

## Aligarh Movement and Women's Education: A Historical Survey

- Kashif Umair

### Abstract

*The idea of Western and modern education for women in the Indian subcontinent had a history of contestation among intellectuals and reformers. In the 1880s, when modern education for boys was agitated by the community then opening schools for girls was out of imagination. In this paper, I trace the history of the consequence which the idea of girls' education through modern institutions evolved after the 1857 mutiny. The question of women's education was born in the Aligarh Movements and what roles were played by different actors in shaping the course of the history of women's education in north India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan played a significant role in women's education and his fellow intellectuals and reformers had very different but often contradictory views on the subject. I focus to dig out the reasons and rationality that were put forward by the actors either in favor or against the idea of modern education for women.*

### Introduction

The question of Muslim women's education emerged in the 1880s among the intellectuals, reformers, writers, and nobles associated with Aligarh Movement. After the establishment of Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and his associates, a small section of people raised the issue of Muslim women's education. At that time, the main focus was to modernize Muslim *quam* meaning men of the community through modern and institutional education. After the Revolt of 1857, Sir Syed consistently spoke in favour of modern, western, and scientific education for Muslims. While in his modernizing project of *quam* only men were considered. Like many of his contemporaries, women were missing from their project of modernization. The possible reason of missing women from modernizing project was that they were not considered the active agents of change and upward mobility and only men were considered to be the right person to do the job. In speeches and writing, women were either missing or discussed for their importance in the household. At that time, Sir Syed and his comrades faced lot of difficulties and opposition in establishing a residential college for boys. The same education for women was out of imagination.

Sir Syed, Altaf Hussain Hali, Nazeer Ahmad, and Shibli Noumani were among the first generation of the Aligarh Movement who talked about women's education in the traditional way where women of '*sharif*' or respectable families are taught vernacular languages and religious education. These men have similarities and differences regarding women's education. There were questions associated with women's education that were influenced by religion, tradition, and the socio-economic structure of society.

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Why was women's education important? What will they do after being educated and its influence on the family? What is the right way to teach them? Members of Aligarh School answered these questions based on their subjectivity. There were differences as well as some common features in their approaches to these questions. But they shared some common concerns: "...patriarchy and misogyny was deeply ingrained in the Indian socio-cultural ethos. All these writers were the supporters of female education but only the education which would make them an efficient housewife, obedient wife and a dedicated mother. These reformers mostly belong to the family of sharifs who kept their women in strict seclusion. Purdah was the essential part of the religion and these reformers never wanted their women to be 'anti-religion'."<sup>1</sup>

Institutional education for Muslim women was raised first in Mohammadan Educational Conferences (MEC). Syed Karamat Hussain was the chief propagandist with Mumtaz Ali. They take entry into the scene in the 1890s and left an influence on the students of MAO college to push women's education further. Among these students, Shaikh Abdullah was the most influential. Till 1902, after the exit of Karamat Hussain and Mumtaz Ali, Shaikh Abdullah was the chief actor with his wife Waheeda Jahan Begam.

From the 1870s to the 1930s when Aligarh girls' school became a college, there were different views regarding women's education in the Aligarh Movement. Some prominent personalities of the time favored and others opposed women's education, but the efforts of Abdullahs and others led to the establishment of a girls' school which ultimately became part of Aligarh Muslim University after the independence of the country.

### **Modernizing the *Quam***

The post-revolt situation forced Sir Syed to adopt the advice which Mirza Ghalib had given him. In 1855, in the first part of his life, Sir Syed rewrote the *Ain-i-Akbari* and asked Mirza Ghalib to write its foreword. Ghalib wrote a short Persian poem and denounced its relevance for the current time. Ghalib advised Sir Syed to not waste his time on the past but to observe the British who are modern. Ghalib wrote:

You waste your time.

