

Dear Aligs!

The AMU community is at a cross-road today. In the history of every institution there comes some defining moments when it is faced with a choice of either reinventing itself or be thrown into the dustbin of history. Today, our crisis is acute, almost existential in nature. And what worries me most is the sickening realization that most of us are not even aware of this excruciating reality that beneath the shadow of a well-populated, rather crowded campus of some 30,000 souls, we have lost what is called the unique ‘university experience’. A university without a real university experience is like an unopened, unread book. It is a critical situation. Let me elaborate.

When Aligarh started as MAO College we were looked upon as a great seat of learning that turned young souls into cultured individuals with a scientific bent of mind; students who knew how to turn every crisis into an opportunity. From day one, we aspired to be the best. Our beloved founder – may Allah shower His blessings on him, had personally visited Oxford and Cambridge and envisioned Aligarh as Oxford of the Muslim world. A group of distinguished British teachers and some of the best minds of the Eastern world worked together to produce the Aligarh Man or the Alig; a highly cultured and captivating individual about whom many decades later Rasheed Ahmad Siddiqui, famous Urdu writer would say: ‘Jab kisi achchhe insaan ko dekhta hun to dil kah ta hai,yeh aadmi zaroor ALIG hoga’.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Today this great seat of learning is in danger because of weakening of the Aligarh spirit; a unique blend of Aligarh tahzeeb and modern education. Imagine, if Aligarh stops producing Aligs and churns out only graduates what would be its raison d’etre?

*This crisis has further been compounded by the new challenges that the Age of internet has thrown upon us. Despite our roots, embedded in the ground, we are forced, today, to live in cyberspace where the rules of the game are entirely different. With the online streaming of class-room videos emanating from Harvard and MIT our classroom lectures will soon be considered medieval and out dated. During the last few years Harvard has spent some 60 million dollars on EdX programmes that intend to provide online lectures to off-campus students. It is expected that in the coming years the number of off-campus Harvard students will grow in millions. It poses a great challenge to low-budget universities like ours. The EdX is not only the future of higher education, it also holds immense potential for spread of education amongst Muslims on a grand national scale. Linked with our Distance Learning Programme, I am sure, it can engineer a renaissance of Muslim education in India. Our university, as per AMU Amendment Act 1981 sec.5(2)(c) has been empowered by the Parliament “to promote especially the educational and cultural advancement of Muslims of India”. This legal provision has remained unutilised, so far, mainly for two reasons; lack of a clear vision and dearth of available resources.*

Dear Friends!

When I took over as a Vice-chancellor some 18 months ago, it took me sometime to realize that Aligarh is a great educational legacy with potential for renaissance. But to my dismay the ground realities on the campus bore little resemblance with the great ideals. Things were in shambles. It was a culture of utter neglect. From heritage buildings to rare books and from hostel life to class rooms, things demanded an immediate fix. Hostels are still overcrowded. Accommodation originally meant for 6000 students was overstretched to accommodate some 15000 students. The over crowding has

taken its toll and it has badly affected our overall performance. The enormity of the situation made me search for solutions. Following the footsteps of the great Sir Syed, I decided to visit some of the best universities of the West so as to figure out what made them so alluring and so distinct. During the visit we signed MoUs with a number of notable universities and also struck some deals for exchange programme. The trip was extremely rewarding but it made me realize that we were 50 years behind. Imagine! It was in 1869 when the great Sir Syed visited British universities to envision and establish a similar institution in India. Now after the elapse of 144 years I, as a custodian of this great legacy, found myself again in the West, this time to learn from the American university experience. Bluntly put, this made at least one thing clear that despite our efforts to reclaim the legacy of scientific knowledge we have not yet achieved what we initially aspired for. For me this was a painful and agonizing realization. For the last 150 years or so we were caught in a “catch-up syndrome”. Catching up with the West or any other civilization, for that matter, cannot give us a lead. This is the rule of the game. I believe it is about time we shun this outdated approach. And it is here that the new Aligarh can play a leading role.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Ever since the MAO College was founded, this ‘mitti ka diya’ or the homemade original device of light had been catalytic in spreading the awareness that there was nothing un-Islamic about modern science. Today, modern university campuses in the Arabian Gulf; Education city in Qatar and King Abdullah University in Saudi Arabia can be seen as a natural corollary to this awareness. Today, speaking in the land of Ibn-e-Maajid – the great medieval authority on Oceanography who lived in this region around the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, I am not only humbled by his encyclopaedic contribution but have also feel some relief because of this new awareness. Today, our new generation knows it well that when de Gama and Columbus were beginning their sea voyage as pioneers in the western hemisphere, IbnMajid was a world authority on oceanography whose encyclopaedic manuals and books were widely in use. For almost 600 years, from 12<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century, universities in the West looked towards the Muslim East for guidance and inspiration. For 600 years Avicenna’s *The Canon* (Al-Qanoon) served as a basic medical text book in western universities. The very idea of a modern university is Islamic in origin. The hood and the gown that so magnificently add colour to our convocations, have an Arab origin as so irrefutably established by George Makdisi. Today, we also know that not long back, until the term ‘scientist’ was invented in 1832, scientists were called ‘natural philosophers’ and the term for scientific knowledge was *úloom-e-arabiyyah* or knowledge of the Arab masters.

