

Conceptualizing Educational Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

Muheeb Ahad ^{1*}, Naseem Gul ²

¹ Assistant Professor, ² Coordinator & Assistant Professor

Department of Islamic Studies, Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajouri, Jammu & Kashmir

ABSTRACT

Syed Ahmed Ahmad Khan is considered as the harbinger of modern education amongst Muslim community of Indian sub-continent. Muslim scholars generally maintain the unanimous belief that it was due to Sir Syed's industrious toils that the spirit of modern education had been imbued in Muslim community who were hitherto aligned with traditional education. Sir Syed propagated and pursued the ideas of modern education as it was to him the sine quo non for the development and progress of nation. He believed that education is such a critical element of a society that plays a vital role in the construction of thought, belief and ideology of a nation. A society may eventually decay or even collapse if this aspect is not developed in the proper manner and in accordance with the demands of time. Sir Syed was a well-known towering personality who spent his entire life working to transport Muslim community to the novel realms of education. All his efforts were to make Muslims capable to cope with the modern day challenges. The current work is a modest attempt to provide readers with a thorough understanding of Sir Syed's educational ideas, his initial objectives of establishing educational institution, approaches to educational reform from the basic level and efforts to bring the various fields of knowledge together under a single roof.

Keywords: Education, Knowledge, Science, Reform, Quran, Scientific.

*Corresponding author's email: muheebahad318@bgsbu.ac.in



Introduction

Towards the closure of 18th century, Muslim society in India was a dismal display of stagnation and decline. The community had lost all the life, vigour, and creative force of a live nation, as seen by their unwillingness to meet the challenges of the west that came with the establishment of British administration in India.¹ In addition, the year 1857 marked a significant turning point in the history of Indian Muslims. The nadir of Muslim political authority, which had been steadily eroding since the early 18th century, was reached in 1857. The horrible bloodbath of 1857 finally put an end to the Mughal Empire, which represented a culture that had been the foundation for Muslim social behaviour as a whole for generations, making it more than just a simple polity. Thus, its collapse dried out the milieu's source and left the Muslims devastated and distressed. They were trapped in a dead end, enmeshed in medievalism, broken-hearted, and discouraged. They had no way out and were reduced to a position of total poverty and object poverty. During this time, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, a great emancipator of the Muslim community, focused his mind on the job of creating circumstances in which his community may make up leeway. Finally, he discovered that education was the answer to every problem plaguing modern Muslim society. He focused on nearly everything, including literature, religion, social life, and education, and everything he touched was profoundly impacted by his ideas and personality. As a result, he emerged as a powerful social and moral force that sped up the process of moving from the middle ages to the modern era.² The Mohammadan Anglo Oriental College served as a tool for the execution of his plan for intellectual revival and social transformation. He provided an entire generation's academic pursuits a new depth and perspective. The foundation of his thinking was the formation of a scientific mindset, which he regarded as a *sine qua non* for intellectual advancement and social progress.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had a practical outlook; he carefully examined the situation at hand and counselled the Muslims to focus on a contemporary education, and abstain from politics for the time being. Without Sir Syed, the history of Muslims on the subcontinent would have been very gloomy, but he provided the apt guidance at the right jiffy. He enthusiastically worked to bring about a change in Muslim thought and behaviour by founding what Gibb correctly refers to as "*the first modernist institution in Islam*". He actually signaled the start of an age of intellectual renaissance in India and contributed many essential elements to the development of modern Indian

Conceptualization Educational Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

society. He has always kept an eye out for the Muslim community. He had a unique perspective and was decades ahead of his time. He was an amazing literary genius, an advocate for Hindu-Muslim harmony, a radical thinker, a learned theologian, a sharp historian, an educated and forward-thinking educator, and a very notable architect of modern India. The globe underwent a significant transition thanks to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's efforts, and its impacts on Muslims are still felt today. He intended to grow his organisation in a way that would make it a Centre of power from which, under Sir Syed's leadership, hundreds of revolutionaries should emerge. It actually did happen, and history records that many of them had their roots at Aligarh Muslim University and left a lasting impression on the world.

