

Sayyid Ahmad Khan: Between Tradition and Modernity In Islamic Thought

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Abstract:

In Islamic history, authoritarian Western domination and a taqlid and passive attitude in religious understanding have also weakened the current situation of Muslims. This kind of situation encouraged Islamic reformers, one of whom was Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who focused on renewing Islamic thought and education. The focus of this research is to analyze Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thoughts in an effort to bridge developments in line with Islamic traditions and modernity. The method used is a literature study with a historical approach and descriptive analysis by collecting data in the form of books, journals, and various other articles, then presenting the results in narrative form. The results of the research show that Sayyid Ahmad Khan responds to current developments by emphasizing rationality, ijthad, and the integration of modern science in Islamic education without abandoning the basic principles of Islamic teachings. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thought reflects a middle position between tradition and modernity and makes an important and useful contribution to the revival of Islamic intellectuals, especially in India, and its relevance for contemporary Islamic thought to this day.

Keywords: *Islamic Thought, Tradition-Modernity, Sayyid Ahmad Khan*

Abstrak:

Dalam Sejarah keislaman, dominasi barat yang otoriter serta sikap taqlid dan pasif dalam pemahaman keagamaan turut melemahkan keadaan umat islam saat ini. Situasi semacam ini mendorong tokoh-tokoh pembaharu islam salah satunya Sayyid Ahmad Khan, yang berfokus pada pembaruan pemikiran dan pendidikan islam. Fokus Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis pemikiran Sayyid Ahmad Khan dalam upaya menjembatani perkembangan yang sejalan dengan tradisi islam dan modernitas. Metode yang digunakan adalah studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan historis dan analisis deskriptif dengan mengumpulkan data-data berupa buku, jurnal dan beragam artikel lainnya kemudian memaparkan hasil dalam bentuk narasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Sayyid Ahmad Khan dalam menyikapi perkembangan zaman dengan menekankan rasionalitas, ijthad, dan integrasi ilmu pengetahuan modern dalam pendidikan Islam tanpa meninggalkan prinsip-prinsip dasar ajaran islam. Pemikiran Sayyid Ahmad Khan mencerminkan posisi pertengahan antara tradisi dan modernitas serta memberikan kontribusi penting dan bermanfaat bagi kebangkitan intelektual islam, khususnya di India dan relevansinya bagi pemikiran Islam kontemporer hingga sekarang ini.

Kata Kunci: *Pemikiran Islam, Tradisi-Modernitas, Sayyid Ahmad Khan*

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of modern Islamic thought in the nineteenth century represented a complex intellectual response to both internal stagnation and external colonial domination within the Muslim world. (Zulkifli et al., 2023) The strong colonization and domination of the West, accompanied by their advances in science and technology, made Muslims aware of the decline they were experiencing. (Ilham & Zami, 2022) On the other hand, internal conditions dominated by traditional taqlid-based thinking and a weakening spirit of rationality further added to the backwardness of Muslims. Reformist thinkers such as Rifa'ah al-Tahtawi, Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan represented diverse regional efforts to reconcile Islamic values with the challenges of modernity through rational interpretation and educational reform. (Patriana et al., 2025)

The socio-political conditions of Muslims in India after the collapse of the Mughal Dynasty and the arrival of British colonialism were a period of decline. (Nurdiana & M, 2024) The collapse of Mughal power not only weakened the political stability of Muslims, but also eliminated their strategic position in government, military, and economy. The situation was further exacerbated by the arrival of British colonialism, which implemented a policy of divide and rule and discrimination against Muslims, particularly in the fields of education and government employment. As a result, Muslims became socially marginalized, increasingly economically impoverished, and lagged in science and knowledge compared to Hindus, who were more privileged. (Sulaiman, 2022)

