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ISLAM AND SOCIAL REFORMS

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The traditional Ulama have always opposed social reforms calling that un-Islamic and they get full support or mobilize support from static Muslim society by quoting either certain selected Qur'anic verses or *ahadithI* which may or may not be authentic. They also often declare reformer *kafir* or *mulhid* or *nature* i.e. not believing in Allah but in nature. Once such fatwas are issued the reformer faces total isolation from society and finds it extremely difficult to carry on his reform movement.

Sir Syed whose birth day falls on 17th October was one such great social reformer. He never touched on any religious doctrine but wanted Muslims to go for modern secular education so that gates of modern knowledge which was mostly available in English, could be opened to them. The Ulama opposed his movement for modern education and founding an institution of modern learning and issued fatwas against him and dubbed him as 'kafir', 'Christan' and 'Yahudi'. One of them even traveled to Mecca and obtained a fatwa for his killing.

The question arises why such fierce opposition to social reforms which was, after all, for betterment of Muslim community in India. It was certainly not religious belief alone. Opposition to social reforms emanates from host of complex factors. Firstly, change is always feared as it brings uncertainty and unknown consequences, especially on part of those who do not benefit from change. And apart from theologians and community leaders, it is feared by the masses who have not experienced any change and have lived in ignorance and superstitious beliefs.

Secondly, it is feared by priesthood and theologians as well as some socio-cultural leaders most as it challenges their leadership. The priests and theologians have had grip over the minds of people for long and they feel any change will throw up new social or theological leaders and they will loose out. Thus they begin to oppose any change to secure their own positions. And to legitimize their opposition they find religious reasons for that and try to quote from scriptures to impress the masses.

The Ulama in 19th century were highly apprehensive of English education as it would mean challenging the madrasa education and also their apprehension that Muslims will Goa step nearer to Christianity. As Arabic education was considered one step towards Islam, English education was considered one step towards Christianity. There was one more reason for Ulama to oppose modern education.

The Ulama had held high positions in Mughal courts and functioned as qadis or religious judges. These qadis were being replaced by British judges and highly qualified Indians who had studied law. These created strong resentment among Ulama and they denounced English education which was taking away everything from them. Thus they had e3verything to fear and nothing to celebrate.

Muslim masses also supported them, firstly because they always recognize these Ulama as their religious leaders and men of great Islamic learning. Secondly, the whole Muslim society was static and decadent. Any change made them fearful and they rightly thought British people as

their enemy who threatened their religious belief and political hegemony. The future was unknown and in the hands of foreign rulers.

Also, as pointed out before, change is feared by those who loose out and celebrated by those who gain every thing from it. Only very few generally side with reformers who have some idea of future prospects. Among Muslims in India Sur Syed began vigorous movement for modern education even before a new class of Muslims who could be beneficiary of English education could emerge.

Eventually of course that class emerged albeit slowly and that class subsequently became harbinger of change. Among these people a galaxy of intellectuals arose who are respected even today. Among them was Nawwab Muhsinul Mulk, Maulavi Chiragh Ali, Justice Amir Ali, Maulavi Mumtaz Ali Khan and several others. They developed new vision of life and laid foundation for better life for Muslims. Many of this new class of Muslims joined civil, police and other services and made name for themselves.

Today many Ulama are not only learning English but also trying to project Islam to non-Muslims in English language. What was thought to be language of kafirs has come to stay in Muslim world. Thus those who oppose change subsequently not only accept it but also becomes for them very means of survival. It is very unfortunate that our Ulama vehemently oppose everything new in the beginning and then accept it for their own survival. We often refuse to move with the times and then time forces us to move with it after paying the price for our refusal to change.

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