Educational Ideas of Sir Syed

Sir Syed had a comprehensive and all-encompassing view of education. His laborious work and industrial presentation aimed to take Muslims to new educational horizons. His approach to education was based on the idea that modern education is the perfect cure for all ills that have brought the community to the brink of total decadence and atrophy. As a result, he saw it as the sole instrument that might encourage the comprehensive regeneration of the populace on all levels—social, political, economic, and moral.³ Sir Syed's sojourn in London helped him to realize the value of modern education and the necessity of it in the Muslim community. Sir Syed was fully aware of the significance of science and technology in the educational spheres in order to fulfill the demands and difficulties of his time. He recognized the shortcomings of the traditional education system and felt that the current curriculum needed to be revised. There is a preconceived notion that Sir Syed was outright hostile to the eastern style of pedagogy and averse to religious education. Zafar ul Islam argued that Sir Syed was not against religious studies but was of the opinion that the traditional curriculum, which he believed was no longer compatible with modern day challenges, needed to be revisited.⁴ He devoted himself to analyzing what he believed to be the root of Muslim backwardness. He saw the expression of reason and logic in the Islamic sacred texts. According to him, there can never be a contradiction between the Quran and the world—that is, between God's words and God's works—and when such a disagreement does arise; the religious norm at issue must be reinterpreted in light of the new information.⁵

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan believed that creating a Muslim college where Muslim pupils could receive instruction in both religious and secular topics at the same time would

be the only way to address the issue of Muslims in India. In addition to preparing Muslims for civil service, he called for an educational system that also steered them toward learning the different types of knowledge of machinery and other mechanical devices. In November 1859 C.E., Sir Syed established the first concrete step in his vision of educational reform by opening a school in Muradabad.⁶ In 1862 C.E., he established a translation organisation, which swiftly developed into a vibrant scientific society in 1864 C.E. To foster intellectual transformation was the initial justification for founding a Muslim educational movement.

Sir Syed's educational mission of intellectual rebirth was carried out through the Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College. He provided an entire generation's academic pursuits a new depth and perspective. The foundation of his thinking was the formation of a scientific mindset, which he saw as essential to both intellectual and social growth. Zobairi argued that, "*The affairs of the College that he founded were conducted on a strictly non-sectarian basis.*"⁷ Sir Syed took a practical approach and carefully examined the situation at hand. He then counselled the Muslims to support the British government, focus on a modern education, and abstain from politics for the time being. Many Scholars believed that without Sir Syed the history of Muslims on the subcontinent would have been very gloomy, but he provided the appropriate guidance at the right moment. Additionally, he realized that general education would make up the curriculum comprehensive and encompassing.

Course Structure Offered by Sir Syed

Sir Syed offered the contents of his curriculum after taking into account the diverse needs and demands of the Muslim community. He structured the Muslim educational system into two categories: general education and special education. Muslims should be in charge of running general education programme that cater to both their secular and spiritual aspirations. The special education should facilitate Muslims to get advantage from the educational system espoused by government. The course structure for general education included:

(A) Religion: This included *Tafsir* (Commentary on the Quran), Traditions of the Prophet (*Ahadith*), Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*) and common principles of faith.

(B) Moral Sciences: This included Geography, Logic, Philosophy, Literature and language, History, Economy and Politics

(C) Mathematics: This included Geometry, Arithmetic, Algebra, and other branches of learning related to Mathematics.

(D) **Natural Sciences:** This included Astronomy, Statistics, Optics and Natural Philosophy.

Course structure for special education included: Anatomy, Physiology, Engineering, Geology, Zoology, Botany, Chemistry and Mineralogy. Sir Syed proposed that the distribution of the above mentioned subjects into different classes of schools and colleges, and the quantity to be taught in each class in a fixed and specific manner.⁸

Curriculum of Elementary Schools

Besides the Quran, few Urdu-language reading and writing materials, arithmetic's, and Persian and English as a second language should all be essential components of the curriculums in these kind of institutions. The Quran must be taught by using a novel methodology that would allow the entire assignment to be completed in six months. The learners of these institutions should also be taught the way of reading prayers. Moreover, brief works on religious ideas such as *Haqiqat-ul-Salwat* and *Rah-i-Nijat* should also be taught in addition to the components mentioned above.

The curriculum of Schools and Colleges

Sir Syed argued that the Government Committees does not need to prescribe the academic programme for English schools and colleges. In this regard, two universities one in Oxford and the other in Cambridge can serve as our models if their curriculum and teaching pedagogy are emulated. The only difference between the eastern style of pedagogy and western style of pedagogy should be that the English textbooks needed to be taught in Urdu rather than in English.⁹

A course structure for the Arabic and Persian schools could also be organized. Simple and virtuous works of Persian literature could be chosen for the purpose. However, as far as the Arabic course as it currently stands need a lot of improvement. It would be required to replace the current approach with a better one because it is rather absurd and at odds with the spirit of the time.¹⁰

We can conclude that the entire curriculum from the preparatory level was majorly divided into four courses which included religion, literature, arithmetic, and natural science. Algebra and geometry were covered in introductory physics and mathematics in the field of natural science. Language, composition, history, geography, logic, politics, and a variety of philosophical subjects were all covered in literature. The Prophet's (SAAS) biography and sayings, Quranic commentaries, jurisprudence, and basic principles were all topics covered in the religion course.¹¹

