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THE RENAISSANCE OF ISLAMIC THOUGHT IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A STUDY OF SAYYID JAMAL AL-DIN AFGHANI**Asma Kounsar**Senior Research Fellow-UGC Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies
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Abstract: An architect of the modern Islamic intellectual revival, and an anti-imperialist thinker, Jamal al-Din Afghani was noted for the middle path that he took between traditionalism and modernism. Equally regarded in the East and West as the defender of Islam and the prime source of Islamic revolution in the 19th century, he is revered in the Arab as the 'Hakeem al-Sharq' (the sage of the East). The vision of Afghani was the reform of Islamic countries, and revival of early principles of Islam, holding extended conversations with both students and teachers on how the revival of Islam could be achieved through an application of philosophy to religion, modern education, especially in the physical sciences to prove that there was no conflict between contemporary knowledge and the teachings of the Qur'an. The modern movements for revival and the renewal in the nineteenth and twentieth century's are more closely associated with the reformist strand represented by Jamal ul-din Afghani and many others. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani is regarded as the champion of Muslim solidarity (al-Wahdah al-Islamiyah). Aware of the increasing western encroachments into Islamic lands, disunity among Muslim nations and the propagation and popularity of the divisive western concept of nationalism among Muslims, Jamal al-Din Afghani called upon the Muslims to arise and strive for the solidarity and unity of the ummah. His idea of the world of unity of Muslims is of religious nature where by Muslims are joined together by the bond of Islam, in one ummah. Towards this end he spent whole of his time and resources. The paper attempts to highlight his immense contribution towards his revivalistic endeavours specially focusing on his vision of Islamic thought with respect to Muslim polity and educational policy.

Keywords: Nahda, Jamal al-Din Afghani, Pan-Islamism, Islamic Revival, Islamic Reformer.

Introduction

The 16-18th centuries were marked by economic and military colonization of Muslim lands by Western nations backed by the Church in its evangelical drive. These campaigns were also important for the Western nations in controlling raw material and sea routes for their trade activity. Faced, under colonial occupation, with a severe crisis at the social, economic, political and religious level, much of the Muslim world had lost its sovereignty to Christian Europe. By the nineteenth century a clear shift of power had occurred; West had dominated and threatened the Muslim world politically, economically as well as culturally and

Muslims found themselves on the defensive whereas, up to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the real threat and primary challenge to Islamic identity and unity was generally seen as internal and challenge to Islamic identity from the West was not experienced until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹ The Muslim worlds were living under colonial suppression, internal discord and poverty, and they, badly were, in need of a visionary leader such as Jamal al-Din Afghani. No one can deny reading the history of that period, that Afghani was one of the most outstanding figures and redeemers of the East. With all the qualification that he possessed, he was

a great political and unique intellectual of his time. Of the many Muslim revivalists who struggled against Western occupation, Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani was the most pronounced in his effort to revive traditional Islamic ideas. He was a visionary reformer and was well aware about the colonial onslaught and deconstructive political ideology of western world vindicating the sacrosanct position of God and placing humanism at the epicentre of civilizational discourse. Knowing very well, the repercussions of post-colonial gift of West to the Muslim World, the immutability of nation state dismantled the sacred unitarian ummatic narrative of Islamic civilization living under the banner of Ottoman Caliphate. Jamal din Afghani was the first person who had this global vision of uniting ummah under a single umbrella known in history as Pan-Islamism; unity of Muslims traversing territorial boundaries. Afghani as a true Muslim had a pragmatic approach. He appealed to the Muslims of all sects to make use of the principle of rationalism which is a special privilege of Islam. "Of all religions," he says, "Islam is almost the only that blames those who believe without having proofs, and rebukes those who follow opinions without having any certainty, in whatever Islam teaches, it appeals to reason and the holy text proclaims that happiness consists in the right use of reason."²

1. **Jamal al-Din Afghani: Life and Works**

Sayyid Jamal al-Din Afghani was one of the most influential Muslims of the 19th century and is considered as the principal figure in awakening Islamic political sentiments and social reforms in India, Persia, Afghanistan, Egypt and the Ottoman Empire. He was an intellectual, a versatile genius, a wandering missionary, an impressive interpreter of the Holy Quran and an orator of the highest calibre who brought about a universal awakening throughout the world of Islam. He moved about in the capitals of Muslim countries;

