Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's View of the Causes of the Great Revolt in British India in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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In the wake of the Great Uprising of 1857 that shook the very foundations of the British Empire in India, the British authorities decided to point an accusing finger to the Indian Muslims alone as being the only instigators (Metcalf 301). As a matter of fact, the British had always regarded the Muslim community as their archenemy in India due to the fact that they (the British) had unseated them from power. Besides, the British officials in India admitted the fact that they had wreaked havoc on the Muslim community, particularly the upper class, and so it was no surprise that the latter would bear a grudge against them. In this respect, T. R. Metcalf stated that:

> As the British were well aware, the Muslim aristocracy could not but resent the complete revolution in their fortunes brought by the imposition of British rule. Once an imperial race, they were now ordinary subjects, on a par with the despised Hindus, and excluded them from all higher posts in the Government. (Metcalf 300)

In reality, many historians and contemporaries of nineteenth-century British India bear witness to the fact that Muslims were not the only "culprits" responsible for the outbreak of this Revolt. This prompted a prominent contemporary Muslim intellectual, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan,[33] to undertake the task of proving to the British the fact that Muslims were not the only ones involved and that Hindus were also responsible. This took the form of explaining to the British authorities the root reasons that led the native inhabitants of the Subcontinent to rise against their masters.

Thus, in 1859, Sir Sayyid Ahmad wrote an Urdu pamphlet entitled *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind* (*Essay on the causes of the Indian Revolt*). As its name indicates, in this pamphlet, Sir Sayyid's primary

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[33] Sir Sayyid (*also* Syed) Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), born of a well-off family, was a Muslim jurist, educator and author who entered the service of the East India Company as a clerk in the Judicial Department, and later rose to the position of sub-judge. S.M. Ikram, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan," in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

objective was to explain to the British authorities in London and Cal-cutta, in "true and manly words" (Abbasi 18), the root reasons that were responsible for the outbreak of the Revolt. In his opinion, the Revolt was the outcome of British colonial blinkered policies and high-handedness in dealing with matters related to the population of India. In other words, he implicated the British by asserting that the events of 1857 resulted from the disaffection of Muslim and Hindu soldiers with the Colonial Government's policies, as well as the fail-ure of the latter to admit native Indians to the Legislative Council (Muhammad xi). In truth, such was the case for the Muslim upper classes, who did not stand the idea of seeing themselves excluded from the colonial administration, since, as Sir Sayyid put it, only "a few years ago they filled the most honourable posts under their gov-ernment, and the desire and hope for such is still in them" (quoted in Malik 120).

In Sir Sayyid's view, had the British rulers made an effort to understand the Indian mind, there might have been no uprising (Aziz 19). In the following passage, Shan Mohammad quotes Sir Sayyid's statement as saying that:

> The evils which resulted to India from the non-admission of natives into the Legislative Council of India were various. … the greatest mis-chief lay in this, that the people misunderstood the views and the inten-tions of Government. They misapprehended every act and whatever law was passed was misconstrued by men who had no share in framing it and hence no means of judging its spirit. … no one was at hand to correct the errors which they (the Colonial Government) had adopted. And why? Because there was not one of their own number among the members of the Legislative Council. Had it been so, these evils that have happened to us would have been averted… (quoted in Muhammad: 1972 19)

Actually, Sir Sayyid wondered why Indians were not included in the high administration and Legislative Council of the British Raj, knowing that their inclusion was a crucial key to the political stabil-ity of the Colonial Government in South Asia. Besides, Sir Sayyid thought that had the British made the effort of admitting natives to high positions in the Government, they would have won the affection

and loyalty of the Indian masses (quoted in Muhammad: 1978 120-21).

Furthermore, according to H. Malik, the British Government applied a "subject political culture" in the Indian Subcontinent (Malik 118). In other words, Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba talked of a "subject culture" whereby the individual is "a passive beneficiary or victim of routine governmental actions" (Almond and Verba 118). This passivity leads to a situation whereby the individual, or subject, does not make any effort to influence the decision-making within their country, but only wishes that they be treated properly and fairly; contrarily to the citizen, who actively gets involved in the formation of political decisions of their respective government (Malik 118).

H. Malik assumed that such was the view of Sir Sayyid with regard to the kind of political culture imposed by the British administration in the South Asian Subcontinent. Indeed, since taking over the reins of power in the region, the East India Company officials had wanted the native population to be passively "docile" and "obedient" to the laws imposed by the Colonial Government, even if these laws were conflicting with their interests (Malik 120). Be that as it may, Sir Sayyid declared the fact that the native inhabitants of India were not the only ones to be affected by the "subject political culture;" in reality, the latter had been very detrimental to the political stability of the British Government there. In other words, the "subject political culture" served as an obstacle that kept the British Government isolated from the subjects (Malik 118). This isolationism on the part of the Colonial Government vis-à-vis its Indian subjects was, as will be seen further down in this article, to contribute to the events of 1857, as the British, ignorant of the local public opinion, were completely taken aback and without advance notice. Commenting on the Colonial Government's lack of knowledge about the public opinion of its subjects, Sir Sayyid stated that the "Government (British) could never know the inadvisability of the laws and regulations which it passed" (Malik 119).

