

Role of Sir Muhammad Shafi in the Origins & Development of the All-India Muslim League

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Abstract

The main theme of the study is to look at the role of Sir Muhammad Shafi before the partition of the Sub-Continent to secure the Muslim nation from the Hindu extremist attitude and monopoly over the politics under the umbrella of the British Raj. After the war of independence in 1857, the future of the Muslim nation was in jeopardy and they were stuck in a dead-end. The responsibility of Muslims of India was taken by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and then later Sir Muhammad Shafi followed his path to secure the Muslim nation. He served the nation from 1892–1931 approximately for 40 years. The contribution of Shafi could not be ignored nor forgotten in the struggle for Pakistan. It will also be discussed that the leading role of Sir Muhammad Shafi in the origin and development of the All-India Muslim League in general and Punjab Muslim League in particular. Shafi was one of those Muslim leaders who perceived very early the alarming situation of the Muslims in political arena and made efforts to help found the All-India Muslim League and its Punjab Branch.

Keywords: Nationalism, Political Development, British, Mohammandans, Independence

Introduction

After the so-called mutiny of 1857, the Muslims were completely lost and helpless. The British Government has ousted them from positions of power and privilege and had subjected them to hostile and dissimilatory policy. In fact, in the early period of 1843, a pro-Hindu policy had been adopted. As Governor-General, Lord Ellenborough, disclose to the Duke of Wellington “I cannot close my eyes to the belief that the race

(Mohammandans) is fundamentally hostile to us and true policy is to reconcile the Hindus".¹ As well as the Lord Dufferin tracked the similar policy of expressing darling words for the charms of the nationalist's Shifts besides on the other end he gave fair warning to Muslims.² As a result of these policies, the Muslims became further alienated not only from the British rulers but also from the whole range of changes introduced by them in the state and society of India. For instance, they refused to learn the English Language and to study sciences. While the Hindus took full advantage of these opportunities for advancement, they, under the influence of ulema, "... began to look up to the study of English by a Musslaman as a little less than embracing Christianity."³ Indeed, they refused to be involved in interested in the education provided by the government institutions.

The reluctance of the Muslims to accept English education affected adversely their chances of getting service in the government offices. Expertise and knowledge of English had become important. So, the Muslims refused to learn English and still wanted to learn Persian and Arabic were later left behind. The predicament of the Muslims could be gauged from a comment made by a British official in Calcutta in which he told that a Mohammedan could not hope for any post above the rank of porter, messenger, filler of ink-pot and menders of the pen.⁴ The relationship between education and job was too clear. Obviously, it was a critical time for the Muslim nation to reconsider the new education system, which was introduced by the British establishment. The Muslim nation needed to change its attitude and accept the latest education model and language (English) to compete with the rivals in the Sub-Continent.

Syed Ahmed Khan took the responsibility at this crucial juncture to rescue the Muslims in British India. No doubt, the responsibility was very hard & tough to convince the British establishment that nobody constantly planned the uprising besides at anycast, the Muslims had little to do with the ultimate violence and deaths. On the other hand, he had to persuade the Muslims that Western education was not harmful to their faith.⁵

While Syed Ahmad Khan worked on both fronts simultaneously. The core problem which mentally disturbed Syed Ahmed Khan was to convince the Muslims to adopt the English Language, literature, and sciences. Syed Ahmed, attention was very clear, he did not want to employ the Muslims as a clerk or administrative officer of the British establishment but wanted to convey the importance and real value of the Western modern education system, which would recover the economic condition and social position of the Muslims. He stressed that young Muslims equipped with the necessary educational qualifications would be able to meet social obligations and would be able to work better for the welfare of their country. Besides, he pleaded again and again that the Muslims should remain loyal to the British Government.⁶ He did not want to offend or annoy them at any cost.

Thus, when the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885, with the active encouragement of the Viceroy, Lord Dufferin with the main object of reform and expansion of the supreme and existing legislative councils by the admission of a considerable population of elected members,⁷ Syed Ahmad Khan was visibly upset. He felt that the organization would drag the Muslims not only into opposition to the British but also to agitation against their rule in India. Syed Ahmad Khan, therefore, soon made his views known to the Muslims. He advised them to stay away from the Congress. He told them not to get involved in any kind of agitational politics. Also, he felt that if democracy of the kind sought by the Congress was introduced in India, which was an assortment of all sorts of races, religions, cultures, and creeds, the minorities, especially the Muslims were bound to suffer.

