

Syed Ahmad Khan and the reinterpretation of *jihād*: education, reform, and Muslim modernism in colonial India

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Abstract

This article examines the political thought of Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), a leading Muslim intellectual in nineteenth-century India, through his reinterpretation of *jihād* under British colonial rule. It argues that he did not simply reject armed resistance, but recast *jihād* as a nonviolent project of intellectual, moral, and educational reform. Using a qualitative historical method based on library research, this study draws on *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind* (1858), his Qur'anic interpretations, and recent scholarship on Islamic modernism, colonial India, and Muslim reform. The article shows that his political orientation was shaped by theological reasoning and colonial realities. By placing education at the center of Muslim renewal, Syed Ahmad Khan transformed *jihād* from military confrontation into a strategy of social empowerment and nonviolent Islamic reform.

Keywords: Syed Ahmad Khan; reinterpretation of *jihād*; Islamic modernism; colonial India; educational reform.

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Introduction

Any discussion of Muslim India is inseparable from the figure of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (hereafter Sir Syed). He was an Indian Muslim reformist who sought to build a bridge between Islam and Western modernity.¹ In the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Muslims experienced significant political and social decline. He emerged as a thinker who emphasized the importance of modern ed-

¹ Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), chap. 4.

ucation and cooperative relations with the British colonial government.² As a bureaucrat who had served within the British administration, he understood the colonial system from within and sought to use this understanding to advance the interests of Muslim society.

The reform movement in Islam may be understood, in simple terms, as a constructive effort undertaken by individuals or groups within a particular historical period to bring about change in established Islamic perceptions and practices. Such change usually begins from the assumption that Islam, as a social reality in a given environment, has become inappropriate or has deviated from what is regarded as “true” Islam.³ Within this intellectual framework, Sir Syed interpreted the Qur’an through a rational and contextual approach, responding to the challenges faced by Muslims under British colonial rule. One of the important concepts he examined in depth was *jihād*, a concept that has often been misunderstood and misused in socio-political contexts.⁴

According to Sir Syed, *jihād* should not be understood narrowly as a holy war or as an act of violence aimed at spreading religion.⁵ He emphasized that *jihād* in Islam is primarily an effort to defend oneself against oppression and injustice, rather than an aggressive or expansionist action. He based this view on the words of God in al-Ḥajj [22]: 39, “Permission to fight is granted to those who are fought against because they have been wronged. Indeed, God is fully capable of helping them.” For Sir Syed, this verse indicates that *jihād* is a defensive right, not an offensive obligation, and is valid only when Muslims are concretely attacked or oppressed by others.

Furthermore, Sir Syed broadened the meaning of *jihād* as an intellectual, moral, and social struggle. In his view, *jihād* in times of peace should be realized through the development of education, moral improvement, and efforts to enhance the social conditions of the Muslim community. He cited al-Ḥajj [22]: 78 as the basis for understanding true *jihād* as a comprehensive struggle in all aspects of life: “And strive for God with the striving due to Him.” In the context of colonial India, this form of *jihād* became more relevant because Muslim society was experiencing intellectual and social decline, rather than merely physical or military threats. Sir Syed also wrote a Qur’anic commentary entitled *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān wa huwa al-Hudā wa al-Furqān*, in which he explained that *jihād* should not be used as a political instrument against the government as long as it did not

² Nasir Hassan Wani, Ikhwan Rahman, and M. Faruk Amarullah, “Exploring the Influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s Thought on the Advancement of Islamic Education in India,” *Khalifa: Journal of Islamic Education* 7, no. 1 (2023): 6-10.

³ Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 98-101.

⁴ Mansoor Moaddel and Kamran Talattof, eds., *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁵ Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1978).

obstruct religious freedom. Therefore, he rejected calls for rebellion against British colonial rule, which at that time still allowed Muslims space to practice their religion. He argued that *jihād* against Britain was illegitimate because there was no systematic religious oppression, and that *jihād* should instead be directed toward improving the condition of the Muslim community rather than overthrowing political authority.⁶

This study focuses on three main issues: Sir Syed's biography and historical background, his understanding of *jihād* in relation to Muslim political attitudes toward British colonialism, and his views on education as a central element in the making of Islamic modernity in India. By examining these issues, the article seeks to understand not only the course of Sir Syed's life, but also the wider significance of his intellectual contribution to Islamic reform in colonial India. In this article, the term "political *jihād*" is used analytically to describe his reinterpretation of *jihād* as a nonviolent political, intellectual, and educational struggle.

