

## Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Methodology to Counter Orientalists' Project

- **Mohammad Muslim**

### Abstract

*This paper aims to discuss methodology of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan that he adopted in his magnum opus and seminal work, al-Khuṭbāt al-Aḥmadiya fī al-'Arab wa al-Sīrat al-Muḥammadiya, commonly known as Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya for refuting Orientalists' project. This paper also aims to highlight the impact of Sir Syed's methodology on later Sīrah writers in Indian sub-continent. This paper will be a serious attempt to comprehend that how far Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was successful in refuting William Muir's Life of Mahomet and the rest of Orientalists, by challenging them in a rational and scientific way. This will place Sir Syed Ahmad Khan among the Sīrah writers of Indo-Pak subcontinent and evaluate Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya in its proper perspective.*

### Introduction

While the Britishers hijacked the Indian governance just after the failure of the Revolt of 1857, Christian Missionaries took advantage of political power to propagate their Christian beliefs. Christian missionaries had made it a habit to malign Islam. And therefore in their public speeches, newspapers and magazines, they used to attack Islam. They would condemn Islamic teachings in different ways, and would criticise the manners and the way of life of Prophet Muhammad in various ways. Therefore, a large number of Muslims, some of them due to ignorance and mostly due to poverty fell victim to their propaganda, and accepted Christianity. In this scenario many Muslim scholars, such as, the late Maulana Rahmatullah, Maulavi Aley Hasan and Dr. Wazir Khan etc., took steps forward and wrote many books to counter the propaganda of the Christians, and debated face to face with them. At that time, in 1861 Sir William Muir's book, *The Life of Mahomet* was published in which he criticised Islam and the personal character of the Prophet Muhammad . When Sir Syed saw the book he decided to write an intellectual response to this book. He wrote twelve essays in Urdu named *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, translated it into English and published it from London in 1870 entitled *A Series of Essays on the Life of Mohammed*.

Colonial powers not only demolished the independent and autonomous states of people in Asia and Africa but derided their cultural heritages as well.

---

**Mohammad Muslim** is Research Scholar, Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh..

**Email ID:** muslim.alig@gmail.com

---

Islam and Muslims were the worst sufferers in the colonial attack. They lost their preponderance in the world affairs; political, economic catastrophe was compounded by serious attacks on their religion and cultural heritage.

Same situation was in India, while the Britishers hijacked the Indian governance just after the failure of the Revolt of 1857. Christian Missionaries took advantage of political power to propagate their Christian belief. Orientalists were attacking on Islam with their scholarship and intellectual capability. In India, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was first who took step to respond to this challenge in scientific way.

### **Rational Investigation of *Sīrah* Literature and Sources**

Before writing response to Sir William Muir Sir Syed first started rational investigation of *Sīrah* literature and sources. Through his deep study and rational investigation of *Sīrah* literature and sources, Sir Syed observed that all the classical *Sīrah* literature (e.g. *Sīrah* of Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Hishām, Wāqidī, Ṭabarī, Abul Fidā', Mas'ūdī etc.) is a confused collection of indiscriminate and uninvestigated traditions (Aḥādīth) which have need to be investigated (Khan 2002: xix).

He said Orientalists are used of such works as sources while writing about Islam and Prophet Muhammad. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was the first person who, went against Orientalists with his intellectual capability, and became successful beyond expectations. He wrote the answers to all the objections by which the missionaries could bring Muslims into their net, and he did so, on the basis of the writings of Christian scholar. He removed all the misunderstandings which the Christians had about Islam. With his rational analysis of Christian literature and intellectual capability he proved that in the world, except Islam, none of the religions is closer to Christianity.

### **Methodology: Book for Book**

In his book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, advances arguments that demolish one after the other the allegations made by Sir William Muir. This he did with clinical precision in a very cool, objective and civilised manner. There is no excitement, no agitation, and no raising of the voice or rolling up of the sleeves. Sir Syed, despite his deep love and reverence for Prophet Muhammad, does not show any anger and remained polite, at its analytical best, throughout the discussion (Khan 2002: x).

Sir Syed, instead of getting the book banned or launching a public campaign, protest, decided to write down a point by point rebuttal of the book with clinical precision in a cool, civilized and objective manner with his rational philosophy and intellectual capability.

Throughout the book, there is no extreme stance here, no violent reaction, no slogan mongering, no anger, and no excitement. The entire tone is that of a seeker after truth that is unprejudiced and unbiased. Here is a man of vision, broad- minded, large-hearted, rational and so moderate. The book does not aim hitting back. Its endeavour is to remove cobwebs, to understand, to unravel, and to explain plainly. However the provocative the criticism, the author does not explode; he keeps his cool; he wins because he remains unruffled. He does not allow emotion to dull the edge of a sharp mind. His instrument is the lancet not the bludgeon. The author knows very well that Jewish and Christian blasphemers are hurling stones from with a glass house. But he resists hurling back the stones which would reduce the glass-house to pieces.

