

Dr. A.M.A. Azeez Memorial Oration

**Muslim Modernism and Reformative
Process in the Field of Education –
a Sri Lankan Experience**

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What is the position of the present day Muslim society's educational development, in which direction is it going? What is the consideration, the Muslim Society giving to the values and needs in education? The assessment, we have with regard to this is inadequate. This is seriously lacking.

Development in education, employment and economic prosperity, has taken place and also an educated middle class group emerged. These are achievements, yet there are obstacles and impediments visible. Had the spirit of the modern education and modern thought spread amidst our Muslims? Moreover, there seems to be discouragement, sporadically spread toward higher education. There seems, clashes of opinion, regarding girls' education, and particularly their higher education.

Questions arise, as to whether the won debating on education of Muslims during the 19th Century and early part of 20th Century, is again raising its ugly head.

Concept of modernity, has its roots in its attempts to come to grips with the meaning, and the significance of the social changes, occurring in Europe, in latter half of the nineteenth century, namely, the effects of industrialization, urbanization, and political liberalism, educational changes in societies.

The term modernity was coined to capture these changes, in progress by contrasting the modern with the traditional. Modernity as a concept, is simply the progress of society in technological and economic relations over a certain period of time. European modernity evolved, from ideas born out of the neo-liberal and Marxist theories, suggests a dramatic and unprecedented break, between past and present. Muslim modernism is first Muslim ideological response, attempting to reconcile Islamic faith with modern Western values such as nationalism, democracy, civil rights, rationality, equality and progress. It featured a critical reinterpretation of the classical conceptions and methods of jurisprudence and new approach to Islamic theology.

Throughout the Islamic history, education was a point of pride, and a field of Muslims excelled, Muslims built great learning centres, in places such as Cordoba, Cairo and Bagdad and Damascus. They established first, primary schools for children, and universities to continue education.

After completion of 'Maktab', students moved to higher education in Madrasa - Arabic word for school. At Madrasa students would be educated further in religious sciences, Arabic and secular studies such as Mathematics, Medicine, History and Astronomy .

Throughout, the Islamic history of educating women was a prominent objective. Women were not seen as incapable in attaining knowledge, they were able to attend lectures in mosques and in madrasas.

The tradition of madrasas and Islamic education continues until today but in a much more diminished form. One main reason for this decline was confrontation of Western education, and inefficiency of madrasa movements at that time.

Science flourished in the Golden Age of Islam, because, there was with Islam strong rationalist tradition, carried out by Mutazilies. This tradition however collapsed by the 14th century, and the grip of orthodoxy emerged.

The organization of madrasas in India, all along remained religious teaching, allowing subjects related to Islam continually

dominated its curriculum in India ever since its inception. Many Indian madrasas propagated the conservative outlook and attitude of Indian Muslims.

Madrasa organisers in India and elsewhere, never thought to change its syllabuses. They did not shift relevant to changing situations and modern demand. Mainly, curriculum of madrasa education ignored, the rational sciences. The madrasas in India, failed to keep pace with the changing modern environment.

The acceptance of modernity in Islam in many parts of the South and Southeast Asia made a major impact on Muslim community. It becomes an important element in the identity of Muslims reflecting new ways in the development of society and state.

By 19th and early 20th centuries a large part of the Muslim world had begun to lose much of its cultural and political sovereignty due to occupiers from Europe. Various European missions had propagated Western technology and modernization.

This subjugation by the colonialists led Muslims to questions their own beliefs as well as their aspirations, making many wonder whether the success of Western occupation was due to the inferiority of their own Islamic Ideals. Out of these self-criticisms came an assortment of responses including adaptation of western ideals, separation of religion and politics, and called for an armed struggle against colonial powers. However, one of the major responses to western modernization of the Muslim world was Islamic Modernism.

Islamic modernism was an attempt to bridge adaptation and rejection. In other words brought in moderate path for the benefit of Muslim society. Most influential proponents of this idea were Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan and Sheik Muhammed Abduh. They blamed the decline of Muslim Societies and their occupation was due to west on 'taqlid', a blind and unquestioned clinging to the past. Hali another contemporary of Sir Syed complains 'taqlid' has not only made the Muslims helpless in religious matters but also retarded their progress in the field of commerce, agriculture and the sciences.

Muslim reformers emphasised dynamism, flexibility, and adaptability. Afghani advocated Islamic renaissance, which would unite the Muslim world while, simultaneously, confronting the cultural threat posed by adaptation of western ideals. Afghani argued that Islam was in harmony with the principles discovered by the scientific reason, was indeed the religion demanded by reason.

