

SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN
HIS CONTRIBUTION TO ARCHAEOLOGY

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Syed Ahmad was undoubtedly the greatest figure in the transitional period of Indian history. His was a many-sided personality. His greatness lay in the fact that he was a true leader of men, who had attracted around him some of the ablest intellects of his age and provided an enlightened leadership at a crucial period of Indian history.

Syed Ahmad occupies an eminent place among the reformers. "Reviewing the actions of a bygone generation, to-day," said Maulana Muhammad Ali, "when it is easier to be wise after the event, I still think that the attitude of Syed Ahmad Khan was eminently wise, and much as I wish that something which he had said should have been left unsaid. I am constrained to admit that no well-wisher of Mussalmans nor of India, as a whole, could have followed a different course in leading the Mussalmans."

As a writer, Syed Ahmad occupies a high place. He was a versatile and prolific writer, who has left behind no less than 25 valuable works both in Urdu and Persian, on history, archaeology, politics, religion and philosophy. He is also universally acknowledged as one of the pioneers of Urdu prose. The greatest contribution of Syed Ahmad was in the educational sphere -- establishment of Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College, Aligarh and the Scientific Society of Aligarh.

It seems desirable to give some facts connected with the family of this great man -- a pioneer of Muslim resurgence -- who was at the same time an educationist, reformer, political thinker, writer and archaeologist.

The native place of the ancestors of Sir Syed Ahmad was Arabia. They moved afterwards to Herat and during the reign of Emperor Jalaluddin Akbar, they came to India and continued to enjoy the Royal titles and dignity. During the time of Aziz ud-Din Alamgir Sani his grandfather received the title of Jawud-ud-Dowlah. Jawud Ali Khan Bahadur received the *mansab* of

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Hazarizat and 500 horsemen and the brother of his grandfather received the same *mansab* with the title of Kobad Ali Khan Bahadur. After the death of his grandfather, the same degree of *mansab* at the time of Shah Alam, continued to Syed Muhammad Mutaki Khan Bahadur, the father of Sir Syed and after his demise, the same hereditary title was conferred on Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.

The maternal grandfather of Sir Syed Ahmad also enjoyed the title of Nawab Dabir ud-Dowlah Amin ul-Mulk Khwaja Farid ud-Din Ahmad Khan Bahadur Mosleh Jang. While the British were in Bengal and their rule had not reached Upper India, the Wakil of the King of Persia was killed in Bombay in an affray and it became urgent for the British Government to send a Wakil on deputation to Persia, Sir Syed Ahmad's grandfather was selected for this high office. On his return, after fully completing the trust, he was appointed a full Political Agent at Ava. After this, in latter times, he held the office of Prime Minister to Akber Shah, the King of Delhi. Sir Syed Ahmad's maternal grandfather was so much respected, that General Sir David Ochterlony always visited him on friendly terms -- and on his demise, Sir Edward Colebrooke, Bart paid the family a visit of condolence. Coming from such a respected family Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was destined to become a great man.

His long life history for about 80 years may be divided into four equal periods:-

- i) First twenty years were devoted to education.
- ii) The next twenty (1837-57) were marked for his success as Judicial officer. During this period he also continued his literary activities and the *Asar-us-Sanadeed* was written during this period.
- iii) The next twenty years (1857-77) were noted for his interest in public welfare activities specially the education of Muslim community.
- iv) The fourth period (1877-98) was the most important period of his life in which he established his reputation as the greatest political leader and educationist of Muslim India during the 19th Century.

Here I intend to deal with that period of his life in which he wrote the *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, revised it and made a lasting

and outstanding contribution in the field of Archaeology and History. His eight years' stay in Delhi from 1846 constitute an important period of his literary career. It was during this period that he renewed and completed the course of his oriental studies and began to move in the intellectual circles and started work on research level. It was thus during this period that Sir Syed Ahmad produced the *Asar-us-Sanadeed* which according to him "will maintain his name for ages to come." (1)

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had to work hard to collect material for his book *Asar-us-Sanadeed* or "The Traces of the Great". It was a pioneer attempt and involved considerable research and field work. He used to spend his holidays on it and often went outside the city accompanied by his friend Imam Bukhsh Sahba'i, to examine ruins of the old monuments and measured their rooms etc. The result of his efforts were published in the form of a book which was partly an archaeological history of Delhi and partly a biographical encyclopaedia of contemporary personalities of the city of Delhi.