A number of previous studies have discussed Sir Syed as an important figure in the history of Islamic reform in India. He is often portrayed as a pioneer of Islamic modernism who emphasized rationality, modern education, and the reconciliation of Islam with Western knowledge. Much of this scholarship, however, has focused on the Aligarh Movement, educational reform, and Qur'anic interpretation as relatively separate themes. The political context of British colonial rule has not always been placed at the center of the discussion. Likewise, studies on *jihād* in Sir Syed's thought remain relatively limited. When discussed, *jihād* is often treated mainly as his rejection of armed resistance, without further attention to its broader political meaning. This article addresses that gap by reading his reinterpretation of *jihād* alongside colonial governance and his educational reform agenda. In doing so, it conceptualizes political *jihād* as a rational, moderate, and nonviolent form of political engagement aimed at strengthening Muslim society under colonial conditions.

This study uses a qualitative-descriptive approach with historical methods. The data were collected through library research involving both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include Sir Syed's own works, especially *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind (The Causes of the Indian Revolt, 1858)*, as well as his Qur'anic interpretations, particularly those that reflect his rational approach to *jihād*. The secondary sources consist of historical books and academic studies related to Sir Syed, Islamic modernism, colonial India, and the discourse of *jihād*. To sharpen the analysis, this study draws on Islamic modernism⁷ and nonviolent political theory.⁸ These perspectives help explain how *jihād*, in Sir Syed's

⁶ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam Sayyid Ahmad Khan dan KH Ahmad Dahlan* (Yogyakarta: Suara Muhammadiyah, 2016), 48-49.

⁷ Moaddel and Talattof, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*.

⁸ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 64-66.

thought, could be understood not as armed resistance,⁹ but as an intellectual and educational strategy within the realities of colonial modernity.

Life, lineage, and intellectual formation of Syed Ahmad Khan

Syed Ahmad Khan occupies a prominent place in the intellectual and political history of India.¹⁰ His contribution was especially significant in the modernization and reform of Islamic education in nineteenth-century India.¹¹ He was born in Delhi on October 17, 1817, into a Muslim family of Mughal nobility with a strong scholarly and religious tradition. According to available accounts, his family belonged to the Sayyid lineage, tracing its descent to the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, through Ḥusayn, the son of Fāṭimah and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. His father, Syed Muttaqi, was known for his religious learning, while his mother exerted a deep moral and spiritual influence on his early formation.

His paternal grandfather, Syed Hadi, had served as a military commander and was later appointed *qadi* under the Mughal emperor Alamgir II (1754-1759).¹² His maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin, served for eight years as a high-ranking minister in the Mughal court and later worked with the East India Company as a diplomat.¹³ Relatively little is known about Sir Syed’s father, apart from his reputation as a forthright man, skilled in archery and swimming, and closely associated with the eminent Delhi scholar Shah Ghulam Ali Naqshbandi Mujaddidi. Shah Ghulam Ali was the *shaykh* of the Mujaddidi order, a branch of the Naqshbandi order founded by Shaykh Baha’uddin Naqshband. In the Indian subcontinent, the Naqshbandi tradition had earlier been associated with Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi,¹⁴ a major scholar who led the Sunni orthodox response to the religious reforms of Emperor Akbar (1556-1605). It was Shah Ghulam Ali, a close friend of Syed Muttaqi, who gave the infant Sir Syed the name “Ahmad” when his father brought him before the scholar. During his early childhood, Sir Syed received religious instruction from Shah Ghulam Ali, particularly in Arabic letters and language.

Khwaja Fariduddin, his maternal grandfather, also left a considerable imprint on Sir Syed’s character, especially in matters of discipline, refinement, order, and cleanliness. Sir Syed and his parents lived in Khwaja Fariduddin’s household, making his grandfather’s influence especially formative. It is said that when Sir Syed was born, Khwaja Fariduddin closely observed the child’s hands and feet

⁹ J. M. S. Baljon, *The Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1949).

