

COLONIAL MODERNITY AND MUSLIM RESPONSES IN BRITISH INDIA: A STUDY OF THE ALIGARH MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to investigate the Indian Muslim response to British colonialism and modernism, with a particular focus on Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's (1817–1888) Aligarh Movement, launched in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The destruction of Mughal sovereignty and the disastrous failure of the Great Revolt of 1857 inflicted severe harm on Indian Muslims. Colonial modernity, constructed on the categories of Western rationalism, secular education, and new administrative structures, challenged traditional Islamic epistemologies and sociocultural paradigms that had shaped the identity of Muslims in the subcontinent for centuries. In this context, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan emerged as one of the most important intellectual and educational reformers of South Asian Islam. In 1875, he founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh to synthesize Islamic principles with Western scientific thinking, contending that the reasons for Muslim decline lay in intellectual stagnation and the futility of armed confrontation with a dominant colonial power, rather than in Islam itself. He led the Aligarh Movement, which promoted an amalgamation of Islamic identity and contemporary education, and strategic loyalty to the British Raj as a pragmatic means of Muslim sociopolitical rehabilitation. Drawing on primary sources, including Sir Syed's texts, and secondary scholarship on colonial and South Asian history, the Aligarh Movement is situated within broader global discourses of colonialism, modernism, and indigenous responses to Western hegemony. It argues that the intellectual basis of Muslim nationalism in South Asia was the reformist agenda of Sir Syed, which orthodox religious leaders stridently opposed, leading to the creation of Pakistan in 1947. The paper also examines the movement's cultural legacy, including its effect on Urdu literature, progressive political thought, and Marxist historiography in the subcontinent. The discourse in this study is based on archival sources and given normative analysis.

Keywords: colonialism, modernism, South Asia, Muslims, Aligarh Movement, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

INTRODUCTION

One of the most fascinating instances in world history of native peoples negotiating between externally imposed systems of knowledge and power and their own deeply ingrained cultural and

religious traditions is the encounter between colonialism and modernity in South Asia in the nineteenth century. The military and administrative dominance of the British East India

Company posed a sharp confrontation between Western rationalism, Enlightenment philosophy, scientific empiricism, and a secular model of government and the worldview of the Indian communities, including the Muslims. In 1857, the Great Revolt was suppressed, and the Crown took direct control of Indian administrative, legal, and political affairs.

British colonization of India brought about drastic socio-political and administrative transformation, particularly for the Muslim community in South Asia. They experienced the nineteenth century as a precipitous fall of the Mughal Empire from political and cultural eminence. The Muslim elite experienced a severe social and intellectual disorientation following the abolition of the Mughal court in 1858, the substitution of Persian by English as an official language, and the systematic marginalization of traditional institutions of Islamic learning. Nonetheless, the Hindu upper-caste counterparts, especially the Bengali *bhadralok* (i.e., privileged and educated class among the Hindu Community), had more easily engaged with colonial educational systems during the Bengal Renaissance. The majority of the Indian Muslims withdrew themselves into conservative religious institutions like Darul Ulum Deoband, rejecting the Western education introduced by the colonial government. They were more concerned with their religious and cultural identity and considered modernism as a threat to it. Consequently, they were the least beneficiaries of the newly evolving administrative and economic setup in British India.

It was against this backdrop of turmoil that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) emerged as a reformer of Indian Muslim society with a mission to restore their dignity and political uplift by meeting the challenge of modernity and eliminating the distrust between British and Indian Muslims. The Aligarh Movement is said to have been the result of his endeavors, approaches, and initiatives to reform the Muslim intellectual life while maintaining its Islamic moral tone. Intending to deliver modern and scientific education to the community, the focal point of the movement was the establishment of the Scientific Society and Translation Society in 1864, the

Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 in Aligarh, which later became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920.

