



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Muslim Education in India”

Presidential Address to the All India Muhammadan Educational Conference

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan

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My first duty and pleasure is to thank you for the honour you have done me in asking me to preside at the meeting of the Conference. To sit in this chair is a signal honour of which any Muslim may be proud, but you have conferred upon me a very particular distinction in inviting me to be your President in this Imperial city and upon this historic occasion. For this honour, gentlemen, I tender you my deep and sincere thanks.

As, gentlemen, you have given me the right to speak in your name, I will lose no time in giving expression to a sentiment which is, I know, in the hearts of all of us. On behalf of the Mahomedan Educational Conference I welcome the guests and delegates who have come from a distance - I thank them that they have borne the discomfort of so much travel in order to confer by their attendance distinction upon this meeting.

And, in particular, I wish to offer the thanks of this Mahomedan assembly to those distinguished Governors of Provinces and Rulers of great States who have promised to honour this occasion with their presence, the fact that our great statesmen and administrators, amid the burden of public cares, should find time to show their interest in the religious, educational and social problems of a community, not their own, confers upon this assembly a very conspicuous honour, for which our heart-felt thanks and gratitude are due to their patronage.

It is, indeed, a matter of surprise as well as congratulation that any one of all this distinguished company should have entered this modest building at all, when a few paces from here all the pomp and splendour of this glorious Empire is unrolled before our dazzled sight. Never before have the Princes of India shone forth in so superb a pageant, never have we beheld, concentrated with equal magnificence, all the might and splendour of the Empire of India, and never have the antique battlements of this imperial City witnessed the proclamation of so great or just an Emperor.

That you have attended this Conference at all, in spite of all these splendid attractions, is due, I believe, to the fact that, though education is our theme, we are deliberating upon something more important than the suitability of this or that textbook, or this or that course of study. We are, if I understand the purpose of this Conference aright, considering what in modern times are the ideals we must hold before our people and the paths by which they attain them; and

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upon the right answer to these questions depends no trifling matter, but nothing less than the future of Indian Moslems.

We are undertaking a formidable task when we attempt to correct and remodel the ideals of our people. But for the task before us, we Indian Musalmans possess many advantages; we have the advantage of living under a Government which administers justice evenly between rich and poor and between persons of different creeds and classes; in the second place, we enjoy complete freedom to devise plans for the amelioration of our people. We have no reason to fear that our deliberations will be abruptly closed if we propose schemes of education other than those approved by Government. We know that no book and no branch of knowledge will be forbidden to us by official command; and, lastly, we know that, under the protection of British rule, we shall be allowed to work out to the end any plans for social and economic salvation which we may devise. Our wealth will not excite rapacity, nor our advancement in learning awaken the jealousy of our rulers. More than all this, we are members of a polity in which the opportunities for advancement in wealth and learning are greater, perhaps, than in any country in Asia, if only we have the energy and wisdom to make a right use of those opportunities.

These are privileges which our co-religionists in Turkey or Persia, who are not British subjects, do not possess. In those countries the opportunities for growing wealthy in commerce and industries or in the independent liberal professions can hardly be said to exist, and in both of them the pursuit of learning and freedom of thought are fettered by restrictions. We Moslems of India, therefore, enjoy unparalleled advantages, and we occupy among our co-religionists a unique position, and, if we properly utilise them and realise our duties, we ought to lead the way and constitute ourselves the vanguard of Islamic progress throughout the world. Here in India we can develop our own ideals of society, we have freedom in which to deliberate upon them, and we have security from internal and external enemies. We may carry our plans to maturity without fear of internal trouble or external aggression. Our brethren in Turkey and Persia must give their first thoughts and unceasing attention to military preparations and diplomatic arrangements, lest, whilst they are evolving schemes of progress, illiberal and autocratic European States should swallow up their independence, and thus they should at one blow lose for ever all chance of future development. But we, who live beneath the liberal rule of England, have here all the chances that a people require of developing our own individuality according to our own ideas.

