

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Muslim Renaissance in South Asia

Joya Chatterji rightly observes that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was the first to claim that Indian Muslims constituted a separate nation (Chatterji, 2023: 47). Although not advocating partition, Sir Syed's political philosophy can be seen as laying the foundation for the Two-Nation Theory.

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This year marks the 207th birth anniversary of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, who was born into a prominent family with ties to the Mughal court in Delhi on 17 October 1817, and passed away on 27 March 1898. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan played a pivotal role in the Muslim renaissance of the Indian subcontinent during the 19th century. His family's aristocratic background provided him with access to both traditional Islamic education and the evolving intellectual currents of his time. He was a pioneering socio-religious reformer, though his legacy is complex and subject to various critiques. His contributions were primarily focused on modernising the Muslim community, which was struggling in the aftermath of the fall of the Mughal Empire and the subsequent rise of British colonial rule.

One of his most remarkable contributions was in the field of education. He recognised that Muslims had fallen behind due to their reluctance to embrace Western education and sciences, largely clinging to traditional religious studies. The Muslim renaissance is said to have begun with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. He was a forerunner of socio-cultural transformations in the Muslim community through the Aligarh Movement (hereafter, AM). To bring about a change in Muslim attitudes, he launched an Islamic renaissance through his writings and the AM. For him, Western science and technology strengthened Islamic convictions, as Islam was not dialectically opposed to reasoning

Hindu interests at the expense of Muslim political representation. He believed that the Muslim community should remain aloof from political agitation, as their active participation in the anti-colonial Mutiny of 1857 had already endangered them by provoking British antagonism.

In his 1858 monograph, *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, Sir Syed identified five major reasons for the 1857 rebellion: the lack of Indian representation in legislative councils, forced religious conversions to Christianity, poor management of the Indian Army, British neglect of Muslim interests, and various other misguided policies that led to widespread dissatisfaction across society. He was deeply impressed by Western rationalism and sought to demonstrate that every doctrine of Islam could stand up to the principles of science, reason, and common sense (Sayeed, 1960: 13). At the same time, he believed that Islam is compatible with liberal secular values and religious tolerance.

Sir Syed Ahmad established the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College in 1875. The foundation of the college at Aligarh served as tangible evidence that Sir Syed's ideas had been embraced by the Muslim community, as the institution was largely funded by their donations. The college was later transformed into Aligarh Muslim University, which became the primary vehicle for Muslim education.

Sir Syed also emphasised the importance of individual well-being. As he stated, "The government must provide all sorts of rights related to property, employment, freedom of religion, speech, and life. It must protect them, and unequal powers should not be allowed to harm anyone. The government must shield the weak and deserving from the undeserving mighty. Everyone should be allowed to get the full benefit from his property and skill" (cited in Kidwai, 2021: 6).

The impact of the Aligarh Movement (AM) on Bengali Muslims could hardly be underestimated. Sir Syed's overall influence upon Bengal was part of his broader attempt to promote the upliftment of Muslims across India, although his direct involvement with Bengal was more limited compared to his impact in North India, particularly in Aligarh. Before the AM, very few Bengali Muslims had access to an English education. It was the AM which introduced some Muslims to Western education and science. It became a source of pride for those Muslims who had been able to attend Aligarh for higher education in modern Western disciplines.



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as well as in university governing bodies like the senate and syndicate. Second, they requested that Muslim representatives be elected separately to the Provincial Council, based on their political significance rather than their proportion of the population.

Sir Syed's ideas on the separate electorate were rooted in his broader vision for Muslim political representation and protection within the British colonial system. His idea of separate electorates for Muslims can be viewed as evolving from some of his political beliefs and concerns for the Muslim community. In Bengal, institutions like Islamia College followed Sir Syed's model of blending Western and Islamic education. Muslim intellectuals in Bengal, such as Nawab Abdul Latif and Syed Ameer Ali, advocated for educational reform among Muslims in line with Sir Syed's liberal approach.