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lecturing, discussing and writing about his mission, leaving behind him a band of his disciples who continued his work even after his death. Several movements of religious revival and social reform owe their origin to this singular personality. He was born in 1838 in the village of Asadabad near Hamadan in north-west Persia, and educated in Tehran, Najaf, and then in India. His father was Sayyid Safdar was a religious scholar was known for his social work in his native country. Afghani received his early education at home, where he was guided by his father. Even at the early age of eight years, Jamal al-Din exhibited extraordinary intelligence. By the time he was 18, he was well versed in almost all the branches of Islamic learning in addition to philosophy, jurisprudence, history, metaphysics, mathematics, medicine, general sciences, mysticism, astronomy and astrology. His learning was encyclopaedic and his genius was versatile. Journey proved to be his best coach. His ceaseless journey around the globe and revolutionary spirit enabled Jamal al-Din Afghani to study the socio-political problems of the Muslims and ignite the spirit of Muslim fraternity and unity against the western domination.³

Jamal al-Din al-Afghani contributed remarkably towards both intellectual and political integration of Muslims. He wrote a good number of works on the various themes of Islam and Muslims. The renowned among them are Haqiqat-i-mazhab-i Nachari va byan-i hal-i-Naccharyyan, which is against the materialist philosophy and marks a refutation of followers of the School of Modernism of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan; Talimmat al-Bayyan fi Tarikh al-Afghan (History of Afghanistan)- A brief description of the land, people, and history of Afghanistan. And his celebrated Magazine, al-Urwa al-Wuthqa (in collaboration with Muhammad 'Abduh one of his student and close associates) besides his speeches and articles, which

are now in compiled form also are treated as the masterpiece of high intellectual value.⁴

Jamal al-Din Afghani's visits to a number of countries during his life have exercised a momentous influence on his later career. These visits provided him with a chance to observe and examine the existing condition of Muslim world and the decline and degeneration among the Muslims. These observations had a profound influence upon Afghani's thought and charging himself to work for the awakening of Muslims from the slumber of western imperialist servitude; he became the champion of the concept of 'wahdat-e-ummah'- unity of Muslim nations or pan-Islamism. He is also credited with having reintroduced and reminded the Muslims ummah of its previous glory and magnificent past, there by paving the way for an Islamic revival.⁵ Afghani died on 9 March, 1897 in Istanbul at the age of 59 years. In the last days of his life he wrote a letter to his colleagues in Persia in which he said:

Only on this account am I grieved, that I have not lived to reap what I have sown, and that I have not fully attained to that which I desired. The sword of unrighteousness has not suffered me to see the awakening of the peoples of the East and the hand of ignorance has not granted me the opportunity to hear the call of freedom from the throats of the nations of the Orient. Would that I had sown all the seeds of my ideas in the receptive ground of the people's thoughts...you, who are the ripe fruit of Persia, and who have zealously girded up your skirts for the awakening of the Persian, fear neither imprisonment nor slaughter. Be not frightened by the ferocious acts of the Sultans. Strive with utmost speed, and endeavour with the greatest swiftness. Nature is your friend, and the Creator of nature your ally. The stream of renovation flows quickly towards the East.⁶

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2. Jamal al-Din Afghani on Nahda of Islamic Thought.

Jamal al-Din Afghani has put his blood and sweat to defend the Islamic countries, threatened by the danger of European expansion. He is remembered as an indefatigable fighter, a tireless activist, who roamed all along the Muslim world, calling for internal reform in order to defend, and eventually drive out the West. Afghani did not belong to the quietist majority of Muslim thinkers, who believed that they should protest against injustice but submit to it. He accepted rather the view of the minority who believed in the right of revolt.⁷ In him, the anti imperialistic attitude remained ingrained throughout his life. Two principal themes run through the life and work of Jamal al-Din Afghani. First, his proclaimed goal was to unite the Islamic world under a single caliph resident in Istanbul. Towards this end, he sought a rapprochement between the Ottoman Empire and Persia, working to have the Shah recognize the Ottoman Sultan as the Caliph of all Muslims, while the Caliph recognized the Shah as the sovereign of all Shi'as. He wrote to the leading theologians of Karbala, Tabriz and Tehran, passionately arguing his case and was partially successful in bringing them to his point of view. Jamal al-Din Afghani was certainly genuine in his desire to end the schism between Shia's and Sunnis in order to build a united Muslim ummah. Such unity would help Muslim to regain their lost glory and dynamism, and repel the vicious plans of Western idiosyncrasy to subjugate Muslim mind by fissiparous tendencies.⁸ However, the rapprochement did not take place due to the political turbulence in Persia. Second, he sought to modernize Islam to make it responsive, as he saw it, to the needs of the age. The movement that he started, which was championed by his disciple, Muhammed Abduh of Egypt, was called the salafi movement. It

