

JAMALUDDIN AFGHANI
THE PIONEER OF MUSLIM
RENAISSANCE

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By Professor Khurshid Ahmad

The twentieth century is witnessing a wide-spread Islamic revival. Independent Muslim states are emerging on the world-map. Liberation movements are everywhere on the anvil. Revivalist trends are manifest in every nook and corner of the Muslim world. The world of Islam is humming with vigour and activity. In this fast rising crescendo of revival, let us not forget the men who roused us from our deep slumber: One of them was Syed Jamaluddin Afghani.

Jamaluddin Afghani was one of the most remarkable leaders of the Muslim revival movement. Through ceaseless efforts he broke asunder the shell of cultural lethargy and political slavery which had encased the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. He raised his powerful voice against the imperialist encroachment and the warmth of his voice began to melt away the chains of servitude. He called the Muslims to unite under one banner and march forward as an integrated whole. He visited all the Muslim countries and sowed the seeds of freedom and independence there. Soon the seeds began to sprout and grow into mighty oaks. Although he did not live to see the liberation of the Muslim world, yet his soul must be feeling happy on the current Muslim revival.

Allama Afghani had a dynamic personality and possessed a sterling character. He was an intellectual of high calibre, a statesman of unparalleled dynamism and foresight, an orator of unique qualities and a journalist of wide dimensions. In fact he was a versatile genius and Mr. E.G. Browne has, in his own way, acknowledged this when he says that he was at once "philosopher, author, orator and journalist, and above all he was a politician dreaded by his opponents as a dangerous agitator."

Life Sketch

Syed Jamaluddin Afghani was born in 1839 at Asadabad in the district of Kabul. There has been a controversy about his place of birth. Some writers say that he was born in Iran. They do not seem to be correct for it is now conclusively proved that he belonged to the tribe of Konar.

Jamaluddin was a descendant of the famous traditionist Imam Tirmizi. His father, Syed Safdar, was a renowned Alim of Afghanistan and was a well-known social reformer. He educated his brilliant son in the best possible manner and Jamaluddin finished his education in Quran, Hadith, Tasawwaf, Law, philosophy, Chemistry and Medicine while he was only eighteen years of age. After completing his education he went to Arabia to perform Hajj. On his way to Hajj he remained in India for one year and contacted the Muslim leaders of thought of the sub-continent. This visit was performed, in 1856 and was it a coincidence or otherwise that the first war of liberation in India broke out in 1857?

After Hajj Jamaluddin Afghani visited several Muslim countries and then returned to Afghanistan. This extensive tour of the Muslim world must have played a great part in the making of the mind of this young reformer. The condition of the Muslim world at that time was most pitiable. It presented the spectacle of a house divided against itself. Every Muslim country was a hot-bed of intrigues and conspiracies. Everywhere people were being oppressed by the unthinking monarchies. The influence of Western imperialism was increasing by leaps and bounds, Jamaluddin was naturally much grieved at this sad state of affairs. He gave his choicest thoughts to the problems of the Muslim world and formulated a plan for its revival to the past glory.

In Afghanistan he took upon himself the education of the crown-prince Muhammad Azam and tried to instil in his mind the reform he wanted to be executed in the Muslim world, in general and in Afghanistan in particular. When Muhammad Azam became the Amir of Kabul he appointed Allama Afghani as his grand vazir. But he could not hold this position for long because of the growing family tensions and feuds. Jamaluddin gave up the job and also left the country. Then he proceeded to Egypt where he gave lectures at Al-Azhar and organised a group of youthful workers. As his influence was increasing, the Egyptian monarch smelt the danger that he was, and exiled him. After leaving Egypt he went to Turkey where he was given a hero's welcome. But soon his freedom movement disturbed the vested interests who used all their power to exile him from Turkey. After that he visited one country after the other, and then thought it advisable to go to Europe. He settled in Paris and with the assistance of his trusted followers—particularly Muhammad Abduh, Saad Zaghlool Pasha and Baqar Irani he brought out *Al-Urwatul Wusqa*, the journal which made a name for itself and which became the forerunner of Islamic revival. The first issue of the weekly *Al-Urwatul Wusqa*, appeared on 13th March 1884. Although it could not live for more than eight months yet, despite the brief span of its life, it exerted a mighty influence over the Muslim world. Encyclopedia of Islam rightly says about this journal that:

"It exercised great influence on the awakening of liberationist anti-English view in the Muslim circles and may be considered the first literary harbinger of the nationalist movements in the Muhammadan territories under the British rule which were gradually strengthened by it."