Put aside the Ain, and parley with me;

Open thine eyes, and examine the Englishmen,

Their style, their manner, their trade and their art.<sup>2</sup>

Soon After, Sir Syed adopted the advice of Ghalib, and began to work with the British more eagerly and left behind the histories of the past. The Revolt of 1857 was a paradigm shift in the history of British India and Sir Syed was not untouched by this change. From here he began to collaborate more eagerly. In 1858, he wrote the *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind* which was later translated into English by his future biographer GFI Graham and Sir Auckland Colin. In this book, he tried to draw a picture of the factors which led to the revolt. He wrote the leading

factors for revolt and made the government responsible for it. After the writing of *Asbab-i-Baghawat-i-Hind*, Sir Syed started many other projects simultaneously with his job. He founded two schools, one in Moradabad and another in Gazipur. Established *Loyal Mahomedans of India*, wrote the commentary of the Bible and purchased a press. He did all these projects in less than one decade and was looking to establish the Scientific Society at Aligarh. All his efforts show that he was passionate about bringing a change in society and the best possible way for it was through education. At that time he had adopted that modern knowledge is the key to success which will bring the lost prestige of Muslim *qaum*.

In April 1869, at the suggestion of Graham, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan made a trip to England when his son Syed Mahmud was granted North-West Provinces' first scholarship to Cambridge. During his seventeen-month of stay in England, he met with inspiring figures of the West such as philosopher Thomas Carlyle and novelist Charles Dickens. He also received the *Star of India* awarded by Duke of Argyll, MG Grant Duff. Sir Syed wrote the '*Essays on Muhammad*' in reply to Sir William Muir and also published a pamphlet on the British governance in India. Another distinguished achievement that Sir Syed got was that he became a member of the *Athenaeum Club* which he got only because of his intellectualism.

He was highly influenced by England in every aspect. After six months of stay there, he wrote a letter to the Secretary of *Aligarh Institute Gazette* on 15th October 1869 which shows his enthusiasm for learning and how England was influencing him. He described in the letter that he is observing almost every aspect of life and society of the ruler's land, the dukes and lords, the middle-class people, workers, women, merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, servants, factories, warehouses, ships, clubs, habits customs and comparing them with India. Through this comparison, he was trying to show why England became ruler and India became its subordinate. He wrote in the letter: "I am not thinking about those things in which, owing to specialties of our respective countries, we and the English differ. I only remark on politeness, knowledge, good faith, cleanliness, skilled workmanship, accomplishment, and thoroughness, which are results of education and civilization. All good things, spiritual and worldly, which should be found in a man [and women], have been bestowed by the Almighty on Europe, and especially on England". He further wrote, "this is entirely due to the education of the men and women, and to their being united in aspiring after this beauty and excellence".<sup>3</sup> In his comparison between the land of the ruler and the ruled, Sir Syed found that education was one of the major factors in which the former had an advantage over the latter. He caught the point of western education which he would later preach in India.

### **Sir Syed's Views on Women's Education**

Sir Syed's attitude towards Muslim women's education before the 1880s is debatable among contemporary scholars. Letters of Sir Syed from England which was published in *Aligarh Institute Gazette* shows that he was quite impressed with the educated women of England. It is considered that after travelling to England he gave some thoughts on women's education. But Iftikhar Alam argues that Syed Ahmad was impressed by the status of British women, their

independence, and independence, even before he went to England in 1869.<sup>4</sup> By referring to various articles which were published in Aligarh Institute Gazette in the 1860s and 1870s, Nasreen Ahmed argues that at that time Syed Ahmad Khan was not totally opposed to women's education or the establishment of schools for them. These articles appearing in the Aligarh Institute Gazette, indicate that in the 1860s Syed Ahmad Khan was not unsympathetic towards Muslim female education.<sup>5</sup> While David Lelyveld argues that by referring to those same articles in the Aligarh Institute Gazette that there was only one article that refers specifically to Muslim women.<sup>6</sup> So it is very difficult to say that was Sir Syed really not unsympathetic towards the modern and institutional education of Muslim women.

From the mid-1870s, Sir Syed began to face questions regarding women's education from his companions and intellectual rivals. On these occasions, he defended his stance on women's education. William Muir delivered a lecture to students at Aligarh College in November 1875 where he reminded the students about their responsibility after being educated. He also touched on the question of women's education. He said: "I have often while in these provinces lamented the custom by which females of India are left in ignorance, and have urged upon you the necessity, if you would really seek to elevate the social position of people, of educating your girl. ....I feel persuaded that until this is done no real advance will be permanently secured."<sup>7</sup> It is unknown how Sir Syed responded to it.