This paper places the Aligarh Movement in the broader history of the Muslim community by outlining the detrimental impact of the 1857 Revolt and demonstrating how this trauma influenced the reformist agenda of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement. It goes into the theoretical connection between modernism and colonialism by evaluating how modern thought developed in Europe and how it was exported to non-Western countries like India as part of imperialism. The specific historical responses of Indian Muslims to British colonization and the subsequent crisis of modernity are further made the subject of examination. A comprehensive account of the aftermath of the Revolt of 1857 and its devastating effects on Muslim society is provided in the third section. This study addresses Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's biography, his intellectual contributions, the institutional and cultural legacy of his movement, and its far-reaching influence on Muslim nationalism and progressive thought in South Asia. This paper contributes to a body of scholarship that rejects simplistic narratives of passive subjugation or outright defiance and instead argues for the complexity and historical contingency of Muslim responses to colonial modernity in South Asia by situating the Aligarh Movement within global debates on colonial encounter, indigenous modernity, and religious reform.

Modernism and Colonialism

Modernity in Europe evolved in an extensive, uneven, and often very contentious process, based on the intellectual and social changes occurring between the 16th and 19th centuries. The Scientific Revolution, with the contributions of great figures in the field of science—such as Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), Galileo Galilei (1564-1642), Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), Isaac Newton (1643-1727)—broke apart the mediaeval Christian cosmology that had conceived the universe as divinely ordered, hierarchical, and fixed. It was replaced by a mechanistic worldview, a world of natural laws which could be discovered

and made available to human reason through systematic observation and experiment. This epistemological revolution had implications not only for natural philosophy, but for all aspects of human thought. It seemed plausible to assume that human society, ethics, and governance followed observable, rational patterns. This belief was centered in the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers including John Locke (1632-704), Voltaire (1694-1778), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and David Hume (1711-176) advocated religious toleration, constitutional government, individual liberty and the supremacy of reason over revelation and tradition. The belief that human history moves inexorably forward by the application of reason to ever-greater rationality, freedom, and material prosperity has become a hallmark of the modern worldview. The central commitment of the Enlightenment was the emancipation of the human intellect from the tutelage of tradition, superstition, and clerical authority, epitomized in Kant's famous injunction to "dare to know" (*sapere aude*).

The Industrial Revolution brought unprecedented material changes to the world, and the intellectual revolutions of the late 1800s and early 1900s did as well. The swift development of transportation and communication technologies (telegraph, steamships, and railroads) resulted in the mechanization of production, the factory system, the rise of industrial capitalism, and the transformation of European societies. These changes have made modernist values—individualism, secularism, confidence in technology, and a strong belief in humanity's capacity to control both nature and society—firmly entrenched. By the mid-nineteenth century, the great European powers, above all Britain, France and Germany, had reached the peak of a world order built on technological supremacy, industrial capitalism and imperial expansion.

It was this conjunction of modernity and empire that gave the nineteenth-century colonization its particular ideological character. According to the scholars like Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and John Atkinson Hobson in his seminal work

Imperialism: A Study (1902) have argued that the European colonialism was not only an economic but also an ideological enterprise of the highest order. The colonizing powers characterized the societies they subjugated as backward, irrational, stagnant, and in need of sophistication and modern education. They described themselves as agents of civilization, progress, and reason. In his famed poem written in 1899, Rudyard Kipling called this ideology the "civilizing mission" and "the White Man's Burden," and this mission could only be accomplished through imposition of Western educational and administrative constructs on the colonized peoples. This had played a vital role in providing moral justification for the colonization of the countries in Africa and Asia.

The primary impact of this ideological campaign and consequent initiatives was on education in British India. After Thomas Babington Macaulay's (1800-1859) infamous *Minute on Indian Education* (1835), the colonial government made English the medium of higher education. All this was done with the deliberate aim of creating a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect." Traditional knowledge systems such as Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit learning were seen as impediments to progress rather than being acknowledged as repositories of civilizational achievement. Within the social and institutional framework of utilitarian-inspired administrative and legal systems that supported Western epistemological hegemony, Western education was the sole dependable route to social mobility and political engagement.