Jamaluddin was a great politician and he went to Russia to reconstruct its relationship with the Muslim East. He was particularly eager to reduce the tension that reigned between Iran and Russia. But because of the betrayal of the Irani monarch his plans were defeated. Although he was exiled from Iran yet during his stay he succeeded in organising the freedom movement there. He also organised the Mujtahids and awoke them to realise their responsibilities. After leaving Iran he went to London from where he brought out a journal: *Ziaul Khafeqeen*. From London, he tried to direct the freedom movement in Iran and other Muslim countries. On the request of the Turkish Caliph he went to Turkey, from where he did not return. When he refused to play into the hands of the Turkish monarch he was arrested. His death occurred because of poison administered to him by Dr. Abul Huda. He breathed his last on 9th March, 1897.

Afghani's Mission

Jamaluddin Afghani had immense love for Islam and Muslims. He lived a life of brisk revolutionary activity and every word that flew from his mouth sparkled with the glow of his deep sincerity and sober thinking. His analysis was that the real cause of the decline of the Muslims was their disunity and internal feuds. He was an arch enemy of imperialism and did his best to awaken the Muslim world to the approaching dangers of Colonialism. He was a firm believer in the Islamic principles of democracy and wanted to establish a *shoora-i-Nizam* (consultative order). His objective is best reflected in the ideals for which the weekly *Al-Urwatul-Wusqa* stood. They were as follows:

- To organise the Muslim countries into one organic whole and to cultivate in them the belief that the Western powers are exploiting their internal differences and rivalries for their imperialistic designs:

- To establish a system of collective security in the Muslim world so that if any one Muslim country is attacked, all the member countries would use their full force to meet the aggression.
- To encourage other Asian countries to revolt against the yoke of imperialism and to achieve freedom.

He stood for freedom and pan-Islamism. Jamaluddin's greatest contribution was that he broke the hard crust of slumber and pioneered the freedom and Islamic revivalist movements of the Muslim world. It was he who organised the liberation movements in Egypt, Turkey, Afghanistan, Iran and a host of other countries. Thus his activities were the aurora of the dawn of the new era of liberty, freedom and Islam.

He was trying to reform the kingship, but here he could not succeed, for the kings were not prepared to mend their ways and sacrifice anything for the ultimate good' of the Muslims-of the world.

He was a great champion of the cause of pan-Islamism. The fact is that cries of Islamic unity which we bear now and then are nothing but an echo of his powerful and resounding voice.

Jamaluddin did not live to see the emancipation of the Muslim world but he was glad to have laid a strong foundation for it. The last message that he gave to the 'Islamic world, which flowed from his mouth a little before his sad demise, is a message which must be read even today with great profit; It is of historical importance and is as fresh as tomorrow morn. We conclude this brief essay with these epoch- making words of the great pioneer of the Muslim renaissance:

"Now I am in such a state that I neither need the tidings of death, nor the hope of life. Neither I am afraid of death nor grieved over my imprisonment. I am happy over this imprisonment for my body is in prison in the cause of the freedom, of the Muslims. I am being assassinated but I am very happy over this death, for I am dying to give life to my nation. My oppressors are unaware of the fact that death of one who stands for a noble mission is never the death of the mission, itself. Nay, because of it rather the word of truth becomes imperishable.

"Now I would let you know my last desire: Gird up your loins for the heroic fight for freedom! Never be afraid of trial or tribulation, arrest or assassination! Never bow before odds! Never worry over the sly artifices of the kings and monarchs! Carry on the light with firm conviction and robust determination! Nature is with you and Almighty Allah is supporting you. The upsurge of freedom is moving at a heavy pace. It is going to sweep away the cobwebs of despotism and imperialism. In no time it is going to overcome the entire east and fill it with life as waters fill the ocean, (Go ahead, I wish you God-speed)."

These words of Jamaluddin Afghani moved a nation to new life. And even today, they beacon us.
