

Sir Mohamed Usman - Pioneer of Social Justice

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Received: 23 May, 2023 | Accepted: 10 June, 2023 | Published: 13 June, 2023

Sir Mohamed Usman Khan, an unani doctor by profession, born in 1884 in an aristocratic Muslim family and his parents were T. Muhammed Yakub Sahib Bahadur and Chand Begum. Mohamed Usman married Shahzady Begum, daughter of Shifa ul-Mulk-Zynulabuddin Sahib Bahadur, Madras. He had no issue. By nature, Usman was pious, God-fearing, good natured, a nationalist and a philanthropist.

He was educated at the Madras Christian College and took his B. A. degree in Philosophy in 1905 under the guidance of the famous Dr. Miller of the Christian College, Madras. His co students are former President of India Dr. Radha Krishnan and famous historian Nilakanta Sastri¹.

Social Life

Sir Mohamed Usman was on close and intimate terms with Viscount Goschen and Lord Frederick Stanley, two of the famous Governors of Madras from 1925 to 1931. In spite of these high connections and intimacy with the high official circles, Usman was very simple and unassuming and mixed and moved with several of his friends freely. A man of principles, Usman was outspoken and there was no variation between his thought and his speech. He must be regarded as a gentleman to the very core, with a fund of common sense. He was respected by all, by both the Muslims and the Hindus of Madras. To understand the greatness and importance of Sir Mohamed Usman is to enumerate the various honors which he acquired by dint of his merit and the titles and offices which the British Government had conferred on him. He became a councillor of the Corporation of Madras when he was only twenty-nine and was appointed an Honorary Presidency Magistrate in 1916-20.

Sir Mohamed Usman was a favorite of the British Government and he was conferred the titles of Khan Sahib, Khan Bahadur and Kaiser-I-Hind in 1920, 1921 and 1923 respectively. In 1928 he was made a Knight and in 1933 he was awarded the medal and title of K.C.I.E. In 1935 he was presented with the Silver Jubilee Medal during the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the accession to the throne by King George V, and the Coronation Medal in 1937².

From 1921 to 1923 he was a Member of the Madras Legislative Council, representing the Muslims of Madras. Later, he was appointed the Sheriff of Madras in 1924 and he became the President of the Madras Corporation during 1924-25. He made his mark in other capacities, such as the Chairman of the Overseas League, Madras Branch, and President, Madras Children's Society. He was one of the trustees of the Madras Victoria Public Hall from 1921 to 1925 and the Honorary Secretary of the Muthialpet Muslim Anjuman from 1913 to 1925. In 1921, he was appointed Chairman of the Government Committee on the indigenous system of medicine³. In 1935, Usman became the first Indian President of the Rotary Club of Madras⁴.

Political Life

As a politician Sir Mohamed Usman was not a congressman. He was a member of the South Indian Liberal Federation (Justice Party) and presided over the non-Brahmin Confederation at Tiruchirapalli in 1919. In his early days, he was very much influenced by P. Theagaraya Chetty and the Raja of Panagal, the founders of the Justice Party of Madras.

He had mistrust of the "Brahmin-dominated" Congress, he advocated justice party politics that spoke of social justice. He was elected as a First secretary of the Justice Party when it was found and also became a Minister of Home for the Madras Presidency in the Justice Party government of the Raja of Bobbili in 1932.

He was totally against the non-violent non-cooperation movement organised by Mahatma Gandhi and the direct action started by the Congress. He emphasized the necessity of the political parties uniting and helping the British against Germany during World War II. He regarded Provincial Autonomy introduced by the Government of India Act of 1935 as a great gift of the British Government to India, and he sincerely believed that if it was worked with goodwill it could improve the condition of the people morally and materially. It was this political affiliation that led to his elevation as the Home Member of the Executive Council of the Governor of Madras from 1925 to 1934. He was also appointed acting Governor of Madras for a short period from May to August 1934⁵.

Service for Education Empowerment

Sir Mohamed Usman became the President of the Muhammadan Educational Association of South India (MEASI) from 1925 to 1935 and he was also the President of the Board of Visitors,

Government Muhammadan College, Madras. He was a Fellow of the Madras University for a long period from 1921. He became a member of the Senate of the University of Madras. He was Vice-President and Chairman of the Madras Branch of the Red Cross Society from 1941 to 1943.

From his membership of the Senate of the Madras University, he became a member of the Syndicate of the University. He was also elected a member of the Court of the Aligarh Muslim University. But the crowning achievement of Sir Mohamed Usman in the educational field was his appointment as the Vice-Chancellor of the Madras University during 1940-42. He was awarded the L.L.D. (Honoris causa) on the occasion of the Centenary Celebrations of the Madras University⁶.