Response of Indian Muslims towards British Colonization and Modernism

The initial Muslim response to British colonialism was largely characterized by resistance—both armed and intellectual—rooted in the conviction that accommodation with colonial power was neither politically viable nor religiously permissible. In the decades preceding the Great Revolt of 1857, various streams of Islamic revivalism sought to purify Muslim religious practice and mobilize communities against colonial encroachment. The

Deoband Movement, formally established in 1867 in the aftermath of the Revolt's catastrophic failure, exemplified one strand of this response. It was characterized by a withdrawal into reformed Islamic orthodoxy, prioritizing the preservation of Islamic learning and moral community over political engagement with the colonial state. More overtly militant responses found expression in the Jihad movement led by Syed Ahmad Bareilvi (1786–1831) and Shah Ismail Shaheed (1779–1831), who drew on Wahhabi-influenced reformism to mobilize resistance against both British power and Sikh rule in the northwest frontier regions. The Faraizi movement in Bengal, founded by Haji Shariatullah (1781–1840), similarly combined Islamic purification with peasant resistance against British landlordism. These movements collectively reflected the conviction among many Muslims that Islamic identity and colonial subjugation were fundamentally incompatible, and that the path to Muslim regeneration lay through religious purification and political resistance rather than intellectual synthesis with the colonizer's worldview.

A second contrasting strand of Muslim response moved in an opposed direction, emerging particularly among the Muslim *ashraf* (nobles) elite of the United Provinces who had previously served the Mughal court and later the East India Company. This accommodationist response accepted the colonial reality as an inescapable political given and sought instead to carve out a space for Muslim advancement within its structures. It was premised on the pragmatic assessment that armed resistance had proven catastrophically futile—the brutal suppression of the Revolt of 1857 had demonstrated this beyond any reasonable doubt. The survival and advancement of Muslim society in India depended on mastering the new languages of colonial power, modern education, scientific mindset, and productive engagement with colonial administration. The proponents of this accommodationist approach did not conceive of it as capitulation or cultural betrayal. Rather, they argued that the acquisition of modern knowledge was entirely consistent with Islamic principles, and

that a reformed, rationally grounded Islam could serve as a spiritual and moral foundation for a modernized Muslim community. It was within this accommodationist tradition that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan developed his reformist project, insisting that modernity and Islam were not irreconcilable opposites but complementary dimensions of a properly educated Muslim life.

These divergent responses to colonial modernity were not simply ideological disagreements. Those reflected deeper social, economic, and class divisions within the Muslim community of South Asia. The revivalist and *jihadi* strands drew primarily on rural populations, artisans, and lower clergy whose traditional livelihoods and social structures had been most directly and immediately disrupted by colonial capitalism and administrative transformation. The accommodationist strand, by contrast, was rooted in the urban *ashraf* classes, who possessed greater direct experience of the colonial administrative and educational system and who stood to benefit most from successfully navigating its structures. The Aligarh Movement, despite its universal rhetoric of Muslim upliftment and communal solidarity, was in fundamental respects an elite project: it targeted the educable classes, produced graduates equipped for government service and the professions, and sought to cultivate a Muslim leadership capable of engaging with the colonial state on its own terms. This class character would prove consequential for the movement's cultural and political legacies, shaping both the nationalist politics of the early twentieth century and the tensions between Muslim nationalism and progressive, class-conscious politics that defined Indian intellectual life in the decades leading to Partition.

Historical Background: Aftermath of The Revolt of 1857

The Great Revolt of 1857, also known as the Indian Mutiny in British colonial history and First War of Independence in South Asian nationalist discourse, was a major turning point in the history of British India and the Muslim community in the subcontinent. The row over animal fat in cartridges issued to the sepoy of the East India

Company's Bengal Army soon spread the uprising beyond its military origins to include soldiers, peasants, artisans and dispossessed nobles throughout northern and central India. The Revolt was a serious threat to the survival of British power at its height. Important centers of resistance developed at Meerut, Delhi, Kanpur, Lucknow, Jhansi and Bareilly, and for several months the Company's power in the Gangetic heartland was practically challenged. The scale and brutality of the revolt took the British establishment by surprise and resulted in a comprehensive re-evaluation of the structure of colonial rule in India.