¹⁰ Moaddel and Talatoff, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*.

¹¹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 64-66.

¹² C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 108-35.

¹³ Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, 140-65.

¹⁴ Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 109-12.

and remarked that a strong and stern-tempered man had been born into the family. This remark suggests the depth of his grandfather's intuition regarding the child's future character. Sir Syed was deeply indebted to Khwaja Fariduddin, particularly for his early exposure to affairs of state and his first encounter with Western knowledge and civilization, although his grandfather died while he was still young.¹⁵

Sir Syed spent his childhood in a harmonious atmosphere, surrounded by comfort and sufficiency. He received his early education in religion, Arabic, and Persian. Although he underwent traditional Islamic education, he was also diligent in reading and expanded his knowledge by studying various sciences independently.¹⁶ At the age of twenty-one, precisely in 1838, Sir Syed's father died. This condition affected his life, as he was still young and had to earn his own livelihood after his family's income declined. At first, he had to accept work as a low-level clerk in the East India Company administration. Fortunately, he was soon appointed as a *munsif*, or deputy judge. In 1841, Sir Syed was placed in the same position in the town of Fatehpur Sikri. After working as a judge under British colonial rule, his thinking gradually became more modern and rational. He also developed a view on the importance of cooperation between Muslims and the British.¹⁷

In 1846, citing family affairs related to the death of his brother, Sir Syed requested a transfer to Delhi and lived in his hometown until 1854. This period was very important for Sir Syed, as he was able to continue his education. In addition, he could observe the developments taking place in Delhi, the capital of the Mughal Empire, which by then existed largely in name. Nevertheless, the city of Delhi continued to attract educated Muslims who gathered there to engage in scholarly and cultural activities. Even Sultan Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor (1837-1858), who was also known for his poetic career, regarded Sir Syed almost as a member of his own family.¹⁸

It was also during this period that Sir Syed's intellectual talent began to stand out. His first Urdu work, entitled *Asar-e-Qadima-e-Delhi (The Old Relics of Delhi)*, was an archaeological book that explored old buildings in the city of Delhi. He also wrote pamphlets on similar issues at a time when there was a fairly heated conflict between orthodox Muslim groups and followers of the Wahhabi movement. One pamphlet written by Sir Syed contained a defense of and support for the Wahhabi position. This was quite understandable, since from childhood Sir Syed had been educated in a puritanical religious environment through his closeness to Shah Ghulam Ali.

¹⁵ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 28.

¹⁶ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 41-44.

¹⁷ Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 73-76.

¹⁸ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 30.

When Sir Syed was transferred to Bijnore in 1865, he produced quite a number of writings that can generally be categorized as historical works. For example, he edited Abul Fazl's *Ain-i-Akbar*, a work related to the great Mughal emperor Jalaluddin Akbar, who ruled from 1556 to 1605. He also edited Ziauddin Barani's essays on Muslim kings in Delhi, as well as the autobiography of Sultan Jahangir (r. 1605-1627). It was also in this city that Sir Syed witnessed the outbreak of the rebellion ignited by the Sepoy army in 1857.

When the Indian Rebellion of 1857 broke out, Sir Syed did not support armed rebellion.¹⁹ Instead, he wrote the controversial work *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind* to explain the root causes of the rebellion. In this work, he argued that the rebellion resulted from faults on both sides, namely the Indian people and the British government. This work is therefore an important primary source for understanding Sir Syed's early political thought.

In the decades following the 1857 rebellion, Syed Ahmad Khan's position within colonial India became increasingly prominent. The title "Sir" was attached to his name after he was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the Star of India in 1888. This honour reflected the British colonial government's recognition of his administrative service, political loyalty, and public role in colonial India. At the same time, it also illustrates the ambivalent character of his reformism: he criticized certain colonial policies, but continued to work within British institutions as part of his strategy for Muslim advancement.