Syed Ahmad Khan was not anti-Hindu, but he wanted the good of the Muslims in particular. Syed Ahmed Khan compared the Sub-Continent with a pretty bride and bride having two eyes, the Muslim and the Hindus. In this sense, he sought unity and cooperation between the two communities. He wanted to help the both, but the attitude and behavior of the Hindus was very unfortunate. They adopted aggressive and

discouraging behavior for the Muslims. During 1867 the language controversy, in Banaras Hindus started opposing the Urdu language and demanded to replace Urdu with Hindi. The hypocritical attitude of Hindus shocked Syed Ahmad Khan, and his efforts for Muslim-Hindu unity was proved to be an idle dream. The Hindus were not interested. In 1873 Syed Ahmad was constrained to launch a movement for the protection of Urdu in the country.⁸

In fact, at the last of the nineteenth century segregated brands of nationalism started flourishing in the Hindu society. One of the initial, as well as the most outspoken proponent for this nationalism, was Swami Vivekananda. His doctrine comprised the belief that the Hindus needed to return to the Vedas period, and that Hinduism was superior to Western materialism.⁹ It was a combative nationalism that contained religious standings. In a similar vein, Arya Samaj established in 1877, sought purification of the Hindus. Also, it wanted to convert back to Hinduism to all those who had embraced Islam or Christianity. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a fanatic Hindu revivalist, published an anti-Muslim *Anandmath*. His sole purpose was to condemn everything representing the Muslim rule in India.¹⁰ All such movements served to discourage Muslims from participating in the activities of the Congress which to a great extent was in the hand of the Hindu revivalists.

It was in the context again in 1877, Syed Ameer Ali formed his “National Mohammedan Association”. It was concerned with social issues in the first few years but soon it got involved with the political issues as well and argued that;

The present backward condition of the Muslim is due partly to internal and partly external causes. The disintegration of the Mohammedan society, the decadence of their principal families, and the general ruin, which has overtaken all classes of the Mussalman community, combined with the absence of any means to represent to government faithfully and honestly, the views of the Mussalmans of India have placed them in a disadvantageous position, as regards political influence and power, relatively to the other Indian communities. It may safely be affirmed that until the establishment of the Central National Mohammedan Association, there existed no political body among the Mohammedan capable of

representing the Government, from a loyal but independent standpoint, the hopes and aspirations the legitimate wants and requirements of the large body of Muslims in this country.¹¹

Like Syed Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali also promoted the way of loyalty to the British. He wanted the Muslims to work with the British Government. Like Syed Ahmad Khan, he also demanded a fair share for the Muslims in the administrative services. Also, he sought Muslim representation decided on considerations other than their sheer numbers. He wanted them to have a fair share of representation in the councils and local bodies. Indeed, Like Syed Ahmad Khan, Syed Ameer Ali had great concern with Muslim rights and interests. He was fully conscious of the anti-Muslim campaigns of Hindu leaders and their influence on the Indian National Congress and thus wanted to help the Muslims.

As the Congress refused to be receptive to special Muslim interests, relations between the Muslims and Hindus, increasingly got more and more tense and bitter. In his address to the inaugural session of the Mohammedan Defence Association of Upper India, Syed Ahmad Khan claimed that the foundation of the Congress and the movement against the cow-slaughter were two sides of the same coin. The only difference was that the former was directed against the British and the latter was against the Muslims. The object of the Congress was to wrest the control of the country from the British and hand it over to certain sections of the Hindus. The cow-protection movement was aimed at discouraging and eventually subjugating the Muslims. In this scenario, he argued that it was in the larger interest of both the Muslims and the British to work together against the rising threat from the Hindus. One way to do that was to prevent the introduction of a form of government unsuited to the Muslims.¹²

No wonder, when Congress passed a resolution for the introduction of representative government in India, Syed Ahmad Khan opposed the idea, tooth and nail. He told the Legislative Council:

India a continent in itself, is inhabited by vast population of different creeds; the rigor of religious institutions has kept even neighbors apart. The

system of the cast is still dominant and powerful...One community may be fully alive to the importance of securing representation on the local boards and district councils, whilst the other may be wholly indifferent to such matters...Under these circumstances, it is hardly possible to deny that the introduction of representative institutions in India will be attended with considerable difficulty and social-political risk. The system of representation by election means the representation of the views and the interests of the majority of the population.¹³

Syed Ahmad Khan could not be more right as subsequent development clearly showed that the system of government, evolved to be representative of the Hindu-majority community. In the end, of course, it forced the Muslims to seek a separate destiny in a separate homeland of their own, Pakistan. For the moment, too, under the influence and guidance of Syed Ahmad Khan, the Muslims and the Hindus went on their separate ways, with the Muslims opposing both the Congress and the new system of government being introduced in India. The separation, however, was not final with the Muslims maintaining a love-hate relationship both with the Congress and the system itself till the Lahore Resolution of 1940.