For the Muslim population in North India in particular, the Revolt held a great deal of historical significance. Delhi was the capital of the Mughals and a significant hub of Islamic scholarship and culture, and became the symbolic focal point after the rebellion. The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862) was assumed to be the official leader of the rebellion, and the Red Fort became, for a brief and intense time, the symbolic center of the attempt to re-establish indigenous sovereignty. Whether or not it accurately depicted the largely Hindu sepoy leadership of the Revolt, this linkage to Muslim political ambitions wrought a disastrous impact. During and after the suppression of the uprising, the British singled out the Muslims as the prime instigators of the uprising and dealt with the community with a severity that went well beyond military necessity. British troops occupied the Jama Masjid, executed thousands, deported or drove out thousands more from Delhi, and systematically destroyed the Muslim neighborhoods around the Jama Masjid. Bahadur Shah Zafar was tried, found guilty, and sent to Rangoon, where he died in 1862, finally ending the Mughal dynasty.

For Indian Muslims, the political fallout went far beyond the immediate violence of repression. The formal establishment of direct Crown rule in 1858, when the East India Company was replaced by the British Raj under the fictitious authority of Queen Victoria, brought no relief to Muslim communities. On the contrary, the constant branding of Muslims by the colonial government as a seditious element resulted in their gradual

exclusion from influential positions in the judiciary and civil service. The replacement of Persian by English as the language of administration, formalized in Macaulay's Minute of 1835, had already dealt a serious blow to the cultural capital of the Muslim *ashraf* class, now implemented with fresh vigor. Persian command had been the most important social distinction for the Muslim *ashraf* class and the most important qualification for government employment. This marginalization was speeded up by the post-1857 dispensation: by the 1860s Muslims were massively under-represented in the Indian Civil Service, the judiciary and the professions in relation to their Hindu counterparts, especially the English-educated Bengali elite. William Wilson Hunter keenly remarked this inequality in *The Indian Musalmans* (1871), pointing out that, while a considerable part of the population was Muslim, the Muslims were all but absent from government service and the legal profession in Bengal.

The major changes brought about by colonial capitalism had a major effect on the society and economy, and things got even worse. India's opening up to the world market saw agriculture turning more into a business and the traditional crafts starting to disappear. The old ways of making a living were dispensed with. People had a hard time adjusting to the new system. Colonial capitalism changed the game rules. Thus, the working conditions and lives of the people had been changed. It replaced the old economic system that had supported Muslim artisans for so long with a new economic system that put profit before people. This was a blow to the community that resonates to this day. Among these industries were the celebrated weavers of Dacca and Lucknow, whose muslin and brocade work had supplied the courts of India and the luxury trade of the East. The Revolt in Awadh resulted in the confiscation and revenue settlement of *taluqdari* (landed) estates, which at the same time reduced many Muslim landholding families, former zamindars, to genteel impoverishment. These economic pressures, political marginalization and cultural displacement produced a crisis of extraordinary depth and breadth in Muslim society in North India.

This crisis, material, political and existential, was indeed the immediate historical context within which the Aligarh Movement came into being. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was Chief Judge in Bijnore and had firsthand experience of the calamities of 1857, was not deceived by the magnitude of the disaster. With remarkable intellectual daring, in 1859 he wrote *Risala Asbab-e Baghawate Hind* (Pamphlet on the Causes of the Indian Revolt). He offered a curiously honest appraisal of the uprising, maintaining that it was not the result of any Muslim conspiracy, but of systematic administrative mismanagement and the colonial government's indifference to Indian grievances. By excusing the British for deliberate malice and focusing on policy deficiencies that could be remedied, Syed Ahmad Khan hoped to both restore Muslim credibility in British eyes and to create the political conditions for a productive dialogue between the colonial state and the Muslim community. This double act of exoneration and criticism would be the political strategy he would pursue for the rest of his life—to show that Indian Muslims were loyal subjects who deserved to have the colonial government invest in their education and development.

