

TRANSFORMING ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN MODERNITY: REASSESSING SIR SYED AHMAD KHAN'S THOUGHT

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Abstract

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This article analyzes Ahmad Khan's educational thought as part of the epistemological reform project in Islamic education in the 19th-century colonial context. Using a literature review approach, this article explores the social background, philosophical foundations, epistemology, methodological goals, and criticisms and limitations of the educational reform initiated by Khan. The results show that Ahmad Khan's educational thinking cannot be reduced to a form of westernization or a pragmatic response to British colonialism. Khan's thinking is rooted in an internal critique of the intellectual stagnation of Muslims triggered by the dichotomy of knowledge, the dominance of taqlid, and the reduction of education to a means of doctrinal transmission. Through the integration of revelation and reason, Ahmad Khan shifted the conflict between religion and science from the theological realm to the methodological, thus opening space for affirming scientific rationality without discarding the role of revelation as a moral and spiritual orientation. However, this article also emphasizes that Khan's integration remains transitional and problematic, due to the lack of a strict methodological framework for defining the limits of intellectual authority and the social limitations on its implementation. Thus, the main contribution of Khan's educational thought lies in opening the crustacean shell for the development of modern Islamic education, not in the order of the final educational model itself, which is ready to be implemented.

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INTRODUCTION

The spread of Islam into regions beyond Arabia, including Africa, Europe, and Asia, has had a profound influence on the development of education, politics, and culture

(Yudha et al., 2024). From the beginning, Islam was not only a religion, but also a social-intellectual force that helped shape world civilization (Abdullah & Kusaeri, 2024). The emergence of Islamic educational institutions in the early period, such as madrassas and centers for scientific studies, reflects the diversity of Islamic traditions that developed across various Muslim areas (Darmawan et al., 2024; Hossain, 2024). The existence of these institutions shows that Islamic education has historically developed through the dynamic interaction between religious knowledge, rational reasoning, and socio-cultural contexts.

In the context of South Asia, Islam entered India in the 7th century through a network of trade and cultural interaction, which became one of the important factors in the intellectual development of the South Asian region. More organized development occurred during the Delhi sultanate and continued during the Mughal dynasty, which paid close attention to the development of science, including education, law, and culture (Anwar, Daulay, and Sumanti 2025). In that era, madrassas and study centers became important spaces for knowledge production, encompassing the study of religion, law, and philosophy (Kurniawan, 2017). These historical traces show that Islamic education in South Asia was initially characterized by epistemological pluralism rather than by a rigid separation between fields of knowledge.

However, the development of education in the Indian region is not only influenced by internal factors such as social or internal culture. The weakening of political authority, such as the collapse of the dynasty's authority in the 18th century and the rise of colonialism in the following centuries, triggered a significant transformation in South Asia's social and intellectual life (Siddiqui 2020). These changes shifted the orientation of Islamic education and sharpened the debate on its epistemological foundation. Historical studies show that the relationship between colonialism and educational transformation cannot be understood as a linear cause-and-effect process, but rather as a complex series of processes involving the struggle between Islamic epistemology and Western scientific paradigms, as well as internal debates about the methodology of Islamic education itself (Alavi 2015).

In this context, a problem arises in the Islamic education system, namely the dichotomy between religious science and general science. This doctrine is accompanied by the development of a social stigma that views Islamic education as focused on achieving salvation in the hereafter by emphasizing worship, memorization, and the

transmission of beliefs, rather than as a space for intellectual development and knowledge (Daulay and Tobroni 2017). This kind of construction not only narrows the scope of Islamic education but also reinforces the epistemological fragmentation that still affects some Muslim societies today.

In this realm, the thought of Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) occupies a critical position. Khan views that the stagnation or decline of the ummah does not stem from Islam's teachings, but from a mindset that rejects the development for science and the space of *ijtihad* (Nurisman & Mahendra, 2022). Ahmad Khan emphasized that the awakening of the ummah can only be achieved through rationality-based education (*Aql*), *ijtihad*, and openness to the advancement of science or the integration of revelation and common sense (Mujibuddin et al., 2025). For Khan, the integration of revelation and reason is an epistemological approach that combines Islamic normative sources with modern scientific methodology to form knowledgeable, faithful, and civilized individuals (Isgandi 2021).

