

Revisiting Syed Ameer Ali: A Pioneer of Muslims' Socio-Political Rights in India

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Abstract:

Syed Ameer Ali, a renowned Muslim intellectual and activist, holds a significant place in Indian history as an instrumental figure in advocating for the socio-political rights of Muslims. His contributions encompassed various spheres, including education, politics, and the legal arena. This abstract seeks to revisit the historical significance of Syed Ameer Ali's pioneering work and its lasting impact on the evolution of Muslims' socio-political rights in India.

Ameer Ali's efforts were multi-faceted, as he worked in the field of education to uplift Muslim communities. He actively participated in political discussions, both within India and abroad, effectively representing the needs and aspirations of the Muslim population. By examining Ameer Ali's work through a historical lens, this abstract aims to shed light on the challenges faced by Muslims at that time and the strategies employed by this visionary leader to bring about change. The study presents a comprehensive exploration of his pioneering efforts and the hurdles he encountered. Ultimately, this analysis provides valuable insights into the evolution of Muslims' socio-political rights in India, highlighting the enduring significance of Syed Ameer Ali's legacy.

Keywords: Muslim politics, Syed Ameer Ali, Indian Muslims, Syed Ahmad Khan, CNMA.

Introduction:

The Right Hon'ble Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) was one of the most prominent personalities among the Indian Muslim leaders. He had a unique position not only in the British Empire but also in the Muslim world. He is recognized as a leader and guide of Indian Muslims. As a Muslim jurist, he is well-known among Muslims all over the world. He was a practical leader, a prolific writer, and a renowned historian with a critical approach.¹ He was the first Muslim to be appointed in Calcutta High Court Bench and the first Indian to be honoured with the appointment in the Privy Council. He is also known for his scholarly works on Islamic history, culture, and law. He played a significant role in the political life of Muslims of Indo-Pakistan. He played a key role with his constructive works in politics, which helped the Muslims in their social and political regeneration of the community. It is also a lesser-known fact that he enthusiastically worked for the cultural revival of the Muslims and promoted the Muslim Renaissance movement in this subcontinent.²

Socio-Political Scenario of Muslim Community During Nineteenth-Century India

The nineteenth century was a struggling period for Muslim leadership. In these conditions, some important leaders got a chance to guide the community. Some of the prominent leaders among them were Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-1893)³ and Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898).⁴

The popularity of Syed Ahmad Khan dominated many other leaders like Syed Ameer Ali and Nawab Abdul Latif. However, these leaders initiated the English education program for the Muslims of Bengal and set an example for Syed Ahmad Khan to implement the same for the Muslims of upper India. Thus, we cannot ignore the valuable contribution of Syed Ameer Ali in the field of Muslim politics and renaissance. In 1875, the Hindus of Calcutta founded two important political organizations, *the Indian Association* and *the Indian League*, which were, in fact, Hindu political organizations. Syed Ameer Ali realized that the Muslims should organize themselves politically so that they could live a peaceful life with political recognition. If they did not organize themselves politically, no one could realize their importance in India, and their existence would be in danger in the upcoming days. With this intention, he started working in this direction and finally, in 1877, he established the Central National Mohammedan Association and became its founder Secretary. This CNMA soon became popular and spread its 53 branches all over India. It gave a remarkable fillip to political awareness among Indian Muslims. He served the Muslim masses through CNMA for a period of 25 years, during which he rendered his valuable services to the cause of Muslim political advancement in India.⁵ “Syed Ameer Ali was the pioneer of political movements by Muslims in India and established the first political organization of the Muslims.”⁶ In 1909, Syed Ameer Ali presented his memorandum to Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India, in which he wrote:

“The Musalman population numbering fifty-three million can hardly be dealt with as a minority. Though living intermixed with non-Muslims, they form a distinct nationality, divided by traditions of race, religion, and ideals.”⁷