Due to his background of an elite family whose members were educated and had served in government. His mother Begum Azizun Nisha was educated in Persian, Arabic, and Urdu and she also held the knowledge of religion. She was the part of elite and sharif family of the ruined Mughal Empire where education through home tuition was the only way to educate females. She also taught Sir Syed at home. She influenced Sir Syed that he was convinced that home tuition was the best medium to teach Muslim females. On the question of women's education, Sir Syed's views like many other of his companions were restricted to only a particular class of Muslim community. These families were called *sharif* or respectable families who practiced purdah. Sir Syed defended himself that Muslim women of respectable families are able to read and write religious books in Persian, Urdu, and Arabic languages. They are either taught by their male family members or by female home tutors.

While on the question of government intervention in educating Muslim women, Sir Syed was opposed to the idea. He believed the status of Muslim women's education was in a bad state but did not feel the need for government assistance to educate them. In his view, although the educational status of Muslim girls was not good, it was unacceptable for government assistance in form of institutional education. For him, 'low status of female education' was better than the 'good status of female education' from government assistance.

"I admit, however that the general state of female education among Mohammadans is at present far from satisfactory; but at the same time, I am of opinion that government can not adopt any practical measure by which the respectable Mohammadan may be induced to send their

daughters to government school for education. Nor can government bring into existence a school on which the parents and guardians of girls may place perfect reliance. I can not blame Mohammadans for this disinclination towards the government's girls school.... . Efforts hitherto made by the Government to provide education for Mohammadan girls have all been in vain, and have completely failed to produce any effect whatever upon respectable families of the Muhammadans. Nor have lower classes derived any benefit from them."<sup>8</sup>

The idea of modernization, progress, happiness, and civilization are defined through an androcentric perspective. The process towards betterment and progress of society is defined by men and in which men are the actors and direct beneficiaries and women are indirect beneficiaries. Sir Syed subscribed to this idea. In a patriarchal and masculinist fashion, as a man, Sir Syed himself decides that traditional education brings happiness for women and modern education for civilized men and through them, is civilized and progressed. He said: "Those who hold that women should be educated and civilized prior to men are greatly mistaken. The fact is, that no satisfactory education can be provided to Mohammadan females until a large Mohammadan male receive a sound education."<sup>9</sup> He put his argument further favouring men's education over women:

"The present state of education among Mohammadan females, in my opinion, is enough for domestic happiness, considering the present social and economic condition of life of the Muhammadans in India. What the government at present ought to do, is to concentrate its efforts in adopting measures for the education and enlightenment of Mohammadan boys."<sup>10</sup>

These were the arguments that Sir Syed put in the public domain in 1882. Two years later he spoke publically somewhat similarly about women's education in Gurdaspur in 1884. At Gurdaspur women of different faiths collected funds for Aligarh college and expressed the desire to meet the sole spokesman of the Aligarh Movement. But Sir Syed did not meet the women's group and gave a written reply. He defended himself that he is not against women's education but favored women's education through home tutors at home.

He said he was not indifferent towards the education of women in his community and wholeheartedly desired their educational advancement. But he was opposed to modern education and advised women to adhere to the traditional system of education. That alone would help them in their moral and material well being, and protect them from difficulties. He confessed that efforts at educating Muslim boys were in fact efforts for the whole being of both boys and girls as the condition of women would improve automatically in consequence of the improved condition of men.<sup>11</sup>

In his view, traditional education was beneficial for women and modern education would

bring difficulty for them. For him, modern education was beneficial for men and harmful for women. The only way women could be beneficiaries of modern education was through benefited men.