And now, gentlemen, let us direct our attention to a question with which your Conference is intimately concerned, namely, how have the Indian Moslems taken advantage of the chances which Providence has placed in their way? We must all acknowledge with shame and regret that so far we have failed. Throughout the whole length and breadth of India how many national schools are there in existence which educate Moslem boys and girls in their faith and at the same time in modern secular science? Is there even one to every hundred that our nation needs and which we should have established had we been like any other healthy people? There are, indeed, a certain number of old-fashioned Maktabas and Madrassahs which continue to give a parrot-like teaching of the Koran, but even in these places no attempt is made either



to improve the morals of the boys or to bring before them the eternal truths of the faith. As a rule, prayers are but rarely repeated, and when said, not one per cent. of the boys understand what they say or why.

Let me take another example of our failure to fulfil our obvious duties towards our co-religionists. During the recent famines no national effort was made to save Moslem children or to bring up to [*sic*] the Moslem orphans of famine-stricken parents in some special technical or elementary school. This surely was a public duty which could never have been neglected in a healthy society.

Again, in Mahomedan society, we too often hear futile laments over the loss of political power, but we must remember that in the modern world a monopoly of political power, such as Moslems once held in India, is neither possible nor even desirable. Now that general liberty is given to all, the monopoly, or even a desire for the monopoly, of political power is both immoral and of no benefit. The just man does not even wish to possess privileges to the necessary exclusion of others. On the other hand, a desire for industrial and financial pre-eminence is perfectly legitimate because it is obtained by the free competition of the energies of individuals without which rapid progress is perhaps impossible. But here again our community has signally failed to take advantage of that peace, justice and freedom which we all enjoy under British rule. We have neglected industry and commerce just as we have neglected every other opportunity of progress.

This general apathy which pervades every walk of life is the sign of a moral disease, and what I will ask you to consider with me today are the causes of this terrible disease, and I will especially invite your attention to this point. Are the causes of this disease, to use a medical phrase, congenital and necessary, i.e., are they part of the faith or are they accidental and acquired? That this disease is accidental and no necessary development of the faith, is shown not only by political progress made by Islam during the first twenty-five years of the Hijra, but by the high standard of duty, morality, truthfulness, justice and charity that was general in Arabian society during the glorious reigns of Abu Bakr and Omar, and this high standard prevailed, mind you, amongst men whose early youth had been passed either like the Koraish aristocrats in the lazy and dissolute society of Mecca before the conquest, or like the rank and file, in Bedouin brigandage, in revengeful murder and in deeds of violence. Islam made heroes of such men, not only in the battlefield but in the more difficult daily sacrifices of [a] healthy and patriotic society. As a body they were law-abiding, just, full of charity, and true to their engagements, so that the conquered Persian peasants looked upon their just Arab conquerors as a godsend, very much as the Indian agriculturists welcomed the English whenever they overthrew a corrupt and cruel native State from 1760 to 1858.

So Islam, as a faith, when it was best understood, did not lead to apathy but to extraordinary devotion and self-sacrifice which it elicited even from such wretched material as the dissolute and immoral Meccan aristocrats of the days of ignorance; for these very men under the purifying influence of Islam distinguished themselves above all the Arabs by their loyalty and devotion. Witness the way in which the great Khalid and Amru, son of Al Ass, conquerors of



Syria and Egypt, respectively, accepted the judgment of Omar and Othman in such a remarkably patient and uncomplaining fashion when removed from governments which they had founded and commands of troops whom they had led to glorious victory. Both these men were actuated by profound moral obedience to authority and devotion to duty, and yet both had been in their youth like the usual worthless Meccan aristocrats.

All this shows that Islam does not necessarily lead to apathy and want of devotion to duty. We must, therefore, consider what the real causes are of this supineness which we are compelled to recognise as universal in Moslem society of today, a supineness all the more remarkable under the benign rule of England, where a little self-sacrifice would enable us to achieve greatness; for through greatness in modern times consists in pre-eminence in learning, wealth, and such pre-eminence we might attain with constant effort [*sic*].

