

Syed Ahmed Khan



Name: Syed Ahmed Khan

Birth: [October 17, 1817](#)

Death: [March 27, 1898](#)

School/tradition: [Sunni](#); [Mughal](#)

Main interests: [education](#), [politics](#)

Notable ideas: [Aligarh Muslim University](#), [Two-Nation Theory](#)

Influences: [Mughal Empire](#), [Western education](#)

Influenced: [Muslim League](#)

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan Bahadur, [GCSI](#) ([Urdu](#): [سیّد احمد خان](#); [October 17, 1817](#) – [March 27, 1898](#)), commonly known as Sir Syed, was an [Indian educator](#) and [politician](#) who pioneered modern education for the [Muslim community in India](#) by founding the [Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College](#), which later developed into the [Aligarh Muslim University](#). His work gave rise to a new generation of Muslim intellectuals and politicians who composed the [Aligarh movement](#) to secure the political future of Muslims in India.

Born into [Mughal](#) nobility, Sir Syed earned a reputation as a distinguished scholar while working as a jurist for the [British East India Company](#). Personally affected by the turmoil of the [Indian rebellion of 1857](#), he penned the booklet *Asbab-e-Bhaghawath-e-Hind* (*The Causes of the Indian Mutiny*) — a daring critique, at the time, of [British](#) policies that he blamed for causing the revolt. Believing that the future of Muslims was threatened by their orthodox nature and outlook, Sir Syed began promoting Western-style scientific education by founding modern schools and journals and organizing Muslim intellectuals. Towards this goal, Sir Syed founded the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875 with the aim of promoting social and economic development of Indian Muslims.

One of the most influential Muslim politicians of his time, Sir Syed was suspicious of the [Indian independence movement](#) and called upon Muslims to loyally serve the [British Raj](#). He denounced nationalist organizations such as the [Indian National Congress](#), instead forming organizations to promote Muslim unity and pro-British attitudes and activities. Sir Syed promoted the adoption of Urdu as the [lingua franca](#) of all Indian Muslims, and mentored a rising generation of Muslim politicians and intellectuals. Although hailed as a great Muslim leader and social reformer, Sir Syed remains the subject of controversy for his views on [Hindu-Muslim](#) issues.

Early life

Syed Ahmed Khan Bahadur was born in [Delhi](#), then the capital of the [Mughal Empire](#). His family is said to have migrated from [Herat](#) (now in [Afghanistan](#)) in the time of emperor [Akbar](#), although by other accounts his family descended from [Arabia](#). Many generations of his family had since been highly connected with the Mughal administration. His maternal grandfather Khwaja Fariduddin served as [wazir](#) in the court of [Akbar Shah II](#). His paternal grandfather Syed Hadi held a [mansab](#), a high-ranking administrative position and honorary name of Jawwad Ali Khan in the court of [Alamgir II](#). Sir Syed's father Mir Muhammad Muttaqi was personally close to Akbar Shah II and served as his personal adviser. However, Sir Syed was born at a time when rebellious governors, regional insurrections and the British colonialism had diminished the extent and power of the Mughal state, reducing its monarch to a [figurehead](#) status. With his elder brother Syed Muhammad Khan, Sir Syed was raised in a large house in a wealthy area of the city. They were raised in strict accordance with Mughal noble traditions and exposed to politics. Their mother Azis-un-Nisa played a formative role in Sir Syed's life, raising him with rigid discipline with a strong emphasis on education. Sir Syed was taught to read and understand the [Qur'an](#) by a female tutor, which was unusual at the time. He received an education traditional to Muslim nobility in Delhi.

Under the charge of [Maulvi](#) Hamiduddin, Sir Syed was trained in [Persian](#), [Arabic](#), Urdu and religious subjects. He read the works of Muslim scholars and writers such as Sahbai, [Rumi](#) and [Ghalib](#). Other tutors instructed him in [mathematics](#), [astronomy](#) and [Islamic jurisprudence](#). Sir Syed was also adept at [swimming](#), [wrestling](#) and other sports. He took an active part in the Mughal court's cultural activities. His elder brother founded the city's first printing press in the Urdu language along with the journal *Sayyad-ul-Akbar*. Sir Syed pursued the study of [medicine](#) for several years, but did not complete the prescribed course of study.