Therefore, he tried to point out that Muslims as a totally different community who had different cultures, traditions, and activities from the Hindus. He also indicated that the Secretary of State for India to deal with the Muslim community appropriately and not as a minority. Further, Aga Khan III (1877-1957) also wrote about the identity struggle and their political rights in his memoirs. 1907 was the year of Guerilla warfare for Aga Khan III and Syed Ameer Ali. They both struggled hard to win the confidence of Lord Morley and finally, they became successful and got separate electorates for their community.⁸ The role of Syed Ameer Ali was much needed and helpful in organizing the Muslim community, especially in the initial stages. He advocated for Muslim political rights before the British government and made the rulers ally to his community. He acknowledged the real importance of British liberalism in Indian policy, as he had personal contacts with some of the leading liberals like John Bright (1811-1889) and Fawcett (1867-1925). Hence, he made an effort to establish an independent Muslim political organization capable of representing the affairs of Muslims of India, and it would be free from the clutches of the British government. He realized that the concept of loyalism was becoming outdated, which was adopted by his two senior (Nawab Abdul Latif and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan) contemporaries. These senior leaders did not show interest to secure their political identity.⁹ In place of forming a political organization, they preferred an official way to present the Muslim demands before the British government. Syed Ameer Ali stated that:

“I felt that great changes were impending in the system of Government and that unless the followers of Islam prepared themselves, they would soon be outstripped in the political race with their Hindu fellow countrymen.”¹⁰

In the early days of 1871, he had given his thoughts on this problem. Both in England and India, he had met frequently with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and discussed the deteriorated economic condition of Muslims of India and their future life. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan showed his complete confidence in English education and academic training. Syed Ameer Ali acknowledged the idea of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. However, he

proposed that the political training of the Muslim community should go on parallel lines, just like the contemporary Hindu community.¹¹

On his return from England to India, he deeply observed the Muslim social and educational organizations, but these organizations were not able to meet the challenges of society. In these circumstances, Syed Ameer Ali realized the need to establish a political organization and later, he founded it, which was named the National Mohammedan Association at Calcutta, on May 12, 1878. The word “national” was chosen because it signified Muslim nationhood and was applied to all Muslims in British India, regardless of sectarian divisions. Though Sir Syed frequently used the term “Muslim nation” or “*qaum*”, he avoided using it to describe the Muslim societies which he built. Nawab Abdul Lateef also followed the methods of Sir Syed, and he also did not identify the Mohammedan Literary Society as a thoroughly political party. On the other hand, the main aim of the Central National Mohammedan Association was the protection and preservation of the common interest of Muslim society.¹²

The association was founded with the following objectives: it was founded for the promotion and well-being of Musalmans of India by using all legal and constitutional methods. One of the essential objectives of this organization was to provide its loyalty and support to the British Crown. Deriving its inspiration from the noble traditions of the past, it proposed to work in harmony with Western culture and the progressive tendencies of the age. The source of inspiration of the association was the noble traditions of the past, according to which it decided to work in unanimity with Western culture and the progressive tendencies of the age. The aim of the foundation of CNMA was to revive the political identity of the Indian Mohammedans by continuous efforts and moral stimulation to get from the British government an acknowledgment of their just and reasonable claims. However, the Association kept in his attention that the future of the Mohammedans was closely connected with the welfare of the other Indian races.¹³

Syed Ameer Ali was the main body of this organization and held the position of Secretary of this Association. He was an influential personality and had contact with the prominent personalities of the Muslim community. Syed Ameer Ali also requested Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to seek help and support for CNMA, but he turned down the proposal of Ameer Ali.¹⁴ Ameer Ali had not given the reasons for Sir Syed’s refusal. However, we could guess that Sir Syed had a different ideology on political grounds, and he was not interested in joining any political organizations at that time. However, due to the hard work and support of Syed Ameer Ali and others, the Association became famous among the Muslim community in India. By 1888 nearly 69 branches were established from Madras to the Punjab Chittagong to Karachi. A unique feature of this institution was that people from all sections of society, rich and poor, were involved in it.¹⁵

