

Rt. Hon. Justice Syed Ameer Ali on

***Lessons from Muslim History for the
People of Bengal***

(Originally delivered in Urdu at the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference held in Calcutta in 1899)

Gentlemen, the time for us to disperse is drawing near, and in a short while we shall be divided from one another by hundreds of miles. Before we adjourn, however, it is my duty as president of the Conference to make a few observations on our proceedings according to a time-honoured custom. I am sorry, I have not been able to write out what I want to say, either in English or in Urdu and cannot entertain you with anything very interesting, especially as I have not that gift of eloquence which is possessed by my friend Nawab Mohsinul-Mulk. I must say that inspite of numerous calls on my time, I have tried to devote a good deal of it to this work and I can hardly tell you with what difficulty I have managed to do so. I only hope I may not feel the time has been spent in vain. I trust that the principles adopted in theory, will be carried into practice and that only the Muhammadans who have attended the proceedings of this Conference, but others who may read or hear of them, will try to act upon the resolutions passed by us. I can assure you that no good can possibly come out of these resolutions, unless they become accomplished facts. Many an eloquent speech comes to nothing, simply because it never goes beyond the region of words. I beg you not to forget what Hakim Sana'i said:

Ai khuda-wandan-i kal al-etezar al-itezer

Ai khuda-wandan-i mal al-etezar al-tezer

O ye masters of words, spare us, spare us,

O ye masters of riches, have trust, have trust (in your fellow-creatures).

Let every one of us realise that he has a duty to perform in connection with the resolutions in the passing of which he has had a share. Until this is realised, it seems to me there is no use of our talking of progress. I have heard that remarks are made in some quarters that the Conference is only a 'Tamasha' and that it did not mean to act on the resolutions it adopted. To start with this idea is a sign of lifelessness and those who think so, will always remain inert and apathetic. We should pray to God to enable us to fulfil the good intentions we have now formed and ask Divine help for the furtherance of our cause. In every nation there are men who are wanting in energy. There have also been men in every age, who have brought ruin on their people from selfish motives.

The history of ancient Greece offers an instance where a man set fire to the temple of Diana at Ephesus, simply to obtain notoriety. He became known, no doubt, but in what sense I leave you to judge. Al-Kami sold Baghdad to Halaku for the sake of power and riches. Did he get them? Should any such man exist among you? You must endeavour to ignore their advice. Let there be no lagging, and let all of us unite to improve our condition. Any progress made by individuals here and there, can, at best benefit partially, and does not constitute the progress of the community, as a whole. For national progress every unit of society must be at work, and I am sure no man who labours for the general weal, will have reason, to repent of his exertions. He will sooner or later, rise in the estimation of the nation and the country, and even if his labours are not sufficiently recognised in the beginning, there shall be no mistake about their recognition in the end – he will be rewarded not only in the world to come, but will be largely rewarded in life by honour from the public.

It is true that great movements for the intellectual and social advancement of community do not always bear their full fruit unless they meet with the sympathy of rulers. Now that we are assured of that sympathy, it is the duty of all of us to throw off indifference and work together in harmony to attain the object we have in view. I venture to hope that we have at last reached the stage which even those amongst us

who have been indifferent to the cause of Muhammadan progress, will take keen interest in the work. As to the necessity of English education, I need not dwell on its importance at any length. It is coming to be recognized on all hands almost as an axiomatic truth and has been so ably set forth in many of the speeches at this conference that no further reference to it is required here. In this connection, however, I must state, the necessity of a cultural educational institution. One reason why a central institution is essential is that without a model the rest of the schools and colleges cannot work properly and the great task of educating a large nation cannot be properly accomplished. This idea of a model central college is not a new one. Such institutions existed in all times, when education flourished both among Mussalmans and non-Mussalmans. At the centres of learning in Spain, Egypt and Asia Minor there were Madrassahs which served as examples for minor schools and colleges. The Nuria Madrassah of Damascus founded by Nur-Ud-Din-Mahmud, the Madrassah of Baghdad founded in the time of Al-Mamun, reorganised by the Caliph Muntasir, and the Nizamia Madrassah may be mentioned, as instances in Islamic history of such model institutions. At a place known as Jundshakpur near Hamadan in Persia, there was a college which imparted the highest scientific and technical education.

The Muhammadans of India, therefore, ought to have at least one institution like those described above, to serve as a permanent model for Muhammadan schools in this vast country. To gain this object you should make earnest endeavours and deem this national duty no less important than the duty of offering prayers to God. A friend of mine has sent me a leaflet containing some publicity, I think I may tell you what I think of it. The author of this paper is under the impression that the boys educated there, lose their religion, become agnostics and necharias. I am afraid he is the unconscious victim of misrepresentations. The word 'necharia' it goes without saying, has been made a term of reproach without the meaning in the least understood. It has unfortunately become a habit with our people to misrepresent those whom they want to denounce and to show even the excellences of a thing as if there were defects. So they have made assertions against the quality of the teaching at Aligarh which have no basis. I believe that those who receive English education, are more strongly attached to Islam in the present age than those who have not had that privilege.