It is to be noted that the separate electorate for the Muslim community was formally recognised in the

periodicals came into existence. The demand for Muslim education created an enabling environment for the Freedom of Intellect Movement (Buddhir Mukti Andolan), a Bengali Muslim-led renaissance advocating rationality against religious fanaticism and social dogma in Bengali Muslim society. It was spearheaded by several Dacca University intellectuals, including Abul Husain, Abul Fazal, Qazi Motahar Hossain, and Abdul Quadir. *Shikha* was the mouthpiece of the Muslim Sahitya-Samaj (Muslim Literary Society), founded in Dhaka in 1926.

In his 1926 speech, Dr Muhammad Shahidullah stated: "The Hindu Shahitya is fed with Vedanta, Gita, Hindu history, and life. Hindu literature gathers flavours from Hindu society. It is through this literature that the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal will recognise each other. Cognition is the basis of love" (Cited in Rahim, 2011: 219). The main slogan or motto of *Shikha* was: "Where knowledge is limited, intellect is inert, freedom is impossible."

Second, the separate electorate expanded job opportunities and improved the economic well-being of Muslims. It eventually contributed to the political ascendancy of A. K. Fazlul Huq, who became the Chief Minister of undivided Bengal after the 1937 elections. Huq formed the Krishak Praja Party for the betterment of the peasants and abolished the exploitative zamindari system. Once, in the 1940s, A. K. Fazlul Huq called upon the people not to apologise for being Muslims (Rashiduzzaman, 2021).

Third, the rise of the Muslim middle class was the cumulative outcome of the historical awakening and empowerment of the Muslims. The masses belonging to the rural and urban middle classes played key roles in the independence of India and Pakistan in 1947. Thus, Syed Ahmad's influence extended beyond his lifetime, with his ideas continuing to resonate during the struggle for independence. He inspired later political leaders, including those involved in the formation of the All-India Muslim League, a party established in 1906, following the partition of Bengal, which played a significant role in the demand for Pakistan.

However, the main domestic problem of separate electorates was addressed when Congress agreed to Jinnah's plea to allow weightage of seats in the legislative councils of certain provinces where Muslims were in the minority. This became known as the historic Lucknow Pact, which made Jinnah a prominent leader of Indian Muslims. The atmosphere in Lucknow, where the All-India Muslim League and the Indian National Congress met to hold their annual sessions, was even more cordial. Jinnah was the main architect of the Lucknow Pact, and he was thereafter hailed as an ambassador of Hindu-Muslim unity. The Lucknow Pact acknowledged the provision of separate electorates, which was later

incorporated into the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919.

In this way, we learn that the separate electorate system was introduced by the Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, recognised by the Montagu-Chelmsford Report of 1919, and further extended by the Government of India Act of 1935. All the elections to the local bodies and Legislative Councils from 1909 to 1946 were held on the basis of the separate electorate system.

It is important to note that the ideology of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was subject to criticism and limitation. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) was a scholar, freedom fighter, and proponent of Hindu-Muslim unity. A close reading of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad's autobiography, *India Wins Freedom*, reveals that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had a decisive influence on Azad. Sir Syed's emphasis on rationalism, scientific inquiry, and social reform significantly shaped Azad's worldview. Azad was inspired by Sir Syed's calls for a modern and progressive interpretation of Islam, advocating for reforms within Muslim society to align with contemporary realities. As Azad wrote, "Suddenly a new way opened before me. I refer to the writings of Sir Sayyid [Sir Syed Ahmad Khan]. Because this experience had a very great influence on my religious and intellectual life" (Cited in Douglas, 1988: 51).

Although Azad recognised Sir Syed's contribution to Muslim education, he disagreed with many of his views. Maulana Azad believed that Sir Syed's policy of loyalty to the British Empire was shortsighted and flawed. Azad argued that this stance diminished the role Muslims could play in the larger Indian freedom movement. He believed that Muslims, like Hindus, should oppose colonial rule, which he viewed as unjust and exploitative. To Azad, aligning too closely with the British harmed the political future of Indian Muslims.