Accordingly, as H. Malik went on, Sir Sayyid wanted the British Government in India to switch to the "mixed-participant culture" (118). Using Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba's phraseology, "in a 'mixed-participant culture', a substantial part of the population

has acquired specialized input orientations and an active set of self-orientations" (Almond and Verba 24). To put it in plain words, the "mixed-participant culture" is a situation where a significant part of the population, notably intellectuals and elites, take part in the process of decision-making in their country.

Briefly speaking, Sir Sayyid saw the exclusion of natives from the colonial administration as a contributory factor that led to the uprising of 1857. Consequently, he pleaded with the Government, "not in the name of democracy, but in terms of Christianity's ethos, and the historical insights derived from the eight centuries of Muslim rule in India," to change its policy (Malik 120). It should be noted that by setting out such drawbacks and weaknesses in the Government of India, Sir Sayyid created an unfriendly atmosphere among some high circles in the British Government in London. According to S. Muhammad, some British politicians, such as Sale Beadon, the then foreign secretary, went so far as to urge the Government to imprison such a "revolutionary writer" (Muhammad xi). However, the British Parliament, which appreciated Sir Sayyid's memorandum, vehemently opposed such a measure against him. In addition, the M.P.'s advised the Government to take such "precious" recommendations into consideration (ibid.).

Indeed, Sir Sayyid's recommendations received due attention from the India Office in London. In H. Malik's view, this can be reflected in the passage of the Indian Council Act of 1861 (Malik 123),[34] which made possible for the first time in the history of British India the inclusion of three Indians in the Legislative Council in Calcutta.[35] However, H. Malik's statement was firmly contested by Muhammad Yusuf Abbasi, who declared that the Indian Council Act of 1861 was by no means the result of Sir Sayyid's *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind.* To back up his statement, M. Y. Abbasi stated that this Act was already implicit in Queen Victoria's Proclamation of 1858 (70), in which it was declared that the native population of In-

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[34] About the Indian Council Act, Syed Razi Wasti stated that it "marked an important step towards representative institutions and legislative devolution … the people got an opportunity to put their grievances before the Government." (Wasti 47).

[35] These Indians were: Raja Narendra, Raja Devi Narain and Raja Dinkar Rao (Ibid). In this respect, H. Malik affirmed that the then first Secretary of State for India, the Duke of Argyll, showed Sir Sayyid in 1969, during the latter's stay in London, the original copy of *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind* "heavily marked and annotated," "tacitly acknowledging his influence on the India Office's thinking" (ibid).

dia should have the right to take part in the management of its country (Fieling 929). As the Queen stated:

> … in so far as may be, Our subjects, of whatever race or creed, be freely and partially admitted to office in our service, the duties of which may be qualified by their education, ability and integrity duly to discharge.[36]

Apart from that, in *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind*, Sir Sayyid went thoroughly in analyzing elaborately the bona fide circumstances that led to the events of 1857. In his opinion, one of the most far-reaching reasons was people's misapprehension of the East India Company Government's intentions (Malik 111). Indeed, by a general consensus, many historians and contemporaries of British India agree on the fact that the inhabitants of the Indian Subcontinent, Muslims as well as Hindus alike, interpreted the English Company's actions and measures as part of a campaign to forcibly convert them to the Christian faith and impose foreign customs on them.

Indeed, the East India Company's actions since they took up the reins of power in India aroused the susceptibilities of many Indians. This was mainly so since the Christian missionaries were allowed into the South Asian Subcontinent. In fact, the Evangelical movement in Britain, which became so powerful at the beginning of the nineteenth century, succeeded in persuading the British Government to force the Company to allow them into the Subcontinent (Wild 162). The Charter Act of 1913, which called for the establishment of the Church of England in India, gave the evangelicals unrestricted access to the country (Read and Fisher 35). Hence, once they set foot in India, the Christian missionaries went openly proselytizing among the local population. In this respect, C. Hibbert bears witness to the fact that copies of the New Testament were distributed to learners of Hindi script upon completion of their course in missionary schools (Hibbert 52).[37] In some areas, the Christian gospel was preached to prisoners in local jails (ibid.). Moreover, the missionaries' enthusi-

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[36] "Her Majesty's Proclamation" (1858) *India Office Records*, Africa, Pacific and Asia Collections, British Library, London: L/P&S/6/463 file 36, folios 215-16.

[37] In this respect, H. Malik wrote: "In the missionary schools, the teaching of theology became mandatory; students were quizzed on who is your Redeemer" (111).

asm for Christianising Indians led them so far as to put pressure on the Company to withdraw its patronage of certain Hindu temples and festivals (Spear 130). Besides, in an attempt to enhance their achievements, the missionaries undertook to educate the younger Indian generation. According to B. Prasad, this "orientation of young minds was inevitably to lead to subversion of the indigenous faiths" (517).

