

A Study of 19th Century *Ashrāf* Perspective of the Muslims of South Asia

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Abstract

Modern approaches on social cohesion and identification confirm that the Ashrāf community of 19th century United India shared a number of commonalities based on interaction, goals, interdependence in relation, structure and unity; and their sense to improve their social and political conditions and their response in the form of socio-political measures, manifested in their involvement in the promotion of literary and political organizations is the field of equal interest for sociologists, anthropologists as well as historians. The ashraf group or community of South Asia, as term evolved through the historical process, developed more cohesion and their efforts were marked under the extensive banner of the Aligarh Movement and were considered as 'prelude' to the formation of their significant political organization—the All-India Muslim League (AIML) in the start of 20th century. The research paper in hand deals with this very ashraf perspective of the Muslims of South Asia.

Keywords: Ashraf Muslims, South Asia, Sir Syed, Jinnah

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1. Introduction

The *Ashrāf* Muslims of South Asia² are generally misunderstood and therefore confound with men of power and authority, a body of elites and aristocrats. In the nineteenth century India, the *ashrāf* do not appear as described. It has been rightly explained that the *shorafā*, another word for *ashrāf*, "did not mean any special class but common people of civil manner and education".³ This study makes an attempt to look into their position and emergence in historical perspective. This will also take into consideration their role as a much-concerned people to protect and preserve their status. This was the concern which led them into politics of the region through the formation of a political organization – The Muslim League (hereafter AIML).

1.1. Historical Evolution of the Term 'Ashrāf'

The concept of *ashrāf* is very old. It is noticeable at various levels- religious social political administrative and cultural. Religiously speaking, this is divinely ordained. Of all the creations of Allah, God, man has been designated as *Ashraful Makhluqāt*, superior to all. At social level, a best example is the marriage of the Holy Prophet Muhammad to Khadija, a

² Abdul Halim Sharar, *Mashriqi Tamaddun kā Akhrī Namūna: Guzishta Lucknow*, first published in 1914 provides extensive details on the subject of *ashrāf* way of life. See: David Lelyveld *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Jersey: 1978)

³ Syed Amjad Hussain, *Awadh Aina-e- Ayyām Mein* (Lucknow: Mahkama-e-Ittilāt Wa Rabta-e-Āamma Uttar Pardesh,1996), 388.

noble lady of Makah.⁴ Politically, a Shareef dynasty surfaced in North Africa (called Al- Maghrib by the Arabs). This was the work of Hassan's descendants. Hassan was the son of 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib who was married to Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Hassan was older to Hussain. The followers of the latter assumed the title of "Syed" to denote over-lordship. Hassan too had his followers who preferred to call themselves *ashrāf* or *shareef*, respectable/gentlemen. It may be added that shareef is singular of *ashrāf*. The Shareef traced their descent through Hassan's grandson Muhammad *Nafs al-Zakiyyah* (d. 762 AD).

During the turmoil days in Arabia a few members of Hassan's family went to North Africa and took refuge in Mauritania. Gradually, they infiltrated into Morocco which was held by the Berbers of Zenata race. The latter took fancy of the new entrants into their land and became their disciple spiritually. Having once established their influence over the Berbers, the Shareefs dislodged the former from political ascendancy which they had held for long. By 1549 the Shareefs felt strong enough to declare themselves master of Morocco. This was actually a historical watershed since it witnessed the transition of power from Berber to the Arab.⁵ In 1670 Moulay Rashid (d.1672) laid properly the foundation of Shareef dynasty here. The rulers first took the title of Sultan and subsequently changed it to the king. The king added Moulay as a prefix to

⁴ Faiz Alam Siddiqi, *Binat ar-Rasūl* (Mandi Bahauddin: n.p, n. d), 83; See also Ghulam Nabi Muslim, *Kafeel-e-Muhammad* (Lahore: n.d.), 21

⁵Richard M. Brace, *Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia*(New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1964), 28-29

the name which meant both servant and master. The title Moulay has since remained a part of the ruler's name and exists even to this day.⁶

Administratively, the word Shareef was indicative of a rank. Under the Ottoman Sultans, who ruled over parts of the three continents of Asia, Africa and Europe, heads were appointed to various parts of the Empire. These heads were generally known as *Walī*.⁷ But there were some exceptions too. In some places the governor was known as Khedive like in Egypt. In Arabia the head of the Holy places of Makkah and Madina was called as Shareef. Hence; Shareef of Makkah during the last days of the Ottoman Empire, particularly during the great war of 1914-1918 Husain was the Shareef of Makkah. But his name and rank came to be so mixed up especially in South Asia that Husain became known as Shareef Husain of Makkah.⁸