Sayyid Khan emerged as a key figure who brought a wave of renewal to Indian Muslims amid the decline they experienced after the fall of the Mughal Dynasty and British colonial domination. Through his ideas and actions, he sought to restore the dignity of Muslims by strengthening education and rational thinking. His efforts to establish modern educational institutions, introduce the importance of integrating Western knowledge with Islamic teachings, and his activities in organizations and the media demonstrated his grand vision to revive the spirit of Indian Muslims, ensuring they would not fall into backwardness. (Amrullah, 2021) Sayyid Ahmad Khan's position as a reformer who successfully bridged Islamic tradition with Western modernity became one of the pivotal turning points in the history of the Islamic revival in the Indian subcontinent. (Mustika & Roza, 2024)

Thus, the discussion of Sayyid Ahmad Khan is not only important for understanding the dynamics of Islamic thought during the colonial period, but also relevant to contemporary Islam. The struggle between tradition and modernity reflects the efforts of a Muslim intellectual in responding to the challenges of the times, without abandoning the roots of Islamic values. Through his ideas, we can see how Islam can interact creatively with modernity while maintaining its identity. Therefore, this study will further examine Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thought as a representation of the synthesis between tradition and

modernity in the context of Islamic renewal, to analyze the core principles, methods, and implications of his reformist ideas for the development of modern Islamic thought.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is qualitative in nature because it focuses on the analysis of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thoughts in responding to the tension between tradition and modernity in the treasury of Islamic thought, rather than on numerical or statistical measurements. The approach used is library research, considering that all research data is sourced from written texts, both in the form of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's works, classical Islamic interpretation and thought literature, as well as modern writings discussing rationalism, Islamic reform, and the influence of Western modernity on Islamic thought. This type of research is considered appropriate because Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thoughts can only be understood comprehensively through a critical analysis of the text, historical context, and intellectual dialogue between the Islamic scientific tradition and the demands of modernity that surround it.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Biography of Sayyid Ahmad Khan

Sayyid Ahmad Khan Ibnul Muttaqi Ibnul Hadi Al-Hasan Ad-Dahlawi was born in India on October 17, 1817. His father's name was Muhammad Muttaqi Khan, who was a religious scholar. He belonged to the Nabillah aristocratic family, and according to his genealogy, he was a descendant of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, through Fatimah az-Zahra and Ali bin Abi Talib, which is why he was given the title Sayyid. His mother was an intelligent woman who was skilled at raising her children. His grandmother was Sayyid Hadi, one of the palace officials during the Almaghir era (1754-1759). He also received the title of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan from the Public Service Commission in 1888 for his achievements. This title was awarded by Hord Duffin (the British government). (Muszandra, 2021)

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was an educator and political leader whose activities were greatly influenced by Western culture, particularly British culture. (Noorzeha, 2019) Sayyid Ahmad Khan pursued a classical and traditional education. In addition to studying Islam, he also studied Arabic, Persian, mathematics, astronomy, and mechanics. Among his favorite subjects were mechanics, geometry, and Euclid's books. (Akmal, 2015) The breadth of his knowledge made him a person of broad learning, progressive thinking, and open to modern science.

During his lifetime, Sayyid Ahmad Khan never experienced hardship or misery, as he lived and resided among the great people of the palace. He sought employment after his father passed away in 1838 AD. Due to his sincerity and hard work, he was accepted to work at the E.I.C. (East Indian Company), a well-known British trading company in India during British rule. In addition to working at the E.I.C., he also held a civil service position and was first appointed as a judge on

December 21, 1841, in Mainpuri. For nearly 20 years, he worked in the court and was known as a fair and capable government official. He was then transferred to the Bignaur area, and in 1846, he returned to Delhi to continue his studies.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's persistence in fighting for the fate of Muslims, especially in the field of education, was in order to produce high-quality and forward-thinking individuals in India. This was marked by his interpretation of the Qur'an up to Surah Al-Kahfi. Sayyid was not only a pioneer and propagandist of the reform movement, but he was also a journalist, a prolific author, a teacher, and an advisor to the Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College, a religious and scientific college.