The Proposed Mohammedan Political Conference

When the Central National Mohammedan Association, led by Syed Ameer Ali, decided to boycott the Congress in November 1886, it appeared to be taking a wait-and-watch approach. The association evaluated Congress’s activities and determined its future course of action regarding the Congress movement during 1887. Syed Ameer Ali realized that the Muslim community should oppose Congress’s policies in an organized way. The community needed a political awareness program to understand the current scenario of the time and politics of Congress. Syed Ameer Ali realized that Muslim abstention from Congress was a temporary benefit that could not be built up into an instrument of Muslim political rights. Syed Ameer Ali believed that the aloofness of the Muslim political leaders from Congress was not a permanent solution for them, and it could not fulfill their political demands. The opposition to the

Congress, while well-founded, was at best a defensive move that could not sustain the support of Muslims for a long time, who were subjected to constant Congress propaganda across the country. However, Syed Ameer Ali thought that the future of fifty million Muslims could not stand on the policies which were against Congress. That is why he believed that Muslims should make their policies to provide the base for their political future. Therefore, he determined to extend the sphere of Muslim political activities. For this purpose, firstly, he called a meeting of Muslim leaders and intellectuals from all over India to discuss about a common political program. It was a good fortune for the Muslims as Syed Ameer Ali sent his proposal when the Indian leaders were preparing to attend the third annual session of the Indian National Congress. He also discussed this issue with Badruddin Tayyabji, who was designed to preside the third annual session of Congress. He said that the Muslims were becoming unanimous on political grounds. There was a strong need to work in co-operation with each other to achieve political as well as material success.¹⁶

In support of the Muslim conference, he put his ideas:

“It is patent that as long as we have no unanimity of views and unity of action in the furtherance of our legitimate and constitutional interest under the British Government, so long we shall form a community of secondary importance in the eyes of our rulers, and will not attain any substantial success in the work of political advancement. Pressed by these considerations I propose to convene a Conference of Mussalman delegates for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th day of February 1888.”¹⁷

In the above paragraph, Syed Ameer Ali tried to explain his views about the prevailing political situation and awaken Muslim society and political leaders. He advised that the Muslims would not get their identification under the British government until they would unite and work unanimously. Therefore, he proposed the idea of a political conference to achieve their political and legal rights.

He hoped that the result of organizing the conference would be better and more positive, and it would bring new energy among the Mohammedans of India. Muslim community and leaders would come together, and a relationship between the two would be developed. It would benefit and fulfill the future goal of Muslim society. In his response to Syed Ameer Ali, Badruddin Tayyabji asked about the actual position of the proposed Mohammedan conference to take up concerning the other Indian communities. Moreover, Tayyabji stressed on the common political problems of the Muslim community with other communities. That is why he had expressed his sorrow about the absence of Muslims of Calcutta from Congress.¹⁸

Conclusively, it can be said that the Mohammedan Political Association had prepared the groundwork for the progress of Muslim politics. Ameer Ali assured that the Conference had a very moderate political program. The primary purpose of this Conference was to keep in its view about the progress of Muslims but not to oppose the fellow community. It was necessary to clarify to bring the Muslim intelligentsia on a single political platform and unite them the same as the Congress did with the Hindu intellectuals. The goals of the Conference were actually a draft for an independent Muslim political organization, which was not being implemented. However, these ideas were later adopted by the All-India Muslim League. Thus, Syed Ameer Ali and his association had a right to be called the forerunner of the All India Muslim League than any other Muslim leader and association of India.¹⁹