Throughout the book wherever Sir Syed Ahmad Khan felt need to write name of William Muir, he writes in so humble and respected manner as Mr. Sir William Muir. In his Urdu version of the book Sir Syed writes *Sāḥab* (respected title to address a man in Urdu language) to William Muir. It was the style of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan that reflects his high moral values which he had possessed. He said, “Do not show the face of Islam others, show yourself as a true follower of Islam”. He believed that, Islam more emphasised on practical behaviour of human being than that of theoretical behaviour.

It is one of the great features of the *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, that in it Sir Syed did not adopt any hostile and polemical style which is generally prevalent among Muslims and which instead of creating predilection and rapprochement among the opponents; create hatred and stubbornness in them. He adopted such a friendly and impartial method which is not disliked by anyone and has established for Muslims an example to follow it. With his rational analysis of Christian literature and intellectual capability he proved that in the world, except Islam, none of the religions is closer to Christianity, and Islam is free from faults which talks about human nature.

He asked the Muslims not to be swayed by the sentimental and demagogic argument of those who want Islam to be known as the faith of the illiterate, intolerant and savage people. He preached the message, that, boisterous protest, burning books and unleashing mindless violence is completely against the canons of Islam. Through his methodology, he

guarded and explained the moral values of Islam and philosophy of *Jihād* for such an era where meaning of the *Jihād* is being distorted and the term *Islamic terrorism* has become hot topic of discussion in the western world.

Unlike the earlier Muslim scholars, charges have not been levelled to counter charges by the Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. But each charge has been answered in a scholarly manner that may silence both the Christians and the atheists. By levelling counter charges, only Muslims could feel satisfied and in some cases, Christians might also be silenced but those who are neither Muslims nor Christians or are atheists could not be satisfied.

The methodology of Sir Syed's *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* explores two aspects of his thoughts, one his views on Islamic spirit embedded in the *Sīrah* of Prophet Muhammad (peace of God be on him) and his logical and tolerant approach. Sir Syed's quest for real Islamic message was his true and sincere application of Islamic rational and tolerant spirit to social, political, and cultural transformation of religion so that all non-Islamic world may understand the free and tolerant spirit of enquiry of Islam. His emphasis on tolerance was his philosophy of life recommended especially in the context of the pluralistic Indian, Christian, and global society. He firmly believed that all critical problems related to man's religio-ethical and socio-political matters can be resolved through free, objective and rational enquiry. He believed that, our biased attitude towards any religion or faith would not solve any problem but would create more confusions and misunderstandings. The methodology of the book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* teaches us that we can resolve all our problems through an objective dialogue and rational research.

Through his methodology and intellectual capability Sir Syed proved that Islam has the solution of all problems of humanity. And Islam is a perfect religion which talks about human nature. Islam talks about the universal law those are practicable and applicable for all human being with ease. He proved that Islam is free from shortcomings.

As long as, I observed, the book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* is critical and rational analysis of sources of *Sīrah* literature, by which he propounded *science of Sīrah writing*. Throughout the book, Sir Syed's discussion has been based on rational thought rather than emotions. Every point of refutation of William Muir's remarks is seen as rational explanation of sources. At any place, Sir Syed does not talk without logic. In short, it can be said that Sir Syed's work *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* is a rational analysis of William Muir's sources which are used in his work, *Life of Mahomet*. It was the Sir Syed's rational approach and intellectual

capability, when Sir William Muir saw the book *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* first time he said in apologetic manner; “I did not objected to the Islam of Syed Ahmad but objected to the Islam of the Muslims” (Hali 2008: 304).

### ***Science of Sīrah Writing: A Model to Sīrah Writer and Muslims***

Through his deep study and rational investigation of *Sīrah* Literature and sources, Sir Syed propounded *Science of Sīrah Writing* to his successors. And in the modern Urdu *Sīrah* literature secured his place as the *Father of Science of Sīrah Writing*.

Sir Syed prepared a model to the Muslims, for *Sīrah* writing and response. In his book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, he used so logical and critical methodology. Sir Syed’s methodology paves the way for the later *Sīrah* writer to write authentic *Sīrah* books. His methodology narrates how to write an authentic and reliable *Sīrah* and what should be the sources, while writing *Sīrah* book? And moreover, Sir Syed told that, how to respond and how to think out of box against biased literature of Islam.