As a result, a fundamental reorientation of Muslim intellectual and political life in South Asia occurred in the wake of 1857. The post-Revolt decades were shaped by the painful realization that such restoration was, for the foreseeable future, completely out of reach. At the same time, the decades preceding the revolt were characterized, at least among the more politically active elements of the Muslim community, by the hope of restoring Muslim political sovereignty through reform, revivalism, or resistance. The restoration of social dignity, intellectual achievement, and cultural identity of the Muslims was now definitively shaped by the realities of British colonial power and their agenda of modernization. The Aligarh Movement is the single most lasting institutional monument of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the most important Muslim intellectual response to colonial modernity in South Asian history. He dedicated himself to this urgent, historically conditioned task.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Aligarh Movement

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan occupies an enduring place in the intellectual and political history of 19th century South Asia. A man of rare and multifaceted genius, he distinguished himself as a religious reformer, a modernist thinker, a rationalist scholar, a gifted writer, and a far-sighted statesman—roles he fulfilled with extraordinary depth and deliberateness. He came into the world on 17 October 1817 in the historic city of Delhi, born into a household whose standing in Mughal society was both deep and distinguished. His father, Syed Muttaqi Mohammad, served as a trusted counsellor to Emperor Akbar II, and his grandfather, Syed Hadi Alamgir, had likewise commanded influence within the imperial court. The family carried with it a legacy of scholarship, dignity, and social prominence that would shape the young Syed Ahmad's outlook from his earliest years.

His father took a careful and deliberate interest in ensuring that his son received an education of the highest possible quality. Syed Ahmad accordingly pursued rigorous study in Quranic learning, Persian, Arabic, Mathematics, and Medicine. Yet as he grew older, the confines of the traditional curriculum began to feel insufficient for a mind as restless and inquisitive as his. He eventually stepped away from the prescribed path, choosing instead to educate himself independently—drawn above all by a deep and abiding love for literature. When his father passed away, he entered the service of the East India Company, initially working as a clerk. In time, his abilities brought him recognition and he advanced to serve as a judge in the local courts. While his academic background was rooted in classical traditions, the educational work he would go on to undertake became a defining milestone in the modernisation of learning for Muslim communities across South Asia.

When the upheaval of 1857 erupted across the subcontinent, Sir Syed was serving as Chief Judge in Bijnour. In the midst of widespread disorder and violence, he personally intervened to protect the lives of numerous British women and children—acts of considerable personal courage. In

recognition of his conduct, the British administration offered him a landed estate and a generous income. He declined without hesitation. He was subsequently appointed Chief Justice in Muradabad and later reassigned to Ghazipur. By 1864, he had relocated to Aligarh – the city that would become inextricably bound to his name – where he threw himself into the establishment of a new college. Twelve years later, in 1876, he resigned from judicial service altogether, devoting every remaining effort to building, sustaining, and steering the institution he believed would transform the fortunes of South Asian Muslims through the power of education.

Elaborating on the founding vision behind Aligarh College, Maulana Mohammad Ali Jauhar (1878-1931) – one of its distinguished graduates, a co-founder of Jamia Millia Islamia, and a foremost leader of the Khilafat Movement (1919-1924) – stated that it was established “to create for young Muslims a center with the true Islamic atmosphere, so that its alumni would not merely be the educated and cultured men, but educated and cultured Musalmans.” The Aligarh Movement eventually emerged as a focal point of the Muslim Renaissance in South Asia, significantly influencing the future direction of their political goals and endeavors and achieving the relevant successes.

