Research Article

Religious Harmony in India: Exploring the Enlightened Approaches of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Wahiduddin Khan

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Abstract.   Throughout multi-religious societies, living peacefully and maintaining harmony and integrity are key requirements. Peace is not merely the absence of war; it has much more socio-psychic connotations that involve all aspects of holistic existence. Religious harmony simply means the peaceful coexistence of different religions and their followers. Peace and religious harmony in India have been topics of great significance due to the country's diverse religious landscape. The nation's history has had some occasions for racial struggle and religious conflict. But there have also been people from multiple religions throughout history who have worked continuously to promote peace and harmony by encouraging acceptance and understanding of those of various faiths.

Foremost among these stalwart figures are Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, whose progressive outlooks had a profound effect on India's religious structure. Sir Syed's efforts were rooted in modern education, so he advocated that "*Hindus and Muslims are two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan. Weakness in any one of them will spoil the beauty of the bride*". Maulana Wahiduddin Khan's approach is deeply spiritual in nature and his approach to peace and religious harmony was rooted in a reinterpretation of Islamic teachings and an emphasis on dialogue, understanding, and non-violence. This paper will explore the various ideas encompassed by both stalwarts, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, regarding religious harmony and the unique approaches utilized by them in order to promote mutual understanding among the religious diversity in India.

Keywords: Interfaith-Dialogue, Non-violence, religious-diversity, Modern Interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

In the current world, interfaith harmony has become a must and one of the most widely discussed topics among scholars all over the world. As the number of clashes and stresses increases among the various religion-affiliated groups, they are realizing the ultimate challenges of ensuring peace and harmony around the globe.[1] Peace and religious harmony are two fundamental concepts that pertain to the coexistence of diverse religious beliefs and practices in a society or community. Religious harmony refers to the establishment of harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships within and between individual religions, as well as between the religious community and the broader society [2] Religious harmony is not a new notion, but it is very old in human history. In the ancient past, Ashoka (304-232 BCE) was in authority over a large part of the Indian region. Being a practicing Buddhist, he spoke highly of peace and described it as the supreme phala (fruit) of Dhamma. Being a Buddhist, Ashoka never criticized any other religion, and despite having unrestricted powers, he never misused them for conversion.[3] Ashoka attempted to promote religious harmony among his citizens through the implementation of tolerance. His objective was to achieve a state of peaceful coexistence among all religious groups. Moreover, his legacy was continued by many Indian scholars and kings, especially medieval Indian king Akbar (1542-1605A.D) the Great. Akbar also adopted the policy of religious harmony in his sultanate and produced the fruits of

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[1] Rahman, S.M Rownak, *Beyond Religion: An inquiry of Akbar's court as a center for Interfaith Harmony,*https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sm-Rownak-Rahman/publication/370809915 Beyond-Religion-An-inquiry-of-Akbars-court-as-a-center-for-Interfaith-Harmony.pdf, Accessed on .25-08-2023.

[2] Zuo'an Wang, *Religious Harmony: A Fresh Concept in the Age of Globalization,* Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences,vol.77, 2013, p. 210 – 213.

[3]Parekar, Dr.Smt.Nanda, *Ashoka`s 'Dhamma: an instrument of social solidarity and religious harmony*, Ananda Coomaraswamy Memorial Conference of Asian Art & Culture, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka8–10 September 2012,

peace everywhere in the country. His court was always busy with people of different faiths without any discrimination based on religion; even Akbar had married so many women of different faiths, including Hinduism.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902 A.D) spoke at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in America. He said, "I am proud to be from a country that has taught the world both tolerance and acceptance of everyone. We not only believe in tolerance for everyone but also that all beliefs are true. Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948 A.D) talked a lot about peace and living together. He said, "By religion, I don't mean formal or customary religion. I mean the religion that is the basis of all religions and brings us direct contact with our Creator."[4] As the statement above draws the conclusion that violence and disharmony have always been usual in society, it is vital to note that, fortunately, advocates of peace and religious harmony have also consistently played a role. Moreover, central figures in our discourse are Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, both of whom represent a constant commitment to promoting religious harmony and actively striving for peace through acts of humanitarian devotion throughout their lives. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Maulana Wahiduddin Khan are two distinguished scholars who have made significant contributions to the domains of Islamic scholarship and intellectualism. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Wahiduddin Khan are the great historical figures of the Indian subcontinent, whose fans and critics have no shortage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1898–1817)

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, the esteemed founder of Aligarh Muslim University, was born in 1817 into a family of high social standing within the Muslim community.[5] His family was attached to the Mughal court in Delhi, where they achieved respect from the Mughal rulers.[6] Sir Syed Ahmad Khan is widely recognized as a visionary figure who played a crucial role in preserving cultural and linguistic identities, promoting secularism, contributing to the field of law, engaging in journalism, serving as a civil servant, advocating for education, engaging in philosophical discourse, and demonstrating expertise in religious scholarship. He wrote many books like Tafsir-al Quran, Khutbat-e-Ahmadia, Asbab-e-Baghwat-e-Hind, Kalmat-e-Haq, Ahkam Tu'am ahl-Kitab and History of Bijnour Rebellion.