The cause of the Muslim community, taken by Syed Ahmad Khan and Syed Ameer Ali was advanced by other Muslim leaders, inspired by their ideas and convictions for the betterment of the Muslim community. Although Syed Ahmad did not lay down a precise political program of actions for his followers, he still showed them the way to lead them to the goal of their ultimate freedom in 1947. Shafi was one such important leader who followed the way. This included in particular his loyalty to the British. In this sense, Shafi represented what has popularly been referred to as the 'Anglo-Mohammedan School of Politics' in Punjab.¹⁴ Proponents and practitioners of this school of thought believed that the only way the Muslims could secure their rights, interests, and demands in India was through co-operation with the British Government. There was no other way out. Neither the Congress nor the Hindu-majority community, in general, could be trusted and relied upon.

Muhammad Shafi's Early Life and his Interest in Politics

Son of Mian din Muhammad, Shafi was born in an Arain family of Baghbanpura on 10 March 1869. He studied in his village up to middle standard but passed his matriculation examination from Rang Mahal Mission High School, Lahore. He joined Forman Christian College for further studies.¹⁵ During his college life, he took a keen interest in public affairs and contributed to newspapers. His articles were published in the *Pioneer*, *Tribune*, and *Civil and Military Gazette*.¹⁶ In August 1889, he went to England for higher education. His cousin Mian Shah Din was already gone there to study law. Shafi and Shah Din's contemporaries in England included M.K Gandhi, Pandit Moti Lal Nehru, Lord Sinha, Syed Ali Imam, Syed Hassan Imam, Mir Abdul Rahim, Sir Ibrahim Rahimtoolah and Maulvi Rafu ud Din Ahmad.¹⁷ All of them went on to play important role in Indian politics. Abdul Rahim and Shah Din founded *Injman-e-Islamia*, to promote the cause of the Muslim in Britain. Sir Abdul Rahim was appointed its first President. After his return to India, Shafi became its next President.¹⁸ Shafi also took a keen interest in the British elections of 1892 and spoke at some of the election meetings. He watched the proceedings of House of Commons quite often and thus observed British parliamentary practices closely.¹⁹ In August 1892, he came back to India after passing Bar-at-Law and started practice in Hoshiarpur. After a couple of years, he came to Lahore and settled there.²⁰ It was during his stay at Lahore that he got interested and involved in the developments in Indian politics.

The activities of the Congress and other revivalist Hindu movements prompted the Muslims to think of their future in India more carefully. They were not doing well politically. Their educational backwardness complicated the situation further. In these difficult circumstances, Shafi felt that he had a role to play and indeed joined politics. Influenced by Syed Ahmad's political thoughts, he adopted a pro-British policy not only to secure Muslim interests but also to save the Muslims from the Hindu majority's domination of the political system. In this context, he was very to help establish a Muslim

political organization. As a matter of the fact, there was no organized and representative Muslim political organization in India at that time. To begin with, Shafi joined the Mohammedan Anglo-oriental Defence Association of Upper India, founded by Syed Ahmad Khan. Its main object was "... to defend Muslim political rights and discourage popular agitation among them."²¹ The Association was comprised of representatives from various provinces of India. Shafi was chosen as the representative of Punjab.²² The Association criticized the aims and objects of the Congress. Resolution after the resolution were passed against the application of the competitive system for the services and introduction of a representative system of government in India. Shafi and Shah Din played an important role behind these resolutions. The elective system was criticized as it was believed to lead to Hindu domination. Indeed, separate electorates for the Muslims were demanded in councils and local bodies.²³

There was not any newspaper representing the Muslim point of view in India at that time. The need for an organ to voice the Muslim demands and to fight for their rights and interests was greatly felt. This paramount need of the Muslims was satisfied by the establishment of the *Observer* in Lahore in 1895. This paper played an important part in the political awakening of Muslims. Shafi was the secretary of the organizing committee of the paper. The committee managed the paper very well in its early difficult years.²⁴

Inspired by Syed Ahmad Khan, Shafi tried to help the Muslim community by having good relations with the British Government. Shafi was a strong advocate of loyalty to the British Government at all costs. Simultaneously, however, he insisted on a separate electorate and job quota for the Muslims. Like Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, he thought that the Congress idea of the elective bodies and competitive examination was harmful to the Muslims and thus he opposed it from day one, long before the genesis of the All-India Muslim League on the national stage. In his letter entitled 'The Mahomedans and the Congress' he strongly argued that Congress was not representative of Indian Muslims. He took an issue with Sir

W. W. Hunter who had suggested in one of his speeches that the Muslims were taking part in the Congress activities with enthusiasm. He insisted that Hunter had miscalculated Muslim attendance in the Congress sessions.²⁵ The Muslims were not interested in Congress. Indeed, they were keen to launch their separate political organization.