Demand for Muslim Rights

From the beginning of his political career, the heart of Ameer Ali felt the pain of the whole of Muslim community, and later, he founded the Central National Mohammedan Association. Through this Association, he worked as a protector of the Muslim community of India. Whenever he felt something was wrong for Muslims, he argued with others. While Surendranath Banerjee was advocating for the simultaneous examinations in England and India for Indian Civil Servants, he opposed Banerjee's decision. He demanded jobs through the system of nomination for the Muslim community. In the beginning, Syed Ahmad Khan supported the move of S.N. Banerjee and opposed the demand of Syed Ameer Ali. Later, he supported Ameer Ali. From the platform of the Central National Mohammedan Association, he represented the community through deputations and addresses to the British Governors and Viceroys. On November 12, 1887, a deputation from the Association waited for Lord Dufferin and informed him of the Muslims' plight. In December 1888, the period of Lord Dufferin as a Viceroy was ended, the Association delivered a warm farewell speech to him. In return, Lord Dufferin acknowledged that the Muslims were facing problems and their condition at a time was not satisfactory due to the historical forces and various incidents. Further, he assured the Muslims that they would be treated appropriately and that the government would make favourable policies for Muslims.²⁰

When the next Viceroy, Marquis of Lansdowne (1888-1894)²¹, replaced Dufferin, the Association presented a welcome address on December 22, 1888. The new Viceroy knew about the actual Muslim condition. He said:

“It does not surprise me to find that, in addressing me, you should dwell upon the difficulties which the Mohammedans of India have had to encounter in their competition with other portions of the people of India. It is, I believe, the case that you have to some extent suffered, as you have pointed out, from the fact that your share of the national wealth is less than that to which your numerical strength would entitle you, and also from the want of a proper organization, such as that to which other sections of the community have had recourse...”²²

In 1883, the Central National Mohammedan Association expressed its views to the government of Bengal on the pending Municipal Bill. The Association recommended that property qualifications should be excluded to increase the participation of the Muslim community in voting and that a provision for separate representation and electorate for minority communities be included. The Association made the government aware of the upcoming dangers, if the suggestions would not include, the effect of this Bill would be fatal for Muslims. Further, it would become a cause of dispute between the Muslims and the Hindus.²³

The political struggles of Syed Ameer Ali and his Association bore fruitful results and attracted the British government's attention. While suggesting the expansion of Legislative Councils in his dispatch of November 6, 1888, Lord Dufferin noted that India's population was composed of many distinct nationalities of various religions and languages separated by dissenting prejudices and social usages and even opposite material interests. In Parliament, one of the speakers, Lord Kimberley, argued during the Indian Councils Bill of 1892 that parliamentary representation of a vast country like Europe with a diverse population is impractical. Further, he said that the Muslim community was an integral part of the Indian community and stated, “If you were to be guided entirely by the Hindu popular opinion, you would find yourself in great difficulty.” The speeches delivered in the Parliament focused on the allotment of seats for Indian representation. According to them, it was the best way to allot the seats to different interests,

communal and professionals, but it was not suggested by Congress. Once again, the Muslims did not get their proper share, and the landed and commercial classes were given a far greater share in the Indian Council Act of 1892.²⁴

Campaign for a Muslim Political Party

In 1904, Syed Ameer Ali settled in England, but he did not stop his journey to safeguard Muslim interests. He wrote an article entitled '*India and the New Parliament*' published in the nineteenth-century journal in August 1906. He strongly advocated for Muslim rights and pleaded for a fair share in representative government in India. He pointed out the weakness of the Muslims that the political inactivity and the absence of a strong political party was the main reason for their backwardness. Therefore, he suggested forming a strong political party that could provide a platform for Muslim representation.²⁵ Moreover, in reply to an address of the Madras Muslims, he mentioned Lord Ampthill²⁶'s speech, "You do not push yourselves enough, you do not ask enough, and you do not show yourselves forward enough."²⁷ Ameer Ali suggested Muslim community to follow the same.

