

## **Contributions of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan to the Muslim Renaissance in Bengal during the Nineteenth Century**

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### **Abstract**

*The European Renaissance emphasizes individualism but the Indian Renaissance has a different nature. In India, the Renaissance refers to the overall social, religious and educational changes in society and the spreading of Western modernity. The nineteenth century was a milestone for the entire Indian society. The Renaissance started from Bengal province initially. Indian society had undergone many changes throughout the entire century. Nawab Abdul Latif Khan (1828 -1893) was a great social reformer and educator. He played an important role in the development of the Muslim community, especially in Bengal. He is regarded as the shining star of the Bengal Renaissance. His remarkable role has shaped the destiny of the Muslim community. In 1863, he established the "Mohammedan Literary Society" in Calcutta. This society played a very crucial role in the development of the Muslim community. He wanted to spread the Western modern English education in the Muslim society. He encouraged the Muslim community to learn European modern education. In 1853, he introduced an essay contest called "The Benefits of Learning English" to motivate young students to learn modern education. However, this paper basically dealt with the entire contribution of Nawab Abdul Khan to the Muslim Renaissance as a chief architect of the Muslim modernization in Bengal.*

### **Key words**

*Muslim Renaissance, Modernization, Mohammedan Literary Society, individualism, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan.*

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## **Introduction**

Nawab Abdul Latif Khan was born in Rajapur of Faridpur district in 1828, in the Bengal Presidency (present-day Bangladesh). He is considered the first Muslim modernizer in colonial Bengal. Then, the Muslim community was in a dark phase under British colonial rule. He realised the importance of modern English education and initiated an intellectual movement among Muslims. Simultaneously, he was an efficient administrator and a significant social reformer. He began his career as a teacher at Dhaka Collegiate School in 1846. Later, he was appointed as a professor of Anglo-Arabic at Calcutta Madrassa in 1848 (**Hossain, 2022**). He served the British colonial government first as a deputy magistrate and later as a magistrate. Thus, he gathered diverse life experiences, which greatly helped him serve society as a social reformer and educator. He gained recognition as a capable administrator within the British colonial administration. His intellectual capabilities and enthusiastic mindset attempted to bring substantial change to the socially and educationally backward Muslim society of colonial Bengal.

## **The Condition of Muslims under British Colonial Rule**

After the death of Aurangzeb, the great Mughal Empire began to disintegrate. Regional rulers gradually grew in power across the empire. However, after the Battle of Plassey (1757), the East India Company emerged as the most powerful political and economic institution in the Indian subcontinent (**Belmekki, 2007**). The Company established a colonial government to administer the subcontinent. The colonial state began spreading modern English education to create a British-minded Indian class that would support colonial rule. From 1835 onwards, the colonial government actively promoted English education. The British administration replaced Persian with English as the official language of governance. As a result, Persian lost its relevance in India, and the Muslim community became resentful of British rule. Muslims did not accept these changes easily. It was difficult for them to consider the British as legitimate rulers. Consequently, the Muslim community psychologically rejected British education, culture, and governance. In contrast, the Hindu community accepted colonial modern education and culture, which enabled them to improve their social status through government employment. During the nineteenth century, a Bengali Hindu middle class emerged, which largely supported British colonial rule. This development did not occur among Muslims because they resisted British education and culture. This isolationist attitude towards colonial rule became a major reason for the backwardness of the Muslim community. Moreover, the Permanent Settlement of 1793 in the land revenue system deprived many Muslim landlords of their landholding rights (**Golam, 2018**). Economic backwardness consequently led

to educational and social decline among the Muslim population of Bengal. W. W. Hunter explained the condition of Muslims in his work *The Indian Mussalmans* (1871). At that time, the Muslim education system was predominantly religion-based and lacked a scientific orientation. *Makhtabs* and *madrassas* were the principal educational institutions for the Muslim community. This traditional educational system failed to foster a scientific outlook in society.

From an educational perspective, Muslim education lacked scientific and modern elements, and economically, the Muslim community remained severely disadvantaged. This traditional education was largely confined to the Muslim upper class, while the lower classes remained excluded even from this limited form of education. Thus, economic conditions also created divisions within the Muslim community regarding access to education. Overall, the educational condition of Muslims was extremely poor. Culturally, the Muslim community was burdened with numerous superstitions during the nineteenth century. As a result, Muslims gradually became a declining and backward community within the Indian subcontinent.

#### **Educational Role of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan in the Muslim Renaissance**

We have already discussed the condition of Muslims under British colonial rule. In such a situation, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan received both traditional and modern education. He wanted to utilise modern education as a means for Muslims to transform their socio-economic and political conditions. As already mentioned, he founded the “Mohammedan Literary Society” in 1863 in Calcutta (Karim, 1970). This society organised lectures on various subjects related to Western science. At the same time, Arabic, Persian, and English literature were given significant importance in its lecture series. He also played an important role in the establishment of Presidency College. Initially, it was Hindu College, founded in 1817. Later, he persuaded the government to convert Hindu College into Presidency College. After the creation of Presidency College, the institution was opened to students from all communities. As a result, Muslims received greater opportunities for higher education. This contribution of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan was highly significant for the Muslim Renaissance.

