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Q3(b)

"When a nation becomes devoid of arts and learning, it invites poverty." (Sir Syed Ahmad Khan). In the light of this statement, assess the role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as a reformer in modern India

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2021 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Indian Political Thought

Indian Political Thought: Dharmashastra, Arthashastra and Buddhist traditions; Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Sri Aurobindo, M.K. Gandhi, B.R. Ambedkar, M.N. Roy.

Core demand of the question

- "When a nation becomes devoid of arts and learning, it invites poverty." (Sir Syed Ahmad Khan). In the light of this statement, assess the role of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as a reformer in modern India. (15 marks)

Revision summary

Sir Syed linked national poverty to the loss of arts and learning.

Aligarh, the **Scientific Society**, and **Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq** were his reform tools.

He sought modern sciences and a loyal path after **1857**.

The reform privileged ashraf men and later fed minority political caution.

He is a major educational modernist, not a leader of inclusive mass nationalism.

Introduction

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan tied a community's wealth to arts and learning. After **1857** he treated modern education, not isolation, as the Muslim path into the colonial public order, and he used that path as a reform of custom as well as of schools.

Body

The statement

- Poverty here is not only empty treasuries. It is political weakness when a people lack the sciences, law, and letters of the ruling age.
- The line justifies English and Western sciences beside Islamic learning, against a retreat into untranslated tradition.
- **Aligarh was the institutional form of the sentence:** a college that would produce men who could sit in offices and argue in the new public.

Reformer of education and loyalty

- The Muhammadan Anglo-**Oriental College (1875)**, later Aligarh Muslim University, is the central act.
- **Scientific Society**, translation, and the journal **Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq** spread a reformist ethic of reason and manners.

- After 1857 Sir Syed urged loyal cooperation with British rule as a shield, which later nationalists judged as politically conservative.
- He criticised some social practices and argued for a historically minded reading of scripture, a modernist not a revivalist pose.

Limits of the reform

- The reform was largely among ashraf men. Peasants, artisans, and women were not its first public.
- Fear of Hindu-majority democracy after the Congress's rise pushed him toward separate political caution, which fed later communal constitutional politics.
- He was not Ambedkar's social revolutionary, nor Gandhi's mass satyagrahi.
- **Assessment must hold both sides:** he opened a modern educational door that still structures Muslim middle-class life, and he narrowed the nation to a fearful minority strategy.

Place in modern India

- Without arts and learning, as he said, a community is poor in the state. Aligarh tried to end that poverty for a section.
- Indian constitutional secularism and minority educational rights (Articles 29-30) later stored a version of that educational self-help.
- The reformer is real. The nation he imagined was not yet the full "We, the People" of 1950.

Flow diagram

Sir Syed -> Arts and learning
Arts and learning -> Aligarh MAO College
Sir Syed -> Post-1857 loyal modernism
Sir Syed -> Ashraf limit separate caution

Conclusion

Sir Syed's sentence makes learning the condition of a people's wealth and power. As a reformer he built Aligarh, translations, and a modernist ethic after 1857. The same project was socially narrow and politically separatist in tendency. He remains a founder of Muslim modern education, not of Indian mass nationalism.

Facts & figures

MAO College, 1875

Founded at Aligarh; became Aligarh Muslim University in 1920.

Scientific Society

Sir Syed's translation and science-spreading association, first at Ghazipur then Aligarh.

Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq

Journal for social and intellectual reform among Muslims.

1857

The revolt after which Sir Syed wrote on the causes of Indian revolt and chose educational loyalism.

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