Syed Ameer Ali was, however, the forerunner of the Muslim political movement in the subcontinent. Central National Mohammeden Association formed by him was the first political body of Indian Muslims. It was an effective and legal platform for the Muslim community for about a quarter of a century. However, due to some issues, Syed Ameer Ali, who was the soul of this organization, settled in England, and consequently, it grew towards its decline. Therefore, he focused on forming another organization that could appropriately represent the Muslim community.²⁸

London Muslim League

Having settled down in England, Syed Ameer Ali continued his work for the Muslim community. He initiated the formation of a Muslim political organization in London in 1907. On May 6, 1908, he formally inaugurated the London Branch of the All India Muslim League in a meeting at Caxton Hall. Its goal was to develop and protect Muslim interests through constitutional and legal means, as well as to promote friendship and harmony among India's various communities. While describing the aims and objectives of the League, Ameer Ali, the organization's founder, and president, referred to the shared interests of Muslims and Hindus in certain areas, such as the inclusion of Indian elements in the administration and the development of representative institutions, as well as the interests which were predominantly related to the Muslims. Moreover, he asked that the Muslims possess their own identity. They should not be merged with other Indian communities; however, they could work with each other to achieve their goals.²⁹ Syed Ameer Ali made an outstanding contribution to the Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. He spent a large part of his life serving the Muslim community's cause, for which Muslims are indebted. His political and social services are immense and could not be forgotten. He made aware the Muslims of their actual condition and endeavoured his best to improve the deteriorated condition of the Muslim community. While serving as a member of the Bengal Legislative Council and the Imperial Legislative Council of the Viceroy, he had done his best to safeguard the Muslim interests. He was also associated with the Ilbert Bill of 1883 and the Bengal Tenancy Bill of 1885. Moreover, he realized the declining condition of the Bengal peasants and wrote an article entitled, *Land Problem of Bengal*, in which he highlighted the actual condition of the peasants. He also endeavoured his best to convince the British government to utilize the *Waaf* properties for the education of Muslims, but he failed in his effort. So, with the above description,

we can say that the contribution of Syed Ameer Ali to the Muslim community is immense, and he will be remembered forever.³⁰

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3. Nawab Abdul Latif was a Bengali Muslim aristocrat, educator and social worker. His title, Nawab was awarded by the British in 1880.
4. Dani, Ahmad Hasan (ed.), *Founding Fathers of Pakistan*, Sang-E-Meel Publications, Lahore, 1998, pp. 80-81.
5. Allana, G., *Eminent Muslim Freedom Fighters (1526-1947)*, Neeraj Publishing House, Delhi, 1983, p. 166.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Khan, Aga, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan III: World Enough and Time*, Cassell and Company, Limited, London, 1954. p. 104.
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10. Wasti, Syed Razi, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
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13. Pirzada, Syed Sharifuddin (ed.), *Foundation of Pakistan: All India Muslim League Documents: 1906-1947, vol. I (1906-1924)*, National Publishing House Limited, Karachi, 1969, pp. xvi-xvii.
14. Wasti, Syed Razi, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
15. Dani, Ahmad Hasan, *op. cit.*, p. 88.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.
20. Gopal, Ram, *Indian Muslims: A political History (1858-1947)*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1959, pp. 53-57, 80-81.
21. He was the Viceroy and Governor General of India.
22. *Speeches by The Marquis of Lansdowne: Viceroy and Governor General of India, Vol. I. 1888-1891*, Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing India, Calcutta, 1894, pp. 28-29.
23. Rahim, M.A., *op. cit.*, pp. 93-112.
24. Gopal, Ram, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-57, 81-82.
25. Rahim, M.A., *op. cit.*, pp. 93-112.
26. Governor of Madras from October 1900 to February 1906.
27. Muhammad Shan (ed.), *The Right Hon'ble Syed Ameer Ali: Political Writings*, Ashish Publishing House, New Delhi, 1989, p. 76.
28. Rahim, M.A., *op. cit.*, pp. 93-112.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*