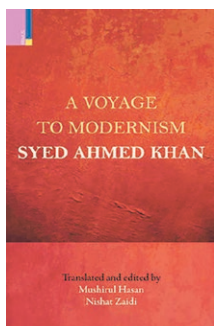


Encounters with Europe

Syed Ahmed Khan travelled from Benares in India to London in England in 1869, spent seventeen months in England, and returned to India in 1871. He wrote an Urdu travelogue, in letter-cum-journal form, about his voyage, and this appeared in different issues of the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*. Mushirul Hasan and Nishat Zaidi have now translated these fascinating pieces, with annotations and a lengthy introduction. The text, originally titled the *Safarnama-i-Musafiran-i-Landan*, is all the more fascinating since it was penned by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, founder of the Aligarh educational institutions and leader of the Aligarh movement among Indian Muslims.

Barnita Bagchi



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A Voyage to Modernism:
Syed Ahmed Khan,
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EARLIER EUROPEAN TRAVELOGUES by Indian Muslims include notably those by Mirza Abu Taleb Khan (1752-1806), and Lutfullah (b. 1802); Hasan, however, argues that Syed Ahmed Khan's travelogue is different in nature, inaugurating a new phase in relations between South Asian Muslims and the West, in which the observations of modernity in England also contain the core of an argument for rapprochement between the British and South Asian Muslims.

We find in these pages a constantly active, entrepreneurial mind, keenly interacting with the world around him whether in Egypt or in Europe, and thinking constantly about how to create channels and institutions for communicating messages of Muslim reform, and for fostering Anglo-Muslim relations. Syed Ahmed is known as one of the progenitors of the so-called 'two nation theory', whereby Hindus and Muslims were

supposed to be members of different nations, a doctrine which led to the movement and eventual creation of Pakistan. Yet his mind as shown in these pages is sharp and dogma-free. When Major Dodd, a Director of Public Instruction in British India mentioned to Syed Ahmed that a particular man had not been made Director of Public Instruction because he did not hold any religion to be true, Syed Ahmed retorted that in his opinion precisely such a man should be appointed to the post in a country such as India, since otherwise, in a country of so much religious diversity, religious prejudice would impede the growth of secular education. Syed Ahmed thus shows his belief in such a broad, nondenominational, secular system of education. This impression is further strengthened by the cordial, admiring warmth with which he interacts with Mary Carpenter (1807-1877), the English Unitarian social reformer and educator who was travelling on the same ship as he was. Although Syed Ahmed himself did little to promote girls and women's education, he says that he was keen to meet Carpenter because of her efforts towards furthering women's education in India. The two of them spoke with the help of a translator since Carpenter spoke no Urdu and Syed Ahmed spoke little English. Syed Ahmed brings up one of the most striking transcultural episodes in the history of nineteenth-century reform, viz. the syncretic, monotheist reformer Rammohan Roy's visit to Bristol, where he stayed with Carpenter's father, and where he died and is buried. Inspired by Rammohan Roy, Carpenter started working for Indian education and social reform,

and she visited India in 1866, 1868, and 1875. Her efforts resulted, for example, in the establishment of a Normal School to train female teachers in India.

This reviewer was riveted by all the everyday details about diet, monetary and credit transactions that Syed Ahmed recounts. He makes detailed enquiries about how animals whose meat he will eat are slaughtered, whether on board ship, or whether in a hotel in Bombay, and gives descriptions of such methods. He gives helpful advice to those Hindus whose dietary practices made it difficult for them to eat food cooked by others on such a voyage to Europe: his advice was to carry enough dry food that would last the month of the voyage, and then to begin cooking once Europe was reached.

In Versailles, Syed Ahmed protests against the way in which Algerian women are shown to be humiliated, bedraggled, and bereft of dignity in a painting that commemorates the French victory in Algeria in the early nineteenth century. Again and again he protests against manifestations of colonial arrogance, as, for example, when he notices Major General Babington writing 'ungrateful and heartless' when Mary Carpenter asked him to jot down his opinion of Hindustanis (Indians) in her notebook. Syed Ahmed writes following this, "All this leads to the conclusion that there is no meeting ground between the British and the Hindustanis. Both carry strange assumptions about each other and the assumptions of both are undoubtedly most often misplaced." [pp 119-120]. Such moments of perceived intercultural impasses on Syed Ahmed's part need to be remembered, lest we think of him in an over-facile manner as the architect of an Anglo-Muslim alliance in nineteenth-century India.

Syed Ahmed visits and makes notes about educational institutions such as Cambridge, all the while planning, gathering funds, racking up debts, and ceaselessly working to further his own educational reform plans in India. These would come to fruition when he set up the school and then the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College (1877) in Aligarh. Aligarh became, and remains (in the shape of the present-day Aligarh Muslim University in Aligarh, India) a key centre for the production of modern knowledge spanning disciplines, with research and teaching conducted in a rigorous, analytic, open-minded manner. Both Mushirul Hasan and Nishat Zaidi are themselves products of that Aligarh education and ethos, and it is thus fitting that they have produced such a useful, enriching, multifaceted translation and annotated edition of Syed Ahmed Khan's encounters with Europe, written from Syed Ahmed's own vantage-point as a key Muslim modernist figure of the nineteenth century.

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