His Scholarship: Interpreting Religion with a Naturalistic Approach

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan authored several books aimed at fostering modernization and rational thought among Muslims in India. His endeavors encompass, among others: *Tafsirul Quran* [Exegesis of Quran], *Khutbat-e Ahmadiya* [Sermons of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan], *Ahkam Tu'am Ahle Kittab* [Ordinances regarding Dining with the People of the Book], *Izalatul Ghain An Zulkarnain*. He meant to eliminate the skepticism and mistrust between the colonial rulers and the Muslims. To this end, he authored *Rasala-e Asbabe Baghawat-e Hind* [A Pamphlet on the Causes of Indian Revolt], arguing that the Great Revolt of 1857 was neither a planned, conspiratorial conflict of Indians against the East India Company nor did it erupt with the help of Russia and Iran. Instead, the British are to

blame for this revolt, as the government's oppressive policies and its disregard for the struggles of ordinary people heightened the anger and frustration among the Company's Indian soldiers and the general populace, leading to this troubling incident. A scholar of Urdu literature and an editor of Syed Ahmad Khan's *Asbabe Baghawat-e Hind*, Professor Moinuddin Aqeel (b. 1946), praises this endeavor, noting that following the Revolt, it was he who wrote such bold criticism, at the time, of British policies wherein he held the British responsible for the insurrection.

Tafsir al-Quran is an interpretation of the Quran by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, in which he sought to offer naturalistic (scientific) explanations for the Quranic verses and the historical occurrences mentioned within. By rejecting the notion of divine intervention and miracles throughout history, he invited strong criticism from traditionalist Islamic theologians. *Izalatul Ghain An Zulkarnain* is an exegesis of the Quranic verse that recounts the tale of “Zulqarnain.” Sir Syed sought to challenge several prevalent myths of the era that lacked support from the Quran. Zulqarnain, he asserts, was the title of the emperor or monarch who governed a significant area of the nation. Sir Syed elaborated on the name “Zulqarnain” and posed questions regarding the history of Arab deities before Islam.

His work *Akham-e Tuam Ahle Kitab* addresses the taboo that Indian Muslims have about dining with non-Muslims. Here, Syed Ahmad clarifies whether Muslims are allowed to consume food in company with non-Muslims or the English. He composed a detailed treatise derived from his comprehension of Quranic verses, the traditions of the Prophet, and the views of Muslim jurists, recommending that Muslims might consume the food prepared by the British in their cookware. Moreover, they may consume the animal or bird killed by those who have received a holy scripture from Allah Almighty.

Advocacy for Loyalism, Rationalism and Modernism

The strategies promoted by Sir Syed Ahmad, his loyalty to the British Raj, and his naturalistic interpretations of Islam faced significant criticism from orthodox groups during his time and beyond. Nevertheless, he firmly believed that Muslims lacked the technological and scientific capabilities necessary to challenge the British, rendering them incapable of restoring their waning political power through armed resistance. As a result, he adopted a stance of loyalty towards the British Raj and encouraged Indian Muslims to do the same, aiming to foster a reconciliation between their efforts to improve their socio-economic conditions and the British government's administrative and developmental initiatives. He urged Indian Muslims to pursue modern education to secure government positions, especially within the Indian Civil Service and the judiciary.

In an effort to modernize Indian Muslims, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan offered Islamic interpretations that aligned with naturalist or scientific perspectives. This approach led to severe criticism from the religious scholars of his time, and many theologians today still find his interpretations of Islam to be unacceptable. Due to several of his beliefs and his naturalist readings of the Holy Quran, he faced significant backlash from the ulema, who label him a *kafir* (unbeliever). Nevertheless, Syed Ahmad Khan defends his actions by asserting that the Quran is the divine word of God, and nature is the manifestation of God's work; thus, they can never be in conflict.

Socio-cultural and Educational Reformation

Following the War of Independence, also known as the Great Revolt of 1857, the Muslims of India faced significant challenges on social, cultural, and political fronts. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan emerged as a prominent thinker who recognized that the decline of Indian Muslims stemmed from their emotional ties to religion, which overshadowed rational and scientific thought. He believed that without embracing scientific and technological education, Muslims would struggle to attain a respectable social and political standing, and their

