

# Healing and Liberation: The Legacy of Hakim Ajmal Khan

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**Abstract-** The current paper aims to highlight the life and achievements of Hakim Ajmal Khan (1868-1927), a pioneer Unani physician involved in India's freedom struggle. Born in 1868 into a family of prominent Unani physicians, he worked tirelessly to revive and modernise traditional medicine while also actively taking part in the national liberation struggle. The paper chronicles his rise from successful practicing physician to one of the most prominent figures in the Indian independence movement, focusing on his efforts to integrate Unani medicine with modern scientific practices and promote Hindu-Muslim unity. The establishment of Tibbia College, his involvement with the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress, as well as his participation in the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements, prove his diverse contributions to India's medical, educational, and political landscape at a critical juncture in its history.

**Keywords:** Hakim Ajmal Khan, Unani Medicine, Tibbia College, Khilafat, Non-Cooperation, Jamia Millia, Hindu-Muslim Unity, Indian National Congress, Muslim League

Hakim Ajmal Khan (1868-1927), a well-known physician and freedom fighter, was born on 12 February 1868 in Delhi to a family that was known for producing highly skilled Unani physicians. Although he studied medicine alongside his father, Hakim Mahmud Khan, and Hakim Ghulam Raza Khan, he learned most of his skills from his older brothers, Hakim Abdul Majeed Khan and Hakim Wasil Khan. He owed them a great deal for helping him in setting up a successful medical practice. In 1892, at the age of 24, he joined the Court of Rampur to serve as Nawab Hamid Ali Khan's personal physician. His time in Rampur was fruitful in many ways. There he came across with the renowned Arabic writer Tayyab Mecci, who was then living in Rampur Court. It was through

his training that Ajmal Khan could converse and write in Arabic with great ease. It also gave him the opportunity to meet with many national leaders, which later helped him break into national politics. Nonetheless, due to personal reasons, he had to resign from his position after nine years of service.

After both of his elder brothers died within three years, he became the sole heir to Tib art. He also took on the responsibility of running Tibbia Madrasa. The institution was founded in 1883 by his elder brother, Hakim Abdul Majeed Khan, who, realising the limitations of traditional teaching methods, tried to institutionalise the Unani system of medicine on the model of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's A. M. O. College. To ensure the school's future, he co-founded the Indian Medicines Company, the proceeds of which were used to support the institution. The company was later renamed '*Hindustani Dawakhana*', which still exists in Ballimaran and is now managed by the Delhi Administration.

Ajmal Khan established a successful practice in Delhi, and his reputation quickly spread across India, attracting patients from all over the country. His ability to combine traditional Unani methods with modern medical advances made him one of the most well-known healers of his time. His clinic was always full of patients, regardless of rank, position, caste, or creed. Giving his observation about his clinic C. F. Andrews states that "he made no difference whatever between rich and poor, Hindu and Mussalman: all were treated alike, and I noted especially the number of the Hindu poor who received free treatment."<sup>1</sup> He never charged consultation fees at his clinic, but when he was called from outside Delhi, he charged a thousand rupees per day. In 1908, the British Indian Government honoured him with the title of *Haziq-ul-Mulk*<sup>2</sup> (literally, the skilled one of the kingdom) in recognition of his

<sup>1</sup>C. F. Andrews, '*Hakim Ajmal Khan*' in *Eminent Mussalmans* (Madras, 1926), pp.291

<sup>2</sup>Qazi Mohammad Abdul Ghaffar, *Hayat-i-Ajma l*(Aligarh, 1950), pp.72

outstanding contributions to the cause of Indian medicine.

Since the Abbasid Caliphate, Unani medicine has been an integral part of Muslim culture and social identity across the Muslim world. However, by the time of British rule, it was in decline. According to Ajmal Khan, it was in a bad state because practicing physicians stuck to old traditional methods and refused to keep up with modern advances in the field.<sup>3</sup> The British's preference for Western medicines further alienated indigenous systems such as Ayurveda and Unani, which the British saw as inherently inferior. As a result, traditional systems were faced with not only competition, but also a direct threat to their very survival.

Ajmal Khan dedicated his entire life to reversing the decline of Unani medicine and rebuilding it on the basis of modern research. He was motivated in part by a desire to revive and preserve Muslim culture, because Unani medicine, as previously stated, was inextricably linked to Muslim intellectual and medical heritage. Restoring its glory, he believed, would protect one of the most important aspects of Muslim identity and pride, particularly at a time when colonial rule was trying to undermine the country's traditional values and institutions. He was also driven by a genuine concern for public health and societal well-being, as well as a desire to make the country self-sufficient in this regard.