Mere professions of a piety do not constitute a man as religious or pious. Even in days gone by, when our own sciences and literature were in vogue, a sound education led to the formation of liberal views considerably in advance of the average man of the time which fact horrified the unknowing not a little. Not a single name worthy of distinction and honour among the sages of Islam but is notable for shaking off trammels of conventionalism. Men like Hakim Sana'i, Moulana Jalal Uddin Rumi, Farid Uddin Attar, Avicenna and Averroes were unpopular in their own days for seeing further than most of their contemporaries and expressing liberal opinions on religious, philosophical and ethical questions. If Rumi had written in these days the lines of his Masnavi:

Az-jamadi murdam-o-nami shudam * Az numa murdam, behaiwan sar zadam *
Murdam az-haiwani-o-Adam shudam * Pasche tarsam kai ze Murdam kam shawam
which contain the closest possible approach to the doctrine of evolution ever found in a Muhammadan book, he would surely have been pelted with stones by the masses. But I hope it will be clearly understood by all of us here that true learning cannot lead to irreligions or impiety and therefore, imputations against the religion of Aligarh-students are unfounded and imaginary. The essential principles of religion are taught there and that constitutes the best religious training. If the theology you are anxious to introduce into the curriculum of the proposed University, means the fundamental principles of religion, I am strongly for its introduction. But I would point out that the proper time for deciding how much of it is to be taught, will come when the idea approaches completion and a committee of experts sits to discuss the scheme of studies.

In the meanwhile it should be remembered that the University should have two sides so far as instruction in theology is concerned. Those desirous of advancing in religious lore and to rise to the standard of the Ulema, may be taught fiqh and hadis, while those receiving secular education to fit themselves as practical men of the world, should be taught only the elementary principles of Islam, as every Moslem is born a Mussalman or becomes one as soon as he believes in one God and recognises Muhammad as His prophet.

Before passing on to the other subjects discussed at the Conference, I take this public occasion of bringing to the notice of the Trustees and Managers of the college a complaint as to the teaching of English in the School department of the college. A friend of mine who has sent his son to Aligarh at my suggestion, wrote to me the other day that "While everything else was well taught there, arrangements for teaching English were not quite satisfactory." If this be true, I am afraid, many people desirous of giving their children the advantages of higher education, will hesitate to send their boys at Aligarh. I wish the Board of Management to inquire into the complaint and set it right, if the ground really exists. The resolution you have passed regarding the establishment of preparatory schools, would benefit the Central Institution only indirectly affect those students who cannot receive University education and who will complete their secondary education in those schools. A select few from among the students of these schools capable of bearing the expense of University education will probably go up to the central college. Muhammadans in every district should try to raise scholarships or create Wakfs for establishing preparatory schools.

As to the resolution relating to the Madrasahs in Bengal you should form a committee to point out the existing defects and to suggest remedies. (At this stage the secretary said that a committee had been formed that morning to consider local and provincial questions connected with education with power to add to the number and to delegate its functions to sub-committees.). I am glad to learn this, but for the resolution concerning the Calcutta Madrasah you ought to have a committee independent of the rest, as suggested by His Honour the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal yesterday and in its constitution pay particular heed to the fact that no discordant element is introduced into it, otherwise your work will come to naught. I have experienced such difficulties and therefore think it my duty to give you the benefit of my experience.

Another resolution worthy of notice related to female education. I need not repeat the substance of the eloquent speeches in its favour by Sahebzada Aftab Ahmad Khan and K.B. Mirza Shujaat-Ali Beg. But I shall make a few remarks about a lecture at the beginning of which I was present yesterday. In the introductory observations there were some strictures on the desire of young men to give liberty to females. I do not know what the learned lecturer would have thought, if he had suddenly found himself in Cordova in the time of Abdur Rahman-an-Nasir or in Granada under Banu-Nasr.

Muhammadan ladies in those days were a source of pride to Islam, not only in learning but in active participation in worldly affairs. They stimulated the ambitions of men to achieve great deeds in arts as well as in arms and they themselves attended the lecture-halls along with male students. Was Abdur Rahman-an-Nasir, the Caliph of the day, who allowed this, not a Muhammadan? Hajib Al-Mansur who introduced Islam in Navarre, allowed similar privileges to women. Can any one say that Shaikha Fakhrun Nesa who preached and lectured publicly at the Jame mosque of Damascus is not a lady entitled to our respect? Did not Hazrat Sakina who could walk about and attend lectures, deserve our respect? Can it be said that the Muhammadans in those days had less regard for religion than we have?