In addition to proselytising, the missionaries set out to deplore Indian traditional practices and religious rituals and describing them as too cruel and primitive. Charles Grant, a contemporary missionary in India, stated that the Hindus exhibited "human nature in a very degraded, humiliating state," and that their religion was marked by "idolatry with its rabble of impure deities, its monsters of wood and stone, its false principles and corrupt practices, delusive hopes and fears, its ridiculous ceremonies and degrading superstitions, its lying legends and fraudulent impositions" (Prasad 431). As a result, they put pressure on the administration of the East India Company to put an end to traditional practices of the local population in the Subcontinent.

Furthermore, according to H. Malik, Sir Sayyid confirmed the fact that, even in the barracks, Muslim and Hindu soldiers were being exhorted by their British superiors to embrace Christianity (Malik 111). He maintained, however, that the 1837 famine was probably the most obvious circumstance that strengthened the conviction among the Indian population that the British were there to Christianize them. In fact, during this famine, Christian missionaries in India took the initiative to be in charge of the orphans in the drought-stricken areas. Nonetheless, contrary to the Indians' expectations, these orphans were brought up into the Christian faith (ibid.). In this respect, it is worthwhile to quote in length Sir Sayyid's statement from his pamphlet:

> In the year 1837, the year of the great drought, the step which was taken of rearing orphans in the principles of the Christian faith, was looked upon throughout the North-West Provinces as an example of the schemes of Government. It was supposed that when Government had similarly brought all Hindustanees to a pitch of ignorance and poverty, it would convert them to its own creed. The Hindustanees used, as I have said, to feel an increasing dismay at the annexation of each successive country by the Honourable East India Company. But I

assert without fear of contradiction that this feeling arose solely from the belief in their minds, that as the power of Government increased, and there no longer remained foreign enemies to fight against, or internal troubles to quell, it would turn its attention inwards, and carry out a more systematic interference with their creed and religious observances (quoted in Mohammed 112).

Another significant wrong action taken by the East India Company was the introduction of secularism, a hitherto unknown tendency in South Asia. According to M. A. Karandikar, between 1772 and 1850, that is, from the time the English company imposed its rule until the eve of the Great Revolt, Indian masses were given "doses of secularism" (137). In fact, Shari'a law (*i.e.* Islamic law) was gradually phased out while secular penal law was phased in. For instance, under Islamic law, an apostate, namely a person who has rejected their religious beliefs, would always be punished with the death penalty, or alternatively, they would forfeit their right to inheritance (138). Nonetheless, this was discontinued as a result of a Bengal regulation in 1832.This regulation removed this legal disability that made the culprits lose their proprietary rights after conversion to another religion, obviously Christianity (ibid.).

It is worthwhile to mention the fact that ante-apostasy practice existed as well among the Hindu community. Hindus who renounced their faith were to suffer the loss of inheritance rights, in addition to being excommunicated (ibid.). However, in 1850, the administration of the East India Company passed the Caste Disabilities Removal Act which declared that:

> … any law or usage which inflicts on any person forfeiture of rights, or property, or may be held in any way to impair or affect any right of inheritance, by reason of his or her renouncing or having been excluded from the communion of any religion, or being deprived of caste, shall cease to be enforced in law… (quoted in ibid.)

It is crystal clear to any layman that by the above regulations, the East India Company officials aimed at providing protection to the inhabitants of India who wished to convert to the Christian faith. Furthermore, in the eyes of many Indians, mainly the most orthodox,

these actions by the East India Company were part of a scheme to Christianize the population of South Asia. In the Muslim case, this British interference to put an end to these legal disabilities against apostasy was construed as a flagrant attempt at depriving the Muslim community of a vital weapon to keep its members in the right path. In this respect, M. A. Karandikar stated:

> The abolition of disabilities concerning apostates meant the loss of an important weapon to keep the Muslim population intact. During the whole of the medieval period the punishment for apostasy had prevented any Muslim from changing his faith (138).

Secularism can also be reflected in the type of education that the East India Company imposed in its subsidized schools. In the case of Muslim schools, the curricula were reviewed, and to the Muslims' dismay, religious subjects, mainly *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and *Hadith* (the Prophet's traditions), were gradually done away with; meanwhile, other sciences and secular subjects were introduced (Malik 111-12). This move aroused the suspicions and fears of the Muslim community. In Sir Sayyid's view, notwithstanding the fact that the East India Company officials were at times driven by humanistic ideals to issue laws and regulations to reform the Indian society, they were always regarded by Muslim and Hindu Indians with scepticism. As a matter of fact, it is worthwhile to recall the fact that the process of socio-cultural reform in the Indian Subcontinent was initiated by Lord Bentinck,[38] whom P. Spear described as a "convinced westerner and humanist, with little sympathy for Indian culture and institutions" (Spear 124). According to Read and Fisher, shortly before setting sail to India, Lord Bentinck, the liberal humanist with a strong evangelical tendency, was told by Lord Ellenborough, then president of the Board of Control of the East India Company in London: "We have a great moral duty to perform in India" (35).