Four years later Sir Syed visited Punjab once more. This time purpose of the visit was to attend the Third Annual Conference of Mohammadans Educational Conference but on the question of Muslim women's education, Sir Syed remained defiant. This time conference was held in Lahore in 1888. By this time many enlightened minds of the Aligarh Movement began to consider women in modern and institutional education. At the conference, the majority of members favored the question of Muslim women's education. A resolution was proposed by Shaikh Khairudin and it was unanimously passed that The Mohammadan Educational Conference 'agreed in principle that the Muslims should open schools for Muslim girls at which Islamic religion and lives of great people are taught in appropriate way.<sup>12</sup> Sir Syed was opposing the resolution. In his speech, he argued that, the teaching of religion and morals to girls at home on traditional lines was sufficient and that teaching of secular subjects like History, Geography, Algebra and Trigonometry to women was useless.<sup>13</sup> It is surprising that the Muslim intelligentsia stood in opposition to the undisputed leader of the Aligarh Movement. This shows the courage of those who passed the resolution in favour of women's education despite Sir Syed's opposition. At last, he also supported the resolution.

### **Intellectual Contribution of Nazir Ahmad**

Nazir Ahmad had some intellectual homogeneity with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. While Sir Syed was born in an elite family serving the Mughal and British powers but Nazir Ahmad was from a family of scholars. Both were born in north India. Like Sir Syed, he also got his early education in Arabic and Persian and was taught religious education. Sir Syed was a scholar and a reformer and Nazir Ahmad was a novelist but both were the government servants and educationists sharing the mission of advancement of the Muslim *quam*. Both served under the British government and were closely associated with the imperial power; they had realized the importance and necessity of modern education for the progress of *quam*.

Nazir Ahmad's first novel *Miratul-'Anas* was written as a guide for his daughters. He got an award and publication assistance from the provincial government. In his view, the present situation of women's education in the *sharif* family should be reevaluated. He proposed some reforms in the traditional model of women's education. Training related to domestic necessity should be taught to girls and vernacular education should be the same as boys. His views, somewhat similar to Sir Syed based on the socio-economic condition, men through their education can be employed in government services and earn outside the family but women while living at home, if they are educated, would give moral guidance and discipline to children. In his view, women's education would be materialized not as an economic gain but sharing and passing of knowledge from one generation to other.

But there were differences and similarities between Nazir Ahmad and Sir Syed on the issue of



women's education as pointed out by Gail Minault. She argues that Nazir Ahmad's interest in women's education went considerably further than Sir Syed's.<sup>14</sup> Analysis of their writings and speeches on women's education show the difference in their approaches.

"The Deputy's views seem to contrast with Sir Syed's more conventional misogyny, but if thoroughly analysed, the views of the two men have considerable areas of agreement. Both view the women's quarters (Zenana) as a place of isolation, backwardness, corrupt customs, and superstition. On the other hand, both view an educated woman as a potential threat to ethical guidance, discipline, and revitalized faith. Neither feels to abolish purdah as a source of women's isolation, since the world can be exercised on the outside world through the women's influence in their families, especially on their sons."<sup>15</sup>

### **Altaf Hussain Hali**

Altaf Hussain Hali has a similar familial and intellectual background as Nazir Ahmad's. His family also served under Mughal and British powers. He too belonged to North India. Hali touched on the issue of women's education in a similar fashion with Nazir Ahmed in his Urdu novel *Majalis-un-nisa*. The story of the novel is based on the condition of urban women and the necessity of educating them. Hali was in support of women's education, like many of his contemporaries, in the traditional way. He was also seeing women's education as a tool to raise children in an educated environment. An educated mother was seen as the first teacher of children and a good manager of the household. He does not go to the extremes, however. The reforms he advocates are justified in terms of women's traditional roles. There is no talk of a western curriculum, nor of higher education, nor of tearing down the curtains of purdah.<sup>16</sup>

### **Sayyid Karamat Hussain**

The question of modern and institutional education for Muslim girls took place after the Lahore conference. The *All India Mohammadan Educational Conference* became a driving force. The formation of the *All India Mohammadan Educational Conference* in 1886 is seen as a response to the formation of the Indian National Conference in December 1885. It was founded to represent the case of educational and social issues of Indian Muslims. After the establishment of MAO College, the purpose was further to expand the networks of educational institutions. Women's education was an essential aim of MEC and played a major role in the advancement of Muslim women's education in north India. Muslim intelligentsia began to join the movement and many of them were very enthusiastic about women's education.