I believe that this disease cannot be assigned to any one single cause, but I will, with your permission, enumerate four causes which, in my judgment, have had a paramount influence in introducing this apathy, this moral torpor, into Moslem society; and you will notice that all the causes of which I speak have been in operation for a very long time.

For the first cause I must go back to the very early days of our faith. The disastrous murder of Omar was an irreparable misfortune. Omar was removed at the most important moment in the history of Islam when vast additions had been made not only to the Empire but to the wealth of every individual Moslem. And he was, above all, the one man whose intense piety and faith and justice made him not only obeyed by all, but made him above everything the model of perfect manhood to the Moslems. The rising generation who had suddenly found themselves possessed not only of Empire but of enormous wealth, when every Arab was richer than he had ever dreamed it possible, lost in Omar in that critical period that example of saintly virtue on a throne which is perhaps amongst every people, modern or ancient, one of the most precious assets of society.

The very absence of Omar at that period was itself a loss which no impartial historian who has studied Moslem society of that period, can possibly doubt, however he may believe that history is influenced by general causes rather than by individual characters. But when his successor was assassinated and again the next head of the Moslem world had to contend against rebellion, a new element forced its way into Islamic society which has curiously not often been noticed by even the best historians, although its effects are visible to this day in the apathy which we are discussing. Many of the most intimate friends of the Prophet and the most pious and distinguished of the "companions" doubted which side they should take in the civil wars, and how they should act so as not to be responsible for any harm that might come, and so were led to adopt the most dangerous principle of all. They retired each into his private home and did not use their influence one way or the other, but passed the rest of their lives in prayer and pilgrimage. This example has ever since been unconsciously followed by some of the best and purest in every Moslem society. The most genuine and the most moral of Moslems often tell you, as they have a thousand times told me almost in identical terms at Constantinople or Cairo, at Bombay or Zanzibar, that as long as they spent their energies in



prayer and pilgrimage they are certain that though they do not do the best, yet they do no harm, and thus they give up to prayer and pilgrimage the lives which should have been devoted to the wellbeing of their people.

It is to this class in India that I appeal and desire most earnestly to impress upon them my conviction that, if they continue in their present attitude of aloofness, it means the certain extinction of Islam, at least, as a world-wide religion. We of this Conference appeal to the pious for their cooperation and assistance, and we warn them solemnly and in all earnestness that, if they give all their time to prayer and their money to pilgrimages, the time will come when that piety, which they so highly prize, will pass away from our society, and (for want of timely assistance at this most critical period) not one of our descendants will know how to pray or put any store upon the merit of pilgrimage. It is to this genuine class of pious men that we appeal here; let them come forward and take their legitimate place in the advancement of their co-religionists and in the moral and religious education of their brethren and children. In the strenuous life of modern times, a people that does not get help from its most pious and most moral sections has as little chance of success as a man who tries to swim with his arms tied behind his back.

A great, but silent, crisis has come in the fortunes of Islam and unless this class wake up to the altered conditions of life and to the necessity of superintending and educating the rising generation, the very existence of Islam is at stake. This class of pious Moslems must understand that what Islam now demands of them is that they should surrender to the training of the young a portion of the time hitherto given to prayer and a portion of the money hitherto spent in pilgrimages or celebrations of martyrdoms, long since past, which only help to keep alive those terrible sectarian differences which are one of the misfortunes of Islam. The example of the Prophet and of Abu Bakr and Omar and Ali should convince these pious people that the first duty of a Moslem is to give his time to the service of his nation and not merely to silent prayers.

A second cause of our present apathy is the terrible position of Moslem women . . . There is absolutely nothing in Islam, or the Koran, or the example of the first two centuries, to justify this terrible and cancerous growth that has for nearly a thousand, years eaten into the very vitals of Islamic society. The heathen Arabs in the days of ignorance, especially the wealthy young aristocrats of Mecca, led an extremely dissolute life, and before the conquest of Mecca the fashionable young Koraishites spent most of their leisure in the company of unfortunate women, and often married these same women and, altogether, the scandals of Mecca before the conquest were vile and degrading. The Prophet not only by the strictness of his laws put an end to this open and shameless glorification of vice, but by a few wise restrictions, such as must be practised by any society that hopes to exist, made the former constant and unceremonious companionship of men and strange women impossible.