Evolution of M.A.O College

The Mohamadan Anglo-Oriental College, established by Sir Syed in 1875 C.E., attracted students from all over the subcontinent as it was a native university. The college's academic programme was enhanced and expanded, in addition to the college's gorgeous building. In 1878 C.E., the first college course was offered, and within five years it had evolved into a kindergarten college. It started offering classes in 1888 C.E. that went all the way up to the Calcutta University M.A. and Allahabad L.L.B. levels.¹²

The best aspects of knowledge from the East and West, as well as from the scientific and religious worlds, were one of the main goals of the M.A.O. College. Additionally, his new educational system was to try a major synthesis of knowledge from the East and the West rather than only imitating the West.¹³ Sir Syed understood that the modern era is the era of science, and that Islam needs to be reinterpreted if it is to meet the challenges of the modern era. Hence, by establishing the college he visualized the education of a Muslim who would have “*Quran* in one hand, modern science in the other hand and on his head the crown of ‘there is no God but Allah’”.¹⁴

The M.A.O College was the first institution in India where eminent Oxford and Cambridge academics and erudite Muslim religious experts coexisted in the same campus. Both in Muslim Asia and in India, the M.A.O. College's environment was unmatched. Sir Syed immediately recognized the education's boundless potential as a powerful tool for shifting people's perspectives and remaking society. Sir Syed expressed anxiety about Indian Muslims' ability to adjust to the intellectual and political shift brought on by Western control during his whole life. His first task was to rewrite Islamic doctrine in order to harmonize it with modern Western science and education. He aims to give the Muslims a self-aware unity with Aligarh as their focal point, modernize them, and connect them with British power in India. In fact, Sir Syed had a wider perspective and had anticipated the urgent need for Muslims in India to receive a contemporary education in order to better their socioeconomic standing. He never discounted the value of religious and oriental studies. In one of his sermons Sir Syed mentions that:

“In the same way, we need to teach Arabic which regardless of whether it is the language of Muslims, is a high-level language that cannot be separated from any other language. It is our duty to give religious education to Muslims of low level

Conceptualization Educational Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

*or average level or high level because what made different nations a nation is Islam. If we don't take care of it, nationality cannot survive."*¹⁵

He continually made an effort to revitalize madaris, update their curricula, and restructure them in accordance with the demands of the moment by his own resources and with the assistance of the Muslim Educational Conference.¹⁶ But he encountered many difficulties both inside and outside the Muslim community, and he was ridiculed and vilified by established religious authorities.

From Synthesis to Unintended Dichotomy

As we have understood in the preceding discussions that Sir Syed made industrious efforts to take Muslims to the new realms of education by bringing the two paradigms of knowledge under single roof. However, he was unable to introduce his own logical approach of religion into the College due to resistance from the Muslim Ulamas. Moreover, Sir Syed's article on Islam's logical approach was not permitted for college students to read. As a result, the religious Ulama were in charge of educating people in religion. Bhuddani mentioned that this might be the cause of the college's output being either anti-religious or excessively religious, which went against current science.¹⁷ As a result, it is asserted that the college's founder was unsuccessful in creating a grand synthesis of modern and religious education. Many scholars contend that methodological issues were likely the most significant and important reasons why reconciliation failed. In actuality, the college's curriculum was compartmentalized, and no attempts were made to synthesize and show how science and religion are intertwined.¹⁸ Bhuddani notes that the current employees at the college contributed to the contradiction between these two systems. The theological department was run by orthodox academics that rejected learning about contemporary sciences. However, the western professors at the college did not only have different religious and cultural beliefs from the Muslims; they also taught the modern sciences without making accommodations for the religion. The other cause was that the Ulamas were not hitherto ready to conform to any rational interpretation of Islam that could blend the two paradigms of learning. Sir Syed understood that the amalgamation of the two paradigms of knowledge would be possible by the reinterpretation of Islam. Therefore, he wrote a commentary on the Qur'an under the title *Tafsir-ul-Qur'an*, and multitude editorials in *Tahdhib-al-Akhlaq* which were fashioned on the rational interpretation of Islam. However, his thought and ideas remained nearly restricted to himself, as he confronted with widespread hostile and

antagonistic reaction from the traditional section of the Muslim community.¹⁹ As a result, the students at the college who were inspired by the modern sciences were unable to understand how the sciences and Islam's religion interacted, and as a result, M.A.O. College followed modern trends.