In the case of the “Haji Mohsin Fund,” he made substantial efforts for Muslim students. Through his initiatives, Muslim students gained access to scholarships from the “Haji Mohsin Fund.” This fund provided financial assistance for the establishment of several educational institutions for the Muslim community. As a professor of Anglo-Arabic at Calcutta Madrasa, he also played a key role in establishing the Anglo-Persian Department in the institution.

The Hunter Commission was constituted in 1882 and is regarded as the first education commission in India. Nawab Abdul Latif Khan played an important role

in this commission. He advocated linguistic representation as a marker of class identity, arguing that Urdu should serve the upper-class Muslims, while Bengali should be the language of common Muslims. He also strongly supported modern Western education for Muslims and drew attention to their separate educational needs before the commission. Within the “Mohammedan Literary Society,” he was an active and influential figure. The society had specific objectives and goals and held monthly meetings where members presented essays on various subjects. Scholars from different parts of the subcontinent were invited to participate in these events. He intended to build a cordial relationship between the British administration and the Muslims of Bengal, while encouraging modern education (Mahmud, 2023).

Many prominent personalities participated in the activities of this society. One notable figure was Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who delivered a lecture on “Patriotism and the Necessity of Promoting Knowledge in India” at a special meeting. Another contributor was Dr. Narayan Nade, who delivered a lecture on medicine. Thus, the “Mohammedan Literary Society” functioned as a committed social organisation aimed primarily at modernising the Muslim community, while also promoting social harmony across religious lines. The society organised inter-religious dialogues and debates. Nawab Abdul Latif Khan led the organisation for more than thirty-six years and managed its activities efficiently. He emerged as the leading Muslim intellectual figure of the society. After his death, his son assumed leadership of the organisation, though he could not manage it as effectively (Mahmud, 2023).

As previously mentioned, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan organised an essay competition in 1853 with the aim of improving the English language skills of Muslim youth. At the same time, he emphasised the importance of the Urdu and Persian languages. Overall, his educational initiatives reflected his objective of creating a capable Muslim community that could actively participate in colonial administration. He strongly encouraged Muslim students to seek government employment and aimed to increase Muslim representation in colonial services. While he embraced modern education, he did not reject Islamic traditions; rather, he sought to synthesise traditional and modern education for the empowerment of the Muslim community of Bengal. Thus, he made a remarkable contribution to the Muslim Renaissance in nineteenth-century Bengal.

### **Role of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan in the Social Aspect of the Bengal Renaissance**

The social and political life of Bengal underwent significant changes throughout the nineteenth century. Nawab Abdul Latif Khan attempted to foster mutual understanding between Muslims and the British colonial government. He aimed to change the Muslim community’s attitude towards British rule and

maintained amicable relations across religious communities. He did not display hostility towards any religion. In comparison to the Hindu community, Muslims lagged in education, employment, and social status. To address this disparity, he sought to integrate Muslims into mainstream social life through modern education. As a social reformer, he paid close attention to the problem of indigo cultivation. British indigo planters exploited peasants, which eventually led to the Indigo Revolt of 1859 in Bengal. Following the revolt, the British Indian government established the Indigo Commission in 1860 (Firdous, 2015). Nawab Abdul Latif Khan played an important role in the formation of this commission, which later worked towards addressing the grievances of peasants.

He also made a notable contribution to the establishment of the “Reformatory for Juvenile Offenders” at Alipur in 1867. He maintained a loyal stance towards British rule and did not support any rebellion against the colonial government. He believed that the upliftment of the Muslim community could be achieved through cooperation with British authorities. As an efficient administrator within the colonial system, he became an integral part of the administration. While many Muslims harboured resentment towards British rule, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan sought to convince them that improvement was impossible without engaging with the colonial system. From a social perspective, he accepted British rule as the governing authority of the Indian subcontinent and worked within that framework to improve Muslim conditions through Western education.

### **Some Political Roles of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan for the Muslim Community**

Nawab Abdul Latif Khan served as an efficient administrator in the British colonial government and earned considerable respect for his administrative abilities. In 1862, he was nominated as a member of the Bengal Legislative Council, becoming the first Muslim to hold this position (Bradley 1910). Through this role, he attempted to safeguard Muslim interests within the colonial legislative framework. The British government also recognised him as a prominent Muslim leader.

One of his most significant political achievements was the restoration of the “Muhsin Fund” for Muslim students. The British colonial government had seized the fund in 1829 and diverted its resources for the benefit of Hindu students. Nawab Abdul Latif Khan initiated efforts to reclaim the fund for the Muslim community (Murtaza 1971). Through his persistent efforts, the “Muhsin Fund” was successfully restored. Subsequently, three madrassas were established in Dhaka, Chittagong, and Rajshahi using the fund. Thus, politically as well, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan played a vital role in advancing the development of the Muslim community in colonial Bengal.

