Sir Sayyid Ahmad (1817AD-18889AD)

Sir Sayyid claimed that his mystical thought developed in rational lines as opposed to a blind following of tradition and belief. He claimed that he re-established the ‘true’ Islam, the pure and intrinsic Islam. In the preface to his book *Tasanif-i-Ahamadiya* he wrote: there are may people who witness the revolutionary changes in the world, yet a few reflect upon them. There are even fewer people who realize the revolutionary changes in their own ideas and think about and seek to understand their causes. If some one were to call to mind the events of his whole lifetime and to understand them he would realize that such surprising changes had occurred in his life, which were not possible in any other sphere of life.

For this type of assertion he was appreciated as well as very much criticized. He was influenced by mystical thought and practices of three schools: (i) Naqshbandiya, (ii) Myjaddielyah, (iii) Shahwali Allah.

**On Prophet and the Qur’an:**

It is believed that the Qur’an is unique and unparalleled due to its eloquence clarity, and composition. Sir Sayyid opined further that the Qur’an is understood by all regardless of time, class and degree of education. Traditionally it was believed that the Qur’an comes from God; it is the reflection of the Divine Light in the nature of Prophethood which God has placed on Muhammad. Sir Sayyid further added that not only the message which Muhammad chose to convey was very unique but Muhammad Himself was unique because His actions his lifestyle and His thoughts fully confirmed to the message He conveyed. In the eyes of Sir Sayyid Ahmad the political life of the Prophet was unconnected with His Prophetic vocation. Classical *ilm-al-kadam* regarded the Prophet with two outstanding qualities; (i) universality in time and space, (ii) absolute finality. Sayyid held that Muhammad is the ‘seal of the Prophets’ as the messages He received and propagated abrogated all previous ones, without being itself abrogated. (2). Sayyid clarified the position of Muhammad as the last Prophet, by stating that the tenets of finality of Prophethood does not mean the end of the *habitus* of Prophethood, or the end of the Divine Bounty to man. God never cuts Himself off from His creation. So after Muhammad men will be born with this innate gift.
of Prophethood. Nevertheless nobody will ever be able to add anything to the universal character, perfection and truth of Muhammad's prophetical message—the message of threefold tauhid. Sir Sayyid developed the theory of habitus (malakah) of Prophethood. But in consistency with earlier thinkers he maintained that Muhammad was the final messenger of God because His message was so perfect and complete that nothing more was left to be conveyed. Prophets coming after Muhammad are expected to preach the message already preached by Muhammad.

Islam and Nature:

Sir Sayyid stated that nature operates in a closed system which obeys certain laws of mechanics and physics, characterized by uniformity of behaviour to which there can not be any exception. All inorganic, organic and human behavior is subject to these mechanical laws. In his writings Sir Sayyid had gone deeper like ancient Muslim thinkers who enquired in to the source, the cause of causes whom men called God. He referred to the spiritual experience of Abraham as recorded in the Qur'an (iii 75-79) – From nature he went to God, from the uniformity of the laws of the physical universe, he was able to transcend to the spiritual reality behind. He saw the stars, the moon, the sun that appear and disappear, rise and set according to fixed immutable laws and was able to penetrate behind the veil of these laws of nature to their Author. He declared I have set my face firmly and truly towards Him who created the Heavens and the earth.

This identification of Islam with nature implied that true spiritualism consists in the belief of One God only and that all the people who accept the Unity of God are Muslims; however different they may be in their religious rituals. He held that spiritualism/religion pure and simple is above all these rituals and formalities, with which it becomes bound up unfortunately. However we find that after expressing the view that Mahammad was the chosen one to receive the message of God; he stated – he who does not believe in any Prophet or Incarnation, revealed scripture, or ritualistic formalities but believes in one God is a Muslim in the true sense of the word. Here we find that Sir Sayyid contradicted his own statements. The Sufis believed in following the Master for their spiritual growth. By the above statement Sir Sayyid discarded the foundation of Sufi philosophy.

