**Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan**

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Sayyid also spelled Syad, or Syed, Ahmad also spelled Ahmed, (born Oct. 17, 1817, Delhi—died March 27, 1898, [Alīgarh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Aligarh), India), Muslim educator, jurist, and author, founder of the [Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Aligarh-Muslim-University) at Alīgarh, [Uttar Pradesh](https://www.britannica.com/place/Uttar-Pradesh), [India](https://www.britannica.com/place/India), and the principal motivating force behind the revival of Indian [Islām](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Islam) in the late 19th century. His works, in Urdu, include Essays on the Life of Mohammed (1870) and commentaries on the [Bible](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Bible) and on the [Qurān](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Quran). In 1888 he was made a Knight Commander of the [Star of India](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Star-of-India).

Sayyid’s family, though progressive, was highly regarded by the dying [Mughal dynasty](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mughal-dynasty). His father, who received an allowance from the Mughal administration, became something of a religious recluse; his maternal grandfather had twice served as [prime minister](https://www.britannica.com/topic/prime-minister) of the Mughal emperor of his time and had also held positions of trust under the [East India Company](https://www.britannica.com/topic/East-India-Company). Sayyid’s brother established one of the first printing presses at [Delhi](https://www.britannica.com/place/Delhi) and started one of the earliest newspapers in [Urdu](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Urdu-language), the principal language of the Muslims of northern India.

The death of Sayyid’s father left the family in financial difficulties, and after a limited [education](https://www.britannica.com/topic/education) Sayyid had to work for his livelihood. Starting as a clerk with the East India Company in 1838, he qualified three years later as a subjudge and served in the judicial department at various places.

Sayyid [Ahmad](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad) had a versatile personality, and his position in the judicial department left him time to be active in many fields. His career as an author (in Urdu) started at the age of 23 with religious tracts. In 1847 he brought out a noteworthy book, *Āthār aṣṣanādīd* (“Monuments of the Great”), on the antiquities of Delhi. Even more important was his pamphlet, “The Causes of the Indian Revolt.” During the [Indian Mutiny](https://www.britannica.com/event/Indian-Mutiny) of 1857 he had taken the side of the British, but in this booklet he ably and fearlessly laid bare the weaknesses and errors of the British administration that had led to dissatisfaction and a countrywide explosion. Widely read by British officials, it had considerable influence on British policy.

His interest in [religion](https://www.britannica.com/topic/religion) was also active and lifelong. He began a sympathetic interpretation of the Bible, wrote Essays on the Life of Mohammed (translated into English by his son), and found time to write several volumes of a modernist commentary on the Qurʾān. In these works he sought to harmonize the Islāmic faith with the scientific and politically progressive ideas of his time.

The supreme interest of Sayyid’s life was, however, education—in its widest sense. He began by establishing schools, at Muradabad (1858) and [Ghāzīpur](https://www.britannica.com/place/Ghazipur-India) (1863). A more ambitious undertaking was the foundation of the Scientific Society, which published translations of many educational texts and issued a bilingual journal—in Urdu and English.

These institutions were for the use of all citizens and were jointly operated by the Hindus and the Muslims. In the late 1860s there occurred developments that were to alter the course of his activities. In 1867 he was transferred to Benares, a city on the Ganges with great religious significance for the Hindus. At about the same time a movement started at Benares to replace Urdu, the language [cultivated](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/cultivated) by the Muslims, with Hindi. This movement and the attempts to substitute Hindi for Urdu in the publications of the Scientific Society convinced Sayyid that the paths of the Hindus and the Muslims must diverge. Thus, when during a visit to [England](https://www.britannica.com/place/England) (1869–70) he prepared plans for a great educational institution, they were for “a Muslim Cambridge.” On his return he set up a committee for the purpose and also started an influential journal, Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq (“Social Reform”), for the “uplift and reform of the Muslim.” A Muslim school was established at Alīgarh in May 1875, and, after his retirement in 1876, Sayyid devoted himself to enlarging it into a college. In January 1877 the foundation stone of the college was laid by the Viceroy. In spite of [conservative](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/conservative) opposition to Sayyid’s projects, the college made rapid progress. In 1886 Sayyid organized the All-India Muhammadan Educational Conference, which met annually at different places to promote education and to provide the Muslims with a common platform. Until the founding of the [Muslim League](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Muslim-League) in 1906, it was the principal national centre of Indian Islām.

Sayyid advised the Muslims against joining active politics and to concentrate instead on education. Later, when some Muslims joined the [Indian National Congress](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Indian-National-Congress), he came out strongly against that organization and its objectives, which included the establishment of [parliamentary democracy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/parliamentary-system) in India. He argued that, in a [country](https://www.britannica.com/topic/nation-state) where communal divisions were all-important and education and political organization were confined to a few classes, parliamentary [democracy](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy) would work only inequitably. Muslims, generally, followed his advice and abstained from politics until several years later when they had established their own political organization.

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