In the last decade of the 19th century, a new member had made entry into the Aligarh School of intellectuals and reformers. After his entry into the Aligarh School, the debate on Muslim women's education got more space and lips to be discussed. Sayyid Karamat Hussain was born in an *Ashraf* family in north India. He got his primary education in the Bundelkhand region where he also taught at a college. In 1886, the same year when *Mohammadan Educational*

*Conference* was founded, Karamat Hussain went to England to study law where here he joined the *Anjuman-i-Islam of London*. There he was active and made contact with many other students who later became active agents in national and social discourse. After studying in England, he returned to India and began practice at Allahabad High Court. In 1890, the annual session of the MEC happened to be held at Allahabad and Karamat Hussain made suggestions regarding women's education. Till 1890, there was no connection between Karamat Hussain and Aligarh Movement but by then time had come. At the same time, Sir Syed's son was a judge at Allahabad High Court where both met and developed a good chemistry. Next year he joined MAO College on the recommendation of Justice Mahmud. Sir Syed asked him why he did not join the *Mohammadan Educational Conference*? Karamat Hussain replied that he would gladly become a member if they would take up the question of Muslim women's education.<sup>17</sup> Karamat Hussain was active at Aligarh and the fruit of his efforts comes when in the 1896 session of Mohammadans Educational Conference a Women's Education Section was formed and publisher Sayyid Mumtaz Ali was made founding secretary. But somehow Karamat Hussain left Aligarh and returned to Allahabad where he taught and practiced law. But he made important contributions to Muslim women's education at Aligarh school. He was the one who openly supported the establishment of schools for girls. He propagated the idea among the matured minds and fresh minds of students of Aligarh. Although he was not successful to establish a girls' school in Aligarh; he helped to find one in Allahabad and found another school in Lucknow.

### **Shaikh Abdullah and Wahida Jahan Begam**

After the withdrawal of Sayyid Karamat Hussain, his student Shaikh Abdullah took charge of the promotion of the girls' school. When he became secretary of the Women's Education Section he noted that MEC's [Mohammadans Educational Conference] resolution in favor of women's education was all well and good, but little of practical nature had yet been accomplished.<sup>18</sup>

A law graduate of MAO College, with a good relationship with its first-generation and prominent members of the Aligarh Movement, Shaikh Abdullah decided to take up the task of women's education to transform it from a literary debate to practical reality. He began working on the task after he became secretary of the Women's Education Section in 1902 and from here he began to consider all possible ways and methods to start a girls' school. It was the irony of the time for women's education that one person was motivated for the cause and another person was demotivated. Abdullah was made secretary by demoting Mumtaz Ali to joint secretary. Mumtaz Ali was not happy with this decision. He spoke at length on the issue of the need for schools for Muslim girls and expressed his unhappiness with his demotion. But Aftab Ahmad Khan justly pointed out that Mumtaz Ali and Shaikh Abdullah were on the same side of in the quest for women's education, and such acrimony did nothing to advance the cause.<sup>19</sup>

In 1904, he with his wife Wahida Jahan Begam started the magazine *Khatun* for women readership which contained issues related to women. *Khatun* was the tool to target Muslim



women to make aware them of the necessity and importance of modern education. In 1904, Shaikh Abdullah found a very influential personality who subscribed to his idea of a women's school and that was the Begam Sultan Jahan, the ruler of Bhopal. She gave him moral and financial support for this project. Begam liked the idea and promised a grant of 100 rupees per month to Aligarh school.<sup>20</sup> She remained a constant supporter of Shaikh Abdullah in his project. Begam Sultan Jahan was the one who deserves a fair share of acknowledgment for the popularization of and acceptance of the idea of a school for Muslim girls. She granted money on various occasions to shape the project into reality. In 1906, *Aligarh Zenana Madrasa* was founded with seventeen enrolled students and within three years numbers went up to 100. By 1914, a boarding house was built and became functional. Nine students were admitted to boarding houses. Within two years another building was in need and its foundation was laid by Begam Sultan Jahan. The progress continued with the school becoming an intermediate college in 1925. In 1938, it became a degree college.