Although the influence of Ahmad Khan's thought was considerable, existing studies tend to highlight his contribution to the rise of Muslims in India from a social, political, and moderate perspective (Amir 2020). Research that systematically analyzes epistemological assumptions and methodological frameworks of educational thought, especially regarding the criticism between the dichotomy of science and its conception of the relationship between revelation and reason, remains relatively limited (Bus 2015). Furthermore, studies that critically examine Khan's ideas within contemporary debates on Islamic education, especially outside South Asia, such as Indonesia, remain rare. This gap is significant considering similar epistemological problems, including the separation between religion and general science, that still color Islamic education in Indonesia today.

Given the gaps in the scattered studies, this study asks two main questions. First, how did Syed Ahad Khan conceptualize the epistemology and methodology of Islamic education, especially the integration of revelation and reason? Second, to what extent is Ahmad Khan's thought relevant to contemporary Islamic education, especially in the Indonesian context? Therefore, this study aims to examine Syed Ahmad Khan's thinking from the perspectives of epistemology and Islamic education methodology, and its relevance to the development of the modern Islamic education system. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the development of modern Islamic education by integrating rational reasoning with critical revelation.

METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing a literature review method. This means that research data is sourced from the literature, including books, journal articles, proceedings, and historical documents relevant to the themes of Islamic education, modernity, and the ideas of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (Yadav, 2022). This approach is used to understand the characters' ideas and thoughts in depth by studying the text and its context. The qualitative approach can also provide researchers with space to interpret the meaning of Syed Ahmad Khan's work and views within a historical, social, and intellectual framework (Saefullah, 2024). Thus, the researcher not only describes Ahmad Khan's thoughts and ideas but also examines the relevance to Islamic education in the digital and modern era.

The data in this study are sourced from reputable scientific articles such as Scopus, Sinta, and Google Scholar. The selection of these data sources was based on credibility, thematic relevance, and year of publication, to examine Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's educational thinking on the Transformation of Islamic Education in the Era of Modernity can be achieved.

The content analysis method, through three stages, including data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing, was used in this study to find the main themes or key concepts that illustrate Ahmad Khan's reformist vision of Islamic education (Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). Triangulation of sources and theories is used to maintain the validity of findings, and to ensure consistency of interpretation (Lim, 2024). This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of the contribution of Ahmad Khan's thought to the transformation of Islamic education in the context of modernity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Syed Ahmad Khan's Social Background And Thoughts

Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) was one of the most influential Indian Muslim reformers who lived during the British colonial period and had a dual intellectual background, namely classical Islamic education as well as modern Western science and administration (Haque & Khurram, 2022). This social and intellectual position shaped Khan's view of the Muslim crisis. According to him, the crisis occurred not due to colonial domination but to internal problems, including rigid thinking and the stagnation of education (Razzaq & Nawaz, 2024).

In *Causes of the Indian Revolt*, Ahmad Khan explicitly attributes the decline of the *Ijma'* to their rejection of the use of reason and the closure of the space of *Ijtihad*: "*Intellectual rigidity, stagnation, and refusal to use reason*" (Khan 1873). This criticism shows that, for Ahmad Khan, educational reform is an epistemological and cultural project aimed at building the rational and moral ethos of the ummah.

The effort to integrate Islamic values with modern science is not intended as westernization, but as a strategy for Islamic reform to respond to the demands of the times without losing its religious foundations (Ali & Bakar, 2021). Thus, Ahmad Khan's social background served as a conceptual basis for the idea of Integrative education, which later became the core of his thinking (K. H. Mir, 2023).