As we have seen, Muslim modernists showed desire to reconstruct their social order on the pattern of original Islam, also they insisted that the new interpretation was undertaken is according to the social economic conditions of the time. They questioned how could a new society be formed, and run on the thought processes of medieval theologians, whose social background was different.

Afghani emphasised that Islam is not the reason for this downfall, but it was due to the society's intellectual backwardness, caused by hundreds of years of neglect and suppression of the Islamic community.

Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh argued that the best way to re-strengthen the Muslim world was through the study of their religion, in order to bring out its true meaning, they should model their lives on the religious teachings. Afghani maintained education, science and technology had been the grand accomplishments of early Islamic civilization.

Muslim modernism insisted new interpretations of Islam. One movement was Islamic modernism, which was both an attempt to provide an Islamic response to the challenges presented by European Colonialism and an effort to re-vigourate and reform Islamic world. It was call for a reformation or reinterpretation (Ijithihad) of Islam.

The Muslim modernists promoted Muslim unity, solidarity and resistance to western cultural hegemony by adopting, promoting and learning of science and technology, philosophy and history and developing legal and political institutions.

We as Sri Lankan Muslims surpassed many afflictions because we approved modern and female education during the latter part of the 19th century. The results were of high esteem. It has helped

form an organized and disciplined society. We should protect and safeguard this endeavour. We should defeat age old views as against this. We should view, countries which are not blessed with modern education, and female education, and feel pity for them. The above countries and societies are facing severe problems.

Muslims are the largest minority in India, majority of this community is far lagging behind, with respect to all material benefits particularly in education and employment. There are many reasons, which are responsible for lower literacy among Muslims towards modern education. It is observed that the Muslims do not provide education to their children, especially to their women folk.

Employment is also closely linked with the status of education. Muslim students do not have access to quality education, thus end up with low paid jobs. Nearly 45% of Indian Muslims live in poor and under developed states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Bengal.

Muslim modernists from Middle East and South Asia asserted the need to interpret and reapply the principals and ideals of Islam, formulating new responses to the challenges of colonial power and modern life.

By the 19th century the balance of power had clearly shifted, towards colonial powers. It was during this period of colonial expansion that the modern Islamic thought emerged. Islamic modernism, a movement to reconcile Islamic faith, with modern values, such as democracy, progress, rights, nationalism, rationalism, science and education, emerged as a response to European colonialism.

The most prominent intellectuals, who pioneered the modernist visions, Jamaluddin Al-Afghani (1838-1897), and Muhammad Abduh, (1849-1905) in the middle east, Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan (1817-1898) and Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938) in south Asia.

They identified the sources of Muslim weakness, and assorted the compatibility of religion, reason and science, they reclaimed the glories of Islamic history, the greatness of Islamic civilization and major achievements in science, medicine and philosophy.

They initiated, reformation and redefined religious thoughts and reformed Islamic laws. Also they emphasized, Muslim pride and unity to face the political and cultural threats of western powers. These intellectuals of Islamic modernism focused on a central question; How can you Muslims be true to enduring values of your own past, while living in the modern world?

Modernity is a way of thought and of living in the contemporary world, and of accepting changes and implementing and integrating new ideas. The mission of the modernists according to Mir Shair Hussain is (I) to define Islam, by bringing out the fundamentals in a rational and liberal manner, (II) emphasising basic ideals of Islamic brotherhood, tolerance and social justice, (III) and interpret the teachings of Islam, with bringing out its dynamic character in the context of the intellectual and scientific progress, of the modern world, (IV) the modernists earnestly make efforts, to reconcile differences between traditional religious doctrine and secular scientific rationalism.

The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the modern Islamic world, defined modernism as, struggle of Islamic modernists, to advocate flexible continuous re-interpretation of Islam so that Muslims may develop institutions of education, law and politics suitable to modern condition and need of the time.

Hisham Sharabi, in his analysis of modernism, in which he says: “modernism is to be understood as a positive attitude toward innovation and change, toward western civilization, generally while traditionalism is viewed negative attitude toward all type of innovation and toward the west.” Modernism thus represents a dynamic outlook essentially pragmatic and adoptable. Muhammad Abduh’s contribution to modernity, with Ahamad N. Ameer, Abdi D. Shuriye, Ahmed F. Ismail’s and International Islamic University, Malaysia.