Until the death of his father in 1838, Sir Syed had lived a life customary for an affluent young Muslim noble. Upon his father's death, he inherited the titles of his grandfather and father and was awarded the title of *Arif Jung* by the emperor [Bahadur Shah Zafar](#). Financial difficulties put an end to Sir Syed's formal education, although he continued to study in private, using books on a variety of

subjects. Sir Syed assumed editorship of his brother's journal and rejected offers of employment from the Mughal court. Having recognised the steady decline in Mughal political power, Sir Syed entered the British East India Company's [civil service](#). He was appointed [serestadar](#) at the courts of law in [Agra](#), responsible for record-keeping and managing court affairs. In 1840, he was promoted to the title of [munshi](#).

Scholarly works



The *Social Reformer* was a pioneering publication initiated by Sir Syed to promote liberal ideas in Muslim society.

While continuing to work as a jurist, Sir Syed began focusing on writing on various subjects, mainly in Urdu. His career as an author began when he published a series of treatises in Urdu on religious subjects in 1842. He published the book *Athar Assanadid* (*Great Monuments*) documenting antiquities of Delhi dating from the medieval era. This work earned him the reputation of a cultured scholar. In 1842, he completed the *Jila-ul-Qulub bi Zikr il Mahbub* and the *Tuhfa-i-Hasan*, along with the *Tahsil fi jar-i-Saqil* in 1844. These works focused on religious and cultural subjects. In 1852, he published the two works *Namiqa dar bayan masala tasawwur-i-Shaikh* and *Silsilat ul-Mulk*. He released the second edition of *Athar Assanadid* in 1854. He also penned a commentary on the [Bible](#) — the first by a Muslim — in which he argued that Islam was the closest religion to [Christianity](#), with a common lineage from [Abrahamic religions](#).

Acquainted with high-ranking British officials, Sir Syed obtained close knowledge about British colonial politics during his service at the courts. At the outbreak of the [Indian rebellion](#), on [May 10, 1857](#), Sir Syed was serving as the chief

assessment officer at the court in [Bijnor](#). Northern India became the scene of the most intense fighting. The conflict had left large numbers of civilians dead. Erstwhile centres of Muslim power such as Delhi, Agra, [Lucknow](#) and [Kanpur](#) were severely affected. Sir Syed was personally affected by the violence and the ending of the Mughal dynasty amongst many other long-standing kingdoms. Sir Syed and many other Muslims took this as a defeat of Muslim society. He lost several close relatives who died in the violence. Although he succeeded in rescuing his mother from the turmoil, she died in [Meerut](#), owing to the privations she had experienced.

In 1858, he was appointed to a high-ranking post at the court in [Muradabad](#), where he began working on his most famous literary work. Publishing the booklet *Asbab-e-Bhaghawath-e-Hind* (*The Causes of the Indian Mutiny*) in 1859, Sir Syed studied the causes of the revolt. In this, his most famous work, he rejected the common notion that the conspiracy was planned by Muslim élites, who were insecure at the diminishing influence of Muslim monarchs. Sir Syed blamed the British East India Company for its aggressive expansion as well as the ignorance of British politicians regarding Indian culture. However, he gained respect for British power, which he felt would dominate India for a long period of time. Seeking to rehabilitate Muslim political influence, Sir Syed advised the British to appoint Muslims to assist in administration. His other writings such as *Loyal Muhammadans of India*, *Tabyin-ul-Kalam* and *A Series of Essays on the Life of [Muhammad](#) and Subjects Subsidiary Therein* helped to create cordial relations between the British authorities and the Muslim community.

Muslim reformer

Through the 1850s, Syed Ahmed Khan began developing a strong passion for education. While pursuing studies of different subjects including European [jurisprudence](#), Sir Syed began to realise the advantages of Western-style education, which was being offered at newly-established colleges across India. Despite being a devout Muslim, Sir Syed criticized the influence of traditional dogma and religious orthodoxy, which had made most Indian Muslims suspicious of British influences. Sir Syed began feeling increasingly concerned for the future of Muslim communities. A scion of Mughal nobility, Sir Syed had been reared in the finest traditions of Muslim elite culture and was aware of the steady decline of Muslim political power across India. The animosity between the British and Muslims before and after the rebellion (Independence War) of 1857 threatened to marginalize Muslim communities across India for many generations. Sir Syed intensified his work to promote co-operation with British authorities, promoting loyalty to the [Empire](#) amongst Indian Muslims. Committed to working for the upliftment of Muslims, Sir Syed founded a modern [madrassa](#) in Muradabad in 1859; this was one of the first religious schools to impart scientific education. Sir Syed also worked on social causes, helping to organize relief for the famine-struck people of the [Northwest Frontier Province](#) in 1860. He established another modern school in [Ghazipur](#) in 1863.