The Philosophical Basis of Syed Ahmad Khan's Educational Thought

The philosophical basis of Ahmad Khan's thought departs from the fundamental and problematic epistemological claim that revelation and will are two sources of knowledge that are interrelated and, in principle, cannot contradict each other (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). Dalam *The Mohammadan Commentary on the Holy Bible*, Syed Ahmad Khan secara eksplisit mengatakan "*God's word in revelation and God's work in nature cannot contradict one another*" (Khan, 1862). This statement is not just a theological affirmation, but a philosophical foothold for redefining the relationship between religion and science in religious education.

Through this framework, Khan shifted the center of the conflict between religion and science from theology to methodology. Conflict is not understood as an inherent contradiction between faith and reason, but rather as a result of human error in understanding the text of revelation or in partially and irrationally understanding natural reality. In this context, revelation is presented as a source of moral and spiritual orientation, while reason serves as an epistemic instrument for interpreting the laws of nature (Hadziq & Muzad, 2025). This formulation directly opposes the pattern of education trapped in the dichotomy of science and the reduction of education to memorization and doctrinal transmission.

However, the claim of the harmony of revelation and reason simultaneously poses an epistemological problem that Ahmad Khan has not resolved. Even Khan has consistently emphasized their compatibility (Khan 1862; Bhat & Bisati, 2025), but does not systematically elaborate on the limits of the authority of reason when dealing with

differences in the interpretation of revelation. The absence of a firm methodological framework for epistemic hierarchy creates problematic spaces, namely, rationality can be dominant in interpreting religious texts, as reflected in the rationalist orientation of modern Islamic reformists (Rahman & Nurjannah, 2025). At this point, Ahmad Khan's thought shows that the transitional character is among the efforts to liberate from intellectual stagnation and the subjectivism of interpretation in Islamic education.

Nevertheless, this epistemological position became the foundation for Khan's critique of the system of dichotomy between religious science and modern science. He views this separation as the leading cause of the intellectual stagnation of Muslims and the decline of civilization, because it closes the possibility of dialogue between scientific rationality and religious values (Isgandi, 2021). By affirming that every form of knowledge is inherently derived from God, whether through revelation or empirical observation, Khan seeks to reconstruct Islamic education as a system of knowledge oriented towards the advancement of civilization (Hadziq & Muzad, 2025).

This epistemological criticism is strengthened by his rejection of the practice of blind taqlid that develops in society and closes the door to ijtiḥad. In *Tahzib Al-Akhlaq*, he writes that the ummah "*must reclaim the intellectual courage that once defended Islamic civilization*". This statement shows that, in Khan's view, education is not intended as a process of passive knowledge transmission, but as a means of fostering intellectual courage, critical reasoning, and moral responsibility (Khan 2005; Raj et al., 2022). Thus, rationality and ijtiḥad are not only theoretical principles but also philosophical foundations for Islamic education that can respond to change.

Overall, the philosophical foundation of Ahmad Khan's thought places education as the axis of reconstruction of modern Islamic civilization through the synthesis of rationality, spirituality, and morality (Rahman & Nurjannah, 2025). However, the main strength of his thought lies precisely in its problematic nature. The integration of revelation and reason that Khan offers opens up a space for epistemological debate that remains relevant today, especially in the context of contemporary Islamic education, which is still grappling with the dichotomy of science and methodological crises.

Epistemology of Islamic Education: Rationality and Ijtiḥad as the Basis of Knowledge

Ahmad Khan's epidemiological view of education is based on the claim that Islam is inherently in harmony with reason and scientific inquiry (Amrullah, 2021). Pernyataan Khan yang terkenal "Islam rests upon reason; without reason one cannot understand revelation" (Khan 1870), which reflects a fundamental shift in epistemic orientation, namely reason ('aql), which is no longer placed as a secondary instrument, but rather as a prerequisite that must exist to access and interpret revelation. In this framework, revelation is neither rejected nor set aside; on the contrary, it requires rational involvement **to** be meaningful in a social context.