Reinterpreting *jihād* under British colonial rule

The socio-political context of nineteenth-century India was marked by British colonial domination and the decline of Muslims after the collapse of the Mughal dynasty.²⁰ Muslims experienced backwardness in the economic, educational, and political fields. In this atmosphere, various responses emerged among Muslims, ranging from armed resistance to social reform.²¹ Sir Syed chose a moderate and reformist path by founding the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh in 1875, which later became Aligarh Muslim University.

In this article, the term "political *jihād*" is employed analytically to describe Sir Syed's reinterpretation of *jihād* as a form of nonviolent political and intellectual struggle grounded in Islamic theology.²² Rather than reducing *jihād* to armed resistance, Sir Syed redefined it as a moral and rational effort to protect the Muslim community from decline under colonial rule.²³ This reinterpretation was not merely a pragmatic response to British dominance, but was rooted in his theolog-

¹⁹ Baljon, *Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

²⁰ Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, 98-101.

²¹ Ahmad Nabil Amir, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan dan Gerakan Pembaharuan di Aligarh," *el-Buhuth: Borneo Journal of Islamic Studies* 2, no. 2 (2020): 133-42.

²² Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

²³ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 64-66.

ical reading of the Qur'an, particularly his emphasis on *jihād* as a defensive obligation contingent upon the existence of religious oppression.

This view was greatly influenced by the political realities following the 1857 rebellion,²⁴ which the British government referred to as the Indian Mutiny and which many Indian historians have described as the First War of Independence. Sir Syed considered the rebellion a mistaken action that caused great suffering for Indian Muslims, since their political position deteriorated even further afterward.²⁵ He believed that armed resistance would only worsen the situation of Muslims and strengthen repressive colonial power.

After the outbreak of the Indian Rebellion of 1857, relations between Indian Muslims and the British deteriorated dramatically. Sir Syed wrote an important work entitled *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind* to analyze the causes of the rebellion objectively. In this work, he identified colonial policies that were insensitive to Indian society as one of the main factors behind the rebellion. However, rather than adopting a hostile attitude toward Britain, he advocated a cooperative approach. He believed that the only way for Muslims to survive and progress was to adopt modern education and establish good relations with the colonial government.²⁶

As an alternative, Sir Syed advanced a peaceful approach and political cooperation with the British as a strategy for improving the condition of the Muslim community. In several of his writings, he emphasized that Muslims needed to demonstrate loyalty to the colonial government in order to gain access to education and public positions that had previously been closed to them.²⁷ This idea is reflected in his work *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind*, in which he criticized the discriminatory policies of the British government as one of the causes of the uprising, while also urging Muslims to act rationally and not be provoked into waging armed *jihād*.²⁸

Furthermore, Sir Syed interpreted the Qur'anic verses on *jihād* contextually. He emphasized that *jihād* should be understood as a struggle for social welfare and education, rather than as violence. This view was in line with his mission to reform Islamic education through the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh, which later became the forerunner of Aligarh Muslim University.²⁹ For Sir Syed, true *jihād* in the context of colonialism was the

²⁴ Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*, 98-101.

²⁵ Baljon, *Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

²⁶ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 45.

²⁷ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 64-66.

²⁸ Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²⁹ Ahmad Nabil Amir, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan dan Gerakan Pembaharuan di Aligarh," 133-42.

struggle against ignorance and the backwardness of the *ummah*, not a physical struggle against the colonial government.³⁰

Sir Syed interpreted the verses on *jihād* through a contextual and rational approach. He believed that *jihād* was not limited to war (*qitāl*), but also included intellectual and moral struggles. The following verses are among those used as references: al-Ḥajj [22]: 78, “And strive for God with the striving due to Him...” Sir Syed interpreted this verse as a call to perform intellectual *jihād*, namely a struggle through knowledge and education to defend truth and improve society.³¹ al-Furqān [25]: 52, “So do not obey the disbelievers, but strive against them with the Qur’an in a great striving.” This verse served as a basis for Sir Syed’s view that the greatest *jihād* is not warfare, but the peaceful and intellectual propagation of Qur’anic values through *da‘wa* and education. Then al-Baqara [2]: 190, “And fight in the way of God those who fight against you, but do not transgress. Indeed, God does not love the transgressors.” Sir Syed emphasized that armed *jihād* was justified only in self-defense, not as an attack against a power that was not directly hostile to Islam, such as the British colonial government at that time.³²