Shaikh Abdullah was not alone in this adventure. It was an adventure because many challenges were there and what kind of thing he wanted to do was not commonly accepted in the society at that time and a lot of courage was required to complete the task. Wahida Jahan Begam played a very important role in the establishment of the girls' school and more importantly in its smooth functioning of it. Aftab Ahmad Khan was a close adviser of Abdullah on the issue of women's education and a sympathizer too. Shaikh Abdullah's success was partly a result of his own and his wife's energies and partly the result of backing he had received from powerful members of the Aligarh educational establishment.<sup>21</sup>

Shaikh Abdullah faced opposition in the quest to establish a girls' school. The greater opposition he faced within the Aligarh Movement. Many people were opposed to the idea of modern institutional education of Muslim girls. It was seen as a threat to religion and social order. The opponents were arguing that what is the necessity of educating girls at school. They receive enough education through female tutors, brothers, and fathers to read religious books. Through this, they are enough trained to run the household and raise children. Shaikh Abdullah had no very different purpose for educating girls but the difference was that he was a proponent of a modern system of teaching. In his view, the school system would serve the purpose in a better way. When *Sharif* women are properly educated, they could bring enlightenment to their children and to other women in extended families. The dark corners of the zenanas would be eliminated.<sup>22</sup>

### **Mohammad Iqbal's Critique of Women's Education**

Among the opponents, poet and philosopher Mohammad Iqbal was one of them. In 1910, speaking at the historical architect Stretchy Hall, MAO College Aligarh, Iqbal admitted that he is not an advocate of absolute equality between men and women and he further claimed that men and women have different functions and performance of these functions are indispensable for the health and prosperity of the human family. He was suggesting that if women are educated other than the traditional way then social order would be disrupted. He argued that

physiology, biology, and teaching of Islam favor the position of Muslim women what Islam has allotted to them. He further described that position has been allotted to women in Islam which indicated that women must adhere to a traditional form of education. He said:

"...it is extremely necessary to give her, in the first place, a sound religious education. That must, however, be supplemented by a general knowledge of Muslim-History, Domestic economy and Hygiene. This will enable her to give a degree of intellectual companionship to her husband, and successfully to do duties of motherhood which, in my opinion, is the principle, function of the woman."<sup>23</sup>

Like many of his contemporaries, Iqbal was also thinking in terms of the 'new woman'. The 'new woman' would be educated but would not challenge and dismantle the traditional roles assigned to her due to her sex. The 'new woman' would manage the household in a better way and most importantly would be able to raise children as an educated mother. She would be an educated companion of her husband but her role would be the same as any other uneducated woman. But there was a difference between Iqbal and his contemporaries who were in favor of women's education that he was searching 'new woman' in the traditional model of education and others were searching in modern education. But both had the same purpose of finding a woman who takes care of her husband and children.

He further said: "All subjects which have a tendency to de-womanise and de-muslamise her must be carefully excluded from her education. But our educationists are still groping in the dark. They have not yet been able to prescribe a definite course of study for our girls... ." <sup>24</sup> He feared that efforts for modern education for Muslim girls would challenge the existing social order. In his view, subjects other than the traditional ones, which are modern and secular in nature pose a double threat. These subjects would add 'negative characteristics' to Muslim women. They would lose their 'pure characteristics' of women and Muslim identity. He demanded that these subjects must be excluded from the curriculums. Possibly in view of Iqbal, de-womanise and de-muslamise are those women who would challenge the traditional notion of 'good woman' and 'good Muslim'. Maybe in his view, if women are taught the secular subjects then would break the socially accepted convention so in this sense they would be de-womanise and de-muslamise.

On this issue, Iqbal shared somewhat similar views with Sir Syed. Sir Syed held the view that what women would do after reading secular subjects like geography and math at school. She had to do household chores. But Sir Syed was not as fierce critique of women's studying of secular subjects as Iqbal but both were against it.