This epistemological stance prompted Khan to identify intellectual stagnation among Muslims as a result of two interrelated factors: first, the dominance of taqlid and the closure of the ijtihad space, and second, the widespread suspicion of scientific methods (Ali & Bakar, 2021). According to Khan, the intellectual decline of Muslims is not a theological problem, but an epistemic one, rooted in a way of knowing that prioritizes passive transmission over critical reasoning. Therefore, Khan argues that the awakening of the ummah can only be achieved by reconstructing the epistemology of education, namely by reviving rational reasoning, reopening the spaces for Ijtihad, and reforming educational institutions foster critical awareness (Haririe, 2024).

At this point, Khan's educational epistemology shows a significant internal tension, the absence of a methodological framework that explicitly regulates the relationship between authority and revelation. Although Khan believed that rationality was the primary means of freeing the ummah from intellectual stagnation (Haririe, 2024). As a result, rationality serves as a binding instrument, while at the same time leaving epistemic ambiguity when the scientific is confronted with the interpretation of classical-style religion.

Khan views Western science not as an ideological threat to Islam, but rather as a methodological source that can be selectively adopted (Rahman & Nurjannah, 2025). He explained that scientific methods such as observation, experimentation, and rational analysis are neutral epistemic devices, while rejecting Western ideologies that contradict the foundations of Islam, such as secularism and materialism (Robinson 2001). However, this selectivity has not been accompanied by a gassed formulation of epistemic hierarchies to anticipate potential conflicts between scientific rationality and the authority of revelation.

Thus, Khan's epistemology is more accurately seen as a critique of the dualities of ways of thinking and of knowledge in Islamic education, rather than as a systematically compiled theory of knowledge. However, it is precisely within these limitations that the influence lies, opening up a space for critical reflection on the development of an integrative educational epistemology in the modern era (Haririe, 2024).

Educational Objectives: Building Civilization and Humanity

In Ahmad Khan's frame of mind, the purpose of education is not reduced to just the transmission of knowledge or the improvement of individual skills. Khan positioned education as a civilization project aimed at reconstructing Muslim society, which, according to him, has lost intellectual, moral, and social competitiveness due to the stagnation of thought and the deterioration of the scientific ethos (K. H. Mir, 2023). Thus, Khan's educational orientation is explicitly macro-social, rebuilding the foundations of Islamic civilization by transforming human beings into moral and rational subjects.

Khan firmly states this view in *Tahzib Al-Akhlaq*, which states that the people of Islah must restore "the moral-intellectual ethos that once elevated the Islamic civilization" (Khan 2005). The quote shows that, for Khan, the decline of Islam was not caused by external factors, but by the collapse of the scientific and moral ethos that had been the main characteristic of the previous era. Therefore, education is required not only to produce knowledgeable individuals but also to cultivate ethical awareness and social responsibility.

Departing from this framework, the educational goals formulated by Khan can be understood as an effort to form human beings who integrate intellectual intelligence and moral maturity, and actively engage in social life (K. H. Mir, 2023). He considers that the decline of Islamic civilization occurs when science is deprived of moral values, while religion is reduced to ritual practices that lose social power (Ali & Bakar, 2021).

However, Khan's educational goals, oriented towards the reconstruction of civilization, also contained internal tensions, although Khan emphasized the synergy between intellectuality and morality. Khan did not explain in detail how such integration was implemented in a social context characterized by class differences, religious traditions, and access to education. This criticism is relevant given Khan's educational reforms, which in practice reached more educated Muslims and urban elites, thereby

raising the potential that the humanistic and civilizational ideals he initiated had the potential to be exclusive (Bhat & Bisati, 2025).

Nonetheless, conceptually, Khan's educational goals have a strong influence on contemporary debates of Islamic education. His emphasis on education as a means of character building, social ethics, and human responsibility opposes the paradigm of Islamic education that is still trapped in the dichotomy between cognitive achievement and moral development (Ali & Bakar, 2021). By placing education as an instrument of educational reconstruction, Khan not only rejects the reduction of education but also affirms education as a mechanism for the formation of moral and social subjects rooted in Islamic values (K. H. Mir, 2023). In this context, Khan's thought is read as an initial critique of the fragmentation of Islamic education's goals and as an attempt to reformulate it.