Despite harsh criticism from conservative clerics and Islamist groups, Sir Syed remained firm in his position. He believed that through a peaceful and educational approach, Muslims could rise without resorting to violence. His political stance later became one of the starting points of the Muslim modernist movement in India and served as an inspiration for later figures such as Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah.³³ His political contribution was also evident in his defense of Muslim rights amid Hindu dominance in the colonial administration. He proposed that Muslims should have comparable political representation in order to maintain the balance of power within India’s colonial society.³⁴

In discussing Sir Syed’s political thought, this study identifies three major aspects of his ideas, namely, the first, relations with the colonial government. Sir Syed believed that Muslims should coexist and cooperate with the British colonial government rather than engage in violent resistance. He explicitly rejected armed rebellion and instead emphasized diplomacy, loyalty, and education as more effective strategies for improving the condition of Indian Muslims. In *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind*, he argued that the 1857 rebellion was not rooted in religious conflict, but in mutual ignorance between rulers and subjects regarding social customs and political realities.³⁵ Sir Syed thus viewed British colonialism

³⁰ Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India*, 109-12.

³¹ Syed Ahmad Khan, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, ed. Mushirul Hasan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

³² Amroeni Derajat and Yaser Amri, “Theology Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan,” *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 24, no. 1, ser. 8 (2019): 53-59.

³³ Hafeez Malik, *Muslim Nationalism in India and Pakistan* (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1963), 84-88.

³⁴ Tim Winter, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁵ Syed Ahmad Khan, *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind* (Aligarh: Sir Syed Academy, 2018), 7-9.

ambivalently. While he openly criticized colonial injustices and discriminatory policies, he also believed that Muslim participation within colonial administrative and educational systems could provide access to social mobility and intellectual advancement.³⁶ This position reflects his broader reformist vision, which prioritized long-term Muslim empowerment over immediate political confrontation.

The second, educational and curricular reform. One of Sir Syed's most significant contributions lies in the field of educational reform. He strongly criticized the traditional Islamic education system for its inability to respond adequately to modern intellectual and scientific developments. As an alternative, he proposed an integrated curriculum that combined religious sciences with modern disciplines such as mathematics, natural sciences, and the English language.³⁷ Through the establishment of modern educational institutions, Sir Syed sought to enable Muslims to compete intellectually and socially within the colonial world. Educational reform, in his view, was inseparable from broader social reform, including rational religious thought, ethical conduct, and social responsibility.³⁸

When compared to Ahmad Dahlan in Indonesia, Sir Syed shows notable similarities in viewing education as an instrument of Muslim emancipation. However, Sir Syed's approach was more explicitly political and pragmatic. While KH Ahmad Dahlan emphasized cultural and social charity through Muhammadiyah, Sir Syed engaged directly with colonial structures in order to advance Muslim interests.³⁹

The third, rationalism in Islam. In the field of Qur'anic interpretation, Sir Syed emphasized a rational and scientific approach. He rejected superstitions and traditions that were not in accordance with reason.⁴⁰ In his interpretation of the Qur'an, he often rejected a purely literal understanding of miracles and interpreted them symbolically in order to maintain consistency with modern science. Sir Syed emphasized the importance of rational interpretation in understanding Islamic teachings. He rejected blind *taqlīd* and encouraged Muslims to accept modern science and technology as part of the *ijtihād* of the age.⁴¹ For him, Islam was not contrary to reason and progress. He also interpreted the Qur'an contextually by prioritizing its moral and social values.

Sir Syed's rejection of armed rebellion and his advocacy of cooperation with the British colonial government should therefore be understood as consequences

³⁶ Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

³⁷ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 55-58.

³⁸ Wani, Rahman, and Amarullah, "Exploring the Influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Thought," 6-10.

³⁹ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 72.

⁴⁰ Moaddel and Talattof, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*.

