BOOK REVIEW


The work under review is a collection of Syed Ameer ‘Ali’s articles, letters and speeches with a critical and comprehensive introduction. It is divided into two parts, viz., “Book One: A Short Account of Life and Analysis of Major Ideas”. This is introductory and comprises 8 chapters, which provides an objective analysis of Ameer ‘Ali’s thought and activities, and a brief assessment of his achievements. “Book Two: A comprehensive collection of his Writings” in 62 items arranged in chronological order including the celebrated “Memoirs of Syed Ameer Ali” which were published in Islamic Culture of Hyderabad-Deccan in 1931-32. In addition, it also contains John Morley’s Reply to the London Muslim League Deputation of 1909 conceding finally the demand for separate electorates for the Muslims (Appendix I). A table of important dates in Ameer ‘Ali’s life has been provided in Appendix III and a list of Ameer ‘Ali’s books, articles, letters to the Press, speeches, memoranda and miscellaneous writings has been given in Appendix IV.

It can be said without any hesitation that the book under review is one of the most important collections of historical documents on the genesis and evolution of Muslim politics in the Indo-Pak subcontinent under the British rule, and a mine of information about important events in the Muslim world and British India during Ameer ‘Ali’s lifetime. “In the history of modern Muslim India,” says our author, “Ameer Ali has a high place. In the fabric of Islamic renaissance he occupies a niche which none will envy or deny him. Endowed with diverse gifts he played many parts in the life given to him on this mortal earth. It is not given to many to fill so many roles. It is given to few to fill them with such distinction, dignity and elan” (p. Intro. 119).

It is simply not possible either to enumerate the roles played by Syed Ameer ‘Ali or to make an exhaustive analysis of the vast materials contained in this study in the short space of a review. Our attempt would, therefore, remain confined to analysing some of the aspects of Ameer ‘Ali’s role which laid the foundation for our political, religious and social thought in modern times.

By all human standards Syed Ameer ‘Ali was a rare genius. As a scholar of Islam, he needs no introduction. His Spirit of Islam (1891) is undoubtedly one of the most widely quoted books on Islamic ideology in modern times, and his Short History of the Saracens (1889) has yet to find a more up to date replacement for the students’ purpose, especially in the Indo-Pak subcontinent. Hence, both are still in print.

His contribution to Muslim law is also well-known—though very few are acquainted with the Urdu translation of Hidâyah entitled ‘Ayn-ul-Hidâyah with authoritative commentary giving the Fatâwa of the major Sunni as well as Shi‘ah schools. This was worked out by a board of ‘Ulama’ under his supervision and guidance and was published from Calcutta in four giant volumes (copy at Dacca University library).

A third aspect of his life, which is by no means less significant, has been brought into focus by the present work under review—namely his statesmanship in defending the natural and legal rights of the Muslims in general and guiding the course of the
intellectual and political development of the Muslim community of the Indo-Pak subcontinent in particular.

"Throughout his life," says our author, "he showed a genuine and deep concern for the welfare of Muslim countries. He wanted them to progress, to improve themselves, to gain and retain their independence and to win the respect of the world" (p. 83). In 1907, he made a strong plea to the British Government to treat the Amir of Afghanistan more respectfully and fairly (p. Intro. 83 and pp. 236-48). At the time of the Turco-Italian war (1911), he condemned Italy for provoking a war of creeds and races by the spoliation of Turkey and appealed to every lover of peace and goodwill on earth to protest, before it was too late (p. Intro. 83 and pp. 352-53). In 1912, when The Times (London) suggested a revision of the Anglo-Russian convention with a view to absorbing Persia, he promptly reminded that the two powers had, barely five years ago, solemnly undertaken to maintain the independence and integrity of Persia (p. Intro. 84).

Turning to the Indian scene, it may be pointed out that Syed Ameer ‘Ali was the first Indian Muslim to realise that historical evolution had brought the entire Muslim population of this subcontinent (including those of Bengal) to a common political destiny and its salvation lay in an active and united struggle for progress as a single political unit. In pursuance of this realisation, he founded the National Muhammadan Association in Calcutta in the year 1877, "with the object of promoting by all legitimate and constitutional means the well-being of the Mussalmans of India". Its objectives further stated, "Deriving its inspiration from the noble traditions of the past, it proposes to work in harmony with Western culture and progressive tendencies of the age. It aims at the political regeneration of the Indian Muhammadans by moral revival and by constant endeavours to obtain from Government a recognition of their just and reasonable claims" (pp. Intro. 46 and 47, ft. n. 1). This was his debut on the stage of public affairs, which spurred a real nationwide movement and led to its enlargement into the Central National Muhammadan Association during the same year (Islamic Studies, June 1968, p. 98). In a short while 53 branches sprang up covering different parts of Bengal, Assam, Bihar, Orissa, U.P., Delhi, the Panjab, Madras, Bombay and Sind (p. Intro. 47, also ft. n. 3).