Nevertheless, Sir Syed was one of the most imposing figures in the universe of Muslim reformers in the 19th century. He fiercely worked to bring about a change in Muslim thought and behaviour by founding what Gibb correctly refers to as "*the first modernist institution in Islam*".²⁰ He had an uncommon vision and was decades ahead of his time. He was a brilliant literary genius, a great thinker, a learned theologian, a keen historian, an enlightened and progressive educator, and a highly notable architect of modern India. Sir Syed's efforts were responsible for the sub-dramatic continent's transformation, which continues to have an impact on Muslims today. He desired for his institution to be developed in such a way that Sir Syed could use it as a springboard for the emergence of thousands of revolutionaries. It actually did happen, and history records that many of them had their roots at Aligarh Muslim University and left a lasting impression on the world.

Conclusion

It is challenging to adequately portray Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's illustrious characteristics, abilities, and accomplishments in the constrained space and scope of this study. What is highlighted in this article is just a small glimpse of what he was capable of accomplishing. The emergence of Sir Syed ensued at a critical juncture when Muslims in India were confronted with a dire situation, dismal prospects, and little hope for a bright future. Sir Syed immediately recognized the boundless potential of education as a powerful tool for shifting people's perspectives and remaking society. Sir Syed expressed concern about Indian Muslim's ability to adjust to the intellectual and political shift brought on by Western control during his whole life. His first task was to reinterpret Islamic doctrine in order to harmonize it with modern Western science and education. He aimed to give the Muslims a self-aware unity with Aligarh as their focal point, modernize them, and link them with the modern education. In fact, Sir Syed had a more expansive perspective and argued that Muslims in India urgently needed modern education to better their socioeconomic standing. Moreover, he never discounted the value of religious and oriental studies or discouraged them. He constantly made an effort to modernize the madaris by updating and reorganizing their curricula in accordance with the needs of the time,

Conceptualization Educational Thought of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

using his own resources and the assistance of the Muslim Educational Conference. The globe underwent a significant transition thanks to Sir Syed's tireless efforts, and its impacts on Muslims are still felt today. He wanted his institution to develop in such a way that it would serve as an example for tens of thousands of intellectuals to emulate Sir Syed's impact. It actually did happen, and history records that many of them had their roots at Aligarh Muslim University and left a lasting impression on the world.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 international license.

References and Endnotes

- ¹ Gulzar N. Buddhani, *The Role and Contribution of The Aligarh Muslim University in Modern Indian Islam (1877-1947)*, M.Phil dissertation submitted to University of Manchester, May 1987, P. 72
- ² S. K. Bhatnagar, *History of the M.A.O. College, Aligarh*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1969, p. 36
- ³ Shan Mohammad, *The Aligarh Movement (A Concise Study)*, Educational Book House, Aligarh, 1999, p. 58-59
- ⁴ Zafar ul Islam Islahi, *Madrassa tul Uloom Aligarh ka Qiyaam aur uskay Awalein Nuqoosh*, Islamic Book Foundation, New Delhi, 2018, P. 18
- ⁵ Hamid Naseem Rafiabadi, *Muslims and Science Education with reference to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*, Rising Kashmir, 2 April 2021, p. 6
- ⁶ Hafees Malik, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1980, p. 187
- ⁷ Riazuddin H. Zobairi, *The Educational and Social Ideas of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan*, (Southern Illinois University, Ph.D. thesis 1971), pp. 208.
- ⁸ *Khan, Syed Ahmad: Report of the Committee for Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning Among the Mohammadans of India*, (English Version), Medical Hall Press, 1872, pp.57-58.
- ⁹ *Khan, Syed Ahmad: Report of the Committee for Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning Among the Mohammadans of India*, Op.cit., p. 66.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.
- ¹¹ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation (Muslim Solidarity in British India)*, Princeton University Press, 1978, P. 125
- ¹² *Reports on the progress of education in the M.A.O College for the year 1893-94*, p.2
- ¹³ Zafar ul Islam Islahi, *Op. Cit.* P.14
- ¹⁴ S. M. Ikram, *Mouj-e-Kausar*, Taj Company Publishers, Delhi, 2004, p. 146 also Fazlur Rahman, *Muslim Modernism in the Indo Pakistan Sub-continent*, N.a, p.82-89
- ¹⁵ Mohammad Ismail Panipati, *Khutbaat-e-Sir Syed* (ed), Majlis Taraqqi Adab, Lahore, p. 249-50
- ¹⁶ Zafar ul Islam, *Op. Cit.* P. 14
- ¹⁷ Gulzar N. Buddhani, *Op. Cit.* p. 138
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 127
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.128
- ²⁰ H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism*, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p.124