By our own mistake we have fallen a thousand years behind Europeans in our civilization especially with regard to females. They took up the work of civilization where we left it and a thousand years must elapse before our women can have the same refinement and culture which European women now enjoy. I feel bound to say on behalf of the young men satirised yesterday that they do not desire to see Muhammadan females on the same level as women in European countries, as the chivalrous regard for women characterising European civilization can not be dreamt of at the present stage of civilization in India, but they certainly want that their women folk may become capable of exercising a healthy influence on home-life. They want them to be able to attend to the bringing up of their children in habits of honesty and straight-forwardness so that they may conceal nothing from their parents and be beyond the bad influence of menial servants, in fact bring them upto become useful and honorable members of society.

Gentlemen, I am not an outside critic but one conversant with the internal affairs of Muhammadans and do not exaggerate the real state of things when I tell you that hypocrisy and other evil habits are imbibed by our children with the mothers milk. If you read the book of Amer Osama, you will find that the ladies of his family fought side by side with men in battle and conversed with their subordinates. Is it right that women should associate with the 'mirasins' and learn the ways of maid-servants? What our English educated young men want is that the women of their generation should be so trained that they may become worthy helpmates and not mere toys or drags to them in after life. For the degeneration of the Muhammadan females of the

present day we are ourselves to blame. We placed them under unnatural restrictions and unprecedented disadvantages as to education and are now suffering the consequences. Are not our brethren in Turkey, Egypt and Persia as good Muhammadans as we can possibly pretend to be? Persia is far behind Turkey in many respects. Yet even there the capacity of women to keep a clean and decent house-hold is such as may put us to shame here. The Sultan of Turkey has established schools for the education of girls at his own private expense. In Beyrout and in Egypt there are schools for girls and I have had the privilege of meeting Egyptian ladies of good families whom to know is to revere. His Highness Princess Nazli Khatun, the aunt of the Khedive, is one of the most cultured woman of the age, well versed in English and French besides Arabic and Turkish, and is held in the highest esteem by the Sultan himself. No less than six journals in Constantinople are conducted by Turkish ladies who wield an influence over their people of which we can have no conception. Such being the advancement in this direction among our co-religionists elsewhere, why should we stand still? I would advice those who know English to read a book named "Hagira" written in English by a Turkish Lady, under the non-de-plume of "adalat" which would show you that between yourself and the Muhammadans of Turkey there is not only a gulf but a sea.

I pass to another resolution adopted by you. It refers to the supervision of educational wakfs. Some sixteen years ago a committee was appointed Government to report on this important question, but it could not achieve anything. I need not go into the reasons which caused the failure of this committee, but simply state the feat that for want of proper arrangements many a wakf has been lost or destroyed during this period, but even now, if attention be apid in this direction, many properties may be saved and utilised by being affiliated with educational institution.

As to the resolution insisting on the retention of Persian in the B.A course of the Allahabd University I do not think it necessary to add much to what fell from Moulana Shibli Numani the other day. He discussed the subject in a very lucid manner, but perhaps for want of time failed to notice one point, when adducing arguments in favour of Persian. The point deserving of special emphasis in this discussion is that the Persian language and literature are so closely intertwined with the very fabric of the social life of Muhammadans that it is simply impossible for

them to give up this literature, and any blow to the study of Persian would be a blow to Muhammadan culture and refinement. Whatever culture we have, came to us through the Persians; so it is difficult to divest the colour it has got therefrom. No Muhammadan can be recognised as a learned man or fully valued unless he knows Persian. You may read English and Sanskrit, but you will lack the touch of refinement which Persian alone can impart. The effect of diverting the study of Persian while retaining Arabic and Sanskrit will be similar in India to that of abolishing Latin from the scheme of studies in English and keeping Greek only. So you ought to persistently try to retain Persian in the University course. The continuation of the Persian character in official documents is also very essential as was shown in a memorial submitted to Government on behalf of the Central National Muhammadan Association, for if the Persian character goes out of Courts, the knowledge of Persian in the N.W.P. will be reduced to the level of that in Bengal.

Before closing, I wish in a few words to tell you that if there is any hope of the Muhammadans regaining life and activity, they must remove from their homes all those causes from which spring domestic strife and pay some regard to the equality of parties in marriages as the nobility of character in parents has its effect on the children, and save their properties from destruction by creating permanent wakfs. In conclusion, I like to thank all those who have come from distances to take part in this Conference. It has been my painful duty, in my capacity as president, to cut short some of the speeches owing to pressure of time and I hope to be excused if I have, unintentionally given offence to anybody. I thank the representatives of the press who have been attending our meetings and the students who have so materially helped us as volunteers, and in congratulating you on the successful conclusion of your proceedings bid you a hearty farewell.

Source: M. Abdullah, *Adunik Shikha Bistare Banglar Koyekjon Muslim Dishari*, Dhaka: Kamiyab Parkashani, 2000, pp. 225-233.