Recounting his activities in this connection, the author of the present work points out, "to carry the message of the Association and to broadcast his call to unity Ameer Ali travelled far and wide throughout India, exhorting people, awakening their political consciousness, persuading them to send their children to schools, and founding branches of the Association. He came to Karachi to impress on the Muslims of Sind the necessity of having a college of their own where the Muhammadan youths could receive religious and moral training equally with secular education. Here Hasan Ali, a prominent Karachi lawyer, helped him in founding the Sind Muslim College" i.e., the Sind Madrasah (Intro. 47, also ft. n. 2).

To enumerate his political activities we may cursorily glance through the following: In 1880, he strongly pleaded in the English Press for introducing taxation and administrative reform in India and extolled the new Act of 1870 which aimed at equalising the status of Indian officers with the Europeans. ‘The rules [adopted for its implementation], however, not only stultify the object of the Act”, he deplored, “but negative [sic!] completely the theory upon which the Government has ostensibly proceeded” (pp. 10-11). In February, 1882, he submitted the famous ‘Memorial’ to the Governor-General Lord Ripon pleading for the amelioration of the condition
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of Muslim students. In August 1882, his "A cry from the Indian Mohammedans" was published in London, in which he critically analysed the causes of the continuous decay of the Indo-Muslim society and suggested ways and means for bringing the Muslims to the path of progress. In 1883, he published another article on "the Life-Problem of Bengal", in which he pleaded for modifying the 'Sunset Law' for the relief of the land-lords on the one hand and, on the other, made a strongly convincing case in support of the Bengal Tenancy Act which was then under consideration. In 1883, he demanded, on behalf of the Central National Muhammadan Association, for the inclusion into the Municipal Bill of Bengal of provisions for lowering the property qualifications in order to enfranchise an adequate number of Muslims and for separate representation and separate electorate for the minority communities (Islamic Studies, June, 1968, p. 103). His articles of October 1905 on "An Indian Retrospect and some Comments", of August, 1906 on "India and the New Parliament" and of November 1906 on "Dawn of a New Policy in India", exerted a powerful influence on the course of political development in this subcontinent and immensely helped the evolution of Muslim politics leading to the foundation of the Muslim League at Dacca in December 1906. He continued to evaluate and re-evaluate the Indian political scene at every turn of its progress. His articles on "the Unrest in India—its Meaning" (June 1907), "Some Racial Characteristics of Northern India and Bengal" (November 1907), "Anomalies of Civilization; a Peril to India" (April 1908), and "The Constitutional Experiment in India" (March 1910)—were all published in the Nineteenth Century, a famous and well-balanced journal of London, which provided a strong forum for political and intellectual discussions. They exerted a powerful impact on the Indian and European officials and enabled Syed Amzer Ali to lead the fateful delegation to Mr. Morley, the Secretary of State for India, in January 1909 that finally won the Separate Electorate for the Indian Muslims. Till the very last day of his life, as we have already noticed, he remained active in this direction. As late as June 1928, he submitted a "Memorandum to the Indian Statutory Commission", recounting the entire political evolution of Muslims of India and pleading on behalf of the seventy millions of Mohammedans who acknowledge allegiance to the King, "I consider it would be an unhappy day for India if the demand for the abolition of the separate electorates is conceded by His Majesty's Government. The country would be plunged into internecine conflict and the fair name of England for equal justice would be tarnished. Joint electorates would, I have no doubt, only perpetuate the present disorders and strife" (pp. 514-15).