The archaeological section comprises of three chapters. First chapter deals with 130 buildings (outside the city) of both Hindus and Muslims. Impressions and sketches of all buildings excepting few have been given. The second chapter (buildings of Qila Mu'ala) describes 32 buildings with inscriptions and maps. The third chapter (city of Shahjahanabad proper) describes about seventy mosques, temples, wells, bazars etc. In all archaeological section deals with 232 buildings of all kinds -- forts, palaces, temples, mosques, mausoleums, assembly halls, towers, gardens, places of public entertainment, wells, bridges etc.-- "in 19 different zones of Delhi each representing a period of its chequered history between 1400 B.C. and 1847 C.E." (2). The origin and nature of each building and the important events connected with it were ascertained by Sir Syed with the help of such inscriptions as were extant and decipherable and then these were checked with popular traditions and available historical references. This involved great deal of labour both physical and mental. The physical labour sometimes also entailed risk of life as it included being lifted up to great heights in improvised cane work trays suspended by ropes. These difficulties, however, could not deter him from accomplishing the task which he had set before him. With great patience he carried on his work and ultimately succeeded in completing it.

The reading and copying of inscriptions outside the uppermost storeys of Qutb Minar in this manner was not an easy

task. An idea of the difficulties which he had to face in deciphering the inscriptions on the Qutb Minar can be formed from his own words. Sir Syed Ahmad says that, "to read the inscriptions of the Qutb Minar which were too high to be read from the base, a hanger had to be made with two wooden poles suspended till it reached the inscription. I used to climb over the Minar and take my seat in the hanger before it was suspended, and thus took its sketch myself. As I used to enter the hanger my friend Sahba'i felt greatly perturbed and the colour of his face changed." (3)

Hali with a poet's sense of analogies characterises these ascents of Syed Ahmad as prophetic of his subsequent ascent of the ladder of greatness. Hali in his book *Hayat-e-Javed* (4) describing the motive behind these efforts of Sir Syed says that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's objective in publishing this book was to relieve himself of financial worries. It may be partially true but the real and more probable motive must have been to preserve an account of the great cultural heritage of Muslims. Few historians and archaeologists are known to have taken such risks of life in the course of their researches as taken by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. The buildings which he has described were being reduced to ruins and these too were disappearing fast, the only way of giving them immortal life was to leave behind an authentic account of as many of them as possible. Financially, perhaps the publication of work like *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, was not lucrative venture because its preparation needed considerable research and hard work.

The biographical section i.e. fourth chapter of the book consists of vignettes on 120 prominent contemporary citizens of Delhi -- spiritual leaders, mystics, divines, religious teachers, scholars and reciters of the Qur'an, poets, calligraphists, painters and musicians. It also deals with the climate and the Urdu language.

"Embodying as the book does a wealth of information, its readability is marred by an unfortunate choice of style. The style, which follows an outmoded tradition of ornate prose, is for the most part quaint, verbose, full of redundant synonyms, overladen with poetic tropes and conceits and studded with verses and, worse, with rhymed sentences and clauses. Here and there, however, when Syed Ahmad can shake himself free of his preoccupation with fine writing, glimmers of his later simple and racy style can be seen. That in due course he completely outgrew the traditional style to become one of the

founders of modern Urdu prose was one of the many achievements of his versatile career." (5)

The *Asar-us-Sanadeed* was published in 1847 and was presented to the Royal Asiatic Society by Roberts, Magistrate and Collector of Shahjahanabad, who took a copy of it with him to England while proceeding on home leave. It however, failed to elicit formal recognition from the Society; but as recorded by Hali, members of the Society were very pleased with the book, and some of them suggested that it be translated into English. Accordingly, when Roberts returned from England, he started translation work in collaboration with Syed Ahmad. It then struck Syed Ahmad that he should at the same time prepare a revised version of the original.

The preface to the revised Edition (6) says: "that the Author begs to offer respectfully, his humble gratitude, to Mr. Roberts and Colonel Saxson, who have patronised him, and he considers that it is through their kindness, that he has been able to complete this work. That the author also considers his duty to offer his gratitude to Mr. Edward Thomas, through whose aid and kindness he has been able to put the work in Type."

This revised Edition, contains the following additions and ameliorations:-

1. The first chapter of this Edition is a new addition altogether (which the first Edition did not contain), and contains a brief history of the first population of all India and particulars respecting the Capital or Seat of Empire, during the old and new reigns.
2. The second chapter of the first Edition contained only an account of the Fort built by Shah Jahan. But the 2nd Edition contains a full account of that Fort, as well as of all the Fortresses erected ever since the city of Delhi was first populated.
3. What the 1st and 3rd chapters of the 1st Edition contained are to be found, in the 3rd chapter of the 2nd Edition, together with additional particulars respecting the old buildings.
4. In the 1st Edition, there were 2 faults, viz. particulars respecting some of the old buildings were not then satis-

factorily ascertained and moreover some errors existed in their description. The necessary corrections, etc. were however made in the 2nd Edition.

5. In the first Edition, the description of the buildings was given promiscuously; but in the new or 2nd Edition, the dates of the buildings are regularly given.
6. In the first Edition it was inserted from where the particulars were obtained or gathered. But on the margin of the second Edition the historical books are quoted.
7. This second Edition contains another thing of great moment, viz. the Inscriptions found on the buildings are copied and inserted in the second Edition in their very original form.