One of the most remarkable events in his professional career occurred in 1910, when the Bombay Medical Association requested the Government of Bombay to introduce a Medical Practitioners Registration Bill in the Bombay Legislative Council. This bill sought to restrict medical practice to those trained in Europe or with a degree from a recognised Indian university, eliminating traditional Unani and Ayurvedic practitioners.<sup>4</sup> The bill also proposed setting up a Medical Council to regulate medical practitioners, with the authority to remove a physician's name from the register if found guilty of misconduct or unprofessional behaviour. Recognising that this was a

death knell not only for his personal profession, but also for India's medical heritage, he initially tried to defeat the bill with the help of Indian legislators but failed.

Despite his early setbacks, he launched a nationwide campaign to oppose this sinister move. He personally toured the country and lobbied strongly against the bill. He also requested the *hakims* and *vaid*s to form a united front to oppose it by holding meetings and communicating their disapproval of the bill to the Governor of Bombay. He organised meetings in both Delhi and Bombay to demand not just changes to the bill but also fair representation on the proposed Medical Council.

At last, he emerged victorious in this fight, and the government passed a resolution stating that "attempts would be made to place the ancient and indigenous systems of medicine on a scientific basis"<sup>5</sup>. As a result, Tibbia colleges were opened by the governments of Madras and Bihar in their respective provinces, while the government of the United Provinces established a Board of Indian Medicine. The district and municipal boards also had to appoint *hakims* and *vaid*s in their respective local dispensaries.<sup>6</sup>

Simultaneously, in 1910, to gain official recognition, he organised the All-India Ayurvedic and Tib Conference, which held its inaugural session in Delhi. Reflecting on indigenous medicine's achievements thus far, he urged delegates to reform the existing system. He claimed that traditional systems were not inferior to others around the world, but that because Indian physicians did not adapt to changing times, the entire system was on the verge of collapse.<sup>7</sup> He also emphasised the importance of setting up modern and suitable institutions for the proper education of both medicine and surgery. He also asked them to incorporate the latest researches in science and medicine. Furthermore, he urged them not to reject modern Western methods. His efforts, however, were met with resistance. For instance, the Unani physicians of Lucknow disagreed with him on several points. They not only avoided other systems, but also opposed

<sup>3</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.33

<sup>4</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.23

<sup>5</sup>Barbara D. Metcalf, *Nationalist Muslims in British India: The Case of Hakim Ajmal Khan* (1985) pp.19

<sup>6</sup>Qazi Mohammad Abdul Ghaffar, *Hayat-i-Ajmal* (Aligarh, 1950), pp.85-86

<sup>7</sup>Qazi Mohammad Abdul Ghaffar, *Hayat-i-Ajmal* (Aligarh, 1950), pp.87

collaborating with the Ayurvedic *Vaids*, who likewise believed it was harmful to align with Unani *hakims*.

Ajmal Khan, on the other hand, had a broad vision. He realised that if Unani medicine were to thrive, it needed to be systematised, institutionalised, and even reformed in such a way that it could coexist with other medical practices, including contemporary Western medicine. His visit to Europe in 1911 convinced him even more of the importance of institutions like the ones he saw there. To make his dream a reality, he toured the country, raising funds primarily from princely rulers in Rampur, Bhopal, Patiala, Alwar, Gwalior, and Indore. In 1916, despite facing opposition from Malcolm Hailey, the Chief Commissioner of Delhi, he was able to successfully purchase a plot of land in Karol Bagh thanks to his friendship with Viceroy Lord Harding.<sup>8</sup>

On March 29, 1916, the Viceroy himself laid the foundation stone for the proposed Tibbia College. However, long before the building was completed, Ajmal Khan's views shifted dramatically; he became a staunch nationalist and invited Mahatma Gandhi to inaugurate the college's new building on 13 February 1921. Ajmal Khan, on the other hand, could not forget the Viceroy's favours and named a wing of the college after the late Lady Harding, who died a few years ago. Since its inception, Ajmal Khan has continued to expand Tibbia College to the fullest extent possible. The college had a hospital of its own known as *Dar-ul-Marda*. It had both an indoor patient wing and an outdoor patient department. In 1923, he founded a separate section of the College called *Vedic Dawakhana* and *Ayurvedic Rasayan Pathshala* with the goal of preserving ancient Vedic medicines and promoting the Ayurvedic medical system. The College still holds the distinction of being the only institution in the country that offers education in both the Ayurvedic and Unani systems of medicine concurrently.<sup>9</sup> In 1926, he established *Dar-ul-Tahqiqat*, a separate department devoted to modern scientific research. He had already assigned renowned chemist Dr. Salimuz Zaman to conduct chemical research on indigenous drugs in 1925. Tibbia College

truly reflects his vision to integrate traditional medical practices with modern scientific knowledge.