In conclusion, this paper reiterates its central thesis that, as a visionary political leader and socio-religious reformer of the 19th century, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan played a vital role in empowering Muslims through the enlightening efforts of his Aligarh Movement. He recognised the importance of English education in empowering Muslims and fostering fruitful interactions with the British ruling elite. While Sir Syed's efforts to modernise Muslim education and social thought had a lasting impact, his critics argue that his loyalty to the British colonial government, his communal outlook, and his elitist approach to education contributed to a fractured Muslim identity. He was an early advocate of the separate electorate for the Muslim community. The demand for and recognition of the separate electorate in 1909 ignited a crucial debate among anti-colonial nationalists, as well as within the Pakistan Movement, ultimately leading to the emergence of two independent states, namely India and Pakistan, in 1947. In a nutshell, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was a key figure in the awakening of the Muslim community in the subcontinent.

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Tomb of Syed Ahmad Khan

and rationalism.

The revolt of 1857 was a significant turning point in Syed Ahmad's life. After the revolt, many protesters, predominantly Muslims, were killed and persecuted by the British government. Sir Syed clearly understood the necessity for Muslims to become proficient in English and acquire modern scientific education to maintain their social, economic, and political standing in India. His academic and journalistic writings sparked informed debates on the social, cultural, religious, and political dynamics between Muslims, Hindus, and the British.

In her newly published book, *Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century*, historian Joya Chatterji rightly observes that Sir Syed Ahmad Khan was the first to claim that Indian Muslims constituted a separate nation (Chatterji, 2023: 47). Although not advocating partition, Sir Syed's political philosophy can be seen as laying the foundation for the Two-Nation Theory, which held that Muslims and Hindus were two separate nations with distinct cultures, religions, and interests. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, leader of the All-India Muslim League and founding father of Pakistan, was influenced by Sir Syed's political philosophy, having been educated at Aligarh Muslim University.

The Two-Nation Theory eventually became the bedrock of the 1940 Lahore Resolution, which was presented by A. K. Fazlul Huq, the then Chief Minister of Undivided Bengal. Professor Ayesha Jalal has noted that, over time, the Lahore Resolution emerged as a significant milestone in the political history of British India (Jalal, 1985).

Sir Syed maintained that Muslims should collaborate with the British government. He viewed the British as protectors of Muslim interests and encouraged Muslims to refrain from participating in the Indian National Congress, fearing it would align with



(L) First issue of the journal Muhammadan Social Reformer dated 24 December 1870, it was a pioneering publication initiated by Sir Syed Ahmad to promote liberal ideas in Muslim society. (R) Syed Ahmad Khan's famous pamphlet 'The Causes of the Indian Revolt'

Lord Curzon executed the partition of Bengal in 1905. Dacca became the capital city of the newly created 'Eastern Bengal and Assam'. The Partition of Bengal was a momentous phase in the development of Muslim nationalism in Bengal. Muslim leaders became very optimistic after the partition scheme in 1905. As a result, in 1906, Muslim leaders formed a new political party, namely the All-India Muslim League, to safeguard the political interests of the Muslim community in Bengal.

The Simla Deputation, led by Aga Khan, met with Governor General and Viceroy Lord Minto in Simla in October 1906. This deputation marked the first organised effort by the Muslim community to present their demands to the British government in India. Muslim leaders put forth two primary demands: first, the allocation of a fixed number of seats for Muslims in municipal and district boards,

Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909. Moreover, Maulana Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, two prominent leaders of the Khilafat Movement in the early 20th century, were both students at Aligarh Muslim University and were deeply influenced by Sir Syed's ideas on Muslim education and political awareness. The Ali brothers carried forward Sir Syed's emphasis on the importance of Muslim unity, although they were involved in the anti-colonial struggle, unlike Sir Syed's pro-British stance.

The constitutional recognition of the separate electorate for Muslims was a milestone in several important ways. First, the separate electorate facilitated the growth of a set of Muslim leaders such as Sher-e-Bangla A. K. Fazlul Huq. The establishment of the University of Dacca in 1921 also had a significant impact on the promotion of Muslim culture and political consciousness. Several societies and