2. The Ashrāf of Nineteenth Century South Asia (Colonial India)

The *Ashrāf* of South Asia however differed from all those discussed here above. They were more a socio-cultural group than anything else among the mass of Muslim population of the region. They believed in a high quality of moral and social order "which took into consideration many practices like dress, style, manners, habit, taste art, architecture and above all the language and literature which was based on Urdu- the mainstay of

⁶ Brace, *Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia*, 29

⁷ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Islamic Dynasties: A Chronological and Genealogical Manual*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980), 93

⁸ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Islamic Dynasties*, 98-99

the *ashrāf* way of life".⁹ A glimpse of the *ashrāf* way of life can be had from the rules set for a meeting between men of different social status. It was imperative for them to maintain a high standard of decorum even in their everyday life. For instance, *ashrāf* would not like to eat in public places like hotels and tea houses. They abhorred at the use of words like *tū* and *tum*. They were even reluctant to send their children to public schools set up by the government lest their own children's good behavior based on high standard of morals was corrupted due to the mixing up with children from other groups. Indeed the *ashrāf* way of life was very much based on social manners or decorum which men of other societies in the country, they believed, lacked.¹⁰

With the rise growth and consolidation of British authority in South Asia in the nineteenth century the *ashrāf* felt much disturbed. Indeed they were the worst sufferers on account of the transition of political power from the Muslim to the British. Muslims had been the rulers for centuries in South Asia. Now after the loss of their position they were reduced merely to a subject race.¹¹ The new establishment under the British introduced its own rules of governance which included many aspects of life – economic social educational and political. For some time *ashrāf* did not conform to these new rules and regulations which came as they did from the government. It had devastating effect on *ashrāf* way of life and they began to sink low in terms of moral and material benefits emanating from the government. The

⁹ Muhammad Saleem Ahmad, *The All India Muslim League* (Bahawalpur: IUB Printing Press, 1988), 4-5

¹⁰ Ahmad, *The All India Muslim League*, 8-11

¹¹ Ahmad, *The All India Muslim League*, 11-12

British ascendancy was seen by *ashrāf* with horror. The feeling by Mawlānā Zahūr 'Alī who bemoaned *ashrāf* pitiable conditions is illustrative of their flings.¹²

Few among the *ashrāf* took notice of their fast decaying conditions and still fewer took practical steps to bring improvements to their miserable life under the British. Among them the one person who took cognizance and moved to take practical steps for the betterment of *ashrāf* was Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898).¹³ For his services which comprised of many different ways he has been called variously as *Sardār-e- Qaum*, Grand Old Man and *Peer-e-Azam* of Muslim Politics.¹⁴

All the activities or measures Syed Ahmad Khan followed were collectively termed as Aligarh Movement. Aligarh, a significant district of United Provinces, was indeed the centre of all his works and therefore earned this name.¹⁵ The first step Syed Ahmad took here was the publication of a journal in 1870 to infuse hope and confidence in the *ashrāf* who lived a highly demoralized life since the start of the British rule.¹⁶ The journal, *Tehzīb-ul-Akhlāq* is indicative that he too placed great importance to the moral character of his people. The Anglicized name of the Journal

¹² On Syed Ahmad Khan see G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmad Khan* (London: 1885).

¹³ Muhammad Saleem Ahmad, *Promise and Fulfillment: Documented History of All India Muslim League* (Bahawalpur: The IUB Printing Press, 2005), xxii-xxiv.

¹⁴ Ahmad, *Promise and Fulfillment*, xxv

¹⁵ Ahmad, *Promise and Fulfillment*, xxvii

¹⁶ This view is forcefully advanced and advocated in Margret H. Case, *The Aligarh Era: Muslim Politics in North India 1860-1910* (PhD Thesis, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1970), 45

was *Social Reformer*. Besides he laid here in 1875 a Muslim School which was raised into a college two years later. Syed Ahmad Khan wanted this College to turn into a Muslim University which no doubt became so but not in his life time. The Muslim College became the centre of all his attention and activities to serve and promote Urdu Culture which was synonymous to *ashrāf* culture in the nineteenth century India.¹⁷

It should be of no less interest to know the British too understood the place and position of *ashrāf* Muslims in the South Asian society. As such they attached much importance to *ashrāf* families. For instance, when Peer Ibrāhīm went to Britain in 1851 he met there leading men like William Gladstone (1809-1898), Lord Palmerston, Duke of Wellington (1769-1852), Lord Charles Hardinge (1858-1944) and many others. But when he went to meet the Queen Victoria his name was announced with added emphasis that he was one of the *shorafā*.¹⁸ Similarly, when in 1860s, a medical institute was opened in Lahore and Muslim students were conspicuous by their absence and this lack of Muslim students was ascribed to the lack of availability of Muslim *Ashrāf*.¹⁹

Syed Ahmad Khan worked to enhance the *ashrāf* position. He employed Urdu Language as a vehicle for the propagation of his activities. Not that he spoke Urdu well and was versed with its literature but because he was well aware that there was Urdu speaking *ashrāf*'s diaspora almost all over

¹⁷ Margret H. Case, *The Aligarh Era*, 54-57

¹⁸ A. General Survey (by province) is to be found in Muhammad Saleem Ahmad, *The All India Muslim League* (Bahawalpur: IUB Printing Press, 1988).