Thus, upon entering the Indian scene, Lord Bentinck began carrying out his "moral duty" by outlawing *sati*. The latter, meaning devotion, was a practice in which a Hindu widow showed her devotion to her dead husband by voluntarily burning herself on his funeral

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[38] Lord William Bentinck was Governor-General of India between 1828 and 1835.

pyre. However, many widows sacrificed themselves unwillingly (ibid.). In fact, most Hindu widows committed *sati* out of desperation and fear of their families. This was due to the fact that in accordance with the Hindu tradition, widows were not allowed to remarry, and so became a burden on their families (ibid.). Beside that, as B. Prasad stated in this respect, some greedy relatives usually wanted to get rid of the widow by "appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband," in order to appropriate her inheritance (434).

Lord Bentinck, who regarded *sati* as a serious crime against humanity, passed Regulation XVII in December 1862, whereby he declared the practice of *sati,* or burning alive widows of Hindus, anywhere in the Indian Subcontinent, illegal and punishable by criminal courts (439).[39] Yet, following the outlawing of this practice, the state of young widows was that of misery since they were not allowed to remarry. Furthermore, some of them resorted to prostitution and debauchery (Prasad 439-40). Being faced with such an unwelcome outcome, the Government of India was compelled in 1856 to pass the Widow's Remarriage Act, which made remarriage of Hindu widows legal. In Sir Sayyid's opinion, this measure, though regarded by many Indian reformers as a positive action, aroused much disaffection among Hindus, mainly orthodox, who regarded it as a breach of their faith and customs (Malik 112).

Next, Lord Bentinck turned his attention to *thugi*. The latter was practised by "thugs," who were worshippers of "Kali," the Hindu goddess of destruction. They carried out their ritual killings by befriending travellers and then strangling them with a piece of sacred scarf. What happened next was stripping them of their belongings (David 7). A. Read and D. Fisher described the *thugi* practice as follows:

> The thugs would befriend groups of travellers, suggesting they join forces for safety on the road. For some days they would journey and camp together, until one night when sitting round the fire, joking and talking happily, the thug leader would clap his hands and shout 'Bring the tobacco!' At this signal, the thugs would leap into action, strangling their victims with special handkerchiefs, with a coin dedic-

[39] According to P. Spear, between 500 and 850 *satis* took place annually in Bengal alone. (125).

ated to the goddess bound into one corner to give extra grip for the left hand. It would all be over in minutes. The bodies would be stripped and bundled into graves … and the thugs would be on their way, taking their victims' possessions as their earthly reward from Kali. (Read and Fisher 36)

Thugi had existed in India for centuries, but during the first half of the nineteenth century, namely when the Indian economy collapsed due to the Company exploitative tendencies, this practice increased significantly. As a matter of fact, A. Read and D. Fisher stated that there were about 10,000 thugs in 40 or 50 great gangs, claiming between 20,000 and 30,000 victims a year (ibid.). Yet, the same authors cast doubt on the exactitude of these figures and claim that no one can be sure due to the fact that this practice was surrounded by total secrecy. Moreover, there were no survivors to tell the tale (ibid.).

The British first learned about such a practice only when their *sepoys*, namely native regiments, going home on leave or returning to the barracks, began disappearing en route (ibid.). Actually, as B. Prasad put it, the disappearance of hundreds of natives could hardly be noted, or it created no astonishment or alarm, since a journey in the Indian Subcontinent was a matter of months (Prasad 456). Thus, the Company officials were determined to banish such a cruel custom. Their reaction, actually, was prompted more by self-defence than by humanity due to the fact that thugs were wreaking havoc on the Company's inland trade. In other words, *thugi* made travel within India very dangerous and insecure. In this respect, B. Prasad wrote that "only when in Bengal and elsewhere the interests of British commerce called for safer travel did the government wake up to the necessity of eradicating the evil" (ibid.).

Consequently, as part of his campaign to reform the Indian society, Lord Bentinck set up the Thugi and Dakaiti[40] Department in 1829 under Captain William Sleeman's direction. Captain Sleeman, aided by 12 assistants, recruited hundreds of informers whose intelligence enabled his police to intercept parties of thugs and excavate their burial grounds (David 7). According to A. Read and D. Fisher, in a six-year period Sleeman's police got 3,000 thugs "convicted in

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[40] "Dakaiti" means an armed robbery by gangs.

the courts and sentenced either to hanging or transportation to a penal colony for life" (36-37).[41] In 1843 and 1851, legislation was adopted to deprive the culprits of many formalities of law in the course of their prosecution (Prasad 357). By 1852, groups of thugs had been disbanded and their families settled under police vigilance (457).