### **The Unquestionable Practice of Purdah**

Among the many obstacles to modern education for Muslim girls, purdah or veiling was one of them. In the 1880s, when the issue of women's education began to rise among the men of Aligarh School purdah was used as a shield to oppose the motion. Among these men, Sir Syed

was the tallest personality who opposed the idea of schooling Muslim girls and suggested that girls should be educated at home within the ambit of purdah. In his view, in school, Muslim girls would not be able to practice purdah if they go outside the home to study. When a student of MAO College named Ghulam-us-Saqlain spoke in favour of women's education in front of Sir Syed he was made fun of and was asked if he had come out of purdah.<sup>25</sup>

Abdullah himself believed that Syed Ahmad Khan's disapproval of Muslim girls' school and modern education was probably not based on any religious or rational argument, but his adherence to the purdah system lay at its root.<sup>26</sup>

The issue of purdah was very sensitive and those who advocated modern education for Muslim girls adhered to it. It was seen as a religious symbol and any girl of a 'sharif' family would not be allowed to study in schools because she would be stepping out of her house and purdah should be in practice. The issue of purdah gained importance due to the obvious question of women venturing into institutionalized education and the consequent broadening of Muslim women's public sphere. It aroused considerable discussion among the educated Muslim elite circles.<sup>27</sup>

Abdullah had a different interpretation of purdah from other men of Aligarh school. He believed that the traditions and cultures of different regions in India had an effect on the interpretation of purdah. In this way, the practice of purdah became stricter and lost its original Islamic interpretation. He thought that purdah in form of veiling to cover the whole body was not practiced during the times of the Prophet although women covered their heads with a chador (long cloak). He further cited Islamic ruling that men had to lower their gaze in the presence of women. He was referring that it was not the responsibility of women alone to practice purdah but men should also do a certain degree.

Through his magazine, Abdullah shared his liberal views regarding purdah. He held a different view from his contemporaries. He said: "My views about purdah underwent a complete change. This change of attitude was based upon my understanding of the teaching of the Holy Quran, and direct recourse to the history of Islam. Recourse to the revealed text and knowledge of Islamic history led me to discard the customary veiling (*rasmi purdah*) of India as an innovation (*biddat*). I did not hide my views on the issue."<sup>28</sup>

When the school was opened, irrespective of what was thinking of Shaikh Abdullah on purdah, he had no choice but to accept the socially accepted belief regarding purdah. Whatsoever he was thinking, he had no option but to adapt to the strict purdah in school. Already he was doing something beyond the socially accepted norm- opening a school for Muslim girls was itself breaking the social barrier. If the custom of purdah was not adopted then the school would not be socially accepted. It was a tragedy of time that Abdullah has to contradict himself- what he was thinking and doing were two opposite things.

The walls of the school were high so that people could not see from outside. People were specially hired to take girls to and from school in strict observation of purdah. When boarding

school was started in March 1914, it was made clear that strict purdah would be followed. It was done to convince the families to send their daughters to an environment similar to their homes. Purdah restrictions in the boarding house were even stricter than at the girls' homes, where they might be permitted to see male relatives-including marriageable cousins. Whereas at school, they were in a totally female society, under the watchful eye of Begam Abdullah, who even watched the mail.<sup>29</sup>

Shaikh Abdullah held a very progressive view regarding women's role in the public sphere. He spoke to girls to be vocal and active in matters of national politics and community work. He was encouraging them to take part in politics from their constituencies and to come out to work in the service of their community. On the occasion of the celebration of the Silver jubilee of girls' college, he spoke on the issue: "...young ladies and girls of this nation that it is now time that they should be ready to shoulder the enormous responsibilities of carrying forward the torch of progress and advancement."<sup>30</sup> These words sound very progressive but it was somewhat contradictory in themselves because at the very same place where girls were put under very strict purdah and were cut off from the outside world and at the same place they were encouraged to take part in the public sphere and fight for their rights.

### **Making of 'New Woman'**

In the the Aligarh Movement, Sir Syed was the one who did not desire to create the 'new woman' because was completely against the modern and institutional education for girls so the possibility was not left for it.