He remained equally concerned with the plight of women, who suffered the most from malnutrition and unsanitary living conditions. To address their problem, he opened a Zenana Tibbia School and Hospital by getting it formally inaugurated by the wife of the Lt. Governor of Punjab, Lady Dane, on 13 January 1909. It was a radical step toward professional courses in female education, given that female education was not popular at the time. Furthermore, efforts were also made to train highly qualified midwives to assist Indian women in their hour of need.

Despite being primarily a physician, Ajmal Khan could not keep his eyes closed to the country's ever-changing political landscape. His political involvement began in 1906 with his participation in the famous Simla deputation and later his support for the resolution establishing the All-India Muslim League in Dhaka.

Since the outset of his political career, he believed that political activity should be understood in terms of community membership and, therefore, mediated through communal organisation. This is clearly evident from his welcome address which he delivered to the third annual session of the Muslim League in Delhi in 1910:

“..... in advancing the cause of one section of the population you advance, indirectly, the cause of the whole..... So long as such sectional interests, whether of the Hindus or the Mohammedans, do not jeopardise the larger interests of the country or community, we should welcome them....”<sup>10</sup>

No wonder that his early political activities were closely aligned with the Muslim League and its objectives, which revolved around the advancement and preservation of Muslim rights and interests under colonial rule. At this stage, he emphasised the theme of Muslim backwardness and reviewed the areas in which Muslim interests needed to be protected. As a result, he emphasised the importance of Muslim representation in universities, municipal and district boards, legislative councils, and the viceroy's council

<sup>8</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.35

<sup>9</sup>Department of Ayush, *Unani System of Medicine: The Science of Health and Healing* (New Delhi, 2013) pp.8

<sup>10</sup>A. M. Zaidi, *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought in India* Vol. I, (New Delhi, 1959) pp.185

to ensure the community's voice is heard and progress is made. He also backed the League's efforts to secure greater political representation and praised British statesmanship for granting such a significant demand in the form of separate electorates for Muslims in 1909.

Despite his involvement with the Muslim League from the beginning, Ajmal Khan, unlike many others in Syed Ahmad Khan's tradition, did not regard the Indian National Congress as inherently hostile to Muslim interests. Furthermore, his first-hand experience with Hindu-Muslim cooperation during the campaign against the Medical Registration Bill convinced him of the value of collaboration between the two communities in achieving larger national goals. This conviction later inspired him and other like-minded leaders to advocate for an amendment to the Muslim League's constitution that emphasised self-rule as the ultimate goal. This shift brought the League much closer to the Indian National Congress. Later, he served on the League Committee, which was in charge of negotiating details with the Congress Committee, which resulted in the Congress-League Scheme, also known as the Lucknow Pact of 1916.<sup>11</sup> During World War I, Ajmal Khan, like Mahatma Gandhi, promoted British war efforts among Muslims, earning the *Kaiser-i-Hind* Gold Medal in January 1915. Actually, until World War I, he was among those who believed that loyalty was the safest way to protect their interests. However, when Turkey joined Germany, Muslim sentiments shifted, and Muslims rallied behind Turkey as a symbol of Islamic unity. As a result, the government reacted quickly and harshly, resulting in widespread oppression and the arrest of prominent Muslim leaders. Even Ajmal Khan was suspected of conspiring with the Afghans to destabilise the British government. Ajmal Khan's involvement with organisations such as Mohammad Ali's *Khuddaam-i-Kaaba* and *Nazarat-ul-M'aarif* of Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi- who was linked to the Provisional Government of India in Kabul- heightened

British suspicions<sup>12</sup>. This growing repression and mistrust strained his relations with the government, forcing him to reconsider his earlier stance of loyalty to the British government.

However, as he revealed to C. F. Andrews,<sup>13</sup> it was the tragic Jallianwala Bagh massacre that triggered a dramatic shift in him, transforming him from a loyalist to an agitator and effectively ruling out any possibility of reconciliation with the British government. From that point forward, he fully embraced nationalism and became a devoted Gandhi supporter for the rest of his life.

Ajmal Khan's most lasting legacy was his promotion of Hindu-Muslim unity. During the unrest in Delhi following Rowlatt Satyagraha, he was preoccupied with keeping the city peaceful. He, along with Swami Shradhanand and Dr. M. A. Ansari, worked tirelessly to maintain communal harmony, and it was their efforts that strengthened the bonds between the two communities. "The sight was wonderful!" observes Swami Ji, "the Muslim biers went mainly carried on Hindu shoulders and the Hindu biers were supported by Muslim shoulders."<sup>14</sup> Their collaborative efforts were later recognised, and both national leaders and British officials paid them tribute. These efforts increased his personal stature as a national leader, allowing him to lead the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress in 1919 and 1921, respectively.