In his "A Cry from the Indian Mohammedans" (1882), he wrote: "A nation consisting of upwards of fifty millions of souls, with great traditions but without a career, deprived, by slow degrees, of wealth and influence by mistaken sentimentalism [of the Englishmen] mixed with a contemptuous disregard for popular feelings, must always constitute an important factor in the administration of India. It is this factor which cannot be ignored, and which must be taken into account by Government in all future projects for the well-being of India" (p. 71). A quarter of a century later he asserted in clearer terms. "Nor ought it to be overlooked that the community of language, sentiment and traditions places the Muslims of the different provinces on a common platform, and constitutes them in an emphatic sense into one nationality" (p. Intro. 63 and 233, dated November 1906). In the following year, as our author further comments, "his tone was even more confident" (p. Intro. 63). "The bond of common
religion and unity of traditions constitute the Mussalmans into perhaps the only homogeneous nationality in India”, declared he in November 1907 (p. Intro. 63 and 279). “They certainly exhibit”, continues Ameer ‘Ali, “many general characteristics which distinguish them from their Hindu compatriots. The Musulman’s pride is the legacy of his past history; his manliness is only partly racial. In a great measure it springs from the teachings of his religion, which inspire him with a sense of human dignity and independence. His conception of divine authority induces him to loyalty to constituted authority” (p. 279). In 1909, while leading the famous Deputation of the Muslim League, London, to John Morley, the Secretary of State for India, he pleaded: “The Musalman population numbering 53 millions can hardly be dealt with as a minority, or have their status regarded as analogous to that of the minor communities of India. Though living intermixed with the non-Muslims they form a distinct nationality divided [distinguished!] by traditions of race, religion and ideals. However much their presence may be deprecated by some of their neighbours, they are important factors to be reckoned with in the administration of the country” (p. 604). Ameer ‘Ali’s pleadings on this occasion succeeded in changing the mind of the Secretary of State and bringing him back to the line of Lord Minto’s promise at Simla. Mr. Morley declared in reply that the implementation of the new electoral system will mean “no departure in substance from the principle of our earlier suggestion that there should be a separate Mohammedan electorate—an electorate exclusively Mohammedan...” (p. 609). He further submitted that to call the Indian Muslims a minority is a misapplication of the term and to regard them in that light would be an injustice to the Muslim people. We form a nationality as important as any other, and our wishes, sentiments and interests should, we conceive, form important factors in the consideration of policy and measures as those of any other (p. Intro. 64).

Our author’s contention that the reader will find in Muhammad ‘Ali Jinnah’s arguments in the post-Pakistan-Resolution era, an echo of Syed Ameer ‘Ali’s arguments —would seem to be well-placed in view of the above illustrations. In the words of K. K. ‘Aziz: “There is the same emphasis on the community of interest, of religion, of language, of wishes and of sentiments. Both resent the application of the term ‘minority’ to their people. Both urge the British to regard the separate existence of Muslims as a vital policy. Both underline the fact that Muslims constitute even a more homogeneous group than the Hindus or the other Indians. And, finally, both acknowledge, bemoan and strive to eliminate the backwardness and poverty of their nation” (p. Intro. 64).

“Sayyid Ahmad Khan had also used the Urdu word ‘qaum’ in some of his speeches and writings with reference to Indian Muslims”, K. K. ‘Aziz goes on to say. “But ‘qaum’ may have other connotations than those of the more specific Western term ‘nation’; it can, for instance, be used in the sense of ‘people’ or even of a caste or sect (bradari). Ameer Ali was, thus, the first to call the Indian Muslims a nation and must be counted as the progenitor of the two-nation theory and by implication one of the makers of Pakistan” (p. Intro. 64).

Besides, it may also be noted that Syed Ameer ‘Ali was probably the first to openly ventilate his displeasure at the decision of the Government to replace Urdu by Hindi as the court language in the provinces of Bihar, U.P. and the Panjab. In 1879, while he was studying law in London and when he was yet barely 20 years old, he drew the attention of the Marquis of Salisbury, Secretary of State for India,
to the difficulties faced by the Indian Muslims on account of the displacement of the Urdu language from its high position. He cautioned that this might seriously mar his community’s progress in modern education (pp. 549-50). He elaborated his concept of Urdu as ‘the language of the Indian Muslims’ twelve years later in his article “A Cry from the Indian Muhammadans” (p. 41 ff.).

His advocacy for the recognition or adoption of Urdu as the language of the entire Muslim population of the Indo-Pak subcontinent was undoubtedly idealistic and is understandable in view of his anxiety to forge the Indo-Muslim community into a single activated political unit. In 1906, he wrote: “it is my firm conviction that the community which fails to grasp the political situation or lacks the vigour or ‘pushfulness’ to claim its constitutional rights must, in the long run, go to the wall” (p. 208, fn. n. 1); and quoting Lord Ampthill’s advice for ‘pushfulness’ to the Muslims, he observes that here is “the best advice for unity of action and purpose” (p. 208). ‘Pushfulness’ and ‘unity’ were, indeed, inseparably and indispensably demanded by the spirit of the age (see ibid.) whose cultural base Ameer ‘Ali sought in one single language—namely Urdu.

