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Topic- Study of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

**Online Class Materials**

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# Syed Ahmad Khan

## Muslim reformer

Through the 1850s, Syed Ahmad 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 criticised 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 Indian Rebellion of 1857 threatened to marginalise 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 organise relief for the famine-struck people of North-West 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. Modelling 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, struggling to find rational interpretations for jinn, angels, and miracles of the Prophets. One example was the reaction to his argument – which appeared in his tafsir (exegesis) of the Quran – that riba

referred to interest charges when lending money to the poor, but not to the rich, nor to borrowers "in trade or in industry", since this finance supported "trade, national welfare and prosperity". While many jurists declared all interest to be *riba*, (according to Sir Syed) this was based "on their own authority and deduction" rather than the Quran.

Many other orthodox Sunni schools condemned him as out of the fold of Islam i.e. *kafir*. Many of his own friends, like Nawab Muhsin ul Mulk, expressed their significant reservations at his religious ideas (many of which were expounded in his commentary of Qur'an). According to J.M.S. Baljon his ideas created "a real hurricane of protests and outbursts of wrath" among the local clerics "in every town and village" in Muslim India, who issued *fatawa* "declaring him to be a *kafir*" (unbeliever). He was also accused of having converted to Christianity.

Maulana Qasim Nanautawi, the founder of Darul 'Uloom Deoband, expressed in a letter to an acquaintance of his and Sir Syed's:

"No doubt, I greatly admire, as per what I've heard, Syed (Ahmad) Sahab's courage (*Ūlul Azmi*) and concern for the Muslims (*Dardmandi e Ahl e Islam*). For this if I shall express my affection for him, it will be rightful. However, similar to this (or rather more than this), upon hearing about his disturbed (*Fāsīd*) beliefs, I have deep complains and sorrow for him"

Maulana Qasim Nanautawi wrote directly to Sir Syed as well, explaining him some of his "noteworthy" mistakes. This correspondence was published as "*Tasfiyat ul Aqaaid*" in 1887 C.E.