



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“The True Purpose of Education”

Speech at the Muslim Educational Conference

Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah Aga Khan

1904

Bombay, India

The assembly to his mind represented all that was best in the Muslims of India. It expressed that awakening sense of their fallen position after a glorious past; it expressed dissatisfaction with their present intellectual, moral and social position; and it expressed the longing desire to regain the intellectual freedom which Muslims enjoyed during the first two centuries of their era. Pessimism was not the force, said the Aga Khan, that had drawn them there that day. Pessimism in the Muslim world was nothing new: It had been, unfortunately, the dominant impulse in such intellectual life as Muslims had had during the last century. Pessimism dominated all modern Persian, Arabic and Turkish poetry. What but pessimism could explain those feverish but constant references to Andalus, to Seville, to Toledo, to Cordova. The forces that had made these annual conferences successful, nay a necessity for the Muslims of the day, were other than pessimistic.

Speaking of the blessing of the British rule, the Aga Khan said:

“I think I am right in saying that one of the forces that has drawn us willy-nilly into assembling here is a growing hopefulness and spirit of optimism amongst our co-religionists in India - a sense of hopefulness directly and entirely due to British rule. Providence has given us a government that guarantees justice; intellectual and religious liberty; personal freedom; a government that gives a clear field and no favour, that constantly, by its acts, reminds us that fitness is the only test, and that for the fit there are no artificial obstacles. We must, if we wish to lead, concentrate all our energies on acquiring those arts that prove fitness under civilised conditions. At last we see signs of dawn. At last we see the dim light of dawning reason. It will be hours yet - in the life of a people decades are but hours - before the sunshine of knowledge penetrates into our homes, but still we see the signs of dawn.”

Of the importance of the Conference, His Highness said:

“Friendly critics have said that we have held many conferences, made many speeches, and many addresses have been delivered, many resolutions passed but that results are still wanting, and that still we Muslims remain behind whenever we are compared with other Indian nationalities on the educational test. This criticism expresses but half the truth. Such critics forget that for us these Conferences are signs of progress. Could a Conference such as this have been held in Bombay 20 years ago? I think not.

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“A great historian has said that if St. Paul or Gautama Buddha visited St. Peter's or the Chief monastery of Lhassa or Kandy, they would not at first realise what was the object of the magnificent ceremonial they would there behold. But if the Prophet saw Santa Sophia or the Musjids of Delhi to-day he would find the ceremonial the same as it was in his day at Mecca and Medina. This is true of the ceremonial. But what about the personnel? How different the case is there The sects, the sectarian differences, the divisions and sub-divisions that have crept even into the simple and clear faith of Islam - how they would pain and surprise the founder?

“However, here for the cause of learning, for the cause of progress, is an assembly where, thank God, differences are forgotten. Here we see once more the unity of early Islam. Is this not progress? Is this not a great step towards salvation? It is a fortunate circumstance that at last we have awakened to the necessity of knowledge.

“There are some dangers ahead and I venture to draw your attention to some of them which we can now guard against. It would be the greatest of all our misfortunes if we now mistook instruction for education and the mere power of passing examinations for learning. It is for this reason that the thoughtful welcome the reform of the Universities which the Government of India now contemplates. It is for this reason that the farsighted amongst the Muslims of India desire a University where the standard of learning shall be the highest and where with scientific training there shall be that moral education - that indirect but constant reminder of the eternal difference between right and wrong which is the soul of education. It is a source of regret for many of us that in the Indian Universities there is that divorce between learning and religion which, especially in the case of Muslims, will, I fear, lead to disaster. Gentlemen, most Muslims, I think, would most gladly welcome a Hindu University, at Benares; we would gladly welcome another at Poona, a third in Bengal or Madras. But because there is evidently no desire on their part to have a sectarian University with a Brahminical atmosphere, it is absurd to deny us a University at Aligarh with affiliated colleges all over India. Another reason why we require a Central University where our individuality may not be lost for the sake of turning out a mechanical imitation of a European is this: we have a history in which noble and chivalrous characters abound; we have a religious past so full of heroic figures that direct contact and communion with them could not but improve and give our youth early in life that sense of the necessity for self-sacrifice, for truthfulness, and for independence of character without which instruction and knowledge are, from the national point of view, worthless.

“t may be said such noble characters also abound in the histories of Greece and of Rome; what need for the study of the history of Arabs? Yes, Englishmen and Frenchmen, the direct successors of Romans, they can and do feel that the glorious characters of Roman history belong to them in a very real sense. Not so for the Muslim youth of this country. For most of us, even the noblest of them remain to the end but distant figures without any direct attraction. Yet Muslim history is so full of heroic characters or men, who lived and moved very much as the Muslims of today in their home life do, that contact with them could not but ennoble.



Muawiyya and Walid are as statesmen not eclipsed either by Caesar or Augustus; and where can you find in the annals of any dynasty, whether European or Asiatic, a more saintly sovereign than Omar ibn Abdul Aziz or a more exemplary Emperor than Hisham ibn Abdul Malik? Direct contact with such great characters could not but strengthen the character of our youth and thus the character of our people. We may have crowds and battalions of graduates - it does not follow that they will be self-sacrificing men who will remove those degenerating customs that keep us not merely amongst the backward, but amongst the fallen. Those painful and those pernicious social customs that have so crept, in the course of centuries, into our religious rites that now even Muslims who are by no means uninstructed, do not know the difference between such customs and the commandments of the founder. Islamism is wrongly supposed to be responsible for such customs. It is for this, gentlemen, that I beg of you to give a thought while yet there is time towards the methods by which you propose to educate your youth. It is for this that I beg of you, gentlemen, to remember that we are a M.A.O. educational and not an instructional conference. It is for this that I beg of you that the cause of a Central University - a University which, please Heaven, may rank some day with Oxford and Leipzig and Paris as a home of great ideas and noble ideal - a University where our youth may receive the highest instruction in the Sciences of the West, a University where the teaching of history and literature of the East may not be scamped over for a mere parrot-like knowledge of Western thought, a University where our youth may also enjoy, in addition to such advantages, a Muslim atmosphere, - I earnestly beg of you that the cause of such a University should not be forgotten in the shouts of the marketplace that daily rise amongst us.”