad Khan.

As one who improved Urdu prose and shaped it into a vehicle of serious thought and speech, the name of Syed Ahmed Khan will always be remembered. His practical temperament was admirably suited for the performance of this role. It is remarkable that a man, who had passed his youth in the gay society of Delhi, who had associated with a poet like Ghalib, and who had been present at many a poetical contest, remained free from any real inclination towards writing poetry. He would occasionally read poetry and appreciate a good verse when he heard it, but he regarded life as too serious to be spent in weaving beautiful fabrics of mere words. His strong commonsense revolted against making poetry his main vocation. The prose in life appealed to him as much as poetry did to others. He may have possibly indulged in early youth in writing verses, but he suppressed his inclination in this direction so successfully in later life that you hardly find any traces of it. In fact you do not find him even quoting poetry very much in his speeches and writings.

Among the writers who came directly in touch with him, and whose tastes were formed in his elevating company, may be mentioned Maulvi Hali, Maulvi Nazeer Ahmed, Maulvi Shibli, Maulvi Zakaullah and Syed Mehdi Ali, better known as Nawab Muhsinul Mulk, to give only a few of the most prominent men of letters. There is a host of others, too numerous to be mentioned, whose

writings have been influenced by the works of Sir Syed or by the School of literature brought into existence by him.

Of the great authors above named, Hali is the only one who is famous for his poetry as well as prose. His poetry breathes throughout the spirit of reform, which characterised the prose writings of Syed Ahmad Khan, and one scarcely doubts that many ideas embodied in the poems of Hali are inspired by Syed Ahmed Khan directly or indirectly. The "*Maddo Jazri Islam*" or "The Tide and Ebb of Islam" is the best known of Hali's poems and the idea of it was suggested by Syed Ahmad Khan.

This is only one illustration of the way in which the literary men of his day were, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by the great Syed. Such instances can be multiplied, but we have to resume the narrative of Syed Ahmad Khan's own literary activities.

Before noticing some of his work, it appears to be necessary to draw attention to the fact that Syed Ahmad Khan, while wielding a powerful influence on his contemporaries, was himself influenced, to a considerable extent, by Western culture, particularly English. It is rather strange, considering that he practically did not know English. He had only picked up a little knowledge of English at an advanced age, but he knew how to collect material for his writings from Western sources. He not only uses many English words in his writings, but has actually introduced many English ideas in Urdu and has imported many English turns of expression, which have now become

quite absorbed in the language. He has opened the door, as it were, for writers who came after him, to further enrich the language by introducing expressions and ideas from foreign sources, whenever they accord with the genius of Urdu. He represents the happy result of a blending of the thought of the East with the thought of the West. His bringing up and early training were those of a true Oriental, but with wonderful adaptability he made his own all that struck him as good and great in Western culture and civilisation. With a breadth of mind, which many who have received a much more liberal education might well emulate, he felt instinctively drawn towards the knowledge that could be gained from the West. He got many useful works from English translated into Urdu, thus adding to the stock of informative books in the language of the country.

In 1866 Syed Ahmad Khan started the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, which lasted till the end of his life and for which he worked as an honorary editor. This paper was, at one time, not only the accredited organ of the Muslims of Northern India, faithfully expressing their opinions on various topics of the day, but it also rendered valuable service to Urdu literature. The contributions of Syed Ahmad Khan to the paper, if collected, would make several volumes and would contain a good deal which would possess more than passing interest. The praise which Hali has bestowed upon this journal, appears to be well-deserved, so far as the earlier years of the life of the journal are concerned. The passage in the *Hayat-i-Jawid* in which Hali praised the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, is re-

produced below in translation, as it embodies the views of Hali on what a properly conducted journal should aim at. He says:—

“A distinguishing feature of this journal was that unlike many of its contemporaries it never injured the feelings of any sect or community. It never gave up sobriety of tone and never indulged in flippancy and unbecoming jokes to attract more customers. It did not write anything which would disturb friendly relations between one community and another in India. It did not write against any Hindu or Muslim State. It did not take part in religious disputes between Hindus and Muslims, and, if it ever intervened, it did so for purposes of bringing about reconciliation among them.”

Syed Ahmad Khan paid a visit to England in 1869 and remained there for a year. His energies found vent in many useful directions. What chiefly concerns us in this essay is the publication of an English translation of the *Khutabat-i-Ahmadya*. The book deals with the life and work of the Prophet of Islam and defends him against the attacks of Western critics. He had taken with him his notes in Urdu and he got a translation of them printed in England. On his return to India, an Urdu edition of the *Khutabat* was brought out, with some amplifications, by the author. He wrote graphic accounts of his travels, which appeared in the organ of his society at Aligarh, and would make an interesting book of travels.