### **Nawab Abdul Latif Khan as the First Muslim Modernizer in Bengal**

Particularly in the context of Muslim revivalism, several movements emerged during the nineteenth century. These movements shaped the cultural and religious values of the Muslim community in India. One such movement was the “Wahabi Movement.” This movement originated in the Arabian Peninsula and was later led in India by Syed Ahmed Bareilvi. Shah Waliullah also influenced this movement, while Ahmadullah and Ibrahim Mandal were among its leaders. The movement aimed to revive Islamic religious practices in India. However, its objectives were fundamentally different from the intellectual movement led by Nawab Abdul Latif Khan. The Wahabi Movement began in the 1820s and continued until the 1870s, spanning a large part of the nineteenth century.

The leaders of this movement sought to eradicate British rule from India and purify Islam from British culture and education. Thus, the Wahabi Movement primarily aimed to protect traditional Islamic values. Another important movement was the “Faraizi Movement,” which began in 1818 in eastern Bengal. It was essentially an Islamic revivalist and agrarian movement against British rule, striving to protect traditional Islamic values while also seeking social justice by resisting colonial domination. Another movement was the “Deoband Movement,” which emerged in the late nineteenth century (Rodrigues 2011). This movement was also Islamic revivalist in nature and focused on preserving traditional Islamic values. It rejected Western modern education and prioritised religious instruction. Thus, these three movements of the nineteenth century shared a common rejection of Western modern education and culture, emphasising traditional religious education instead. From a historical perspective, it can be observed that during the nineteenth century, many Muslim leaders sought to preserve traditional religious teachings and were reluctant to embrace Western modern education. In contrast, leaders such as Nawab Abdul Latif Khan advocated the adoption of Western modern education for the Muslim community, particularly in Bengal. Therefore, two parallel paradigms existed within Muslim intellectual revivalism during this period. It was not an easy task for Nawab Abdul Latif Khan to transform the educational outlook of Muslims in colonial Bengal overnight.

Importantly, he did not disregard traditional religious education. Rather, he attempted to integrate traditional Islamic education with modern Western education in an effective manner. Unlike the earlier movements, which completely rejected Western education, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan recognised its importance for the socio-economic development of the Muslim community. He synthesised traditional education with modern Western learning to empower Muslims. Consequently, he

became the first Muslim leader in Bengal to modernise the Muslim education system. He understood the significance of modern education and encouraged Muslim youth to learn Western languages, science, and philosophy. He wisely accepted English education as a means to compete with the Hindu community in education, employment, and social status. He realised that without English education, Muslims would fail to gain respect and political influence under British colonial rule. His intellectual insight was therefore remarkably sharp. During this period, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was another prominent figure in the Indian Muslim Renaissance who promoted awareness of modern Western education (De, 1995). His intellectual initiative is known as the “Aligarh Movement.” Similarly, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan’s intellectual movement played a crucial role in uplifting the Muslim community in Bengal. Hence, he is regarded as the father of the Muslim Renaissance in Bengal and can justifiably be considered the first Muslim modernizer in the region.

### **A Critical Analysis of the Role of Nawab Abdul Latif Khan in the Bengal Renaissance**

From a critical perspective, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan’s role in the Bengal Renaissance also reveals certain limitations. He worked primarily within an aristocratic environment, which distanced his efforts from the poorer sections of society. As a result, Western modern education failed to reach the economically marginalised Muslim population of colonial Bengal. The benefits of his intellectual movement were largely confined to the upper-class Muslim community, while peasants, labourers, and marginalised Muslims experienced little transformation in their intellectual lives. His organisational initiatives remained limited to elite sections of the Muslim society, creating educational bifurcation within the community. A similar pattern was observed among the Hindu community, where the Kolkata-centric Hindu middle class led an intellectual movement that largely excluded the marginalised population. In terms of language, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan emphasised English, Persian, and Urdu, while neglecting the Bengali language. He did not produce any academic writings in Bengali, choosing instead to write in English and Urdu. As a Bengali intellectual, this neglect of the Bengali language remains a point of criticism. Although the “Mohammedan Literary Society” was open to all, Hindu scholars participated in limited numbers. Another significant criticism is his support for British colonial rule. At a time when many Muslims opposed British authority due to historical and religious reasons, he maintained cordial relations with the colonial administration. This stance was unpopular among traditional Muslims, who viewed cooperation with a foreign colonial power with suspicion. Despite these criticisms, it must be acknowledged that Nawab Abdul Latif Khan worked extensively

for the advancement of the Muslim community. At a time when British colonial power dominated the Indian subcontinent, his efforts to rejuvenate Muslim society were invaluable. His contributions provided a foundation for intellectual and educational reform among Muslims in Bengal. Therefore, despite the limitations of his approach, his relevance in the context of the Bengal Renaissance remains undeniable.

In conclusion, Nawab Abdul Latif Khan emerged as a prominent figure who sought to illuminate the intellectually marginalised Muslim society of nineteenth-century Bengal. He devoted his life to uplifting the community from ignorance, poverty, superstition, and social decline. His enduring contributions to the Muslim Renaissance of Bengal continue to occupy a significant place in the intellectual history of the region. He was a capable administrator and a sincere social reformer. Even if his legacy is overlooked at times, history continues to revive his mission and vision within the broader narrative of colonial Bengal.

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