Upon his transfer to [Aligarh](#) in 1864, Sir Syed began working wholeheartedly as an educator. He founded the [Scientific Society of Aligarh](#), the first scientific association of its kind in India. Modeling it after the [Royal Society](#) and the [Royal Asiatic Society](#), Sir Syed assembled Muslim scholars from different parts of the country. The Society held annual conferences, disbursed funds for educational causes and regularly published a journal on scientific subjects in [English](#) and Urdu. Sir Syed felt that the socio-economic future of Muslims was threatened by their orthodox aversions to modern science and technology. He published many writings promoting liberal, rational interpretations of [Islamic scriptures](#). However, his view of Islam was rejected by Muslim clergy as contrary to traditional views on issues like [jihad](#), [polygamy](#) and animal slaughtering. Clerics of the [Deobandi](#) and [Wahhabi](#) schools condemned him harshly as a [kaffir](#). In face of pressure from religious Muslims, Sir Syed avoided discussing religious subjects in his writings, focusing instead on promoting education.

Advocacy of Urdu

The onset of the [Hindi-Urdu controversy](#) of 1867 saw the emergence of Sir Syed as a political leader of the Muslim community. He became a leading Muslim voice opposing the adoption of [Hindi](#) as a second official language of the [United Provinces](#) (now [Uttar Pradesh](#)). Sir Syed perceived Urdu as the *lingua franca* of Muslims. Having been developed by Muslim rulers of India, Urdu was used as a secondary language to Persian, the official language of the Mughal court. Since the decline of the Mughal dynasty, Sir Syed promoted the use of Urdu through his own writings. Under Sir Syed, the Scientific Society translated Western works only into Urdu. The schools established by Sir Syed imparted education in the Urdu medium. The demand for Hindi, led largely by Hindus, was to Sir Syed an erosion of the centuries-old Muslim cultural domination of India. Testifying before the British-appointed education commission, Sir Syed controversially exclaimed that "Urdu was the language of [gentry](#) and Hindi that of the vulgar." His remarks provoked a hostile response from Hindu leaders, who unified across the nation to demand the recognition of Hindi.

The success of the Hindi movement led Sir Syed to further advocate Urdu as the symbol of Muslim heritage and as the language of all Indian Muslims. His educational and political work grew increasingly centered around and exclusively for Muslim interests. He also sought to persuade the British to give Urdu extensive official use and patronage. His colleagues and protégés such as [Mohsin-ul-Mulk](#) and [Maulvi Abdul Haq](#) developed organizations such as the [Urdu Defense Association](#) and the [Anjuman Taragqi-i-Urdu](#), committed to the perpetuation of Urdu. Sir Syed's protégé [Shibli Nomani](#) led efforts that resulted in the adoption of Urdu as the official language of the [Hyderabad State](#) and as the medium of instruction in the [Osmania University](#). Sir Syed is widely criticized for making the use of Urdu a political issue that served as a wedge between Muslims and Hindus, who saw Sir Syed's advocacy as an effort to re-establish Muslim hegemony. To Muslims in northern and western India, Urdu had become

an integral part of political and cultural identity. However, the division over the use of Hindi or Urdu further provoked communal conflict between Muslims and Hindus in India.

