

BOOK REVIEW

Book Review: Gulfishan, Khan: *Essays on Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah*, Aligarh Muslim University Press, 2015, 426 pp. ISBN 978-81-929867-8-4 price: 450.

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The book, as the title reflect, is the result of the thirteen essays/ articles penned by the author over the past a decade. These essays seeks to provide an in-depth understanding of the two widely acclaimed personalities—Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah—who I would add should not be confused with the grandfather of former Chief Minister Omar Abdullah. The present book, under review, thus deals exclusively with the abundant contribution of them particularly in the field of literature and education.

In the very Introduction, the author introduces us with the source material she has explored over more than a decade for finalising these essays. These essays, she says, are based on the multifarious writings of the two eminent educationists, mainly expressed through the medium of Urdu language. And these writings, she adds, comprise of different forms of scholarly expressions which included autobiographical reminiscences, political monographs, travelogues, scientific and religious treatises, pamphlets, historical essays, and numerous articles contributed in journals, magazines, and newspapers—which are preserved in the prestigious Maulana Azad Library of Aligarh Muslim University.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan, writes Gulfishan Khan, was a man neither forestalled by predecessors nor to be classed with contemporaries or to be replaced by known or readily surmiseable successors. The Renaissance man whose personal impact on contemporaries, younger companions and later generations, Khan demonstrates, is even greater accomplishment than the foundation of the Mohammedan Anglo—Oriental College later named as “Aligarh Muslim University”. Similarly, Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah, the other educationist-cum-philanthropist and a true product of the Aligarh Movement whose ideas also sought to achieve the same high goals as were set by the pioneer reformers—formal education of Muslim women reflects the deep imprint of the same multifaceted personality. Therefore, the opening short essay “Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah: The Founder Speaks” says Khan, is an academic tribute to the campaigner of a worthy cause by a little-known alumnus.

According to Khan, the founder, even if, presented a male vision of ideal womanhood, yet it is far from being an androcentric construct. Therefore, it is a powerful call for readjustment of gender relations. Our visionary, Khan adds, could imagine as what would happen when women would become educated and will begin to articulate their own ideas. In view of Shaikh, writes Khan, medicine and teaching were the ideal professions for women. Thus, the founder wished that they should become physicians, advocates, successful entrepreneurs and above all better human-beings, Khan elaborates.

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The beginning essays delve deep into the wide spectrum of the social and cultural ideas of the leading thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan. These essays, according to Khan, attempt to reconstruct the social and intellectual milieu of North India during the period of the burgeoning colonial ascendancy including the rich intellectual legacy of the great thinker. At least five of the essays, Khan says, aim to recreate the social and cultural environment of pre-Revolt Delhi of Sayyid Ahmad Khan.

One of the essays entitled, “Sayyid Ahmad Khan: Some Early Influences”, which focuses on the academic activities of Sayyid Ahmad Khan in his early youth, according to Khan, demonstrate that he inherited a great and lively tradition of learning, scholarship and scientific inquiry from his family as shown in the biographical accounts of Khwaja Farid al-Din Ahmad and Zain al-Abidin, his maternal father and uncle respectively. Similarly, the essay on the, “Ulama and the Delhi Madrasah: Some Early Colonial Experiences”, deals with the economic deprivation and impoverishment of the erstwhile bureaucracy of the Mughal Empire due to the land-revenue settlements including the resumption of land revenue grants and assignments by the British East India Company. Khan argues that, the traditional Ulama, as well as the intelligentsia in general, were forced to accommodate with the harsh realities of the time has been exposed in the life story of Maulavi Rashid al-Din Khan, a scion of the Mughal aristocracy.