As President of the Muslim League's Amritsar Session in 1919, he urged all Muslims to refrain from slaughtering cows on *Bakrid*. He cited many religious traditions, claiming that the sacrifice of animals other than cows was preferable.<sup>15</sup> Because he was well aware that this animal had caused many communal riots, he sought a peaceful solution to the problem to bridge the divide between the two communities and unite them for a larger national cause.

As a well-known figure among both Muslims and Hindus, the Hindu Mahasabha appointed Ajmal Khan as Chairperson of the Reception Committee for its

during the Martial Law days in the Punjab, in the year 1919".

<sup>14</sup> Swami Shradhanand, *Inside Congress* (Bombay, 1946) pp.62

<sup>15</sup> A. M. Zaidi, *Evolution of Muslim Political Thought in India* Vol. II, (New Delhi, 1959) pp.193-195

<sup>11</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.75

<sup>12</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.80

<sup>13</sup>C. F. Andrews, 'Hakim Ajmal Khan' in *Eminent Mussalmans* (Madras, 1926), pp.297-298

"My political ideas were wholly changed by the iniquitous deeds of the present bureaucracy in India

1921 session in Delhi. It was the first and only time in Mahasabha history that a Muslim leader received such an honour.<sup>16</sup> Seizing the opportunity, he preached from its platform the gospel of communal unity and love, emphasising his lifelong commitment to communal harmony.

During the Khilafat Movement, Ajmal Khan helped organise the All-India Khilafat Committee, of which he was also elected President later in 1921. He is also credited with initiating the Khilafat Movement, which later was merged with the Non-Cooperation Movement. On 19 March 1920, observed as Khilafat Day in India, he returned to the British Government the *Kaiser-e-Hind* Gold Medal, two coronation silver medals, and the title *Haziq-ul-Mulk*, which he had received earlier in recognition of his meritorious public service as a physician.<sup>17</sup>

During this very time, Ajmal Khan established a National Muslim University in Aligarh called *Jamia Millia Islamia* on 19 October 1920, with the goal of boosting the non-cooperation programme. The college's foundation stone was laid down by the well-known Nationalist Muslim scholar *Shaikh-ul-Hind* Maulana Mahmud Hasan of Deoband, who had recently returned from exile in Malta, where he had been interned for his alleged involvement in the Silk-letters conspiracy. Ajmal Khan was its first Chancellor, a position he held throughout his life. In 1925, he moved the college to Delhi, where it received continuous attention. He was solely responsible for raising funds for the institution, and it is true that if he had not watched over it, it would have collapsed long ago.

In an unexpected turn of events, at the height of the Non-Cooperation Movement, the All-India Congress Committee chose him to lead the Ahmedabad Congress. This opportunity arose following C. R. Das' arrest in Calcutta shortly before the Ahmedabad Congress. He accepted the unanimous offer, which, according to C. F. Andrews, "crowned the whole work of his own life in the cause of Hindi-Muslim unity."<sup>18</sup> Following Mahatma Gandhi's arrest and imprisonment, he assumed temporary leadership of the

entire movement, which he carried out diligently despite his own declining health.

To summarise, Hakim Ajmal Khan's life and contributions represent an important intersection of medical knowledge, educational reform, and political activism at a critical point in Indian history. The fact that he opposed the medical bill demonstrates his passion and determination to preserve ancient Unani medicine, which could have vanished entirely from India, as it has in Middle Eastern countries, if he had not fought against such efforts.

Despite opposition from his fellow traditional physicians, his strong commitment to modernising and institutionalising Unani medicine, particularly through the establishment of Tibbia College, demonstrates his progressive approach to preserving traditional practices while aligning them with modern scientific standards. He aimed to harmonise the three major medical systems—Unani, Ayurveda, and allopathy—by identifying and eliminating their flaws. Rather than seeing them as competitors, he saw them as complementing one another.

Furthermore, his ability to unite communities by promoting Hindu-Muslim unity is one of his most enduring achievements, as shown by his membership in both the Muslim League and the Indian National Congress. Furthermore, the founding of *Jamia Millia Islamia* demonstrates his belief in education as a tool for national empowerment. In short, his contributions as a freedom fighter, physician, and educator helped shape modern India by promoting development, unity, and self-sufficiency.

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<sup>16</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.148

<sup>17</sup>Zafar Ahmad Nizami, *Hakim Ajmal Khan* (New Delhi, 1988), pp.132

<sup>18</sup>C. F. Andrews, 'Hakim Ajmal Khan' in *Eminent Mussalmans* (Madras, 1926), pp.298

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