Educational Methodology: Integration of Modern Science and Institutions

Ahmad Khan's educational methodology is the most operational stage of his epistemological and civilizational reform project. In contrast to reformists who stop at normative criticism, Khan translates the idea of integrating revelation and reason into concrete institutional engineering, curricula, and an intellectual environment. For Khan, educational reform cannot be achieved solely through theological discourse, this must be achieved through institutions that foster the habits of rational thinking and the scientific ethos among Muslims (Khan 2005).

This methodological framework was concretely realized through the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental Colleg (later Aligarh Muslim University), which according to Bus's records (2015) The institution is not just an imitation of a Western university, it is designed as a synthesis space between the traditional Islamic education system and modern academic methodologies that emphasize research, rational discussion, and mastery of practical science. From this, it can be seen that Khan's educational methodology serves as a structural mediation between the epistemology of Islam and the demands of modernity, rather than a form of westernization of Islamic education (Khudri et al., 2025).

This integrity is reflected in the curriculum design, which combines Islamic studies, including tafsir, hadith, and theology, with modern sciences such as mathematics, natural sciences, law, and others (Mun'im & Hasanah, 2025). The separation of religious

and modern science, for Khan, is epistemologically wrong. Therefore, the educational methodology he offers is not intended to produce scholars, but educated individuals with scientific competence and moral orientation.

In addition to institutions, Ahmad Khan also developed an educational methodology by fostering a public intellectual environment through the establishment of the Scientific Society of Aligarh, which served as a medium for translating and disseminating Western scientific works into Urdu or Arabic (Amrullah, 2021). Meanwhile, Khan also published the publication of the journal *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* as a non-formal pedagogical means to instill rational ethics, social awareness, and the spirit of moral reform in society (F. Mir, 2022). These two initiatives show that Khan's educational methodology is not limited to the classroom but is designed as a social learning ecosystem.

However, Ahmad Khan's educational methodology is not free from internal problems. The educational and curriculum reforms he initiated in practice were more accessible to educated Muslims and the urban comfort classes. This led to criticism that the Aligarh education project had the potential to reproduce social exclusivity, so that Khan's humanistic and civilised ideals did not fully reach the broader ummah base (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). Moreover, Khan's belief in the neutrality of modern scientific methodology has not been fully accompanied by a clear pedagogical framework for managing the tension between scientific and religious rationality in learning practice.

Nonetheless, conceptually, Khan's educational methodology occupies an important position in the contemporary debate on Islamic education. Its emphasis on institutions, integrative curriculum, and the formation of an intellectual environment opposes the pattern of Islamic education that is trapped in the memorization of religious doctrine or symbolism without transformative power. In this regard, Khan's methodology can be read as an initial attempt to formulate a modern Islamic education that is not only compatible with science but also oriented towards the formation of people who are faithful, rational, and socially responsible (Kolahdoozha & Abediha, 2022).

Critiques and Limitations of Syed Ahmad Khan's Educational Reform

Although Ahmad Khan's educational reform project was one of the most important contributors to reviving the rationality and methodology of Islamic educators, its implementation was not immune to criticism and structural limitations. One of the

main criticisms came from traditional clerics and conservative religious groups who viewed Khan's reforms as a form of westernization that could potentially erode the authority of the Islamic tradition. Robinson (2001), in his article explains that the integration of western curriculum, the use of English, and the adoption of modern scientific methodologies are perceived as threats to the classical Islamic education system that emphasizes memorization, authoritative transmission, and ritual discipline. Thus, this criticism shows that, However Khan asserts that the integration of revelation and reason, reform in the view of mere understanding, will emphasize rationality rather than the continuity of the Islamic scientific tradition.