Founding Aligarh



 Victoria gate, a prominent building at the university

On [April 1, 1869](#) Sir Syed traveled to [England](#), where he was awarded the [Order of the Star of India](#) from the British government on [August 6](#). Traveling across England, he visited its colleges and was inspired by the culture of learning established after the [Renaissance](#). Sir Syed returned to India in the following year determined to build a "Muslim [Cambridge](#)." Upon his return, he organized the "Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning among [Mohammedans](#)" (Muslims) on [December 26, 1870](#). Sir Syed described his vision of the institution he proposed to establish in an article written sometime in 1872 and re-printed in the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* of [April 5, 1911](#):

I may appear to be dreaming and talking like Sheikh Chilli, but we aim to turn this MAO College into a University similar to that of [Oxford](#) or Cambridge. Like the churches of Oxford and Cambridge, there will be [mosques](#) attached to each College... The College will have a dispensary with a Doctor and a compounder, besides a [Unani Hakim](#). It will be mandatory on boys in residence to join the congregational prayers ([namaz](#)) at all the five times. Students of other religions will be exempted from this religious observance. Muslim students will have a uniform consisting of a black alpaca, half-sleeved *chugha* and a red [Fez](#) cap... Bad and abusive words which boys generally pick up and get used to, will be strictly prohibited. Even such a word as a "liar" will be treated as an abuse to be prohibited. They will have food either on tables of [European style](#) or on chaukis in the manner of the [Arabs](#)... Smoking of cigarette or [hugqa](#) and the chewing of [betels](#) shall be strictly prohibited. No [corporal punishment](#) or any such punishment as is likely to injure a student's self-respect will be permissible... It will be strictly enforced that [Shia](#) and [Sunni](#)

boys shall not discuss their religious differences in the College or in the boarding house. At present it is like a day dream. I pray to God that this dream may come true."

By 1873, the committee under Sir Syed issued proposals for the construction of a college in Aligarh. He began publishing the journal *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (*Social Reformer*) to spread awareness and knowledge on modern subjects and promote reforms in Muslim society. Sir Syed worked to promote reinterpretation of Muslim ideology in order to reconcile tradition with Western education. He argued in several books on Islam that the Qur'an rested on an appreciation of reason and natural law, making scientific inquiry important to being a good Muslim. Sir Syed established a modern school in Aligarh and, obtaining support from wealthy Muslims and the British, laid the foundation stone of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College on [May 24, 1875](#). He retired from his career as a jurist the following year, concentrating entirely on developing the college and on religious reform. Sir Syed's pioneering work received support from the British. Although intensely criticized by orthodox religious leaders hostile to modern influences, Sir Syed's new institution attracted a large student body, mainly drawn from the Muslim gentry and middle classes. The curriculum at the college involved scientific and Western subjects, as well as Oriental subjects and religious education. The first [chancellor](#) was [Sultan Shah Jahan Begum](#), a prominent Muslim noblewoman, and Sir Syed invited an Englishman, [Theodore Beck](#), to serve as the first college principal. The college was originally affiliated with [Calcutta University](#) but was transferred to the [Allahabad University](#) in 1885. Near the turn of the 20th century, it began publishing its own magazine and established a law school. In 1920, the college was transformed into a university.

Political career



 Sir Syed with political associates

In 1878, Sir Syed was nominated to the Viceroy's Legislative Council. He testified before the education commission to promote the establishment of more colleges and schools across India. In the same year, Sir Syed founded the Mohammedan Association to promote political co-operation amongst Indian Muslims from

different parts of the country. In 1886, he organized the [All India Mohammedan Educational Conference](#) in Aligarh, which promoted his vision of modern education and political unity for Muslims. His works made him the most prominent Muslim politician in 19th century India, often influencing the attitude of Muslims on various national issues. He supported the efforts of Indian political leaders [Surendranath Banerjee](#) and [Dadabhai Naoroji](#) to obtain representation for Indians in the government and civil services. In 1883, he founded the Mohammedan Civil Service Fund Association to encourage and support the entry of Muslim graduates into the [Indian Civil Service](#) (ICS).