Aligarh Muslim University has educated several hundreds of students across the Muslim world. It has had close contacts with the Emirates as several honoured guests from royal families of UAE have visited the university on different occasions. HE Sultan Bin Sultan Al Nahayan visited on 1 April 1975 and his donation allowed us to establish the Institute of Petroleum Studies. On 25 February 1999 HE Obaid Bin Saif Al Nasser, Minister of Petroleum & Mineral Resources visited AMU to receive D. Lit. Degree (Honris Causa)

Dear friends!

Aligarh was established to reclaim this rich legacy of scientific research and exploration. An ideal Alig, as envisioned by the great Sir Syed, was the one who had Quran in one hand and science in the other. This ideal Alig is difficult to produce, nevertheless, we have come a long way. Science as a method is no more alien to us. When MAO College was founded, we were the only one calling for a rational and scientific thinking, today there are some 400 modern universities in the Muslim world

capable of undertaking any scientific venture. As a pioneer modern university Aligarh has a duty to serve as 'light on the hill' not only for the Muslim East but also for the Western world.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

To turn Aligarh into an 'intellectual power house' and restore its primacy in the academic world, we have made a detailed strategic plan: **Vision 2020**. The paucity of time does not allow me to share with you the entire document. Hence, I shall limit myself to some of the main highlights.

Preserving and Restoring the Aligarh Spirit:

- Aligarh Tahzeeb which is a unique blend of Indo-Islamic culture and is known for its all-encompassing pluralism, God-oriented secularism, freedom of thought and a commitment for the millat as well as for rest of humanity, has to serve as guiding light in all our efforts to give Aligarh a new look.
- Aligarh Tahzeeb is not limited to Sherwani, Biriyani or Shere-o-Shayri. In a changing world where English has attained primacy the idea of an ideal Alig needs to be revisited.
- Our founder was a great thinker and a prolific writer. It is unfortunate that Aligarh has yet to produce a compendium of his writings. With very little resources at its command, Sir Syed Academy probably cannot do much unless it gets generous support from the spiritual sons and daughters of Sir Syed. We have a plan to collect and edit each and every piece of his writings and publish them as a multi-volume compendium. And it has to be done before the year 2020 when the university will be celebrating its centenary.
- Our founder was also a great Islamic reformer. His journal Tahzeebul Akhlaq was also subtitled as the Mohammedan Social Reformer. Although the journal resumed its publication in the 80s, soon it turned out to be an ordinary magazine. We are desperately looking for a new set of writers who can ignite young minds, instilling in them a true Islamic spirit and scientific thinking.
- According to Iqbal, Sir Syed 'was the first Indian Muslim who felt the need of a fresh orientation of Islam and worked for it'. It is again unfortunate that the religious project of Sir Syed remains frozen in his own university. This certainly is no tribute to the founder nor a good omen for a living community. Given the sensitivity attached to this issue, it needs an open debate. Remember! There is no sane alternative to critical thinking.