⁴¹ Charles Kurzman, ed., *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

of this theological framework, rather than as simple political accommodation.⁴² In *Asbāb-e-Baghāwāt-e-Hind*, he explicitly argued that the 1857 rebellion stemmed from mutual misunderstandings rather than religious persecution, thereby weakening the juridical basis for armed *jihād*.⁴³ Under these conditions, he maintained that *jihād* had to take alternative forms, namely intellectual reform, moral discipline, and educational advancement.

Within this framework, education functioned as the core instrument of political *jihād*. By strengthening Muslim intellectual capacity and social discipline, Sir Syed sought to restore Muslim agency without resorting to violence. Political *jihād*, in this sense, did not aim to overthrow colonial power, but to transform Muslim society from within through a theologically justified, nonviolent struggle. This conceptualization distinguishes his position from mere political pragmatism and situates it firmly within a reformist Islamic discourse shaped by, yet not reducible to, colonial constraints.

Education and the making of Islamic modernity

Sir Syed was a pioneer of Islamic modernism in India who placed education at the center of Muslim renewal.⁴⁴ He viewed the decline of Muslims in India as caused not only by British colonialism, but also by the tendency of Muslims themselves to remain trapped in conservative modes of thought and to reject the development of modern science. For Sir Syed, education was the principal means through which the glory of Islam could be revived within the framework of modernity. In his view, Islamic modernity did not mean the total adoption of Western culture, but rather the synthesis of Islamic values with scientific advancement and rational thought.⁴⁵ He believed that Islam was not inherently opposed to modern science; on the contrary, it encouraged the pursuit of knowledge as part of worship and as a responsibility of the *khalīfa* on earth.⁴⁶ Therefore, education had to become the main instrument for preparing Muslims to face the challenges of the age.

Sir Syed was deeply concerned about the educational condition of Indian Muslims, who had fallen behind both Hindu and Western communities. According to him, the traditional education system, particularly the *madrasah*, focused too heavily on classical disciplines such as Arabic grammar and jurisprudence, while

⁴² Endrika Widdia Putri, "Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern Perspektif Sayyid Ahmad Khan," *Jurnal Al-Aqidah* 11, no. 2 (2019): 152-66.

⁴³ Syed Ahmad Khan, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*.

⁴⁴ Wani, Rahman, and Amarullah, "Exploring the Influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Thought," 6-10.

⁴⁵ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 64-66.

⁴⁶ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform: The Madrasa in British India and Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 41, no. 2 (1999): 294-323.

neglecting modern empirical science and logic.⁴⁷ He argued that this kind of education caused Muslims to lose their competitiveness and become increasingly marginalized within the British colonial structure.

Aligarh Muslim University, which originated from the institution he founded, became a symbol of this educational struggle. Thousands of its alumni later became intellectuals and leaders in the Muslim world, thereby strengthening the influence of Sir Syed's thought in the modern Islamic world.⁴⁸ Sir Syed founded the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh in 1875, which later developed into Aligarh Muslim University. This institution became a center of Muslim educational reform and played an important role in producing a generation of Muslim intellectuals who were open to Western science and rational thought.⁴⁹

According to Sir Syed, Indian Muslims would not be able to rise politically or economically unless they first advanced intellectually.⁵⁰ Education was an instrument for building character, critical reasoning, and the technical skills required in modern society. He rejected the idea that accepting Western education meant betraying Islam. On the contrary, he believed that Islam would become stronger when supported by rational thought, scientific knowledge, and social reform. In his well-known work *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, Sir Syed emphasized that education should be directed toward the formation of noble character and open-mindedness. He also developed a scientific and rational approach to Qur'anic interpretation in order to demonstrate that Islam is a religion that encourages the pursuit of knowledge and progress. Through this approach, he sought to overcome the dichotomy between religion and science, while also instilling the spirit of *ijtihād* in responding to modern problems.⁵¹

Sir Syed's thought, however, also generated criticism.⁵² Although many appreciated his ideas, he did not escape opposition. Traditional scholars regarded his approach to the West as too liberal and overly compromising. In the field of Qur'anic interpretation, many scholars rejected his rational method because it was seen as weakeni

ng the transcendental dimension of revelation.⁵³ Some orthodox Islamic groups considered Sir Syed to have opened the way for the secularization of Islamic teachings. He was seen as too oriented toward Western science and logic, to the point of obscuring the role of revelation and the classical Islamic tradition. In his exegetical works, for instance, he often rejected literal interpretations of

⁴⁷ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 26.