The new edition is not only an improvement in point of expression, it contains additional material by way of a few more charts of buildings and transcripts of inscriptions. This new edition came out in 1854 (7). Garcin de Tassy, a well known orientalist published a French translation in 1861, which won for Syed Ahmad the honour of honorary Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society and he was duly awarded Diploma (dated 4th July) in 1864. The Secretary of the Society in his letter of 20th July, 1864 wrote to Syed Ahmad Khan, "In congratulating you on this well-deserved mark of distinction, I trust it may be gratifying to you to know that your researches on Indian antiquities are duly appreciated, both in this country and abroad" (8). It appears that the English translation was never completed, possibly because Roberts was transferred from Delhi before he had finished the work. So far as the original purpose of writing the book, namely, to earn some money, was concerned, Hali mentions regretfully that it was not fulfilled and that, on the contrary, Syed Ahmad suffered a heavy loss. As a matter of fact, all but one or two copies of the book were lost during the disturbances of 1857.

Another contribution of Sir Syed Ahmad in this field is a chronological list published in 1852 of the rulers of Delhi over the preceding five millenia from Raja Yudhishter to Queen Victoria (9). The list, an improved version of one appended to the first chapter of the *Asar-us-Sanadeed* (second edition), covered 203 ruler, giving their full names and titles, their parentage, the names of their capitals and the periods of their reigns.

The buildings, gardens, palaces etc. of Delhi have been described in various books in some cases briefly and in some cases in detail. But it is fortunate for us that during the first half of the 19th century two books were written about the old buildings of the city of Delhi. It is only because of these two books that we know of the existing buildings and also of the remains of those buildings which are no longer in existence. The first book was written by Sangi Baig in persian titled *Sair-ul-Manazil* (10). This book was written on the instigation of Sir Metcaff. The second book, *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, was written by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and published for the first time in 1847. The first edition was reprinted by Nawal Kishore.

The Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi has based its edition of 1966 on Nawal Kishore's edition. Another edition was produced from Cawnpur by Maulana Rahid which is based on the second edition of *Asar-us-Sanadeed* of Sir Syed Ahmad but with few additions. The draw back of first edition produced by Sir Syed Ahmad was that it contained very few inscriptions. Therefore, the Historical Society of Pakistan while producing their edition have tried to add more and more inscriptions as appendices. There is no doubt that inscriptions are one of the most important sources of history. They not only tell us about the buildings where they are placed but sometimes they throw light on the history of a nation or a country and are considered to be an authentic source. Thus inclusion of inscriptions and sketches of the buildings of Delhi in the 2nd edition produced by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan has considerably added to the value and importance of the book. The Historical Society of Pakistan while producing their edition of 1966 have drawn heavily from the "*List of Monuments*" by Maulvi Zafar Hassan which were prepared by him with considerable pains and are authentic lists of the old and new buildings of Delhi.

Besides *Asar-us-Sanadeed*, *Sair-ul-Manazil* and *Lists of Monuments*, we get useful information about the buildings of Delhi from a book titled *Waqiat Darul Hakoomat Delhi* by Maulvi Bashiruddin. However, Sir Syed Ahmad's contribution to Archaeology in the form of *Asar-us-Sanadeed* is outstanding and lasting. The importance of this detailed and authentic work about the buildings of Delhi, which was once a city of great importance, becomes evident and outstanding when we keep in mind the times when it was written and also the difficulties and odds which the author had to face in writing and composing this work. The inclusion of copies of inscriptions in their original form adds immensely to the value and authenticity of this

book. This also makes it distinct from other contributions on the subject.

NOTES

1. Asar-us-Sanadeed -- Printed at the Indian Standard Press by William Demonte 1852 (page 1 Preface) Accession No. 8476, National Archives of Pakistan.
2. Syed Ahmad Khan, M. Hadi Hussain, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, p. 21.
3. Hayat-e-Javed by Hali, published by Punjab Academy Trust, Lahore 1957, p. 115.
4. op. cit, p. 114
5. Syed Ahmad Khan, M. Hadi Hussain, Institute of Islamic Culture, Lahore, 1970, p. 22.
6. Printed at the Indian Standard Press by William Demonte in the year A.D. 1852 in the city of Delhi.
7. The English title of this edition indicate 1852 as the year of print. The Urdu title indicate the year of its revision as 1852 and the year of print 1853 in case of chapters and 1854 in case of Preface. The title also says that any book not bearing the seal of the author will be considered as stolen. The copy of this edition in the National Archives of Pakistan, Islamabad bears the seal. (Accession No. 8476, National Archives of Pakistan).
8. A History of the Freedom Movement Vol. II. Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi 1961, p. 470.
9. Silsalat-ul-Muluk, Vol. VI, pp. 166-231.
10. Asar-us-Sanadeed by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan reprinted by Pakistan Historical Society, Karachi p. 30.