**Some Major Initiatives:**

- For the first time in AMU history, a comprehensive plan is being laid out for the renovation of our heritage buildings. We are in touch with the Agha Khan Foundation persuading them to sponsor this grand project. We cannot wait much longer because if we do not restore Strachey Hall its roof will collapse. We need 5 Cr for this restoration. These historical buildings emanating from the Jama Masjid will be the convention centre of AMU.
- We have to immediately de-congest our hostels. We are in the process of constructing a new hostel for 1500 girls and 1000 boys. We need funds to build a hostel for international and NRI students (10 Cr). Our policy is "games at your doorstep". We have constructed 19 basket ball courts and an equal number of volley ball courts, ie one for each hostel. To discourage "Dhaba Culture" we have made a cafe in each hall.
- We are in the process of revitalizing our schools. These are our feeder institutions. The Govt has agreed to upgrade all our schools upto KV standards. We start with the Union School this year.
- We need to upgrade our class rooms. We should have one smart class room for each of our 100 departments. (10 lacs per class room).
- We need to upgrade our syllabi and have constituted a committee of young energetic teachers who have had an exposure abroad to make recommendations which will be implemented with next academic session.

- Our research must be productive and driven by passion. We have constituted an Innovation Council to encourage research and facilitate procurement of patents.
- AMU is the only university with a riding club. We urgently need new stables (5Cr). We are one of the two with an astro turf hockey ground. We need an Olympic size swimming pool (5Cr).
- We intend making AMU the first green university and will be investing Rs 20 Cr to harness solar power for electricity generation.
- An entirely new Faculty of International Studies is in offing that will bring together foreign language experts and area specialists. It will also serve as a window to the world.
- JNMC needs to be modernized. We are considering a proposal for upgradation of JNMC into AIIMS under MOH.
- This year we have also started a Bridge Course for madarsa graduates. The idea is to bridge the knowledge gap. The course will prepare madarsa students for undergraduate studies in Humanities, Social Sciences, Management and Law. Depending on the success of this initiative, in the future we can also think of providing them with intense coaching for admission to other professional courses. Madarsa is a vast educational network, an intellectual shelter for the poor, less privileged lot. Synchronising it with the university system will have revolutionary implications. We wish that like other students the madarsa people too think big and dream even bigger.
- Our old boys are our ambassadors in different parts of the world. We need their 3T's ( Time, Talent and Treasure). We have constituted an Alumni Affairs Committee for an effective global networking of our old boys and for utilising their support in our development schemes. They are spread in 90 countries and wherever I visited them, I could gauge the immense love and attachment they have for their alma mater. This past summer I was in the US and this is no exaggeration to say that the Alig community there made me feel as if I was visiting just an extended campus of the AMU.

Dear friends!

Next time when you visit the campus you may breathe fresh air and experience a better and peaceful intellectual atmosphere. We are working hard to fix potholes in our geographical campus as well as in the minds of our people. An eco-friendly, noise-free campus with wider roads and new pavements, clean, comfortable guest houses awaits you on your next visit. The idea is to turn the entire campus into a buzzing intellectual hub. New hostels, new departments, new buildings, new roads and above all we are working hard to create a new, vibrant Muslim mind to take Aligarh to new heights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In short, back home at AMU, a revolution is underway. I invite you to be an active partner in this great Aligarh Renaissance.

There is a common misconception that AMU is a government funded institution hence it does not require any outside financial support. The fact is that the government funding is inadequate and is mainly exhausted in catering to energy bills, staff salaries and other logistics. Very little is left for maintenance and development. If AMU has to function as a leading world-class institution it must find other avenues for extra funding. From day one “chanda” (public & private donations) has been our hallmark and a constant source of funding. Never mind! “Chanda” is our lifeline, it is very much in the blood of this institution. Without our petty donations and emotional involvement this institution cannot thrive. In the past we had princely states in India and they wholeheartedly supported our construction projects. Govt funding is generous but inadequate because it has to be spread over a thousand universities, on the anvil. But today we are in the process of reinventing ourselves where our competitors are Harvard and MIT. We are left with no other choice. Either we reinvent ourselves or perish. Behold! This is a defining moment. We cannot afford empty coffers. Today we do not have princely states but we have our alumni, big foundations and endowments and a large number of philanthropists ever willing to support a noble cause. The issue is who should approach them and how? To our advantage, we are a global community of visionaries and planners

and need to work in unison. The Aligarh based Alumni Affairs Committee may serve as a liaison office. It is high time for the worldwide AMU community to act globally. Only then we will be justified to sing in unison:

جو ابر یہاں سے اٹھے گا وہ سارے جہاں پر برسے گا