It was in 1870, on his return from England, that Syed Ahmad Khan started his well-known

periodical, called the *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*, which made quite a stir in social, religious and literary circles during its existence. It ceased to exist in 1876, but has left a lasting mark on Muslim Society and Urdu literature. Many of the articles that were contributed to this periodical by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan are of permanent value and have been published in book form in Volume II of the abstracts from the *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*, published by Malak Fazl-ud-Din of Lahore. The volume is worth reading. Some portions of it may now be uninteresting, as dealing with matters which are no longer of any great moment, or on which public opinion has now undergone considerable change. Others may not appeal to some as purely religious or technical. But even after omitting such portions, there remains a good deal which can be read with advantage. In many of the articles of the *Tehzib* you see Syed Ahmad Khan at his best as a writer of Urdu. For example, I may cite the following passage in which Syed Ahmad Khan writes on the pleasures of hope:—

”او نورانی چہرے والی یقین کی اکلوتی بیٹی۔ امید۔ یہ خدائی روشنی تیرے ساتھ ہے۔ تو ہی ہماری مصیبت کے وقتوں میں ہم کو تسلی دیتی ہے۔ تو ہی ہمارے آڑے وقتوں میں ہماری مدد کرتی ہے۔ تیری ہی بدولت دور دراز خوشیاں ہمیں پاس نظر آتی ہیں۔..... تیری ہی برکت سے خوشی خوشی کے لئے نام آوری۔ نام آوری کے لئے بہادری۔ بہادری کے لئے فیاضی۔ فیاضی کے لئے مہکت۔ مہکت کے لئے نیکی تیار ہے۔“

It is gratifying to notice that the lectures and speeches made by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan have

also been collected and offered to the public in the form of a book. We owe this collection to Maulvi Imam-ud-Din of Gujrat and its publication to the enterprise of Malak Fazl-ud-Din again. These speeches are full of thought and suggestions and some of them could be as useful to-day as they were when they were made years ago. For instance the learned and thoughtful lecture which was delivered at Mirzapur in 1873, has the following passage:

”یہ خیال کہ ہماری رسموں میں تبدیل کی ضرورت نہیں ہے (گو وہ کیسے ہی مضبوط یقین دل میں بیٹھا ہو۔ بیہروسے اور اعتماد کے لائق نہیں ہے۔ کیونکہ ممکن ہے کہ صرف عادت نے یہ خیال ہمارے دل میں جمایا ہو“

There is one more work of Sir Syed which may be noticed in conclusion. He started writing a commentary in Urdu on the Quran, which has been left unfinished, but the part that was written has been published. It was published by him in his life-time and a reprint of it in six volumes has been published by Malak Fazl-ud-Din. This work belongs to the domain of religion and does not require a detailed reference while we are dealing mainly with Sir Syed's services to literature. About the merits of the commentary there has been a great controversy. The orthodox Muslims have always looked upon it as a heretical interpretation of the Sacred Book, while many of those who have received modern education have given an unstinted meed of praise to this well-meant effort of the Syed, the real aim of which was to stem the tide of materialism and unbelief, which was coming in the wake of modern education and

which threatened to deprive many Mussalmans of their belief in their religion. In this object he succeeded to a considerable extent; and even if it appears that, in his desire to reconcile religion with science, he occasionally resorted to far fetched arguments or fell into some errors of reasoning, there can be no doubt that posterity will give him credit for standing up boldly for freedom of opinion and thought and for devoting himself, according to the best of his ability, to the interpretation of the Holy Book.

Many small pamphlets and stray writings of Sir Syed have not been specifically mentioned in this essay, for want of space, but those who desire more exhaustive information about the literary works of the author, will find in the *Hayat-i-Jawid* a good book of reference. From what has been said above, it is clear that though service to literature was only one of the many fields of activity to which Sir Syed devoted his life, yet this alone, apart from his other great services, is enough to give him a lasting claim to our gratitude.

He lived a noble life and died a noble death. He used to spend every penny he had in the cause he had at heart, so that when he died there was nothing in his house to defray the expenses of his funeral, which were borne by a devoted friend.

His death evoked universal sorrow and mourning in the country and particularly among the Muslims and numerous elegies were written on his death. Thousands of meetings expressing regret at this national loss were held throughout

the country. Though a quarter¹ of a century has elapsed since his death, he lives still in the loving memory of thousands of admirers. His mortal remains have found repose in a corner of the spacious mosque he had built in the vast enclosure of the M. A. O. College at Aligarh. There rests one whose heart burnt all his life with the fire of patriotism and the desire to serve his co-religionists and his countrymen. A simple and unassuming grave marks his resting place, but it speaks eloquently, with its silent tongue, to those who were opposed to him during his life and used to avoid him as unorthodox, to come to his grave, to ponder over his work and to judge him better. It says, in the words of a Persian poet :

زمن بہ جرم طپیدن کنارہ مے کردی
بیا بہ خاک من و آر میدنم بنگر

“You were avoiding me during my life on account of my restlessness. Come now to my grave and see my repose.”

1. This was the approximate period that elapsed between the death of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the time when this lecture was delivered.