[**Enlightenment quest**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1644222/enlightenment-quest)

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THE Age of Enlightenment spread over 200 years in the history of European societies made an outstanding impact on the latter’s intellectual, religious, economic and sociopolitical dimensions. The movement put European societies on the highway of progress, and unleashed radical transformations. This movement was possible primarily because Europe underwent a series of ‘revolutions’ — from the Renaissance, Reformation to the Industrial Revolution — especially, the advancement of Gutenberg’s printing press.

In the context of Europe, the word ‘Enlightenment’ denotes a particular historical period (roughly 17th and 18th centuries), characterised by an extraordinary emphasis on reason as the source of knowledge as opposed to superstition, mythology, etc. Discoveries one after the other, thanks to a rational approach towards natural phenomena, made it possible to see the Enlightenment as a solution to human problems. It unravelled the mysteries of the universe and set aside centuries-old dogmatic beliefs.

This Age of Enlightenment was a contrast to the Middle Ages seen as ‘Dark’ by the Christian West. The Enlightenment era inaugurated an age of inventions and discoveries, addressing age-old problems of disease, social and economic afflictions. Last but not the least, it separated the church from the state due to constant tensions between the two. As Steven Pinker in Enlightenment Now demonstrates, the gigantic achievements of philosophers, scientists, artists, writers and activists of the time empowered human reason to address centuries-old problems.

The word ‘enlightenment’ is also used as a general term, referring to a set of ‘insights’ developed by an individual through knowledge, education and personal achievements. Often, when we regard somebody as an ‘enlightened’ person, we mean a person who is seasoned, wise and well-read, often having a command over multiple languages.

We need a rational approach as well as spiritual insight.

When the word is used outside Europe, such as in the subcontinent, it refers more to spiritual, esoteric and meditative practices that lead to deep mystical insights, though not so much intellectual achievements. In esoteric, gnostic or Sufi milieus, the term in the Islamic context often refers to those who have been blessed with internal and spiritual enlightenment, such as Jalaluddin Rumi, Mansur Al-Hallaj, Bayazid Bustami, or Rabi’a Basri.

In the third sense, the word (enlightenment) is used in the Vedantic or yogic or monastic traditions. In these contexts, the word is used for ‘awakened’ or ‘liberated’ persons. In these traditions, yogic practitioners are advised to rein in the rational process, containing its interference in the practice of meditation. This does not mean they reject reason as a tool for survival, but it is just that it is seen as an obstacle to ‘enlightenment’ in the spiritual sense.

A man who seems to initiate the ‘age of enlightenment’ in the subcontinent in the European sense is Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). Due to his enormous emphasis on the use of reason as a tool for progress and interpreting culture and tradition, Sir Sayyid initiated a sort of strong trend that laid emphasis on rational ways of apprehending human or divine affairs.

Through his own writings and educational philosophy and its application in his MAO College (later the Aligarh University), he started to use reason as a powerful tool to solve human cultural problems, showing glimpses of the age of ‘enlightenment’, considering the universe as the Work of God, referred to it by the Word of God. Subsequently, many intellectuals have been inspired by his thoughts.

In these times of emotionalism and benightedness, our intelligentsia need to consider the tradition of use of reason as a primary tool to resolve conflicts. Modern educated youth, born, bred and educated in different milieus, particularly those in educationally more developed societies, are fascinated by the intellectual culture of modern times, exposed to, and trained as they are to more academic and political freedom of research.

In research-oriented societies today, knowledge generation is encouraged through ‘critical’ thinking and ‘evidence-based’ approaches from early schooling to higher education. This development has led to ‘enlightened’ people, capable of making use of reason to its fullest extent. Societies that are fostered on emotionalism and sloganeering can only lead to irrational behaviour, culminating in authoritarianism.

Human societies need both — the strong rational approach to improving human conditions, as well as the spiritual insights that can inspire the synergy between human intellect and spirituality, by encouraging curiosity and exploration, awe and wonder, humility and courage, with strong moral consciousness, that may result in ‘enlightened’ citizenry.

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