

## THE FOUNDER OF A 'MINI-INDIA'

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Sir Syed Ahmed Khan | Photo Credit: [THE HINDU ARCHIVES](#)

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, an iconic social reformer and founder of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), which has completed 100 years, was born on October 17, 1817. That was a long time ago, but his thought process is as relevant today as ever before.

With the new National Education Policy, the role of education in national integration has been rekindled. National integration is a reality today. During colonialism, it was an ideal for Sir Syed. His distinctiveness lay in the way he used education as a tool for national integration. He said in 1883: "It is the... verdict of all the nations and great seers of the world that national progress depends on education and training (of the people). If, therefore, we desire the prosperity and development of our nation, we should strive for a national system of education to educate our people in science and technology."

'Sir Syed unfailingly stood for all Indians'

Some scholars on colonial history have criticised some of Sir Syed's statements on social order and his perceived closeness with the colonial government. However, to draw a generalised conclusion on Sir Syed's convictions merely through the lens of some quotes without understanding their context would not be a fair way to assess his legacy. A person's text should be judged in the context of the time in which they lived. The period of Sir Syed's life was characterised by rapid transition — Mughal rule yielding to British imperialism. We must not underestimate the challenges posed by the new order for someone brought up in the old order. Sir Syed embraced change against all the odds.

When Sir Syed started his project of educational renaissance, he invited all Indians to come together to join hands in the struggle against illiteracy. This arose from his wish to unshackle Hindus and Muslims from medieval thinking towards broad-mindedness, reason and progress. It is critical to understand that while his approach always remained inclusive, he gave special attention to Muslims as Hindus had embarked to the path to scientific education much earlier than Muslims. It is a known fact that the debate on the tension between religion and science had settled earlier among Hindus than Muslims. Sir Syed laid out his vision for Hindu-Muslim unity in a speech in January 1883 where he said, "India is like a bride which has got two beautiful and captivating eyes — Hindus and Muslims. Within the ranks of the Hindus or Muslims themselves, or even between brothers as also between fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, there is dissension. But to make it perennial is a symptom of the decay of the family, the country, and of the nation."

The bonhomie between the two communities has always existed since the inception of the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College, the precursor of AMU. This was not a small task. During colonial rule, a narrative of hatred had been engineered by the British. Sir Syed led by example. During the Bismillah ceremony of his grandson Ross Masood, Sir Syed placed him in the lap of his friend Raja Jai Kishan Das. When Sir Syed established a madarsa in Ghazipur, he elected Raja Dev Narayan Singh as patron of the school. Sanskrit was one of the five languages taught at this school. The managing committee of MAO College comprised 22 members of whom nine were Hindus.

Man who knew tomorrow

Sir Syed laid the foundation of comparative religious studies and revived the spirit of Dara Shikoh's philosophy — to bring major communities of India together by finding commonalities in their religions and assimilate them as a one mighty stream. This is why AMU established the Dara Shikoh Centre for Interfaith Understanding. Section 5 (2)(b) of the AMU Act empowers the university to promote the study of religions, civilisation and culture of India.

Also read | [‘Sir Syed Ahmad Khan tried to eliminate the sectarian attitude that fostered a conservative point of view’](#)

In AMU's 100 years, it has not only contributed to nation-building but also played a role in India's quest for building friendly ties with the Muslim world. For this, AMU is recognised as an institution of national importance under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. During the course of history, AMU has passed through many challenges but never has it abandoned its inclusive character. Apart from drawing students from 26 other countries, it has students from 31 States and Union Territories and thus represents India's multi-religious, multi-racial and multi-lingual character. This is why Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during the centenary celebrations of AMU in 2020, called the institution a "mini-India". Mr. Modi underscored the principles of 'nation first' and 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, Sabka Vishwas', while emphasising that Sir Syed established AMU with a rational, progressive and scientific mindset. It is appreciable that the Prime Minister invoked the contribution of a 19th century reformer in the making of 21st century India. This is a testament to the vision of a man who was far ahead of his times.

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