Shaykh Muhammad Abduh in Egypt had significantly contributed in reforming and liberating the educational system, and reviewing the religious ideals and thought. His work and struggle, has brought unprecedented change in legal, social and political structure and helped to revitalize modern Islamic aspiration.

Muhammad Abduh introduced ground breaking initiatives to systematize the teaching class, syllabus and method of learning ready to complete with, scientific style of western education and to include ethics science, philosophy, history and other literacy traditions.

He opposed the conservative system of Al-Azhar University and he himself undertook to reform and transform the existing curriculum of Al-Azhar.

Hitherto the Al-Azhar students were to read texts, their commentaries, without critical analysis. He introduced new method for teaching, and introduced new text books and new syllabus and new method of learning. He emphasized the need to uplift the level and standard of Al-Azhar University.

Abduh is a strong supporter of feminist right. His struggle for education of women and reforms on their behalf had significant impact, on many great Muslim reformists of Egypt.

Educational Revolution and Female Education

Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan began to realize the advantages of western model education. Despite being a devout Muslim, Seyed Ahamed Khan, criticized the influence of traditional dogma, and religious orthodoxy. Sir Seyed began to feel increasingly concerned, for the future of Muslim community.

Sir Seyed felt, that the socio-economic future of the Muslims was threatened by their orthodox versions to modern science and technology. He published many writings, promoting liberal rational interpretations under pressure from orthodox Muslims. His main objective was to promote modern education among Muslims.

Sir Seyed Ahamad Khan responded to the question of the relationship between reason and faith in Islam, whether faith and reason can accommodate one another, become a new dimension under the impact of the 19th century rationalism and scientific development. Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan came forward to address this issue. He showed that Islam was in conformity with modern success, he did not refute them. He tried to make the community

aware of the glorious past, and feel proud of the great civilization of culture and tradition.

Another main issue is education for women. Women are trapped in the darkness of the houses, parents and traditionalists preventing girls and women from sending them to seek knowledge. It was a horrible situation for Muslim community, that was misconception about Islamic thoughts and creeds.

Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan was the first man to start to reform movement, among the Muslims, specially for Muslim women in India. This movement was known as Aligarh Movement for educating Muslim society. He established Muhamadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh which developed in to Aligarh Muslim University in 1890. This was the first attempt to provide western and scientific knowledge to the Muslims in the sub-continent.

To materialize his dreams he organized all India Muhamadan Educational Conference. The All India Muhamadan Educational Conference (AIMEC) was an organization promoting modern, liberal education for the Muslim community of India. One of the major policies of this movement was to make an effort to spread modern education.

After establishing MAO College Sir Seyed Ahmed Khan started to realize the need for womens' education in 1896. The annual executive session of Muslim Educational Conference was held in Aligarh, and a proposal to start a women's educational section was decided in that educational conference.

In the annual session of educational conference of 1898, in Lahore, a separate unit for women's education was established. Senior Muslim leaders and reputed Journalists defended the decision of Muslim Educational Conference, to start a women's educational movement. Chairman of the conference in his presidential address argued why female education is so vital for Muslim societies as follows:

“A second cause of our present apathy is the terrible position of Muslim women.... there is absolutely nothing in Islam to justify this terrible cancerous growth that has for nearly

thousand years eaten in to the very vitals of Islamic society. How can we expect progress from the children of mothers who have never shared or even seen the free sound intercourse of modern mankind?”

- All India Muhamadan Educational Conference Presidential Address (1st)(The Nanove Wisdom Archive).

The conference adopted, a resolution to start girls' schools in all state capitals. It was accepted. Sheikh Abdullah was appointed as Secretary to the women's educational project. Under his leadership, styled the women's educational movement, he played a very important role for the future of women's education, in India. Abdullah and other members of the movement started university articles in favour of women's education. In several occasions, Aligarh leaders raised their voice in favour of women's education.

Siddi Lebbe

There was no place for education in Ceylon for Muslim girls, during M C Siddi Lebbe's era. No interest was shown in the field of education by the general public. Siddi Lebbe propagated the changes that took place in Egypt and India to Sri Lankan Muslim community. By this change, his vision was to see a prosperously developed and an academically sound society.

In Sri Lanka M.C. Siddi Lebbe was the father of modern Muslim education. Although he was a rich man, at the time of his death, he had neither sold or mortgaged the major part of his properties in order to finance his schools (M.P.M.Shaheed - The sage leader of the Muslim community, Sunday, 29, August 2004).