Yet, the cruellest social practice which had been dealt with even before the advent of Lord Bentinck was that of "infanticide." The latter meant the murder of the child by his parents and prevailed in some communities in India. The act was performed secretly by strangulating or starving the child to death, or in some cases, applying poison to the nipples of the suckling mother (Chpra 639). This sacrifice had two facets. One was the offer of a child in sacrifice to placate the river Ganga, which is a Hindu deity, and it was common in the Bengal areas that were close to this sacred river (Prasad 441). It was mainly carried out to fulfil a vow by a childless woman that in case she was blessed by the sacred river Ganga with children she would sacrifice her first born child to it (ibid.). Logically the child, whether male or female, was allowed to grow till such time that other children were born to the woman. B. Prasad quoted a contemporary describing this practice:

> If after the vow they (women) have children, the eldest is nourished till a proper age, which may be three, four or nine years according to the circumstances, when on a particular day, appointed for bathing in a particular part of the river, they take the child with them and offer it to the Goddess. The child is encouraged to go further and further into the water till it is carried away by the stream, or is pushed off by inhuman parents. (ibid)

The other type of infanticide, known as "female infanticide," was the killing of a female infant soon after its birth. According to B. Prasad, this practice, which was mainly practised by high castes in central, northern and western India, had no religious observance and was prompted by "pride, poverty and avarice" (ibid). In other words, the presence of an unmarried girl in the family was regarded as a disgrace to it. Moreover, even if marriage were arranged, it would lead

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[41] The same authors added that one of these thugs admitted having personally killed 719 people, and only regretted that he had not killed more (37).

to financial burden as it was customary for the Indian bride to offer the dowry to the groom. Also others, mainly low-caste[42] Hindus, resorted to female infanticide because of the difficulty of finding a suitable husband caused by the custom of hypergamy, namely marrying a person of a superior caste (Chopra 639).

The British were disgusted by such a practice even before India was opened to the Christian missionaries. It was during Lord Wellesley's general-governorship (1789-1805) that the English Company took legal measures to put an end to it by passing Regulation XXI of 1795 and Regulation III of 1804 which declared such infanticides as murderers (Prasad 443). Hence, the ending of these cruel traditional practices was in itself a progressive step aiming at freeing Indians of their harmful superstitions. Yet, it aroused much discontent among the local population, notably the orthodox Hindus and Muslims, who interpreted this interference in their religious and socio-cultural life as part of a scheme devised by the Company officials to violate their established customs and to forcibly convert them to Christianity.

This led Indians to impugn all innovations brought by the British to the Indian Subcontinent. Probably the best example illustrating such a situation was the Indian reaction to the introduction of modern means of communication, like the telegraph, which were interpreted by Indians as an attempt by "white wizards" to work some kind of magic upon them. In this respect, A. R. Desai stated that "even progressive measures such as the construction of railways and the establishment of the telegraph system were interpreted as acts of black magic by which the white wizards schemed to tie India in iron chains" (Desai 286).

In another sphere, Sir Sayyid Ahmad talked of another cause in *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind*, which is the one related to the economic disaffection among the Indian population. Indeed, many historians agree on the fact that the greatest curse of British rule in the Indian Subcontinent was the reckless economic exploitation of the country by the East India Company and its servants. In fact, like the British,

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[42] The social stratification in the South Asian Subcontinent, particularly among the Hindu community, is referred to as the "the caste system." According to the Shastra, a sacred scripture of Hinduism, the Hindu society is divided into four castes, or social classes: Brahmans (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (farmers and tradesmen) and Shudras (serfs and menials). People outside these groups were known as "untouchables" and were regarded as the dregs of society (Galbraith and Mehta 51).

the Mughal emperors had also come to India from outside, and their religion, namely Islam, was different from that of the native population; be that as it may, once they settled there, they adopted the country as their own. They had never tried to plunder it in order to enrich another one. The case for the British was different. The latter had come to the Subcontinent only for its economic exploitation. In order to meet their objective, the British, upon holding the reins of power in the region, went ahead with a set of reforms that destabilized the local economic tissue. Probably the best example is the Permanent Land Settlement Act, which was introduced by Lord Cornwallis, Governor General of India from 1786 to 1793.[43]

This article is mainly concerned with the causes dealt with by Sir Sayyid in his pamphlet mentioned above. For instance, he asserted that many elements of landed gentry had long been unhappy with the East India Company as a result of the passage of the Act VI of 1819. This Act authorized the Company's officials to take away *la-kharaj* lands from their owners. In Islam, *la-kharaj* is an appellation used to denote a rent-free land, that is, a land which is exempt from tax due to the government. The word *kharaj* literally means a tax or tribute on land.[44] In the Indian context, the term *la-kharaj* was used to refer to those lands, originally offered by the Mughal emperors, in which the rent was waived to show the state's *ma'fiy* (pardon) or *inam* (reward or benediction) (Malik 113). According to H. Malik, *la-kharaj* lands were of various kinds, and the two most important ones were: first, the *milk* lands, which were granted, on a permanent basis, in favour of intellectuals and religious people, or for the maintenance of schools, mosques, temples and shrines. Most of the *milk* lands were hereditary (ibid.). With regard to the second type, the *jagir* lands, they were granted, on a temporary basis, to some Mughal officers for military or political services rendered to the State. Most of the *jagir* lands located close to the troublesome frontiers were granted to the strongest and most competent military chiefs. Hence, the aim was twofold: on the one hand, cultivating the land; on the

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[43] The Permanent Land Settlement Act of 1793 was a new land revenue system imposed by the administration of the East India Company to supersede the traditional one. This Act was to have serious repercussions on the Indian landed gentry (Read and Fisher 25).

