Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement

Sir Syed's education, writing and religious ideas, the Aligarh College and movement, his relations with the British and the ulama, the Hindi–Urdu controversy and the Two-Nation Theory, and how successful the Aligarh Movement was.

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Who was Sir Syed?

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (**1817–1898**) was born in **Delhi** into a noble Muslim family. He worked for the **East India Company** as a judicial official and saw the **1857** War at close hand (he saved the lives of some British people at Bijnor). After 1857 he decided that the Muslims would only recover if they learned **Western education and science** and made peace with the British.

His early work: restoring the confidence of Muslims

- He wrote **"Asbab-e-Baghawat-e-Hind"** (*The Causes of the Indian Revolt*, 1859) arguing that the British, not the Muslims alone, were partly to blame for 1857: they had misunderstood Indian customs and had no Indian members on the Legislative Council.
- He wrote **"Loyal Mohammedans of India"** to show that Muslims had not all been against the British.
- His aim was to remove British **suspicion** of the Muslims and to show the Muslims that **they must cooperate**.

His book on the monuments of Delhi, **Athar-us-Sanadid** (1847), had already made his name as a scholar.

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His contribution to education

Date	Step
1859	set up a school in **Muradabad**
1863	set up a school (**Victoria School**) at **Ghazipur**
1864	founded the **Scientific Society** at Ghazipur (later moved to Aligarh) to **translate English books** on science and history into Urdu
1866	began the **Aligarh Institute Gazette**, which spread articles on history, science and agriculture
1869–70	visited **England**, where he studied the schools and colleges of Oxford and Cambridge, which he took as his model
1870	began the journal **"Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq"** (*Social Reformer*) to spread modern ideas among Muslims
1875	founded the **Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) School** at **Aligarh**, which became the **MAO College** in **1877**
1886	started the **All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference** to spread his ideas across India

Aligarh College taught **modern subjects** (science, mathematics, English) as well as **Islamic studies**. Students lived in hostels and played sports. Teachers included **Englishmen**. It later became the **Aligarh Muslim University** (**1920**), and many leaders of the Pakistan Movement studied there.

The reasons for founding the College. To give Muslims a modern education so they could get **government jobs** and compete with Hindus, to produce **leaders**, to **restore Muslim self-respect**, and to show that **Islam and modern knowledge** were not opposed.

His religious views

He tried to show that **Islam was compatible with reason and science**, and said that the Quran was God's word and nature was God's work, so they could not contradict. He wrote a **commentary on the Quran** and rejected superstition and some traditional interpretations. This meant that **conservative ulama** attacked him (some even called him a heretic).

Relations with the British and the ulama

- **British:** he urged Muslims to be **loyal** to the British and to **stay out of politics** until they were educated. He had the support of many British officials, and **Theodore Beck** (a principal) and others at Aligarh. He was knighted in **1888** (KCSI).

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- **Ulama:** many **opposed** him because of his support for Western education and his religious interpretations. Others supported his reforms. He tried to reassure them that Islam would not be harmed.

His political views and relations with Congress

- When the **Indian National Congress** was formed (**1885**), he **advised Muslims not to join**. He argued that Congress was **mainly Hindu**, that Muslims were a **minority** who would be **outvoted** under democratic elections, and that Muslims were still too backward in education.
- He was invited to join Congress but **refused**, and he supported **reserved seats** for Muslims as a safeguard.
- In speeches at **Lucknow (1887)** and **Meerut (1888)** he said that Hindus and Muslims were **two nations** with **different interests** and a system based on a numerical majority would harm the Muslims.
- He died in **1898**, before the **Muslim League** was founded (**1906**), so he had no role in the Muslim League itself, but his ideas **inspired** its founders.

The Hindi–Urdu controversy (1867)

In **1867** some Hindus in **Banaras** (Benares) demanded that **Hindi in the Devanagari script** replace **Urdu in the Persian script** as the language of the courts and offices in the United Provinces. Muslims feared for their **language and culture**. Sir Syed realised that Hindus and Muslims could **not work together** on a matter such as language. Many believe this convinced him that the two communities were **separate nations**. It also became a long-term issue in Hindu–Muslim relations.

The Two-Nation Theory

The **Two-Nation Theory** says that **Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations**, with different religions, languages, history, culture and customs, and so cannot be one nation with a common political system. Sir Syed's speeches and the Hindi–Urdu controversy were **early** statements of this idea. It was developed by **Iqbal** (1930), **Jinnah** and **Rahmat Ali**, and was the basis of the **Pakistan Movement**.

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The Aligarh Movement: success and limits

Successes	Limits
a **modern educated Muslim middle class** and leaders	most **poor Muslims** and many ulama did not benefit
Aligarh College became a centre of Muslim thought	the Movement was **elitist** (for nobles and the upper class)
restored **self-respect** and **national consciousness**	it **opposed political activity**, which later generations changed
improved **relations with the British**	the British **favoured Hindus** in jobs anyway
gave the **Two-Nation Theory** and led indirectly to the Muslim League	conservatives (ulama) were suspicious

Sir Syed's education movement, his Two-Nation ideas and his loyalty to the British made Muslims a political force and laid the base for the Pakistan Movement.

TRY IT

How important was the work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan to the development of the Pakistan Movement during the 19th century?

Outline. *Education:* Aligarh College created educated leaders. *National consciousness:* revived Muslim confidence after 1857. *Politics:* told Muslims to stay out of Congress, so protecting their separate identity; Hindi–Urdu controversy and the Two-Nation Theory. *Religion:* reconciled Islam with science. **Judgement:** very important, though he **did not himself call for a separate state**, and his policy of loyalty and non-involvement in politics was later replaced.

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