However, Sir Syed's political views were shaped by a strong aversion to the emerging nationalist movement, which was composed largely of Hindus. Sir Syed opposed the [Indian National Congress](#) (created in 1885) on the grounds that it was a Hindu-majority organization, calling on Muslims to stay away from it. While fearful of the loss of Muslim political power owing to the community's backwardness, Sir Syed was also averse to the prospect of democratic self-government, which would give control of government to the Hindu-majority population:

"At this time our nation is in a bad state in regards education and wealth, but God has given us the light of religion and the Koran is present for our guidance, which has ordained them and us to be friends. Now God has made them rulers over us. Therefore we should cultivate friendship with them, and should adopt that method by which their rule may remain permanent and firm in India, and may not pass into the hands of the [Bengalis](#)... If we join the political movement of the Bengalis our nation will reap a loss, for we do not want to become subjects of the Hindus instead of the subjects of the ["people of the Book..."](#)

His fierce criticism of the Congress and Indian nationalists created rifts between Muslims and Hindus. At the same time, Sir Syed sought to politically ally Muslims to the British government. An avowed loyalist of the [British Empire](#), Sir Syed was nominated as a member of the Civil Service Commission in 1887 by [Lord Dufferin](#). In 1888, he established the [United Patriotic Association](#) at Aligarh to promote political co-operation with the British and Muslim participation in the government. Syed Ahmed Khan was [knighted](#) by the British government in 1888 and in the following year he received an [LL.D. *honoris causa*](#) from the [Edinburgh University](#).

Legacy



Sir Syed's gravesite

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan lived the last two decades of his life in Aligarh, regarded widely as the mentor of 19th- and 20th century Muslim intellectuals and politicians. He remained the most influential Muslim politician in India, with his opinions guiding the convictions of a large majority of Muslims. Battling illnesses and old age, Sir Syed died on [March 27, 1898](#). He was buried beside [Sir Syed Masjid](#) inside the campus of the Aligarh university. His funeral was attended by thousands of students, Muslim leaders and British officials. Sir Syed is widely commemorated across South Asia as a great Muslim reformer and visionary.

The university he founded remains one of India's most prominent institutions. Prominent alumni of Aligarh include Muslim political leaders [Maulana Mohammad Ali](#), [Abdur Rab Nishtar](#), [Maulana Shaukat Ali](#) and [Maulvi Abdul Haq](#), who is hailed in [Pakistan](#) as *Baba-i-Urdu* (*Father of Urdu*). The first two [Prime Ministers of Pakistan](#), [Liaquat Ali Khan](#) and [Khawaja Nazimuddin](#), as well as the late [Indian President Dr. Zakir Hussain](#), are amongst Aligarh's most famous graduates. In India, Sir Syed is commemorated as a pioneer who worked for the socio-political upliftment of Indian Muslims, though his views on Hindu-Muslim issues are a subject of controversy. Sir Syed is also hailed as a founding father of Pakistan for his role in developing a Muslim political class independent of Hindu-majority organizations. The [Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology](#) was established in honor of Sir Syed in [Karachi](#) and is a leading technical institution in Pakistan.

Criticism

During his lifetime and in contemporary times, Sir Syed was criticized for encouraging communal divisions between Hindus and Muslims. He is identified by historians as one of the earliest advocates of the [Two-Nation Theory](#) — that Hindus and Muslims were distinct and incompatible nations.^[12] Historians argue that Sir Syed was emotionally unable to accept the prospect that an independent India's Hindu-majority would come to rule Muslims, who had been the erstwhile colonial rulers. He also feared that Hindu culture would diminish the [Perso-Arabic nature](#) of Muslim culture, which had enjoyed a dominant status under Muslim rulers for centuries. His condemnation of Indian nationalists and profession of the incompatibility of Muslims and Hindus widened the socio-political gulf between the communities that had emerged with the Urdu-Hindi controversy. At the same time, Sir Syed was intensely criticized by religious Muslims who regarded his liberal reinterpretation of Islamic scripture as [blasphemy](#).

Supporters of Sir Syed contend that his political vision gave an independent political expression to the Muslim community, which aided its goal to secure political power in India. His philosophy guided the creation of the [All India Muslim League](#) in 1906, as a political party separate from the Congress. Sir Syed's ideas inspired both the liberal, pro-British politicians of the Muslim League and the religious ideologues of the [Khilafat](#) struggle. The Muslim League remained at odds with the Congress and continued to advocate the boycott of the Indian independence movement. In the 1940s, the student body of Aligarh committed itself to the establishment of Pakistan and contributed in a large measure in the activities of the Muslim League. Sir Syed's patronage of Urdu led to its widespread use amongst Indian Muslim communities and following the [Partition of India](#) its adoption as an official language in Pakistan.