Sir Syed: The Pragmatist of 19th Century India

By Mohammad Sajjad

Sir Syed's own education was neither systematic nor continuous, yet he did exercise a commanding intellectual greatness. In terms of the medium of instruction, he advocated early education in vernacular language (Urdu/Hindustani), while for the higher education he exhorted to prefer English language. Later, due to exigencies, he revisited this position.

Sir Syed (1817-98) was much in uenced by the career and views of his maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin (1747-1828), a Mathematician and polyglot with a well stacked library, Prime Minister of Mughal ruler Akbar Shah II (1806-37) in 1815, and again in 1819. He also served as the
Political Agent of the East India Company in Ava (Burma) and in Persia (1803). Sir Syed's father, Muhammad Muttaqi (d. 1838), too, had association with the Mughal court. Sir Syed preferred to join the services of the British East India Company. Such a career choice outside the Red Fort of Delhi may testify that Sir Syed got an early indication of a general idea of the changing world. He started his career as an o ce-worker in the judicial establishment at Agra through a family network. In 1839, he became ***Naib Munshi*** at the Commissioner's o ce at Agra. His stay of seven years there was quite important in the development of his personality and of his acquaintance with British administration and culture.

It is little intriguing as to why Sir Syed did not join the Delhi Kalij which had already introduced English section in the 1820s and later Vernacular Translation society as well.

Prior to the upsurge of 1857, Sir Syed does not seem to have been concerned with, or aware of, such developments in the arena of education under the colonial regime. He was rather still rooted in his traditions and history. The life of his mind, in the 1840s and early 1850s, continued to be in the traditional groove of poetry, sectarian debates (***Rah-e-Sunnat wa Radd-e-Bidat***, 1850), mysticism (***Kalimat-ul-Haq***, 1849), and the like, though also in history, evident from his Persian account of Muslim rulers, ***Jaam-e-Jam*** ('Jamshed's Cup', a book of chronological tables, ***jidwal,*** about the rulers of Delhi – from Timurlane to Bahadur Shah II, including the non-Timurid, Pathan rulers, 1840), and ***Asar-us Sanadid*** (1847), an inventory of monuments and notables of Delhi, ***Silsilat-ul-Maluk*** ('Chain of Kings', which listed the names and dates of all the rulers of Delhi from ancient times to his day, 1852). This indicates about his dual personality – a world he had grown up in and a world he could sense lay ahead. However, the second edition of ***Asar-us-Sanadid*** (1854) clearly indicates not simply a change of style but a narrative where form is undermined – facts and analyses are given prominence. As late as 1855, when Sir Syed approached Ghalib to write a foreword (***taqriz***) for Abul Fazl's ***Ain-e-Akbari*** (an authentic record of Akbar's administration) he was editing, the latter's suggestion to focus on the scienti c, intellectual, and material accomplishments of the West, instead of looking into India's past did not go well with him. Thus, it can be safely argued that till this point, Sir Syed was largely absorbed into past, rather than visualising the future and doing something about it. His intellectual exercises till the early phase of the revolt, clearly devoid of any need or concern for reforms, are to be situated in that awareness.

Sir Syed was de nitely evolving from simply a man of taste and re nement to a careful observer and analyst imbibing the spirit of Benthamite Utilitarian pragmatism. This shapes his view on education as a vehicle of well-being and progress of the society in the years to come, particularly a er 1857-59. By now he had come to believe in the permanence of British rule in India, which is why he strove to come to terms with it.

Then, what is so speci c about Sir Syed to have advocated for modern/western education, from the 1860s, and which medium of instruction did he prefer, and why?

True, the spread of Christian missionary schools was a cause of suspicion. Sir Syed also underlined this factor in his ***Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind*** (1858) and gave an account of the public reaction to the government's educational policy. By doing so he was not only conveying the feelings of public but also his own views. Thus, this was his rst exposition about the subject of education. He shared the feelings of the corresponding class of his fellow countrymen that the British were trying to marginalise Persian and Arabic by replacing it with the vernacular (Urdu/Hindustani, which was still held in contempt by the Muslim aristocracy) and English.