⁴⁸ Md Yousuf Ali and Osman Bakar, "Syed Ahmad Khan's Twin Objectives of Educational Reforms in British India: Muslim Advancement and Hindu-Muslim Unity," *Al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 26, no. 1 (2021): 49-70.

⁴⁹ Wani, Rahman, and Amarullah, "Exploring the Influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Thought," 6-10.

⁵⁰ Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 193-213.

⁵¹ Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform," 294-323.

⁵² Derajat and Amri, "Theology Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan," 53-59.

⁵³ Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

miracles that did not accord with modern logic, such as the events of the *Isrā' Mi'rāj* and the splitting of the moon.⁵⁴

However, it is precisely here that the enduring significance of his thought becomes evident: Sir Syed demonstrated intellectual courage in reinterpreting religious texts for the public good amid profound social and political change. As noted by Fazlur Rahman, “Syed Ahmad Khan was a pioneer who paved the way for Muslim intellectuals to think freely, without having to feel guilty for diverging from classical orthodoxy.” This intellectual openness marked a decisive shift in modern Islamic thought, in which reinterpretation (*ijtihād*) was no longer viewed as a threat to faith, but as a necessary means of preserving it within changing historical contexts.⁵⁵

Sir Syed’s intellectual legacy continues to attract scholarly attention, particularly in the fields of Islamic education, Qur’anic interpretation, and political thought. Contemporary studies emphasize that his reformist ideas laid the foundations for later Muslim modernists who sought to reconcile Islamic norms with rational inquiry and social reform.⁵⁶ His educational project at Aligarh, together with his rational hermeneutics, is increasingly understood as an early model of Islamic intellectual modernization rather than as mere colonial accommodation.⁵⁷

In the context of rapid technological development and accelerated flows of information, Sir Syed’s rational and contextual approach to Islam remains highly relevant. His emphasis on coexistence, ethical reform, and intellectual openness offers a constructive framework for Muslim-majority societies grappling with pluralism, globalization, and the challenges of modern governance.⁵⁸ By prioritizing education and reason as instruments of social transformation, his thought continues to offer valuable insights into contemporary debates on Islam, modernity, and peaceful political engagement.⁵⁹ Thus, Sir Syed’s thought affirms that Islamic modernity in India could be achieved only through comprehensive educational reform. He inspired the emergence of Muslim modernists who sought to balance faith and reason, while also paving the way for the active and productive participation of Muslims in nation-building.⁶⁰

Beyond institutional reform, Sir Syed placed education as the epistemological foundation of Islamic modernity. For him, the crisis faced by Indian Muslims was not merely political or economic, but fundamentally intellectual. The dominance of *taqlīd*, resistance to scientific reasoning, and suspicion toward Western

⁵⁴ Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860-1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 109-12.

⁵⁵ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*, 64-66.

⁵⁶ Moaddel and Talatof, *Modernist and Fundamentalist Debates in Islam*.

⁵⁷ Baljon, *Reforms and Religious Ideas of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.

⁵⁸ Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940*.

⁵⁹ Zaman, “Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform,” 294-323.

⁶⁰ Tajudin Zuhri, Masripah, and Nenden Munawaroh, “Pembaharuan Pendidikan Islam Sayyid Ahmad Khan dan Relevansinya dengan Kurikulum Merdeka,” *Jurnal Pendidikan UNIGA* 18, no. 2 (2024): 214.

knowledge had, in his view, paralyzed Muslim creativity and adaptability. Education therefore functioned not only as a means of social mobility, but also as a transformative process through which Muslim intellectual attitudes could be reshaped toward rational inquiry, critical thinking, and openness to new ideas without abandoning Islamic ethical values.