[44] This was originally applied to a land tribute from non-Muslim tribes located within the Islamic world. T. P. Hughes, *A Dictionary of Islam*, W.H. Allen & Co., London, 1895, http://www.injil.de/Main///////Books/Hughes/index.htm. Accessed 16 April 2007.

other hand, maintaining the military forces in the area to ensure safety (ibid.).

Sir Sayyid affirmed that following the passage of the Act VI of 1819, many *la-kharaj* lands were confiscated, and on the basis of weak pretexts; as confirmed by H. Malik who summarized Sir Sayyid's statement by saying that on "'the flimsiest pretexts' many lands, which had been held rent-free for centuries, were confiscated by the Company" (ibid.). Actually, since setting up their hegemony over the South Asian Subcontinent, the East India Company officials had cast doubt on the grants of *la-kharaj* lands. They regarded them as a subterfuge used by their Muslim predecessors in order to meet the increasing demands on the imperial treasuries in the declining years of the Mughal Empire (ibid.). According to H. Malik, the Company officials accused some "impecunious" Mughal emperors of having abused their power when they used such land grants in order to meet some claims, made by some "fraudulent" subordinate officers, on empty coffers (ibid.).

In Sir Sayyid's view, the confiscation of *la-kharaj* lands alienated the local potentates a great deal. He further pointed out that, besides religious interference, the Act VI of 1819 was on the top of the list of Indian grievances against the administration of the East India Company (Malik 114). Moreover, Sir Sayyid also pointed the finger of blame to the Government of the East India Company for the decline of the Indian local industries. Indeed, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of modern industries, Britain sought very cheap raw materials as well as more overseas markets in order to get rid of its surplus mass-produced merchandize. Naturally, the easiest way for London to satisfy her needs was to turn to her colonies. This made the English Company pursue economic policies in India which would, on the one hand, encourage the exportation of raw materials, mainly cotton, to Britain as needed by the British textile industry (Prasad 504-05), and on the other hand, thwart Indian local industries in order to avoid competition within and outside India. As a matter of fact, many historians bear witness to the fact that the traditional Indian industries were higher than any European industry before the Industrial Revolution (476). Furthermore, during the eighteenth century, India maintained its position as the largest producer of

industrial goods (ibid.). Illustrating this industrial superiority, B. Prasad quotes a Portuguese visitor to India as saying:

> I could never make an end of telling such a variety of manufactures as well in gold, silver, iron, steel, copper and other metals, as in precious stones, choice woods, and other valued and rare materials. For they are all cunning folk and we nothing to the people of the West, themselves endowed with a keener intelligence than is usual with us and hands as subtle as ours … And what is to be observed of all good workmanship and cheap. (472-73)

It is noteworthy to mention that these Indian goods were manufactured by skilled craftsmen in their homes, who pursued the same occupation for generations.

In the meantime, British businessmen, who became politically powerful during the first half of the nineteenth century, feared for their businesses from Indian competition, as the latter made goods of higher quality. As a result, they lobbied Parliament to force the East India Company to take pre-emptive measures against Indian industries (ibid.). Thus, as part of its efforts to thwart Indian industries in favour of British goods, the Company went on importing large-scale machine-made goods into India at a cheaper price in order to undersell the local ones (Malik 116). This was aggravated by the fact that Indian handicrafts had to push up prices due to inland duties that were imposed by the Company customs within India itself (Desai 79-79). Meanwhile, heavy duties were levied on Indian goods imported into Britain. This led to a sharp decline in Indian cotton exports. According to Prasad, Indian imports in London fell from 6,000,000 rupees in 1792 to 3,000,000 rupees in 1823 (509). It would be worthwhile quoting A. R. Desai at length regarding this unfair trade:

> Had no such prohibitory duties and decrees existed, the mills of Pailsey and Manchester would have been stopped at their outset, and could scarcely have been again set in motion, even by the power of steam. Had India been independent, she would have retaliated… This act of self-defence was not permitted her; she was at the mercy of the stranger. British goods were forced upon her without paying any duty, and the foreign manufacturer employed the arm of political injustice to

keep down and ultimately strangle a competitor with whom he could have contended on equal terms. (Desai 76)

In addition to that, the introduction of the railways helped British manufactured goods penetrate the remotest areas of the Indian Subcontinent, hence establishing dominance over the Indian market (ibid.). This made India become a vital market for Britain's staple export, namely cotton goods (Hobsbawm 149). In other words, India was flooded with mass-produced goods from Britain and was forced to produce and export raw materials needed by British machines (Chandra, Tripathi and De 21). As a result, deprived of home and foreign markets because of the unfair competition from the British businessmen, that was condoned by London, the Indian handicraft industries collapsed by the mid-nineteenth century. In this respect, A.R. Desai commented that:

> Such was the tragic fate of the highly organized handicraft industries of India which had existed and thrived for centuries, which had spread the fame of India throughout the world, which had evoked the admiration and jealousy of other peoples from ancient times, from the Egyptians, the Persians, the Chinese, the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs, and the Europeans which had made India known as 'Gorgeous Ind' for epochs. (Desai 80)

In a word, Sir Sayyid was of the opinion that the British had pursued exploitative policies which aimed at profit-making at the expense of the native population. The fact that India was flooded with all kinds of cheap, mass-produced British goods culminated in gradually putting an end to traditional Indian industries. This threw many Indian craftsmen and artisans into a state of unemployment and hopelessness. Eventually, this category of the Indian society harboured a grudge against the East India Company and did not hesitate over the idea of rising up against it in 1857. In this regard, H. Malik stated that frustration and unemployment led thousands of Indians, particularly Muslims, to join the rebels "just as in a famine hungry men rush upon food" (Malik 116).[45]

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[45] According to Malik, these rebels were paid four or six pennies on a daily basis, while many of them received three pounds of grain daily instead of cash (ibid.).

Another cause that Sir Sayyid Ahmad dealt with in his pamphlet was the lack of communication between the governors and the governed. In his opinion, the East India Company officials settled in India only on a temporary basis and lived separately from the native population (Malik 115). Indeed, unlike the former Muslim rulers, the British were not keen on the idea of getting intermingled within the social tissue of the Indian Subcontinent. In reality, notwithstanding the fact of being alien to the natives in terms of religion and culture, the Muslim rulers did not bother about living alongside the Hindu population, and even sharing some aspects of their culture. According to H. Malik, the Delhi area was the best place to reflect Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis, where Mughal emperors and princes adopted in a liberal manner secular Hindu mores and folkways (25). Even women were said to have sung the same songs sung by Hindu women on occasions of birth, circumcision, engagement, wedding, and death (ibid.).[46]

Again in this respect, H. Malik bears witness to the fact that intermarriage between the princes of the Red Fort[47] and Hindu nobility were not uncommon. Here, it is noteworthy to mention the fact that it was the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605) who had set a precedent in this direction by marrying a Hindu woman, the daughter of a local raja (Malik 25). In a word, the relationship between the Muslim rulers and their subjects in pre-British India was, by and large, harmonious. However, the British gave the native inhabitants a wide birth that made it impossible to establish any sort of social intercourse between the former and the latter.

Nevertheless, some historians believe that the situation in the eighteenth century, namely, when the East India Company officials were fresh in the Subcontinent, was different. For instance, J. H.

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[46] According to Syed M. Taha and Nasreen Afzal, Muslims in South Asia allowed themselves, to a certain extent, to be influenced by Hindu culture due to the fact that they realized that they were a microscopic minority compared to the Hindus, and so, in order to make their rule acceptable, they felt the obligation to make some sort of concessions in order to placate the majority. As an illustration, the authors mentioned that some previous Mughal emperors, such as Babur and Akbar, went to the extent of forbidding cow slaughter in order to avoid offending the Hindus (Taha and Afzal 99).

[47] The "Red Fort" is an appellation used to refer to the Mughal court. It is usually called "Lal Qila" in Hindu and Urdu, and was the official residence of the Mughal emperors. It was built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in the mid-seventeenth century and was called the "Red Fort" due to its red sandstone walls. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, UK, 2001, CD-ROM Edition.

Plumb thinks that in the eighteenth century, there were many instances of mutual respect and warm intercourse between the British officials and the native population. As he pointed out in the following statement: "they (the British) adopted Indian habits in food and dress, and frequently married Indian women, … They showed deep respect for Indian authority, and an intelligent curiosity about the customs and habits so alien to their own" (Plumb).[17] Lending support to this statement, J. Morris referred, in his *Pax Britannica: The Climax of an Empire,* to the existence of easy and respectful social intercourse between the "white man" and the "brown" in the early days of the East India Company (Morris 134).

Be that as it may, this positive attitude would not outlive the early nineteenth century. In fact, many contemporary accounts attest to the fact that a metamorphosis occurred in the relationship between the East India Company officials and the natives whereby the former's attitude, characterized by aloofness, triggered coldness and distance between the two sides. While on the subject, it is useful to refer to the fact that this British aloofness could be reflected, in the main, in the military stations where it grew more flagrant. Some historians and contemporaries attributed this situation to the invention of the steamship (135). Actually the latter, which could go to and from India much faster than before, relieved the British officers from their boredom of being in a far country by making it possible for them to go home on leave during their tour of duty in India without being away for too long. It also made it possible for the officers' families to come and stay with them on visits or live in India permanently (ibid). Thus, with the invention of the steamship, there was no need to socialize with the natives for the purpose of evading boredom.