With regard to the Eternal force called God or Almighty Sir Sayyid maintained that—all that exists, that we can in some way understand and imagine is linked by a connecting chain. By necessity this chain ends up in a final Being or Cause of Causes, the Creator and the Lord of the Worlds.

He further said that the existence of God starts from the established fact of the existence of primary matter (hayula), consisting of primary particles-ajza (atoms) and Salimat (wholes) — out of which all existing things are made.
Sayyid Ahmed Khan maintained that all the scriptures of Jews and Christians speak of this primary matter, in their account of Creation. The things made up of this primary matter change, and as they can not change by themselves they change due to change in space and time. Space and time are the instruments of nature. Nature is created by God, Creation is a closed system of created reality governed uniformly by the law of cause and effect unknown to man.

The traditional treatise *Kalam* gives three statements about God: (i) God is one in number (ii) He is unique and uncomparable and (iii) He is simple, not complex. God’s oneness becomes evident when man is able to establish harmony and inter-relatedness with all the existing things. Sir Syyid says that the Qur’an in its own distinctive manner establishes the same. There is no plurality in God. The present world can not exist without the Cause of causes; the oneness of the God can not be halved or doubled. Science today makes it possible for man to know that the entire universe assumed its present form out primary matter of atoms, and that the primary matter consisting of atoms can not by itself cause the movement which changes them in to manifold universe, But Science could not locate where from the primary matter, the atom came. So He alone brought everything into existence out of nothing (*nista*). This is the uniqueness of God.

Finally God is not concerned with man’s belief or disbelief about Him. Thus He is simple. Man in the words of the Qur’an is patterned after the nature of God Himself. But he has been given the free will to choose between good and evil while shaping his existence. God gave this freedom to man on His own accord and not under any compulsion.

Sir Sayyid believed in the existence of soul. He does not discuss about the nature of the soul. As to the resurrection he refers to many theories but accepts the one according to which the soul at the time of death acquires a certain physical medium distinct from the present body. He mentioned that paradise and hell described in sensuous terms in the Qur’an are mere symbolical representations of the psychological state of the individual in the life after death. “No soul knoweth what joy of the eyes is reserved for the good, in recompense of their work (XXXI 1, 17). In every religion there are certain truths which form the vary basis of spiritual life. The Qur’an says: “set your face towards the right religion which is based on the nature of God on which is patterned the nature of man” (XXX 30). Sir Syyid Ahmad Khan emphasised on the basic feature of Islam ie *Unity of God (tauhid)* and moral behaviour which springs from the depth of one’s heart. But religion in practice has to provide a path – *sharia*. ShahWali Allah was the first thinker who realized the necessity of clarifying this important matter. Discussing the role and function of a Prophet, he pointed out that the Prophet gives a reorientation to the traditional principles on the basis of changed circumstances and time. It is not His aim, nor it is practicable for Him to bring about a total change to the social and legal practices of His people. His
main aim is to give guidance to people to reconstruct a healthy society, when the society's health sufferers decay due to misinterpretation of so called religious men who in the name of true religion propagate irreligious practices. He does not destroy the environment, but only moulds it in the right manner.

Sin, Reward and Punishment:

Commenting on the story of the fall of Adam and Eve, he rejects the view that this historical event constituted a sin, in the sense of disobedience to God’s command. He argued that by that time shariat did not exist and man was not yet put under any obligation, to follow certain path. Sir Sayyid said, sins are of two kinds ie first violation of the law and the second which affects one’s inner self, his personal relationship with God. He was of the opinion that sense of guilt of violating a legal law is for the common man, whereas the guilt of not performing activities which would bring one nearer to God is sin in the eyes of higher souls.