derives from the word 'al-salaf al-salehin' (the pious ancestors) and refers to the legal opinions advanced by the first three generations after the Prophet. It was essentially a rationalist movement, which sought to bring about a nahda (renaissance) of Islamic thought. In the late 1870's, while he was still in Egypt, al-Afghani wrote to Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid describing his pain and outrage over the humiliation of Muslim countries by western powers:

When I considered the condition of the Islamic people (milla) it rent the shirt of my patience and I was overcome by fearful thoughts and visions from every side. Like a fearfully obsessed man day and night, from beginning to end, I have thought of this affair and have made the means of reform and salvation of this milla my profession and incantation.⁹

Afghani requested that the Ottoman Sultan use his power and prestige as caliph to launch a pan-Islamic front against the West, offering to be his representative in India, Afghanistan and central Asia. His expulsion from Egypt and the defeat of liberal hopes there seem to have convinced Afghani of the need for a new tack. He still experimented with different modes of resistance, often seeking to exploit European rivalries, but later on he advocated nationalisms, religious-based rather than ethnic or secular, in different Muslim countries, and also deployed such potent invocations as pan-Islamism.¹⁰ Afghani made himself the champion of what western writers call political "pan-Islamism," preaching the union of all Islamic people under the same Caliphate for the purpose of emancipating themselves from foreign domination. He used to say:

The European states justify the attacks and humiliations inflicted by them upon the countries of the East on the pretext of the latter's backwardness. Nevertheless, the same states try to

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prevent by all means in their powers, even by war, all attempts at reform or renaissance of the Islamic peoples. From all this arise the necessity for the Muslim world to unite in a great defensive alliance, in order to preserve itself against annihilation; to achieve this it must acquire the technique of Western progress and learn the secrets of European powers.¹¹

He propounded these ideas in al-Urwah al-Wuthqa, under the title "Islamic Unity". He maintained that Muslims were once united under one glorious empire, and that their achievements in learning and philosophy and all the sciences are still the boast of all Muslims. It is a duty incumbent upon all Muslims to aid in maintaining the authority of Islam and Islamic rule over all Muslim lands.¹² Though Afghani was never the originator of pan-Islamic and reformist ideas for the Muslim world, what made his reputation as the foremost nineteenth century Pan-Islamist was that he conveyed the message of the indispensability of Islamic unity against growing Western encroachments repeatedly and towards various audiences, suiting his appeal at any particular time to the specificities of the country that he operated in. On the one hand, his message was essentially anti-Western, while on the other hand he conceded that Islamic societies, in trying to achieve internal regeneration and revival, should borrow and benefit from European science, technology and philosophy, and adopt the values of modern Western polity. The fact that Afghani had to work in different political environments forced him to switch his tone to match the particular circumstances: at times he advocated parliamentary politics, but at other times he was ready to work with absolutist rulers; he sometimes saw the Ottoman Caliph as legitimate and tried to configurate a Muslim union centered around it, while on other occasions he seemed to support the claims for Arab

Caliphate; even though he was anti-British he was on particular cases ready to cooperate with British officials and agents.¹³ Afghani's reputation as the best known Muslim thinker of the nineteenth century comes from the fact that he championed anti-imperialist pan-Islamic ideas in the political context of the nineteenth century imperialism when there was the perceived threat and popular and intellectual reaction to growing Western pressures. He was also an early critic of orientalism challenging the notion held by Europeans that Muslim Middle East was backward because of the "essential" features of Islam. On the one hand, he sought to glorify the earlier achievements of the Islamic civilization; and on the other hand, he tried to explain the downfall of Muslim societies. In many ways, he laid out the arguments and the rhetoric to be used by later nationalists and anti-imperialist Islamists in the Middle East.¹⁴ Beside his ideas on Muslim unity, Afghani was also influential regarding his thoughts on Islamic revival, involving both reform and purification of religion, and borrowing from the West for the improvement of Muslim societies. In this respect, he desired that Islamic societies develop their own philosophical reasoning referring to their own sources and traditions. In that, he assigned central place to Islamic religion and sought to transform religion into a social and political force.¹⁵ Thus, while he was a remarkable man during his life time Afghani became a legendary figure after his death also, with his call for Islamic regeneration through Muslim solidarity became model for other movements also. Today he continues to maintain his reputation among contemporary political Islamists who regard him as a precursor.¹⁶