Sir Syed strongly criticized the dichotomous mindset that positioned religion and modern science as mutually exclusive domains. He argued that such a division was historically inaccurate and theologically unfounded, since classical Islamic civilization had flourished precisely through the integration of transmitted revelation (*naql*) and reason (*'aql*). In this sense, modern education was not an innovation that threatened Islam, but rather a continuation of Islam's own intellectual tradition. By encouraging Muslims to study natural sciences, philosophy, and Western thought, Sir Syed sought to revive the spirit of *ijtihad* as an intellectual obligation in responding to changing historical circumstances.⁶¹

Furthermore, Sir Syed conceptualized education as a strategic instrument for political survival within colonial structures. He realized that access to administrative positions, legal professions, and public institutions under British rule required mastery of English and modern disciplines.⁶² Without educational reform, Muslims would remain excluded from decision-making processes and increasingly marginalized in a colonial society dominated by Western-educated elites, particularly among Hindu communities. Thus, education became a form of political empowerment, enabling Muslims to negotiate their position within the colonial system without resorting to violent confrontation.⁶³

In his educational philosophy, moral formation (*akhlāq*) occupied a central place alongside intellectual development. Through his journal *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq*, Sir Syed emphasized that modern education should cultivate ethical responsibility, social discipline, and civic consciousness.⁶⁴ He rejected the notion that Western education inevitably produced moral decadence, arguing instead that moral decline resulted from ignorance and the misinterpretation of religious teachings. For him, ethical refinement and rational education were mutually reinforcing elements, both essential to the creation of a progressive and dignified Muslim society.⁶⁵

The long-term impact of Sir Syed's educational thought can be seen in the emergence of a new Muslim intelligentsia in South Asia.⁶⁶ Graduates of Aligarh institutions became bureaucrats, lawyers, journalists, and political leaders who

⁶¹ Suwarno, *Pembaruan Pendidikan Islam*, 70.

⁶² Zaman, "Religious Education and the Rhetoric of Reform," 294-323.

⁶³ Derajat and Amri, "Theology Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan."

⁶⁴ Zuhri, Masripah, and Munawaroh, "Pembaharuan Pendidikan Islam Sayyid Ahmad Khan," 214.

⁶⁵ Wani, Rahman, and Amarullah, "Exploring the Influence of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Thought."

⁶⁶ Derajat and Amri, "Theology Thought of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan."

played crucial roles in shaping Muslim political consciousness in the late colonial period. Although Sir Syed himself did not advocate the establishment of an Islamic state, his educational legacy laid the intellectual groundwork for later political movements among Indian Muslims. In this sense, education functioned as a silent yet powerful form of *jihād*: an enduring struggle to restore Muslim agency, dignity, and relevance within the modern world.

Conclusion

Sir Syed emerged as a pivotal figure in the intellectual and political transformation of Indian Muslims in the nineteenth century, particularly in response to the challenges of British colonialism and the internal stagnation of Muslim society. His political thought was shaped by a rational and reformist orientation that rejected violent resistance and emphasized cooperation, negotiation, and strategic adaptation. Through a contextual reinterpretation of Islamic teachings, especially the concept of *jihād*, Sir Syed offered an alternative model of Muslim political engagement that placed social reform, intellectual renewal, and moral responsibility above armed confrontation.

His reinterpretation of *jihād* represents a significant contribution to modern Islamic political thought. By redefining *jihād* as an intellectual, ethical, and educational struggle, he expanded its meaning beyond physical warfare and situated it within a broader project of civilizational renewal. This approach enabled Muslims to remain faithful to Islamic principles while engaging critically with modernity and colonial realities. His emphasis on education as a form of *jihād* further highlights the strategic role of knowledge in empowering marginalized communities and restoring Muslim agency within an unequal political order.

Ultimately, Sir Syed's legacy lies in his ability to bring Islam, reason, and modern education into a coherent framework of social transformation. His educational reforms not only reshaped Muslim intellectual life in colonial India but also laid the foundation for the emergence of a modern Muslim intelligentsia in South Asia. Although his ideas provoked criticism from conservative circles, their long-term influence demonstrates the enduring relevance of his thought. In a contemporary world still marked by tensions between tradition and modernity, Sir Syed's vision offers an important model for understanding how Islamic values may coexist with rational inquiry, pluralism, and progressive social change.

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