Through his written works, it becomes evident that the author has a definite aim to serve as a catalyst for societal change. His primary objective was to eradicate

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[4] *Religious Harmony,* https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/33879/1/Unit-15.pdf, Accessed on 27-08-2023.

[5] Hali, Altaf Hussain, *Hayat-e-Javed*, vol. 1, 2000, p. 25

[6] Kidwai Shafey. *Sir syed Ahmad Khan: Reason, Religion and Nation,* Routledge, 2020, p.21.

impractical customs and traditions, particularly those intertwined with religion.[7] Sir Syed, being a visionary individual, recognized that religious discord was the primary obstacle hindering peace within Indian society. His thoughts consistently advocated for the promotion of religious harmony, with a sincere focus on fostering peace and the development of India. He advised the individuals to unite and collaborate instead of engaging in conflicts. Once we have achieved greater strength and unity, we will be able to contribute towards the creation of a more promising future for both India and the global community.[8] He openly stated that India is a nation that encompasses not only Hindus, but also Muslims, Christians, and individuals from various other religious and cultural backgrounds.

Due to the increase in religious conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, which posed a significant obstacle to achieving peace, Sir Syed directed the majority of his efforts towards addressing the concerns of these two communities. *In so many speeches Sir Syed exhorted these communities "We (Hindus and Muslims) eat the very same food, drink water from the same rivers, and breathe the same air; we are the two eyes of the exquisite bride that is Hindustan; weakness in any of them will taint the beauty of the bride (Dulhan)". [9]* He firmly held the belief that a nation such as India can enhance its strength and foster its development solely through the cultivation of mutual goodwill and harmony among its populace. During a lecture delivered in Gurdaspur, Punjab, he made the following statement: *"O Hindus and Muslims! Do you belong to a country other than India? Don't you inhabit this Soil? And are you not buried under it or cremated on its Ghats? Hindu and Muslim is nothing but a religious word. All Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians who inhabit this country are one Nation".[10] Furthermore, the concept of Hindu-Muslim unity was also exemplified in the laying of the foundation stone of Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College, as noted by its founder. "The main purpose of this college is to impart knowledge to Muslims who are suffering because of lack of it but this institution is for all. Hindus and Muslims are like and both of them need education". It is important to note that Ishwari Parsad Upadhyay, the first graduate, and Amba Parasad, the first postgraduate, from Aligarh Muslim University, serve as exemplary illustrations of Hindu-Muslim unity and secularism. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan made significant efforts to bridge the gap between Muslims and British during a time when many Indian Muslims lacked awareness, resulting in numerous challenges and hardships for both the Muslim community and*

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[7] Hasan,Dr. Mohammad, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Contributions: An Essay,* IJIRMF, vol.8,Issue.2,2022, p.8-10.

[8] Azeemuddin Muhammad, *The Philosophy of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan of Religious Tolerance, Communal Harmony,* Multiculturalism & National Unity, IJARESM, Volume 5, Issue 12, December-2017, p.42-50.

[9] Kumar, Sajad Ahmad, Building culture of peace in a plural society of India: A study of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. Journal of education: Rabindra Bharati University, Vol. XXV, No. 4(IV), 2022, p.33.

[10] Ib.id, p.33-34.

India as a whole. He emphasized to his countrymen that 'it is the first and main obligation of all well-wishers of the country to fight for the benefit of all people, regardless of caste or religion.[11] He stressed to his fellow citizens that it is the foremost and primary duty of all individuals who hold the well-being of the nation precious to advocate for the welfare of all individuals, irrespective of their social or religious affiliations.

Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021)

Wahiduddin Khan is also among the great and historical figures of the Indian subcontinent, like Sir Syed. Both scholars propounded the notions of religious harmony and peace as their core ideas. But the former is mostly famous for education and harmony, and the latter is famous for the ideology of peace. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan was born in India's most populated state, Uttar Pradesh, during the British occupation of India. He has dedicated his entire life to the pursuit of knowledge. His early years were characterized by a deep spiritual inclination and a thirst for knowledge. His education under prominent Islamic scholars and his exposure to various philosophical and religious traditions significantly shaped his intellectual journey.[12]

His pursuit of knowledge has been extensive, commencing with their education at Madrasa and progressing towards a comprehensive understanding of both religious and modern scientific disciplines. His interactions with leaders from other religious communities broadened his perspective, allowing him to appreciate the common ethical values shared by diverse faiths. This exposure fueled his commitment to bridging gaps between religions and fostering a climate of religious harmony. His approach was deeply rooted in his belief that the core teachings of all religions inherently advocate peace, compassion, and coexistence. He has authored over two hundred works encompassing a wide range of disciplines, including religion and science. The author's writings effectively express his vision for a harmonious world and offer practical guidance on its attainment. His establishment of the Center for Peace and Spirituality (CPS International) in 2001 demonstrated his unwavering commitment to disseminating his message on a global scale.[13] The seminars, workshops, and publications organized by the center consistently engage a wide range of audiences, amplifying Khan's influence and furthering his lasting

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[11] Sir Syed: A symbol of communal harmony, 2020,https://muslimmirror.com/eng/sir-syed-a-symbol-of-communal-harmony/, Accessed on 24-08-2023.

[12] Awan, Md. Rafique Anjum, *Revisiting Islam the reformist thought of Wahiduddin Khan*, New-delhi,2018, p.94-95.

[13] Abidin Zaenal and , Muhammad Taufik Ismail, *Transformative Peace Education: Psychoanalytic Analysis of the Biography of Maulana Wahiduddin Khan*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, vol. 676, International Conference on Islamic and Muhammadiyah Studies (ICIMS 2022), p.367.

legacy as a prominent advocate for religious harmony. This journey showcases the transformation of a curious young intellect into a globally renowned figure.

Maulana Wahiduddin khan believes that the idea of all faiths being one is impractical and absurd. Religion-based differences are certain. It is important to clarify that not all religions share the same spirit of tolerance, compassion, and dignity among individuals. The notion suggests that oneness is achieved by embracing all differences. To promote peace, we should create harmony by recognizing differences among individuals rather than eliminating them. Differences are inherent in humans and cannot be eliminated. To achieve social harmony, mutual respect is more important than mutual recognition. Differences are not a sign of evil but rather a sign of achievement and respect for others. Moreover he stressed Muslims adopt an extreme level of pacifism to avoid communal clashes, even when provoked.[14]

Khan cited various sources from the Qur'an to validate his concept of reconciliation. He also cited Azad's model of collaboration with people of other faiths as well as his contribution to the development of India. Khan's doctrine of co-existence requires Muslims to adjust and familiarize themselves with the pluralistic and multi-ethnic environment of the country. Moreover, Muslims must take the initiative to strengthen inter-ethnic and intercultural relations for improved cooperation on issues such as propagating moral values and working in the field of education. Thus he advocated for the reinterpretation of sources in a modern context.[15]

Through the process of reinterpretation, his focus was on the identification of specific passages within religious texts that emphasize the shared characteristics and similarities present among various faiths. His emphasis on verses that highlight the interconnectedness of all existence and faith in a singular, transcendent origin. Through the emphasis on these unifying elements, his objective was to illustrate that religions are not inherently conflicting with one another but rather different ways of expressing a shared underlying truth. He held the belief that religious diversity serves as an example of divine creativity and is intended to encourage appreciation and knowledge among humanity. The focus on unity extended beyond theological matters to encompass practical actions that effectively showcase unity amidst diversity.[16]

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[14] Wahiduddin Khan, "Rahmatul Lil'alamin (The Mercy to Mankind), Al-Risala, 159 (February 1990), p.28.

[15] Khān, Waḥīduddīn. *Indian Muslims: The need for a positive outlook*. New-delhi 1994.

[16] Ahmad Khalil, *Muslim Minority, and Communal Harmony in India:AStudy of theViews of Wahiduddin Khan,* Journal of Islamic Governance Vol. 6, No. 1, 2021, p.74-75

CONCLUSION

Sir Syed and Wahiduddin Khan did not advocate conservatism in matters pertaining to religion, society, education, institutions, or literature. Throughout their entire lives, they demonstrated the fundamental values of peace, harmony, unity, and religious inclusivity for all individuals. They advocate for the promotion of interfaith unity and communal harmony, fostering an environment where all segments of society can collaborate and pursue unrestricted progress. Both individuals consistently highlighted the importance of fostering Hindu-Muslim unity through their literary contributions, written works, and organizational endeavors. Analysis of historical information from recent times indicates that there have been significant divisions observed in the current scenario. The task of promoting religious harmony and creating unity among communities has emerged as a notable challenge for persons who maintain humanistic and divergent perspectives. It is of utmost importance that we undertake a thorough review of the contributions to religious harmony made by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Wahiduddin Khan in order to assess their significance in contemporary discourse.

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