3. **Jamal al-Din Afghani on Muslim Polity.**

Jamal al-Din Afghani's political activities was a result of his reaction and confrontation with the western cultural and political supremacy. He was the first to identify the thrust of western

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imperialism and culture threatening the political and cultural identity of the east in general and Muslims in particular. In order to combat these imperialist challenges, he was practically involved in the politics of many Muslim countries for this purpose he formed councils and association of Muslim in Egypt, India and Iran to oppose the western imperialist designs that were gaining ground in these countries. As for Afghani, the role of Islam as a bond of unity to which Muslim nations should stick was a recurrent theme in his speeches and writings. He saw in Islamic religion a proto-nationalistic cement,¹⁷ in that it could provide a tool for solidarity that was much more effective than any other basis. Thus, the emphasis on solidarity and on the necessity of a united front against the West was what united Afghani and Sultan Abdul Hamid; and besides, Afghani was impressed by the defensive reflexes of Abdul Hamid and his apprehension of Western imperialistic motives.¹⁸ Similarly, while speaking of Islamic unity in modern context Afghani regarded sectarian differences as irrelevant, and wished to reconcile Shia's and Sunnis - an accord of his attitude with Abdul Hamid. However, Afghani's pan-Islamism was a revolutionary one aimed at uniting Muslims against Western domination, and his motive to work with Abdul Hamid or any other autocratic ruler was instrumental.¹⁹ Afghani has been a heroic figure in the struggle against corruption, indolence, despotism, colonialism and the blind imitation of the west. In this pursuit he is regarded if not the creator, as the catalyst of Islamic revolution in the 19th century.²⁰ The contemporary biographer of Afghani, Jurji Zaidan in the concluding paragraph of his *Masha hirash sharq* (celebrated Men of the east) says about him, "it will be gathered from this brief summary of his life and deeds that the goal towards which all of his actions were directed, and the pivot on which all his

hopes turned, was the unanimity of Islam and the bringing together of all Muslims in all parts of one supreme caliph. In this endeavour he spent all his energies and for this end he abandoned all worldly ambitions taking to himself no wife and adopting no profession".²¹

The idea of the unity of all Muslim people and nations struck the mind of Afghani early during his pilgrimage to Makkah. During the pilgrimage ceremonies he noticed hundreds of thousands of people belonging to different countries, of different colour, race, language, cultural and traditions but of the same faith and intention had assembled in the house of God exhibiting such a striking and glorious solidarity and collaboration. And Afghani thought if this unity was achieved by the Muslims, no power in the world could rise against.²² The unity of Muslims is the main theme which runs through almost all the Afghani writings. Afghani praises religious adherence and laments those Muslims who want to eradicate this cohesive element from Muslim societies. In an article entitled "Religious Adherence" Afghani says that those who follow western ways blame religious adherence for all the evils in the Muslims world. In fact the practice of 'asabiyya (solidarity) is the key to the defense of one's own people. Asabiyya can be exaggerated, but in proper proportion it is the source of unity, rectitude, and character in a nation, and unity is the source of national strength. Those who imitate the west are opposed to stressing religious ties among people. Europeans have seen that religion is the strongest ties of unity among Muslims and thus have tried to break this religious tie before patriotism could develop to replace it. ²³ Jamal din al-Afghani has wonderstruck at those Muslim who, "by attacking all asabiyya, help destroy Muslim unity and put the community in the hands of foreigners".²⁴

Afghani was the first major Islamic thinker to use the concept 'Islam' and 'the West' as

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violently opposed binaries. This antimony has since become quite standard in virtually all Islamic thinking, it was Afghani that this Muslim consciousness of the spectre of the West as an accusing menacing power became explicit and that the response to it became active.²⁵ Afghani was thoroughly aware that no Islamic renaissance could ever arise under hostile, foreign rule. He also fully understood the crucial importance of a superior leadership which would place the interests of its people before any personal, worldly gain.²⁶ The pressure of the western imperialism, especially of the British, had become so intense that no long term plan for religious reform and intellectual renaissance could be initiated without tackling the political question first. The west was ready to take advantage of the political dissensions among the Muslim rulers. Hence, Afghani advocated the establishment of constitutional governments in Muslim countries and appealed for the unity of Muslim countries under a single caliph. However, there were three chief obstacles in the achievements of Muslim Renaissance: (a) foreign political pressure, (b) despotism of Muslim rulers, and (c) the orthodox 'ulama who in order to safeguard their religious prestige and political influence supported the reactionary policies of the rulers.²⁷ It was due to this wide-ranging struggle against Western imperialism, Muslim despots and the orthodox outlook, which invited bitter opposition from his far more powerful enemies who deprived him of every opportunity to give effect to his plans of Muslim renaissance.²⁸ Afghani composed in rhymed prose an ironic commentary on the misunderstandings he evoked in Afghanistan. He writes:

The English people believe me a Russian
The Muslims think me a Zoroastrian.
The Sunnis think me a Shiite and the Shiite
thinks me an enemy of Ali
Some of the friends of four companions have believed
me a Wahhabi. Some of the virtuous

imamates have imagined me a Babi The theists have imagined me a materialist and the pious a sinner bereft of piety The learned have considered me an unknowing ignoramus And the believers have thought me an unbelieving sinner Neither does the unbeliever call me to him Nor the Muslim recognize me as his own Banished from the mosque and rejected by the temple I am perplexed as to whom I should depend on whom I should fight The rejection of one makes the friends firm against its opposite There is no way of escape for me to flee the grasp of one group There is no fixed abode for me to fight the other party Seated in Bala Hisar in Kabul, my hands tied and my legs Broken, I want to see what the curtain of the Unknown will Design to reveal to me and what fate the turning of this malevolent Firmament has in store for me.²⁹

4. Jamal al-Din Afghani on Muslim Educational Policy

Jamal al-Din Afghani has also responded to western or modern education and educational reform in the Muslim states and considered it as a very important issue. He states the utility of modern science and the urgency to popularize them among the Muslims as indisputable. However, he emphasizes that no real advantage from modern sciences can be drawn unless they are used properly according to the actual needs of the nation, and by keeping up its integrity. He concedes that there is nothing wrong in the argument that one of the chief causes of the backwardness of the Muslims is that they lack modern sciences and, therefore, there should be an all out effort to popularize their sciences by setting up schools all over the Muslim countries on the pattern of European institutions.³⁰ Afghani stresses that this should not become mere object of blind imitation, which will not suffice the need, rather should be done only for self strengthening purposes. He points out that this task, great as it is, cannot be

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accomplished unless it is supported, first by sovereign political power and secondly by sound finance. The Muslims, however, lack both these provisions.³¹ Though Afghani denounced the theories of the West as immoral and regarded these as prison for humanity, yet he did not lag behind in advocating his people the virtues and significance of learning modern science, which he considered were indisputable for achieving heights of progress in this world.

Afghani also criticized modernized schools erected by the Ottomans and Egyptians for lacking philosophical basis for the sciences they teach. He remarks that since there did not exist a philosophical spirit in their outlook, the Muslims could not gain any benefit from modern scientific education. They were obliged to send their youth to Europe for education and invite the European teachers to teach in their schools.³² Thus Afghani points out that the progress and development of the Muslims is only possible when the reformation is based on religion. The West and the means of its progress should not become mere objects of imitation and if they become so it would degenerate into submission to the West. He appears to suggest that Islam as a dominating faith must take advantage of the successful experience of the West and use it for its own strength.³³

5. Conclusion

Sayyid Jamal-al Din Afghani, an outstanding figure of the later part of the nineteenth century, is considered as defender and reformer of Islam. He exercised a greater influence upon the contemporary history and the course of events in the Muslim world, more than any of his contemporaries. Jamal al-Din Afghani's thought left a deep impress upon the contemporary and later Muslim intellectuals and religious and political leaders. Afghani's pan-Islamic ideology and anti-west tendencies continued to find expression among the writings of the

later literary figures of Persia. In India Abul Kalam Azad and the poet-thinker Iqbal, among others, were deeply influenced by his diagnosis of the degeneration of the Muslims as well as by his views on religious reforms. In Egypt, where his stay was longer than in any other country, his religious mission was more systematically and effectively carried forward by his distinguished disciple Muhammad Abduh and the al-Manar party. In Russian. Isma'il Bey Gasprinsky, the most outstanding figure in the history of Russian Turks in the 19th century, and the Azerbaijani leaders, such as Resul Zadeh, Topchibasheve and Agaev, were deeply influenced by Afghani.

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