economic conditions would remain stagnant. Furthermore, he was convinced that any conflict with the colonial powers would only lead to further difficulties and decline for the Muslim community. As a result, he initiated a reform movement within Indian Muslim society, advocating for the adoption of Western knowledge and seeking to harmonize their religious and cultural identity with that of the British. Through colonization of several countries, including America in the seventeenth century, Australia in the eighteenth century, and portions of South Asia and Africa in the nineteenth century, the British had established an enormous empire. In Syed Ahmad Khan's view, this reformation could only be achieved by liberating the Muslim community of India from religious orthodoxy and integrating Islam with a modern value system influenced by the West. Mazharuddin Siddiqi asserts that the fundamental motivation driving Sir Syed's religious ideology appears to be a strong aspiration to bring about a religious reformation within the Muslim world, akin to the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan advocated for religious reforms and criticized conventional methods of addressing socio-political issues. In a tribute to him, Professor Mushirul Hasan (1949-2018), a historian and former Vice Chancellor of Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi from 2004 to 2009, remarks that:

“For a man tutored in feudal family that had experienced the trauma of declining Mughal Empire, he was high pragmatic and realistic in his orientation and attitude. For a man tutored in Islamic learning, he was remarkably broad-minded and forward-looking. He was a visible symbol of Muslim regeneration, a catalyst of social and educational reforms.... He possessed the intellectual sources to reconcile matters of faith with more immediate task of rescuing the Muslims from their downward spiral. He laid stress on interpretation and not conformity, on innovation rather than blind acceptance of Islamic Law.”

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's engagement with colonial modernity was fundamentally based on a significant theological reorientation, wherein he supported a type of religious innovation (*ijtihad*)

aimed at reconciling Islamic scripture with the “Law of Nature.” By promoting a rationalist interpretation of the Quran—often referred to as *Nechari*—Sir Sayyid contended that authentic religion must not conflict with scientific truths, thus rejecting traditionalist interpretations as outdated and inadequate for addressing the socio-political issues of the nineteenth century. He argued that the decline of the Muslim community stemmed from a strict adherence to *taqlid* (blind imitation of tradition), which he perceived as a barrier to intellectual advancement and a source of self-imposed isolation from the British administrative and educational systems. By asserting that the “Work of God” (Nature) and the “Word of God” (Revelation) were in alignment, Sir Sayyid rationalized the embrace of Western modernism not as a betrayal of faith, but as an essential socio-political transformation necessary to ensure the collective future of Indian Muslims within a competitive colonial environment. Even though the predominantly Muslim population continues to critique Sir Syed’s interpretations of Islam, he paved the way for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning). Later, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, a Muslim nationalist ideologue, emphasized this idea as a remedy to the Muslims in South Asia and elsewhere who were facing political degeneration and decline.

Legacy of the Aligarh Movement

Even though it faced harsh criticism from traditional Muslim theologians, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement attracted contributions from a wide range of Muslim ideologues and a substantial socio-political and cultural legacy for Indian Muslims. It gave rise to prominent figures who were crucial in the development of the Urdu language and its literature. One such person is Maulvi Abdul Haq (1870–1961), renowned as *Baba-e-Urdu*, who came from this particular movement and institution and whose outstanding contributions to the beginning and development of Urdu journalism throughout Colonial India are both notable and unforgettable. The most notable advocates for Muslim rights, including Nawab Muhsin-ul-Muluk (1837–1907) and Nawab Waqar-ul-Muluk (1841–1917), who were instrumental in

founding the All-India Muslim League in 1906, were connected to the Aligarh Movement. A prominent Pakistani historian, Professor Sharif Al-Mujahid (1926–2020), asserts:

“Within a brief span of some fifty years between 1880s and 1930s, three outstanding Muslim leaders who had so enthusiastically started out as staunch Indian nationalists, ended up finally at strong threshold of Muslim nationalism. In the ultimate analysis, their pragmatic shift from one end of political spectrum to the other was responsible for Muslims carving out themselves a separate destiny and an independent state of their own of India’s body politics. They were Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Allama Iqbal, and Quaid-i-Azam Jinnah. Jinnah became a founding father of Pakistan, Iqbal a poet-philosopher and ideologue, and Sir Syed, though hardly perceptible at the time, the founder of Muslim nationalism.”