¹⁹ Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight: How Britain Gave Away an Empire* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), 31

the region²⁰who will be able to understand his message easily. This fact more than anything else assured him success of his mission. Before his death he was able to bring *ashrāf* closer together. Muslims speaking other languages simply followed him, becoming an integral part of *Ashrāf* community and the Aligarh Movement, terms which had become synonymous for all practical purposes.

3. Leadership of Muhammad Ali Jinnah: A Discourse from the *Ashrāf* Perspective

The *Ashrāf* perspective in the United India or Colonial India, what the term might be, gave way a number of personalities which emerged on literary, social, political canvas like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), his comrade Khāwaja Altāf Hussain Hālī (1837-1914), Sir Allāma Muhammad Iqbāl (1877-1938), 'Ali Brothers, Mawlānā Āzād (d.1958), and many hundreds of others. However; Muhammad Ali Jinnah, later called as the *Quaid-i-Azam* (the leader of the leaders) played a unique, effective and decisive role. He was one of the *ashrāf* but he behaved differently and introduced a new discourse and it can safely be said that the position of Jinnah and the part he played as leader of political movements in South Asia have not come under full examination yet. The few works published in the last few decades, it has been observed, are those written by his admirers (termed by the critics as his 'own people').²¹But these have been viewed with skepticism by the western scholars who refuse to recognize them as proof of the evaluation and objective study of Jinnah's achievements. Some of these scholars have gone even to the extent of

²⁰ Collins and Lapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, 110

²¹ H.V. Hodson, *The Great Divide* (London: Hutchinson, 1969), 37

making prophecies that "History beyond that written by his own people would never accord Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948) the high place his achievements merited".²²But the merit of the statement and the truth in it are subject to question. One fact however remains unattended that Jinnah, the founder and creator of Pakistan has thus far remained outside the interest of western scholars.²³To this day he is perhaps the only leader among the top-ranking politicians of South Asia of the twentieth century who has failed to attract the attention of or create any interest among them. It can therefore safely be assumed that this lack of interest had been one of the main reasons for the lack of appreciation and understanding of Jinnah's contributions to the politics of the region.

4. Conclusion

At the start of the twentieth century, barely two years after the death of Syed Ahmad Khan, *ashrāf* are found operating on all India level for the

²² Ibid, 38-40

²³Lord Mountbatten to Campbell-Johnson' in Allan Campbell- Johnson, *Mission with Mountbatten* (London: Athenaeum Books, 1951), 56. It is not without interest to know that once Jinnah felt the same way about Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy of India (1916-1921), Hector Bolitho, 69. The situation has since then been changed. The publication of Stanley Wolpert, *Jinnah of Pakistan* (New York: 1984) and Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah- India- Partition, Independence* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2009) dispraise the claim of the author. It should be of particular interest to know that Jaswant Singh belonged to extremist Hindu group and was a member of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a fundamentalist Hindu political organization. (With publication of the *Jinnah of Pakistan*, the earlier observation needs now to be corrected accordingly.)

protection and advancement of their political and other rights under the British. Those involved in this sort of activities were not the men of elite group or aristocracy exercising power and authority. They were men mostly belonging to middle class earning their livelihood through independent professions like legal practice, small time traders and businessmen, teacher's journalists and Hakeem/ Doctors etc. Barring a few who may have belonged to the old families of Nawābs and Raees the majority belonged to *ashrāf* who eked their living by toiling hard. The leadership, political and other, came from these middle class men of *ashrāf* background. The initiation of the league in the first decade of 20th century AD is a testimony to the fact that those involved in its birth were part of the *ashrāf* group who worked with sincerity to build a better tomorrow for Muslims as a whole. This dream of 'better tomorrow' was materialized with the emergence of Jinnah on the Indian political scene. The glaring chunk of his political services is his early efforts on the platform of the AIML which later brought fruit in the form of Lucknow pact (1916), the very result of his political acumen and vision. He countered Gandhi's clever tactics and one outstanding proof of this was the chalking out of Delhi Muslim Proposals in 1927 whose rejection by the Gandhi and Congress and responding with the Nehru Report (1928) finally forced him to present his well-thought-over 14 points in 1929, an emblem of advocacy for the Muslims, and his final and last decision of 'parting of the ways' with Congress afterwards.