From these necessary and wholesome rules the jealousy of the Abbassides, borrowing from the practice of the later Persian Sassanian kings, developed the present system . . . which means the permanent imprisonment and enslavement of half the nation. How can we expect



progress from the children of mothers who have never shared, or even seen, the free social intercourse of modern mankind? This terrible cancer that has grown since the 3rd and 4th century [sic] of the Hijra must either be cut out, or the body of Moslem society will be poisoned to death by the permanent waste of all the women of the nation. But Pardah, as now known, itself did not exist till long after the Prophet's death and is no part of Islam. The part played by Moslem women at Kardesiah and Yarmuk the two most momentous battles of Islam next to Badr and Honein, and their splendid nursing of the wounded after those battles, is of itself a proof to any reasonable person that Pardah, as now understood, has never been conceived by the companions of the Prophet. That we Moslems should saddle ourselves with this excretion of Persian custom, borrowed by the Abbassides, is due to that ignorance of early Islam which is one of the most extraordinary of modern conditions. As if the two causes already mentioned were not enough to strangle Mahomedan society, the Abbassides set a terrible example of personal ambition which has left a deep impression on Islamic history. These unworthy relatives of the Prophet, ever jealous of the superior merit of the Ommiades, to whom they

had sworn allegiance, beaten time after time in the field, made an unholy alliance with the newly-conquered men of Khorasan, led them astray by the so-called traditions in praise of their own family (invented by the thousand to mislead the newly-concerted [sic] and non-Arab Moslems who understood little of the liberal and democratic spirit of Islam), and with the aid of these allies overthrew the house of Ommia. This example of treachery for the sake of self-aggrandisement, coming from a family nearly related to the Prophet, throws great light on the fact that, time after time for the sake of furthering individual or family ambition, Moslems have sacrificed the welfare of their Sovereigns or States or peoples, for it is easy for those who are not naturally pious to forget the welfare of the nation for the sake of their own advancement.

The fourth cause of the general apathy of modern times which we are considering is undoubtedly the doctrine of necessity. No fair or reasonable-minded person who has read the Koran can for a moment doubt that freedom of the will and individual human responsibility is there insisted upon, but Abul Hassan Alashari (a direct descendant of that Abu Musa who was responsible for the fiasco at the arbitration at Doomah) - Abul Hassan, whose piety and learning and genius cannot be doubted - has placed the stamp of his unfortunately misapplied but great genius on Islam and given to Moslem thought that fatal fatalism which discourages effort and which has undoubtedly been one of the principal causes of the non-aggressive spirit of modern Islam. It was not till about the year 200 A.H. that the question of Jabr or Taqdeer, i.e., freedom of the will or necessity, began first to agitate Moslem thought. Had the matter come before the world of Islam during the Caliphate of some good and virtuous Caliph who was universally respected, and whose piety and faith were beyond doubt (such, for instance, as the saintly and exemplary Omar-ibn-e Abdul Aziz) an authoritative judgment in favour of freedom of the will would have finally laid this question at rest, but unluckily this true doctrine of Islam found, for its champion, Mamoon. Now, Mamoon's extraordinary ideas and very curious behaviour towards some principles of the Shariat had made the pious suspicious, and the very fact that Mamoon was the champion of the doctrine of the freedom of the will was enough to make the pious prejudiced against all those who held, and rightly held, that this



was a fundamental doctrine and that no society that accepted fatalism and carried it to its logical conclusion could possibly succeed. It is the fashion to place all the responsibility for the downfall of Islam to Chengiz and the Tartar invasion.