In 1869, when he was 52 years old, he accompanied his son Sayyid Mahmud, who had received a scholarship to study at Cambridge University. He used this opportunity to observe and study modern educational reforms. He sought to combine modern knowledge with religious knowledge and argued that reason plays an important role in religion, because reason can produce modern knowledge and technology that are very beneficial to humanity.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan also wrote other books, including: *Risalah Khair Khawahan Musulman* (Treatise on Loyal People) and *Ahkam Tha'am Ahl al Kitab* (Laws on the Food of People of the Book), which dealt with reconciling Muslims with the British government, thereby eliminating mutual suspicion between the two sides. Sayyid Ahmad Khan had extraordinary qualities, namely energy, perseverance, courage, strong will, a great ability to absorb knowledge from all directions, extraordinary political wisdom, and a pleasant sense of humor. For half a century, he led the Muslim community in India. He influenced and shaped many individuals who went on to achieve more than any modern Muslim leader could accomplish. Ultimately, Sayyid Ahmad Khan fell ill and passed away in 1898 at the age of 81.

The Concept of Sayyid Akhmad Khan's Thought and Its Relevance

Sayyid Akhmad Khan's reforms were influenced by two factors, namely Western colonialism, which hurt India, especially among Muslims. Therefore, he wanted to challenge the influence of Western imperialism, particularly in the political sphere, through the idea of Islamic modernism. He gained his modernity from his interest in Western science, especially in terms of modern technology. So he thought of incorporating Western scientific doctrines while still adhering to Islamic teachings. His thoughts covered several aspects, including:

1. Modern education and the integration of knowledge.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's reform movement primarily focused on education. He established the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, which we now know as Aligarh Muslim University. A modern institution that integrated Islamic and Western knowledge. The dissemination of knowledge in this institution was based on a) freedom of thought, b) appreciation of foreign (Western) science and culture, c) openness, and d) balance in the development of students' moral, spiritual, and intellectual aspects. (Zuhri et al., 2024)

2. The role of reason and intellect

In modern Islamic theology, Ahmad Khan placed a high value on reason, albeit with limitations. Sayyid Ahmad Khan was open to the idea that Islam is consistent with the principle of causality and that humans have a responsibility to use the potential that God has given them.

3. Modernity in the Colonial Context

This way of thinking was born in a colonial situation, where Indian Muslims were a minority and in a weak position. Akhmad Khan proposed adapting modern science as applied by the West as long as the concepts did not contradict Islamic teachings. He also established educational institutions as a means of renewal.

4. Modern Islamic Theology

Sayyid Ahmad Khan actively engaged in debates about the harmony between reason and revelation in Islam. Unlike many scholars who limited the role of reason, he emphasized that rational thinking is integral to understanding faith. Rejecting fatalism, he upheld the concept of Qadariyyah, believing that humans have an active role in shaping their destiny. He also argued that the natural laws established by God are consistent with divine revelation.

Thus, his ideas continue to benefit the Islamic world today through their relevance to contemporary life, particularly in the fields of education, social change, and ethical values. In education, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thought can serve as a model for contemporary Islamic education. For example, in the form of a more flexible curriculum, adaptive to the times, and integrative. (Rauf et al., 2025) Furthermore, his tolerance in understanding the relationship between Islam and science helps Muslims face the challenges of science, technology, and modern criticism. Finally, the relevance of his ethical and theological values emphasizes that Islam is capable of addressing worldly issues, that theology should not be separated from reality, and that humans bear responsibility in life.

Impact and Controversy

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas had a major influence on Indian Muslims, particularly on the renewal of Islam in India through education. He believed that modern education was the key to the revival of Muslims, who were lagging due to British colonialism. Through the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College in Aligarh, Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted Indian Muslims to achieve glory and progress by transforming Western science and technology through modern educational reform. (Muszandra, 2021) From this educational institution emerged Muslim intellectuals who were able to elevate the position and culture of Muslims in colonial society.