Shafi, Simla Deputation and the Foundation of the All-India Muslim League

With the start of the 20th century, the support for separate electorates had substantially increased among the Muslims. In this respect, two events, the partition of Bengal and the Simla Deputation played an important part. Lord Curzon the Viceroy of India, partitioned Bengal into two provinces, creating a new province of East Bengal. He felt that the old province was not governable largely because of its large size.²⁶ Fortunately, the Muslims constituted a majority in the new province and thus it offered them a lot of opportunities in various fields of life, including education, services, and representation in local bodies, etc. Obviously, all this was at the expense of the more advanced Hindus. In exasperation, they took the plea that the Bengali 'Nation' was divided.²⁷ They boycotted the British-made goods and made systematic efforts to pressurize the government through an agitation. Soon, they met with success, and Morley the Secretary of State for India declared that the government was about to appoint a small committee to consider the question of extending the representative element in the Legislative Council.²⁸ This declaration enhanced Congress's prestige since this was one of its major demands. The Muslims got worried, they felt that the Muslim rights would not be safeguarded in an elective system. They apprehended and with a lot of justification that their position would become weaker still since they were a minority community in India.²⁹

Not surprisingly, Nawab Mohsin-ul-Mulk a trusted lieutenant of Syed Ahmad Khan organized an all-India Mohammedan Deputation, with Sir Agha Khan as its head to represent and advocate the claim of the Muslim community regarding their representation in the legislature and the public

service. Shafi took part in the discussion about the demands to be presented to the Viceroy, to help Muslims secure their proper place in the Indian polity. The Deputation waited on Minto and Simla on 1 October 1906. It asked for the separate representation for the Muslims in the Legislative Council, district boards, and municipalities and an adequate share in service. Shafi, as indicated above had already raised these demands at different forums from time to time. As one writer explained: "The main points raised were similar to those often advocated by the Punjab Muslims. Criticism was expressed for the existing system of election... A due share in services was also demanded."³⁰ The Viceroy's response was sympathetic and considerate implying in the clear term that the Muslim rights would be safeguarded. But the *Observer* was not satisfied. It was particularly unhappy over the fact that the Viceroy did not specify that the Muslims would be given their 'due share in services'.³¹

This kind of criticism over the Viceroy's response showed the great concern Shafi had for the rights and interests of Muslims. Despite pro-British conservatism, he dared to criticize the British Government. It was also evident that separate representation and special job quota for Muslims were some of the main concerns of his politics from the very outset.

Shafi was convinced that to plead the All-India case on the All-India level, it was necessary to have a proper and effective political organization. The idea of organizing the All-India Muslim League grew up during the various meetings which took place while discussing the Muslim demands for Simla Deputation. In Punjab, political activities were launched through *Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam*, without compromising in any way the attitude of loyalty to the British Government. The leaders of the *Anjman* wanted to co-operate with the Muslim leaders of other provinces in forming a large national political organization. Shafi and Shah Din represented this group.³² Even before this, Shafi had agreed at several times the need for a political organization to secure and promote Muslim interests. During his stay in London, he had contributed an article to the *London Observer* suggesting the formation of such a political

organization for the Muslims of India to be named the Muslim League.³³ In September 1901, he wrote a series of articles in *Daily Observer* in which he advocated, again and again, the need for a political organization to safeguard the interests of the Muslim community. He even sketched its constitution and went on to suggest that it should be called *Indian Muslim Patriotic League*.³⁴ In September 1906, in a special meeting of the Muslim leaders called to discuss the Address to be presented before the Viceroy's at Simla, the need for a political organization was again argued very strongly by Shafi and many other leaders. In the end, everybody agreed on several good reasons. Briefly stated they were:

- 1 Muslims were a separate political entity, as characterized by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan.
- 2 The Congress was essentially a Hindu dominated organization
- 3 An organized response was required to deal with the situation arising out of the partition of Bengal.
- 4 The Muslims needed a platform to pursue the demand for separate electorates for all representative institutions. Of course, Shafi again suggested the name of the Muslim League which was readily accepted by the participants.³⁵