Ameer ‘Ali was a man of catholic taste and wide interests, and found time to study all branches of polite letters, law, history, philosophy, literature, religion and art. “What made him unique”, according to our author, “in the nineteenth-century India, was his equal command over the learning of the East and the West. He was not only the first Indian Muslim to be learned in the Western intellectual lore but the only Indian Muslim to be equally at home in Eastern and Western knowledge”. “Muslim leaders of the second half of the nineteenth century”, K. K. ‘Aziz points out, “were all well versed in Islamic and other oriental learning, but almost totally ignorant of the thought of the West”. In this respect, he says, Ameer ‘Ali stands alone. “In fine,” K. K. ‘Aziz concludes, “he was that rare combination of East and West which can exist in spite of Kipling’s maxim to the contrary and which the modern cosmopolitan world often demands but, alas! rarely produces” (pp. Intro. 111-12).

In the realm of practical politics, “his foresight as well as his reading of European and American history told him that political activity by itself was meaningless, until its social base was well and truly laid. Therefore, like Sayyid Ahmad Khan, he believed in social reform; but unlike him, he was convinced that political activity should not wait on the consummation of social progress. The ageless river of time flows fast and does not wait on anyone’s convenience. If Muslims stood by and waited for the foreign rulers to bestow favours unasked for or concede rights undemanded, they would wait in vain” (p. Intro. 112). How truly these words have been said about a man who was able to visualise in 1907 that hardly 25 years would pass before India would be ready to stand on her own feet. “The last fifty years since the British Crown assumed the direct sovereignty of India have witnessed changes which nobody living in the sixties [1860’s] could have conceived as possible”, wrote Ameer ‘Ali. “Another twenty-five years of peaceful development are certain to bring still greater advance. The hour-hand of Time cannot be stopped” (p. 251).

What makes him still more great is the fact that in spite of all his pleadings for the Muslim cause, he was, like Nawab ‘Abdul Latif, non-communalist to the end. He emphatically says in his ‘Memoirs’: “No one can accuse me of partisanship, I have never exclusively supported one creed, one people, or one sect. I have always pleaded for justice and fair-play for all” (p. 619).
The Bengali Muslim community was, indeed, honoured by the birth of such a great man as Syed Ameer 'Ali in their midst. But as he himself said, "the Muslims, unfortunately, all over the world, have short memories" (p. 619),—the Bengali Muslims lost sight of his statesmanship soon after his death; but thanks to the scholars in the Panjab, his memory is again being revived. In fact, in recent years no less than four books have been brought out from Lahore dealing with Syed Ameer 'Ali's articles, speeches and letters.

The first was a small volume of 82 pages entitled Central Mohammedan Association of Calcutta and the Memorandum Presented to Lord Ripon, 1882. It was prefaced by Prof. Sh. A. Rashid and was published by the Historical Research Institute, University of the Panjab, Lahore, in 1963. All its copies were sold out in a short while. In spite of the publication of other volumes, it still stands as a valuable work, especially because of the inclusion into it of a number of documents giving the reaction of the leading Muslim as well as non-Muslim intellectuals of the Panjab to the 'Memorandum'. Hence, a second edition of this work is rightly due.

Secondly, Dr. Syed Razi Wasti, Head of the Department of History, University of the Panjab, has brought out his compilations of Syed Ameer 'Ali's writings in two volumes in 1968,—one entitled Memoirs and Other Writings of Syed Ameer Ali and the other captioned Syed Ameer Ali on Islamic History and Culture. Both the volumes were published by the People's Publishing House, Lahore. The first volume runs into 364 pages and the second volume could not be procured by us in spite of our persistent endeavours.

The fourth one is the work under review by Dr. K. K. 'Aziz, who is, at present, Professor of History in the University of Khartoum, Sudan. It was published by the Publishers United Ltd., Lahore, simultaneously with the two volumes of Syed Razi Wasti. Although it is bound in one volume, it comprises 119 pages of Introduction and 663 pages of Ameer 'Ali's writings amounting to 62 items of articles, letters and speeches published in different Journals and Newspapers as well as a few valuable papers hitherto unpublished, having been recently recovered from the sons of Syed Ameer 'Ali.