The other essay, “Some Preliminary Reflections on Origin and Development of Urdu Language”, traces Sayyid Ahmad and the other Delhi-based educated elite’s early linguistic and aesthetic concerns with the nature of the emerging language, a literary debate, which according to Khan, became a controversial issue at a later stage. The long essay on the mystic of pre-Revolt life of Shahjahanabad/ Delhi is based on the timelessly fascinating work of Sayyid Ahmad Khan called “Asar al-Sanadid”. This monumental work of the pioneer archaeologist and historian of calibre, Khan demonstrates, continues to inspire generations of scholars since its publication in 1847. This essay particularly focuses on to highlight Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s representation of the religious life of the Mughal Delhi, then known as Shahjahanabad in the first half of the nineteenth century. The work from the pen of one of the most articulate Muslim(s) of the nineteenth century South Asia, Khan argues, is not only about the buildings and monuments of Delhi, but, it is also a significant document for restructuring the social and intellectual life of the imperial city during the period of colonial ascendancy. Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s account of the Sufi life as portrayed in “Asar al-Sanadid”, Khan adds, shows that, the mysticism [Tasawwuf]—the social manifestation of devotion, piety and scholarship was an integral part of Islamic life-style of urban elite and notables of the imperial metropolis. Khan further views that, it is a picture of reformed Sufism and Sufi practices as embodied in the person of the eighteenth century savant Shah Wali Allah Dehlawi. Despite its acknowledged authenticity, according to Khan, the account presented a highly idealised view, if not romanticised one, of the mystic life with no consideration of impact of the socio-economic changes which occurred after the colonial takeover of the city.

The other two essays, “An Overview of Scientific Thought and Technology in the Subcontinent During 18th –19th Centuries” and “The Archaeological Society of Delhi”, according to Khan, also reinforce the view that despite the withering away of Mughal power, Delhi remained a significant locus for sciences, art and literature, and until the cataclysmic events of 1857, scientific subjects like astronomy, geometry and mathematics were extensively cultivated by the Ulama—the traditional scholars as well as among the Sufi circles. However, for Sayyid Ahmad, Khan further elaborates that, it was not only cultural life of Mughal

Delhi and manifestation of Sufism, rather for him, his scholarly contribution in the domain of religious thought was of paramount importance.

According to Khan, the essay entitled, “A Critical Review of the Biographical Literature (Sira) of the Prophet by Sayyid Ahmad Khan—A Reappraisal”, shows author’s preoccupation with the growth and development of Islamic sciences. This essay, says Khan, takes into its purview only the introduction (Dibacha) of Sayyid Ahmad’s celebrated essays entitled, “Al-Khutbat al-Ahmadiya fil Arab wa Sirat al-Muhammadiya”, and seeks to identify the Eastern and Western sources which informed the work. Thus, the essay demonstrate author’s mastery of traditional Islamic subjects called “Manqulat” which included Hadith (Sayings of Prophet), “Sira” (Biography), “Exegesis” (Commentary) and “Jurisprudence” (Law).

However, the essay entitled, “Aziz al-Nisa Begam: A Pious Role Model”, is of singular and particular importance. It is not only the first modern biographical sketch of an exceptionally gifted mother, but, according to Khan, it is significant that it shows the biographer—son continued to reiterate the virtues of home learning for women by portraying his home-educated mother as an ideal woman.

The last two essays entitled, “Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah (1874-1965) and Muslim Female Education Movement” and “Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah (1874-1965) of Aligarh and the Indian National Politics” in the book are concentrated on the gender discourses and political ideas of Shaikh for the cause of women. The dynamic content of Shaikh’s comprehensive political discourses, argues Khan, could be explained against the cultural milieu of colonial Aligarh where the brothers of ‘Akhara’ played out their political disputes in the context of national and international events and issues. Though to safeguard the political rights of Muslims as a separate community in a self-governing polity remained the paramount concern of Shaikh, but, yet, Khan adds, he advocated India’s unity, cohesion and national integrity in unequivocal terms. Khan further argues, even if, Shaikh Abdullah’s idea of a nation (Quam) remained what Anderson called ‘imagined communities’, but he also looked forward to a bright future of India as a secular nation although without providing a definition of a secular state.

My criticism, if at all, is only that, though the author in each essay has succeeded in providing strong foot notes, yet she escapes from providing any references, bibliography and indexing at the end of the book. This failure of the author may fail to serve the purpose of any research scholar, especially one who wishes to go for further substantial study only on the basis of this book. One can also find some typo errors, though minor, but visible in the book, which I would suggest needs to be (re)corrected. And my handful appreciation is that, the author in each essay has shown a great bent of mind for using the original sources which in itself is a sign of making this work an indispensable starting point for further study on the same subject. However, one can hardly find any political, social, cultural or economic narration of post 1857 colonial India, in which: Sayyid Ahmad and Shaikh Abdullah, both had played their role, nonetheless, the author has succeeded in making the work more pioneering and thought provoking.



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