Again in this regard, some historians bear witness to the fact that before the invention of the steamship, the officers, by default, used to spend most of their time with the sepoys, namely native regiments, or their mistresses. J. Morris stated that "in those days, most of Englishmen in India took mistresses, and thus got close to the life and feelings of the Indian people in a way that their successors seldom could" (134). Now, with the arrival of the British wives made possible by the recent invention, the Company officers and the natives grew apart, and consequently, there was less trust and more ten-

sion between them. In fact, British women would not allow such Anglo-Indian socialisation to take place. After all, women represented home, and so there was no reason for the European officers to socialize with Indians, because their wives and relatives were there and there was no room for boredom as before (ibid.). Backing up this statement, S. David stated that "women were sent out as portable little packets of morality, to comfort their men, keep the blood-line clean, and remind them of their mothers" (David 39).

With Europeans becoming increasingly more preoccupied with their own society within a far land, contact between the native regiments and their officials was reduced to a minimum. C. Hibbert quoted Subedar Sita Ram Pande, an Indian soldier in the Company's service prior to 1857, recalling:

> In those days the sahibs (Europeans) used to give nautches[48] to the regiment, and they attended all men's games. The also took us with them when they went out hunting … Nowadays they seldom attend nautches because their padre sahibs (wives) have told them it is wrong. These padre sahibs have done, and are still doing, many things to estrange the British officers from the sepoys. When I was a sepoy the captain of my company would have some men at his house all day long and he talked with them … I know that many officers nowadays only speak to their men when obliged to do so … (55-56)

In such an atmosphere, the native soldier became subject to insult and maltreatment by his superior. S. David reports on a contemporary stating that the sepoy was regarded as an inferior creature. He was sworn at and spoken of as a "nigger." He was also addressed as a "suar" or pig, an appellation hated by a respectable native, especially a Muslim (David 40). Hence, in such an unpleasant ruler-ruled relationship, overshadowed by remoteness-cum-haughtiness on the part of the ruler, was there any room left for the existence of any form of communication between the two parties? In Sir Sayyid's opinion, this lack of communication between the governor and the governed was equally an important factor that wreaked havoc on the British Government in India, which was shaken to its foundations in 1857 (Malik 115).

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[48] A "nautch" is a traditional dance performed by professional dancing girls in the Indian Subcontinent (Hibbert 397).

Actually, in expounding Sir Sayyid's views of the causes of the Great Revolt, H. Malik asserted that the adoption of a "no-communication" policy with the Indian population made the British form false conceptions about its subjects. In other words, the Colonial Government misunderstood the opinions of its subjects, the result of which was seen in the happenings of 1857 (ibid.). Furthermore, according to H. Malik, the reports on the local population submitted by the British subordinate district officials, which were the one and only source of information for the Colonial Government, were "highly superficial and unreliable." This was due to the fact that the informants, who used to be "wealthy native gentlemen" once upon a time and were reduced to a state of hopelessness, were merely a bunch of sycophants who praised the governor in an insincere way in order to gain some favours (ibid.).

Apart from that, in addition to its main objective, namely the delineation of the most important reasons behind the outbreak of the happenings of 1857, *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind* was equally to serve as an apologia for those "few" Muslims who had committed a "serious" blunder by rebelling against the Colonial Government (Abbasi 18). Nonetheless, Sir Sayyid also argued that "the whole community should not be made to pay for the actions of some misguided individuals" (19). At the same time, Sir Sayyid pleaded with the British to reconsider their assessment of the Muslim community. In this respect, M. A. Karandikar reported him as arguing that despite the fact that the Muslims had committed a mistake, "all hope was not lost and the Muslims could even now be won back with the help of a prudent policy" (Karandikar 139-40).

It is worthwhile to mention the fact that Sir Sayyid did not take any active part in the event of 1857. On the contrary, he even provided shelter for European families. As corroborated by G. Ali Khan, who stated that Sir Sayyid saved the life of twenty European families at Bijnor and assured Mr Shakespeare, the local British magistrate, by saying: "As long as I am alive, you have no cause to worry" (Ali Khan 62). The fact that Sir Sayyid's faithfulness to the British at the height of the hostilities stood firm and unshaken did not go unnoticed. Indeed, the British in India were thankful and decided to reward him for having stood on their side. In this regard, H. Malik affirmed that Sir Sayyid was offered a *khilat* (robe of honour) of

"five pieces with three germs and a cash prize of one thousand rupees to compensate for the loss of his property in Delhi, which was estimated at Rs. 30,384" (Malik 82). Furthermore, according to H. Malik, Mr Shakespeare, just mentioned above, recommended in 1858 in a confidential report to R. Alexander, the local Commissioner, that Sir Sayyid should benefit from a pension of 200 rupees on a monthly basis in perpetuity, or for his own life and that of his eldest son (ibid.). Later on, by the same token, Sir Sayyid was to be invited to Britain in 1869 where he received a hero's welcome and had his pamphlet *Asbab-i Baghawat-i Hind* translated into English and published there (Karandikar 41).

Belkacem Belmekki[49]

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