His media of communication to propagate this idea was the "Muslim Nesan" Journal, which was run by him. He emphasized, that education should be imparted equally to both boys and girls. He was a champion for women's cause and strived for it, thereby he became one of the foremost leaders in South Asia who wanted to liberate Muslim women from medieval dominance.

He made commendable remarks on the Hyderabad female judge Fathima Surka, when he heard of her investiture. He wanted to see Muslim women in Ceylon to emulate Fathima Surka of Hyderabad.

He pointed the lacking of the Colombo Muslim girls in education, and in comparison to the Kandy Muslim girls who were actively engaged in education, and he also pointed out that lady doctors emerged from America and England. At the top he wanted to see the Muslim educated women taking part and actively engage in social life.

He strongly objected the fatwa of some Ulamas, that the Muslim community should evade learning through English Medium.

He publicly and openly addressed the need of modern thinking and English Education. He questioned in Egypt and Turkey of Muslim children, including the girls, are learning French and English, and why not our children learn taking this as an example.

Many of the Muslim schools, founded by Siddi Lebbe in Kandy, Kegalle, Udunuwara, Kurunagala and Badulla were managed, and financed by him. Also he started the first Muslim Girls School in Kandy, when his sister was the head teacher.

At this period of crises Siddi Lebbe appeared as a champion, and he urged his follow men to expand the horizon of education of Muslim Community. In the history of Muslim education in Ceylon, 1892 will always remain, a memorable year. It was then that the Muslim Educational Society, achieved its objective in establishing a school to impart modern education.

However, Siddi Lebbe's efforts did not end in vain. With the help of Orabi Pasha, the Egyptian exile, and Wapiche Marikar a great Philanthropist of Colombo, he worked hard to promote new educational systems and a better environment. With the inauguration of the Anglo-Mohamadan School of 1884, in New Moor street, Colombo, dawned a new epoch for Muslim education and social awareness.

At the inauguration ceremony, Orabi Pasha appealed to all Muslims to unite, forgetting their petty differences. Siddi Lebbe also

spoke, on the future of Muslim Society, and the promotion of new education. This was a great moment, people were deeply moved with tears, embracing one another and performing salaams, thus the inauguration ceremony of the school, did create the mind set, for social revolution in Muslim society, and there emerged a sort of situation in which educational backwardness was to be removed.

Siddi Lebbe and Wapiche Marikar did not stop their endeavour at this point, and they made an untiring effort, to enhance their vision for promotion of education. The year 1892, was a milestone in the Muslim educational history of Sri Lanka. A.M.A. Azeez, well defined and capsualized the change, and on the impact of the establishment of the school (Zahira) expressed as follows:

“With the establishment of the new school ended the period of Muslim non co-operation with modern education, that had characterised the previous seventy five years of the 19th century” (The ‘West Reappraised’, A.M.A. Azeez, 1964).

A.M.A. Azeez’s thoughts and the ideas of modernity came on the background of thinkers like Al-Afghani, Sir Seyed Ahamed Khan, Allama Iqbal and others.

Azeez considered that the lack of education had been the root cause of whole backwardness and short coming of Muslims. A.M.A Azeez occupied the foremost place among those who came forward in the modern time, in order to establish confidence in Muslims’ attitude toward modern education. In the modern era there was opposition against science, technology and modernity. Azeez criticised this view and he emphasised that Muslims should acquire knowledge of science and other educational achievement from the Western world.

However, Azeez said that it was a matter for sadness that Islamic world began to ignore science and technology. He agreed and argued that it was a wrong theory that resulted from the wrong growth of thinking, that Islam is not an impediment to accept science and integrate that with life of Muslims.

About the Speaker

Prof. M.S.M. Anes hails from Puttalam. He graduated from the University of Peradeniya with Honours in Philosophy. He obtained his M.A. from the University of Jaffna and Ph.D. from the University of Peradeniya.

He retired as Professor of the Faculty of Philosophy and Psychology at the University of Peradeniya. He has made significant contributions as an academic in many spheres. He is the Chairman of the All Ceylon Muslim Educational Conference, and is a Consultant to the South Eastern University in Sri Lanka.

He has insights into the sufferings not just of the Northern Muslims in Puttalam, but also of the host community that was greatly affected by the sudden and large influx of persons into the area. He was a Commissioner of the Citizens' Commission on the Expulsion of Muslims in the Northern Province by the LTTE in October 1990.

Prof. Anes continues with his academic pursuits after retirement from the University of Peradeniya.