### **Beating the Christian World on its Own Ground**

Before Sir Syed, no Muslim scholar went to Europe for writing response to the Orientalists. It was the Sir Syed, who first visited to Europe to collect material for writing Orientalists’ response. A great man of understanding and having far-sighted, Sir Syed collected material and wrote an intellectual response. It was Sir Syed who had beaten the Orientalist on its own ground by their own sources and language. When Sir Syed embarked upon the awesome task of beating the Christian west on its own ground and using its tool of logical analysis of marshalled facts he was confronted with an acute shortage of relevant material in India. It was available in British Museum and India Office Library in London. Sir Syed’s personal sources were inadequate to secure the material he was looking for. He had thought wistfully of a visit to Britain in another context as well. In view of the over-riding importance of modern education for the rehabilitation and uplift of Indian Muslims he wanted to study the British system of education. In order to raise resources for the journey, he sold his personal library and mortgaged his residence. In England he took copious notes from the books that he read avidly, and got the notes translated into English (Khan 2002: vii).

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan did not confine his attention to the book whose contents he wanted to refute but he extended his search to all the literature that could have a bearing on Islam and the last Prophet Muhammad. In the book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, are find references to a number of English authors who had tried to denigrate Islam. Most of these spread over

centuries stemmed from abysmal ignorance and unmitigated rancour and blasphemy. Sir Syed paid them only a fleeting attention and dismissed them with the contempt that they deserve.

It was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan who first travelled to Europe only in order to collect material from the big libraries to write a book in support of Islam, get it translated in a language of Europe which is generally spoken and understood throughout that continent, and get it printed and published there. Thus he is the person who presented the virtues and merits of Islam to those nations who, for the last 1300 years did not hear anything except wrong notions about it. About the Sir Syed's job, Reverend Hooper, principal of the Divinity College, Lahore said;

“It is very surprising that the Muslims consider Sir Syed Ahmad Khan an infidel, heretic and irreligious. I think whatever Syed Ahmad Khan has done for Islam has never been done by any other Muslim. As the Muslims consider all religions, except Islam, as false, and acceptance of Islam as obligatory, therefore it was their duty to present before those whom they consider not on the right path, the reality and virtues of Islam. They should have gone to their countries to deliver sermons in their languages and should have written books in favour of Islam in their languages. I do not know whether during the last 1300 years any Muslim had done so before Sir Syed Ahmad Khan” (Hali 2008: 272).

Mr. Arnold writes that;

“instances are found when a Muslim, sitting in his own country wrote in his own language a book against Christians and in favour of Islam and it was translated in European language, but I do not know if any Muslim went to Europe for this purpose, wrote a book in European language and published it there (Hali 2008: 272).”

Sir Syed himself used to say, “In 1870 AD when *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* was published in London, an Englishman had written in a newspaper of London that the Christians should become alert as an Indian Muslim, sitting in their country has written a book in which he has shown that Islam does not contain the stains and spots which the Christians put at its attractive face (Hali 2008: 272).”

### **Conclusion**

To conclude this topic, it can be said that, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, in his mission and purpose behind the job was almost successful. His work, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* has become an everlasting answer to a book containing profanities, lies in writing back, not clamoring for

bounty hunt. The publication of *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, went a long way in dispelling the misunderstandings, allegations had been and has been propagated by the Orientalists. It was the Sir Syed's methodology of response, and rational philosophy by which Sir William Muir was highly impressed, when he saw *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* for the first time, he made apology to Sir Syed and said, "I did not object to the Islam of Syed Ahmad but objected to the Islam of Muslims.

This apology of Sir William Muir proves that, the book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* is best argued refutation anywhere of the attacks made over the centuries against the life and mission of Muhammad (peace of God be on him) by Orientalists, and Christian world.

The book, *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya* is rated as the best argued refutation anywhere of the attacks made over the centuries against the life and mission of Muhammad (peace of God be on him) the book is so well-documented and the argument so logical and convincing that it eclipsed Sir William Muir's *Life of Mahomet* that had provoked it.

In *Khuṭbāt-i-Aḥmadiya*, nothing appears that may be termed as against the recognised principles of Islam. At only one or two places he has deviated from the principles commonly accepted by the Muslim community. It is like many Muslim scholars' differences from the numerous principles generally accepted by the Muslim community. For example, he maintains that the event of the Prophet's (peace of God be on him) ascension to the heavens is nothing but a dream, as also believed by some companions of the Prophet (peace of God be on him). Moreover he has included the episode of *Shaqq-i-Sadr* (opening of the Prophet's bosom). In one or two other such events he has differed with the Muslim community. But differing in those matters does not necessarily means opposition to the principle of Islam.

### **Bibliography**

Hali, Khwaja Altaf Husain. (2008). *Hayat-i-Javed*. Eng.Trans. by Rafi Ahmad Alavi. Aligarh. Sir Syed Academy

Khan, Sir Syed Ahmad. (2002). *Life of Mohammed*, New Delhi, Cosmos Books