To make the constitution of the proposed League a Committee was constituted, with Shafi as one of the seven members including from Punjab.³⁶ After lengthy deliberations, the delegates of Mohammandans Educational Conference finally met at Decca (New Dhaka) and announced the foundation of the All-India Muslim League following as they put it, Sir Syed's scheme of separate Muslim existence.³⁷ As expected the Congress and the Hindus denounced the foundation of the Muslim League. The Muslim demand for separate electorates was the special target. Out of all the important Congress leaders, only G.K Gokhale appreciated the scheme of separate representation. In his opinion, it was necessary to promote unity in the country through the proper representation of every group and community. He understood

the Muslim endeavor to safeguard its legitimate political rights.³⁸

Muhammad Shafi and the Punjab Muslim League

Syed Ahmad Khan had great influence over Punjab leadership. His ideas influenced Shafi and his cousin Shah Din. That is why they supported both the Mohammedan Educational and Muhammadan Defence Association of upper India. They were also active in *Anjman-i-Himayat-i-Islam*, which was a nucleus of political activities of the Punjabi Muslims. They were greatly stirred by Syed Ahmad Khan's political thoughts, especially his conservative views and the expression of loyalty towards the British. They also wanted to cooperate with Muslims of other provinces in forming a political organization along the above line. That accounted for their active role in Simla Deputation and the formation of the All-India Muslim League. After the formation of the League Shafi got in touch with Nawab Viqar-ul-Mulk to form a provincial branch of the party in Punjab.

In December 1907, at a conference of the leading Muslims of Punjab, held in Lahore, it was decided to establish a branch of the Muslim League, in association with the All-India Muslim League, "to safeguard and advance the political interests of Mohammedans in Punjab and infuse into them a spirit of enlightened patriotism."³⁹ Shafi was elected General Secretary of the party. Viqar-ul-Mulk was elected. He congratulated Shafi on his efforts despite all the opposition and difficulties.⁴⁰ It was largely due to his organizing capacity and relentless efforts that within a short period of one year the number of district leagues in Punjab exceeded the number in any other province.⁴¹

Interestingly, Shafi already had an organization by the name of the Muslim Association since 1905. He merged that organization with the provincial branch and re-named the new set-up as the Punjab Provincial Muslim League.⁴² Shafi and his supporters were called the conservatives. The group held by the Mian Fazli Hussain was referred to as progressive. The *Paisa Akhbar* supported the former group of the *Zamindar* backed the

latter.⁴³ Both groups now claimed to be the provincial branch of the All-India Muslim League. However, the differences between the two were settled eventually in the All-India Muslim League session in December 1907. Fazli Hussain agreed to the dissolution of his organization and joined the Punjab Muslim League Shafi group.⁴⁴ After the compromise, the conservatives under Shafi assumed the role of representing Muslim opinion in Punjab. But the difference in approach between the two groups created difficulties all the way. Eventually, Fazli Husain in 1923 parted company and went on to find a new party, the Punjab national Unionist Party, which ruled Punjab till the creation of Pakistan in August 1947.

Shafi perused the case of separate Muslim electorates in the councils and the reservation of seats in government services using both the platforms, the All-India Muslim League and its Punjab Branch. Indeed, this emphasis on these two points became a hallmark of his political creed and politics. Added to this of course was his continued and uncritical sense of loyalty to the British government. The result of this commitment was that the Provincial Muslim League campaigned actively for the safeguard of the Muslim interests at each stage of the bill for reforms it held meetings and representations to the government of Punjab.⁴⁵ In the end, because of its active role, the Punjab Provincial Muslim League established its hold on the province and leading Muslims from all over the Punjab joined the organization.⁴⁶

Findings

In these formative years of his political life, we see a pattern and trend which stayed with Shafi throughout his political career. The hostile activities of the Congress and the poor conditions of the Muslims especially in Punjab, encouraged him to joined hands with the government to serve and promote Muslim rights and interests. In the process, of course, he went on to commit himself more to the Punjab cause than the overall Indian Muslim cause. He recognized the need for a separate Muslim political organization and thus, given the

first opportunity, he played an important role in organizing the All-India Muslim League and its provincial branch in Punjab. He remained active on both these platforms and tried his best to secure Muslim interests as much as possible. In this context, the imminent constitutional reforms of 1909 provided him an ideal setting and opportunity. In the process, in the fast-changing circumstances in India.

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