After the first generation of Aligarh Movement, a new class of educated Muslim men emerged educated in India and Britain. These young men were in search of educated wives who could give them intellectual companionship and able to raise children in an educated environment. The purpose of finding 'new woman' was the passing of knowledge from one generation to another- from mother to children- would be easily possible. While husbands were working outside the home and wives would be raising and teaching children. The making of 'new woman' was not to liberate women from traditional roles that they perform but to reinforce the traditional roles further.

The early advocates of women's education in the Aligarh Movement were trying to convince the opponents by arguing that educated women would be better wives and better mothers than uneducated women. Whatsoever was the nomenclature of women's education intently many reformers were making efforts to the creation of 'new woman'. Women's education, therefore, was a way to enable women to better fulfil their traditional roles, not to create new ones. Education for girls, unlike education of boys, was portrayed as contributing to cultural continuity, not breaking from it.<sup>31</sup>

While women's education in modern and institutional form was not challenging the traditional roles of women but it was a radical step in itself to bring out women from schools and colleges. These were the same institutions that later led to challenging the traditional roles of women and

other social customs. Educated women came to occupy the position that was earlier considered men's job. These similar institutions which were reinforcing the social customs and traditions produced the educated women as politicians, activists, writers, reformers, actors, and singers who challenged those social customs and traditions. Thus efforts of reformers who advocated the modern education for girls did not go in vain. The fruit of their hard work came later but it made a radical change in the perception of women's education and it became more socially acceptable.

### **Conclusion**

History of Muslim women's education and its engagement with Aligarh School has shown unilinear progress. Initially, it was discussed among the literary circles and reformers with very limited scope. It was restricted only to the traditional mode of education. Reforms were introduced within that limited scope. It was the time when modern education for boys was the main part of the Aligarh Movement and women's education had its limitations. David Leliveld gives the reasons behind the lack of interest among reformers on the issue. One must realize its limited purchase on the wider society and the diverse sources that have yet to be explored with respect to the conditions of women. Nevertheless, Syed Ahmad's long life and his intellectual prominence serve to make his ideas about the roles and rights of women, including his ambivalences and inconsistencies, matters that have had to be reckoned with, if only as a point of departure for further research on the history of gender and family.<sup>32</sup>

But the second generation of Aligarh School took the issue further and established girls' schools. The shift in the attitudes towards women's education from the first generation to the second generation came due to Mohammad Educational Conferences. It was the platform that provided space for Muslim male intellectuals around the subcontinent to discuss the issues related to the community every year. Ideas and plans were exchanged and a movement for institutional education for Muslim girls was born.

It is very interesting to enquire whether the girls' school or women's education itself a break from the traditional model, was challenging the social customs and traditions or reinforcing them. Founding a girls' school was itself challenging the social customs but it was reinforcing the same social customs and sex-segregated roles in the family and public sphere. On the contrary, it provided a space to be more knowledgeable about girls themselves and the world beyond them. Initially when girls' school was established in the first decade of the 20th century, then it was reinforcing the existing social customs and roles for women as mothers and daughters but by the mid-century when the school had become a college then its fruits began to come out. Graduates of college entered the public sphere and made their sound presence.

Shaikh Abdullah and Waheeda Jahan Begam were liberal in their attitudes but compromised due to social and religious conditions when founding schools and reinforced the existing social customs but also challenged some of them. Gail Minault beautifully examines this dichotomy of Abdullahs in the following words:

"Women's education would revitalize vernacular learning and thus strengthen Indo-Islamic culture from within, contributing to a renewed pride and the reaffirmation of cultural and religious identity. Women's education would also halt the dislocation in family life caused by the disparities in educational levels between husbands and wives. Further, by bringing enlightenment into the household, women's education would ensure that future generations would be enlightened. These were all very sound propositions, but they meant that women's education was designed to enable women to better fulfill their traditional roles, not to create new ones. Education for girls, unlike education for boys, was promoted as contributing to cultural continuity, not breaking from it. Sharif values were perpetuated; the curtains of purdah were not torn down, but rather institutionalized with detailed rules for purdah observance.<sup>33</sup>

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