

# Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Muslim

# Renaissance in South Asia

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**Sir Syed Ahmad Khan KCSI FRAS**

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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 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



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