On November 5, 1859, Sir Syed founded a Persian public school in Moradabad on the lines of old educational system, persuading the elites not to remain con ned to private domiciliary education. The only inadequacy of/in these private Persian schools, in the view of Sir Syed, was that their curricula did not emphasize upon modern history. Syed Ahmad's own sons, Syed Hamid (1849-94) and Syed Mahmud (1850-1903), who had already started English at home, studied in this new school. Thus, till then, Sir Syed's paradigm was Persian or English, and not vernacular.

During 1859-62, Sir Syed was critical of the government schools and its emphasis on vernacular medium for the fact that, in his view, adoption of vernaculars, particularly Urdu (also known as Hindustani), would obstruct the way to higher learning. Moreover, Sir Syed also held that it was incapable of cultivating the intellectual faculties, something that was, according to him, the ultimate objective of education.

In May 1862, on being transferred to Ghazipur, his mission reached there. On March 11, 1864, the foundation stone of the school was laid, which was named Victoria [College]. It was an advance upon the Moradabad's school in the sense that now there was inclusion of study of English language in the curriculum, for educational as well as political and other purposes. While at Moradabad, the study of history was insisted, now at Ghazipur, the study of natural sciences was emphasized, in addition to the study of history, of improving the agricultural system, and of introducing western discoveries in that eld. For the purpose of more general di usion of Western sciences, just before founding the Victoria School, the Scienti c Society was established. Sir Syed's turn towards vernacular was conditioned by the fact that Persian was replaced with Urdu as the language of government in 1837, and the vernacular (Urdu) rather than Persian could ensure jobs in the British Indian administration. By 1867, he proposed Vernacular University. However, on the colonial prodding, Urdu came to be ercely contested by Nagri. This embittered Sir Syed. Yet he remained undaunted. He visited England during 1869-70 and made extensive study of the schools and colleges there. He came back even more convinced with a stronger resolve and perseverance that only a residential educational institution could take care of the educational and cultural concerns of the Muslims. Modernising the ***qaum*** (a term he used in many meanings, but mostly for elite Muslims), without losing cultural roots, could be accomplished only with a carefully monitored boarding education. To mobilize funds for such a college, he resorted to writing and public oratory persuading the

richer segments to shi their priority from building grand mosques to spending on western education. He asked them to shun politics, and concentrate on modern education.

He articulated his vision of a modern residential educational institution while welcoming Lytton on January 8, 1877, at Aligarh, that his college is founded on the ‘principles of tolerance and progress’ and ‘to preach the gospel of free enquiry of large hearted tolerance and of pure morality’ and that the MAO College had made a ‘unique history in the entire Eastern World by the fact that it was neither founded with an individual’s charitable initiative nor with a monarch’s patronage, but through a community e ort.’

Overall, Sir Syed, in his last days, was hardly satis ed with the erstwhile existing universities (Calcutta, Bomaby, Madras, Punjab, Allahabad) as these were more for oriental education in India which according to him imparted inferior quality. He insisted on character building (***tarbiyat***) in his MAO College, though he regretted the constraints because of which it was not to the extent it was imparted in the British universities. He regretted that his MAO College was not able to mobilize enough fellowship to prop up promising students for genuinely qualitative higher education.

By 1894, he seemed to have become somewhat satis ed that Muslims were shedding their distaste for modern education in English language. He kept insisting that a er developing the MAO College into a university, many more such residential colleges were to be established. Sadly, in decades a er the death of Sir Syed, rather than multiplying the example of the MAO College in other parts of the subcontinent, the Educational Conference got involved into the politics of the Muslim League.

Sir Syed’s insistence on prioritizing modern education to upli the community carries no less relevance even today when we are commemorating the bicentenary of that great soul, in the midst of many kinds of domestic and global challenges.