Apart from the growth of Muslim nationalism that culminated in the founding of the All-India Muslim League and the subsequent creation of Pakistan, another crucial legacy of the Aligarh Movement was the rise of the Marxist and Communist movements in Colonial India. The members of the Progressive Writers Association included Khawaja Ahmad Abbas (1914–1984), Sardar Jaffari (1913–2000), Bari Alig, and Sibte Hassan (1916–1986) came from Aligarh University. Furthermore, the pioneers of Marxist historiographical trends in South Asia, such as Muhammad Habib (1895–1971), his son Irfan Habib (1931), and Mashirul Hassan (1949–2018), were historians who pursued historical enterprises that focused on secular, pluralistic, and anti-communal perspectives on Indian history.

The social legacy of the Aligarh Movement is evident in its achievement of cultivating a new Muslim middle class, which transitioned the community from a traditional landed aristocracy to a professional group comprising civil servants, lawyers, and doctors. Culturally, the movement initiated the Urdu prose revolution through Sir Syed’s journal, *Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq*, which modernized the language to articulate Western scientific ideas while advocating for a reformed social etiquette. Politically, the movement served as the intellectual foundation for the All-India

Muslim League, with the Aligarh campus emerging as the principal training ground for the leaders who ultimately developed the Two-Nation Theory and spearheaded the Pakistan Movement. Furthermore, by founding the Muhammadan Educational Conference in 1886, the movement created a national platform that for the first time unified the diverse Muslim populations of India into a self-aware political community during the colonial period.

Conclusion

Summing up the above discussion, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's approach to colonial modernity marked a pivotal transformation in the course of South Asian Islam, shifting from a stance of reactionary militant resistance to a more pragmatic and rational engagement with British governance. By integrating Islamic identity with Western education and scientific exploration, he established a framework for communal survival that effectively connected medieval traditions with the requirements of the nineteenth-century state. Although his promotion of political quietism and his 'Nechari' theological advancements faced significant opposition from traditionalist factions, including the Deoband movement, his influence remains crucial to the evolution of Muslim political awareness. Ultimately, Sir Syed aimed not only for a reconciliation with the British but also for the cultivation of a cultural renaissance that would empower Muslims with the intellectual resources needed to navigate the complexities of a modern world, thereby fundamentally reshaping the socio-political landscape of India and laying the conceptual foundation for the future rise of Muslim nationalism.

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- Born on June 7, 1914, in Panipat, Haryana, from a distinguished family, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is known for his many positions as a journalist, film director, screenplay writer, and author. Before enrolling at Hali Muslim High School in Panipat, he had his early education at home. He graduated from Aligarh Muslim University with a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature in 1933 and a Bachelor of Laws in 1935. Researcher Showkat Hussain also claims that Abbas's paternal grandfather, Khawaja Ghulam Abbas, was slain by cannon fire during the 1857 uprising against the British and is considered Panipat's first martyr. The renowned Urdu poet Mirza Asad Allah Khan Ghalib's principal protégé was his maternal grandfather.
- Ali Sardar Jafri, a well-known Urdu poet, was born and reared in Balrampur, Uttar Pradesh. Poets like Josh Malihabadi (1898-1982), Jigar Moradabadi (1890-1960), and Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896-1982) greatly influenced his intellectual growth. He attended Aligarh Muslim University in 1933, when he was exposed to Communist ideas. However, he was dismissed in 1936 for alleged "racial reasons." In 1938, however, he finished his undergraduate studies at Zakir Husain College (Delhi College) of Delhi University. His doctoral studies at Lucknow University were cut short when he was detained in 1940-41 for his anti-war poems and his political participation as the university's Student Union Secretary.

Sibte Hasan was born on July 31, 1912, in Ambari Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. He also attended Aligarh Muslim University. For further studies, he went to Columbia University in the United States. In 1942, he joined the Communist Party of India. Following the partition of India, he relocated to Pakistan. Hasan served as an editor for esteemed publications, including *Naya Adab* and *Lail-o-Nehar*. He passed away from a heart attack on April 20, 1986, while returning from a conference in India, and was interred in Karachi.