School of Indian Medicine was the result of the deliberations of a Government Committee that met in 1921. It was chaired by Mohammed Usman and its Secretary was Capt. (Dr.) G. Srinivasa Murti who is generally considered the father of the school. Muhammad Usman, later knighted, was someone who for long has been a mystery, unless you count the well-known facts that he was an Executive Councillor, a Vice Chancellor of the University of Madras, and the first Indian to act as Governor of Madras⁷. (7) As the acting Governor, he was also the Chancellor of the Madras, Andhra and Annamalai Universities.

The Usman Report

The maternal and paternal grandfathers of Sir Usman were skilled practitioners of Unani medicine — a Perso-Arab system based on the teachings of Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen (Unani means Greek in Arabic). Sir Usman was a respected Unani physician and often addressed as ‘*Hakim Sahab*’ or ‘Doctor’ though he didn’t have a medical practice of his own.

In 1921, he chaired a government committee whose deliberations led to the founding of the School of Indian Medicine in 1925. The findings of *The Usman Report*, detailed the indigenous systems of healing in India and the need to let them thrive alongside Western medicine. The document is considered to be the first major health report to have been published in India.

As mentioned in *Modern and Global Ayurveda: Pluralism and Paradigms*, (edited by Dagmar Wujastyk, Frederick M Smith, published by State of New York University Press in 2008), among the more interesting features of the exhaustive report are the testimonies of *Vaidyas* and *Hakims* recorded in their original languages. There were 183 responses to a detailed questionnaire prepared by the Usman Committee that were sent out in English, Tamil, Sanskrit, Urdu, Telugu, Kanarese and Oriya⁸.

Executive Member of Viceroy Committee

The Viceroy's Executive Council was the cabinet of the Government of India headed by the Viceroy of India. It is also known as the Council of the Governor-General of India. It was transformed from an advisory council into a cabinet consisting of five members heading revenue, military, law, finance and home by the Indian Councils Act 1861 giving recognition to the portfolio system introduced

by Lord Canning in 1859. In 1874, a sixth member was added to be in charge of public works. On 8 August 1940, the Viceroy Lord Linlithgow made a proposal called the August Offer which expanded the Executive Council to include more Indians.

The King has approved the appointment of Khan Bahadur Usman Khan, a member of the executive council, to be the governor of Madras in place of Sir George Stanley during the latter's absence while acting as viceroy. Sir Mohamed Usman Shahib Bahadur, K.C.I.E has been one of the four members Executive council of the Governor. He is second Indian to be appointed governor of a province then the other being Sir Mohamed Said Khan who was appointed as Governor of the United Province the previous year⁹.

Sir Mohamed Usman was totally against the spread of Japanese influence in South-East Asia and was a strong supporter of British imperialism. When the British Government expanded the Viceroy's Executive Council by adding several Indian members, Sir Mohamed Usman was appointed a Member for Posts and Airways and occupied that position with great distinction and patriotism.

Even though the Congress and the Muslim League rejected the offer of the British Government made through Sir Stafford Cripps, Sir Mohamed Usman welcomed it and stated, "Patriotism is not the exclusive privilege and monopoly of political parties." He bitterly attacked the policy of the Congress Party when he declared, "All the progress that has been made in India as a result of British connection has been through the so-called irresponsible Executive Council. A responsible executive system of simple majority rule will not suit India on account of great communal differences¹⁰."

When he was a Member of the Executive Council at Madras, he was responsible for introducing a Bill for providing additional grants for the improvement of factories, for the improvement of the condition of the Depressed Classes and for the improvement of the lot of the Todas in the Nilgiris. He was always interested in the welfare of the poor and the downtrodden. When he died in February 1950, the press and the public hailed him as a great patriot¹¹.

Conclusion

Mohamed Usman was very rich. His house called Bada Bangla. There were only three bungalows on Eldams Road at the time. *Bada Bangla's* grounds started from the Teynampet gardens and spanned over two and a half streets away¹². However, he was kind to the poor. He worked for their welfare. He never fails to give food to the poor on festival days. He firmly believed that British rule will give empowerment and social justice to the downtrodden people. So, he closely tied relations and get confidence from the British at the same time he used his power to get benefits to the common people. One of the roads has been named in memory of Mohamed Usman in Chennai City's commercial hub T. Nagar.

End Notes

¹Third from, right? The Hindu, December 10,2007

² S. P. Sen, Dictionary of National Biography, Institute of Historical Studies, Calcutta, 1974, P. 375.

³ Ibid.

⁴ S. Muthiah, Madras, Chennai: A 400-year Record of the First City of Modern India, Volume 1, 2008.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ A hospital by any name, The Hindu, July 21, 2008.

⁸ "A 75-year-old legacy". The Hindu. August 11, 2003.

⁹ Madras Governor "Indian appointed to act for Sir George Stanley", The Straits Times, 11 January 1934, P.11

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Nahla Nainar, [The personal side of a public servant](#), The Hindu, August 18, 2017