This tension is increasingly evident in the relationship between Khan's scientific rationality and the spiritual traditions that have taken root in Muslim society. Troll (1978) notes that the rationalization of education often confronts popular religious practices that are not entirely in line with modern scientific paradigms. As a result, Khan's educational reforms gave rise to polarization between rational-institutional groups and traditional religiosity groups.

However, these criticisms do not negate the influence of Ahmad Khan's thought; they affirm the character and context of his reform project. Education was formulated as a strategy to save the Muslims intellectuals in the colonial situation, not as a final solution across space and time. Therefore, Ahmad Khan's thinking is more appropriately understood as a transitional reform project that opens up space for epistemological and methodological reform, while at the same time leaving the problem of social implementation to be continuously criticized and developed in contemporary Islamic educational discourse (Lubis et al., 2025).

The Relevance of Ahmad Khan's Educational Thinking to Modern Education

Despite being born in a 19th-century colonial context, Ahmad Khan's thinking remains highly relevant to contemporary Islamic educational discourse. Its relevance lies not in the historical reproduction of his ideas; however, in epistemology, it seeks to address the classical and modern problems of Islamic education, especially regarding the dichotomy of science, the crisis of educational goals, and the tension between rationality and the value of spirituality. Khan's integration of revelation and reason by Khan offers a normative and methodological basis for Islamic education to be adaptive without losing its moral orientation in the era of globalization (Lubis et al., 2025).

Ahmad Khan's emphasis on *ijtihad* as an epistemic principle has direct implications for 21st-century education that demands the ability to think critically, reflectively, and contextually. Khan's *ijtihad* is not interpreted solely as a legal method, but as an intellectual disposition that encourages openness to new knowledge and rejection of epistemic dogmatism. In the end, Khan's thinking intersects with the cutting-edge debate on the need for Islamic education to move away from a passive transmission model towards the formation of rational, ethical, and socially responsible educational subjects (Saefullah 2024).

The relevance of Ahmad Khan's thought is also reflected in the institutional tendency in Islamic education in Indonesia, which seeks to integrate Islamic studies with modern scientific approaches. The phenomenon of the development of integrative studies between the Qur'an and science in several universities or other educational institutions shows that there is continuity with the spirit of Ahmad Khan's epistemological reform, especially in an effort to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge and affirm the dialogical relationship between religion and science (Lubis, Husti, and Mustofa 2023).

At this point, Ahmad Khan's thought is better understood as an epistemic horizon than as an educational model ready for application. It does not offer a final technical solution, but it opens up space for critical reflection on how Islamic education can respond to modernity without being trapped in the secularization of values or the romanticization of tradition. Thus, Ahmad Khan's relevance in modern education lies in his capacity to think inspiring reforms that are reflective, contextual, and grounded in the integration of rationality, spirituality, and human responsibility (Bhat & Bisati, 2025).

CONCLUSION

Ahmad Khan's educational thinking in this article is shown to be reducible to a Westernization project or just a pragmatic response to British colonialism. Khan's reforms were rooted in an internal critique of the intellectual stagnation of Muslims triggered by the dichotomy of knowledge, the dominance of *taqlid*, and the narrowing of the function of education into doctrinal transmission. By moving the conflict between religion and science from the blood of theology to methodology, Khan offers an integrative framework between revelation and reason that affirms scientific rationality while minimizing the role of revelation as a moral and spiritual source. However, this

integration is still transitional and problematic because there is no firm methodological framework for the limits of intellectual authority, so the epistemology of education is better read as an epistemic critique of a theory that is ultimately systematized.

At the level of goals and methodologies, Khan consistently placed education as a civilization project oriented towards the formation of rational, moral, and socially responsible human beings. However, the reform also leaves social limitations, especially its tendency to reach more educated Muslims and urban elites. Thus, Ahmad Khan's main contribution to modern Islamic education lies not in the provision of an institutional model that is ready to be replicated, but in opening up a new perspective in the transformation of Islamic education that opposes the separation between religious science and modern science, while placing education as a space for integration between rational, spiritual, and social responsibility.

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