In addition, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's diplomatic approach to British colonialism demonstrated a new strategy in the struggle of Indian Muslims. Instead of choosing confrontation, he believed that advances in technology and modern science could benefit Indian Muslims. (Usman, 2020) Through the Aligarh

movement, his ideas spread and fostered awareness of Indian Muslim identity while opening space for social and political reform. (Amir, 2020) Thus, his intellectual legacy signifies a pivotal synthesis between Islamic faith and modern rationality, shaping the transformation of Indian Muslim society toward progress without detaching from its religious foundation.

Support for Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas came from some Muslim scholars and intellectuals who saw the urgency of modern education for the revival of Indian Muslims. They considered Sayyid Ahmad Khan's efforts in establishing educational institutions to be an important step in building a Muslim generation that was broad-minded, religious, and modern. Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas even inspired political figures such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah in building the intellectual and political foundations that became the basis for the establishment of Pakistan as a separate state for Muslims in the Indian subcontinent. (Hadziq & Muzadi, 2025)

Despite his influence, Khan's thought was not without controversy. Traditional 'ulama and contemporaries such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani accused him of excessive rationalism and political compromise with British colonial authorities. Conservative scholars rejected the modern education pioneered by Sayyid Ahmad Khan because it was considered too Westernized and had the potential to weaken classical Islamic scholarship. Al-Afghani even considered Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas to be a form of extreme rationalism that deviated from the norm, accusing him of being too close to the British colonialists at the expense of the interests of Muslims. (Amin, 2014) Therefore, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas became a point of tension between modernity and tradition, illustrating the dynamic nature of the discourse on Islamic reform in 19th-century India.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan's renewal of thought has significant relevance to the global modern Islamic movement, especially in the context of educational reform and Islamic thought that is adaptive to the developments of the times. His thinking encourages Muslims to absorb Western knowledge while upholding Islamic principles worldwide. Ahmad Khan's idea of integrating classical Islamic education with modern science has inspired various contemporary Islamic educational institutions, which emphasize contextual learning that is relevant to social and technological developments. (Zuhri et al., 2024) Ultimately, the ideas and Aligarh movement that he pioneered became one of the important milestones of Islamic modernism, which places rationality, education, and social renewal as the keys to the revival of the ummah.

Thus, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's thinking can be seen as one of the important milestones in the history of Islamic modernism, which had a major influence in the fields of education, social affairs, and religion. However, on the other hand, his ideas also sparked controversy, especially among traditional scholars who considered his approach too compromising towards the West and colonial powers. His legacy has not only influenced 19th-century Indian society, but has also inspired the intellectual and social awakening of Muslims in various countries. Therefore, Sayyid Ahmad Khan can be considered a key figure in the discourse of

Islamic modernity, whose contributions remain relevant to this day.

CONCLUSION

Sayyid Ahmad Khan was an important figure in the history of modern Islam in India in the 19th century. His ideas on the integration of Islam and modernity played a major role in awakening the intellectual consciousness of Muslims. Although his thinking was controversial, mainly due to his rational approach to revelation, his contributions in the fields of education and social reform are widely recognized. Therefore, he can be seen as one of the pioneers of modern Islam who sought to bridge Islamic tradition with the challenges of the times. In addition to his thoughts, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was also known for his strong leadership qualities, such as perseverance, courage, broad-mindedness, and political wisdom. For approximately half a century, he played an active role in guiding the Indian Muslim community and influenced the emergence of a progressive generation of Muslim intellectuals. His ideas in the political sphere were reflected in his strategy of building relationships with the British colonial government and Indian society in an effort to protect and improve the position of Muslims. Furthermore, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's ideas remain relevant in the contemporary context, particularly in the development of Islamic education that is adaptive to scientific developments and social changes. His views on the harmonious relationship between reason and revelation provide a conceptual foundation for Muslims to critically and responsibly engage with modernity without losing their Islamic identity. Thus, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's intellectual legacy not only has historical value but also contributes to shaping the direction of Islamic thought renewal in the modern era.

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