The fact that Syed Ameer 'Ali's writings presented in the two volumes of Syed Razi Wasti and the present work of K. K. 'Aziz are mostly identical, points to a deplorable lack of co-ordination among Research scholars in this country which unnecessarily leads to duplication. This may, however, have been due to the great distance which divides the present places of work of the two authors. Both the works are well produced and scarcely suffer from the printer's devil though the printing and get up of K. K. 'Aziz's book is decidedly better. Moreover, the long introduction of our author, in which he has not only attempted but also brilliantly succeeded in analysing the life and major ideas of Syed Ameer 'Ali, is a valuable addition over Razi Wasti's two volumes and makes the work easily understandable and comprehensive. Our author has also brought to light a number of important papers and letters which had remained hitherto unpublished and hence not available to others. Nevertheless, it may be said in fairness that the reader will find all the four volumes immensely readable, thought provoking, instructive and interesting.

A word of caution and we finish. It may be noted that while judging the intellectual attainment of Syed Ameer 'Ali, it is forgotten by many that he was born in Bengal, in the vicinity of Calcutta, and was brought up in the surroundings of a
middle class society, which being predominantly made up of the Bengali Hindus, the challenges of its storm and stresses deeply affected the intellectual development and moulded his thought. Overlooking this Bengali background, many Western students of Islam seek to link up his intellectualism with Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Aligarh movement—which as the chronology of Ameer 'Ali's intellectual development itself will show—was a later growth. Hence, their contention that Ameer 'Ali proved what Sir Sayyid had thought out and for that reason, like Sir Sayyid, Ameer 'Ali was also an apologetic, proves ipso facto fallacious.

Dr. 'Aziz found not even the remotest hint in the materials collected in this volume, to support the above Western contention. Nor is there anything of the sort to be found in Ameer 'Ali's *magnum opus*, the *Spirit of Islam*, or even in the *History of the Saracens*, which, as we have already noted, was meant to serve the students' purpose and as such naturally contains some amount of romanticism. Completely free from this unwarranted prejudice, our author unfortunately makes a blunder too by contending that "following the footsteps of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's nechuri school of thought, he (Ameer 'Ali) interpreted the creed on rational grounds" (p. Intro 117). Is it not a fact that Syed Ameer 'Ali composed his first work, *The Critical Examination of the Life and Teaching of Muhammad*, during his stay in London in 1872 which was published in 1873? (pp. 555-56). Did it not provide the rational basis for his later work, *The Life and Teaching of Muhammad or the Spirit of Islam*, published in 1891? (p. 666). Ameer 'Ali mentions that he met Sir Sayyid in London in the year 1871 and gives us no impression of being influenced by him. He rather speaks of his differences with Sir Sayyid in political matters (p. 556). Moreover, it was too early for the nechuri school to be firmly established and influence intellectual stalwarts like Ameer 'Ali. Dr. 'Aziz also devotes more than half a page to demonstrate many agreements and differences that existed between the two. To quote a few instances, our author says (p. Intro. 119):

"Like him [Sir Sayyid], Ameer Ali believed that Islam was a liberal faith; unlike him, instead of stopping short at the statement that it was not hostile to liberty, he went further and identified it with progress. Like him, Ameer Ali defended Islam against European attacks; unlike him, after establishing its superiority he invited the Western seekers of truth to join the faith. Like him, Ameer Ali took his Islam straight from the Quran; unlike him, he took it as a system of life rather than as a mere system of thought."

Our author further insists that Ameer 'Ali appeared as if in answer to the call of the times. "He dealt with the problem in two ways: on the one hand, he preached a liberal Islam freed from all accretions and pulsating with life; on the other, he presented to the West an Islam which was grounded in reason and was thus a religion of nature" (p. 116). On the contrary, is it not a fact that while Sir Sayyid emphasized that Islam is rational because it is natural or nechuri, Ameer 'Ali argued that Islam is rational because it is humane, based on a divine message addressed to humanity, modelled after the example of a human prophet and grounded essentially on the moral or spiritual basis of life? In fact, while Sir Sayyid contended that Islam is a religion of nature, Ameer 'Ali believed that Islam is a religion of humanity, and this is the essence of both his books listed above.

At the end, I should like to draw the attention of the educators as well as educational authorities of Pakistan to the appropriateness and advisability of utilising the present work, partly as well as wholly, at all levels of our schools, colleges and
It will do immense good to our boys and girls if, especially, the 'Memoirs' of Syed Ameer 'Ali is made a textbook or rapid reader at the matriculation level of our schools, which besides giving a good grounding to them in literary English, will also give them the necessary insight in our culture and religion. The introductory chapters of the present work comprising Book One (p. Intro. 1-119) can also be profitably utilised for this purpose, after due correction of the above-mentioned points in pp. 116-118.

MU'IN-UD-DIN AHMAD KHAN.