Sir Sayyid mentions about two inherent human qualities. They are: godliness (quqat-i-taqwa) and inequity (quqat-i-fujur). They exist in every human being who is rational. Man’s happiness comes when he defeats the second by the first and misery comes when the vice versa takes place. The sinlessness (ma’sum hona) of the Prophets and other Holy men was due the absence of the faculty of inequity. Man’s spiritual growth or decline takes place on the basis of growth or decline of his godliness. This godliness becomes lively by various means i.e. following the Prophet, interaction with Holy men, doing good works, and relying on God with fear and hope. Repentance (taubah) means to be truly sorry for one’s sin, to ask God for forgiveness and not to commit that sin again. Sir Sayyid holds that punishment for our sin consists in the misery of the soul. In the case of grave sin, this misery affects the soul and makes itself felt, especially at the time of death.

Resurrection and future life:

The soul lives on after the death as immaterial. The main difference between the animal and human soul is that man can cause his soul either to develop or decline and to gain happiness or misery according to the action he performs. Sir, Sayyid is of the view that the human soul is privileged by being “put under obligation”. But the animal soul has not been given this capacity.

The Qur’an refers to resurrection as qiyamah. The teaching of the Qur’an about life after death is to be interpreted against the background of absence of belief among Muhammad’s Arab contemporaries in the existence of an immortal soul in man. They were barbarians. In order to impress the minds of his wayward fellowbeings to do good and refrain from wickedness the Prophet had to appeal to their imagination and this prompted the idea of bodily resurrection. Thus it is essential to understand the overall aim of the Qur’an: to encourage men towards good action and to discourage them from evil action by showing their long term
consequences. The verses on paradise and hell are intended to make those people understand in figurative language the highest form of eternal bliss and repose if a man is godly in his behaviour. By employing such language the Qur'an tries to awaken the desire in man to obey the moral commands and to respect Divine Prohibition. We should not derive the meaning that the earthly bodies are again revived after death.

Sir Syyid says that it is essential to recognize the overall aim of the Qur'an. The “eternal bliss and repose” (ru'yah Allah) as mentioned in the Qur'an is regarded as the highest blessing of Paradise. Paradise is to be understood metaphorically. Paradise is to observe the “Holy Essence” without a veil and without bodily eyes. The vision can not be described, Sir Sayyid mentions, that the term ‘tafsir’ mentioned in the Qur'an is similar to the term ‘iqan’ used by the Sufis which is defined as the perfect certainty of the inner reality that God exists in everything.

The decisive difference between the believer (mu'min) and the unbeliever (ka'fir) is the inner heart-felt affirmation (tasdiq-i-qulbi) of oneness of God. All sins can be forgiven by God, even without repentance, but lack of belief can not be forgiven without a return to God in repentance (taubah). Sir sayyid thinks that if a person believes in One God but does not believe in Muhammad, he may not be branded as an unbeliever. Further he says that one who believes in One God and Muhammad and his message (maja'a bihi) must be considered as a believer irrespective of the way he interprets the message of the Quran.

In his two books Tabyin-al-kalam (1860) and khutbat-i-Ahmadiyah (1869-70) Sir Sayyid, in line with Muslim theology professes about following the dictates of the Qur'an. He states however about an affirmation which is very controversial i.e. the reason alone is the instrument by which faith or knowledge can be acquired. By taking this view he discards the intuitive way to know the higher truths as professed by Sufis. Thus he discards gnosis (marifah). He arrives at a strange conclusion that as reason is used universally so the reason of one man can be corrected by that of another and the reason of one age by that of another age.

According to Sir Sayyid there is no qualitative difference between reason and revelation. He says that a very few are endowed with the reason of highest degree who are the guides and leaders of people: mufhimen. They receive Divine Illumination: wahi. The difference between the Prophet and other geniuses is that they work in altogether different spheres. The Prophet is a spiritual healer and his sole function is to reorient the spiritual and moral life of people, whereas the men with genius may or may not have spiritual aspirations.

Thus giving a lot of stress on reason and natural science he developed a new kind of philosophy – away from the sufí way of looking at the aim of life. He confused the whole subject and got away by stating that the definitive and normative truth established by science also follows the truth of the Qur'an.