But in my humble opinion - an opinion held also by many of the most learned who have given the matter serious study - it was, first, the bad example and selfishness of the Abbassides; secondly, the fatal system... with its restrictions on the intellectual development of the women; thirdly, the constant and silent withdrawal of the most pious and moral Moslems into a life of private prayer and devotion; and, lastly, this doctrine of necessity, that brought about our downfall. I say it was in my opinion these four causes that have brought Moslem society down to its present low and degraded level of intellect and character. How low we have fallen, one can easily find out by comparing Moslem general intelligence of today to that which exists even in the most backward of Slavic-European States. If this downward tendency is not arrested, there is danger that the best minds amongst the present day Moslems in India will be brought up without any knowledge of the purity and beauty of Islam, and this loss will mean the certain estrangement of all the ablest of the community and the consequent loss of character, honesty and devotion amongst the intelligent, and this will mean, further, that our intellectual and social leaders will not possess the moral qualities most necessary for permanent success.

If, then, we are really in earnest in deploring the fallen condition of our people, we must unite in an effort for their redemption, and, first and foremost of all, an effort must now be made for the foundation of a University where Moslem youths can get, in addition to modern sciences, a knowledge of their glorious past and religion and where the whole atmosphere of the place (it being a residential 'Varsity) may, like Oxford, give more attention to character than mere examination.

Moreover, Moslems in India have legitimate interests in the intellectual development of their co-religionists in Turkey, Persia, Afghanistan and elsewhere, and the best way of helping them is by making Aligarh a Moslem Oxford, where they can all send their best students not only to learn the modern sciences, but that honesty and self-sacrifice which distinguished the Moslems of the first century of the Hijra. Gentlemen, it is not only my opinion, it is the opinion of all the best minds that guide Moslem thought in India, that such a University would restore the faded glories of our people. There is no doubt of the efficacy of the remedy, the element of doubt lies in the preparation of it. Will the Mussalmans of today exert themselves so much as to found such a University? Have we so wholly lost the noble disregard of self, the generous devotion to the good of Islam which characterised the early Moslems, as not to be able to set aside some of our wealth for this great cause? We are sure that by founding the University we can arrest the decadence of Islam, and if we are not willing to make sacrifices for such an end, must I not conclude that we do not really care whether the faith of Islam is dead or not?

Gentlemen, I appeal to all of you who hear me today to give not only your money, but your time and your labour to this great end. And especially I would most urgently adjure those



who, in obedience to the precepts of our religion, give large sums in the way of God to consider whether it is not more in accordance with the commands and examples of the Prophet to help their Moslem brethren than to undertake pilgrimages and celebrate costly anniversaries.

The sum which we ask for is one crore of rupees, for we propose to establish an institution capable of dealing with the enormous interests involved; we want to be able to give our Moslem youths not merely the finest education that can be given in India, but a training equal to that which can be given in any country in the world. We do not wish that in future our Moslem students should be obliged to go to England or Germany if they wish to attain real eminence in any branch of learning or scholarship, or in the higher branches of industrial and technical learning. Now, we want Aligarh to be such a home of learning as to command the same respect of scholars as Berlin or Oxford, Leipsig or Paris. And we want those branches of Moslem learning, which are too fast passing into decay, to be added by Moslem scholars to the stock of the world's knowledge.

Above all, we want to create for our people an intellectual and moral capital; a city which shall be the hope of elevated ideas and pure ideals; a centre from which light and guidance shall be diffused among the Moslems of India, aye, and out of India too, and which shall hold up to the world a noble standard of the justice and virtue and purity of our beloved faith.

Gentlemen, do you think that the restoration of the glory of Islam would be too dear at one crore of rupees? If you really care for the noble faith which you all profess, you can afford the price. Why, if the Moslems of today did their duty as did the Moslems of the first century, in three months you would collect this money to pay for the ransom of Islam. Bethink you that there are in India 60 million Moslems, and of these at least ten million, or one crore, can afford one rupee a head; from the head of every Moslem family we only ask for one rupee, whereas we all know well that there are people who can pay Rs. 1,000 or Rs. 10,000 with ease.

Gentlemen, these are facts; if our ideal is not realised, it will be because the ape within has swallowed the angel; it will be because, though we profess veneration for the faith and for the Prophet, it is but a lip-loyalty that will not make this small sacrifice to revive in its purity the glorious faith of Islam.