Next year, if grain is dear, I shall be a Sayyid: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, colonial constructions, and Muslim self-definitions

DAVID LELYVELD

Abstract

British social surveys and census statistics defined 'Sayyid' as a caste identity, while often casting a sceptical eye on the authenticity of genealogical claims associated with the concept. The article examines how Muslims, especially Sayyid Ahmad Khan, participated in the formulation of the concept of Sayyid identity and status. Islamic ideology and practice have long wrestled with conflicting claims of religious equality and hierarchical status, often based on concepts of sacred lineage. From his earliest writings Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98) emphasised his descent from the Prophet Muhammad on his father's side alongside his somewhat less exalted relationship with his Kashmiri grandfather. In later years he tried to balance universalistic ideals with claims to status based on supposedly 'foreign' ancestry, which he cited as parallel to the supposed Aryan ancestry of high-status Hindus. His British allies used his Sayyid ancestry as reinforcement of his leadership of an India-wide Muslim 'community' and evidence that India was not prepared to develop into a national polity based on representative government. But the Aligarh movement's claim to represent the wider Muslim population and in particular its educational project at Aligarh struggled with a more egalitarian ethos, defining students and the members of voluntary associations as 'brothers', and quite prepared to cross ascriptive boundaries both in public life and personal relationships.

Keywords: Sayyid Ahmad Khan; Aligarh movement

یوں تو سیّد بھی ہو، مرزا بھی ہو، افغان بھی ہو
تم سبھی کچھ ہو، بتاؤ تو مسلمان بھی ہو

You may be Sayyids, you may be Mirzas, you may be Afghans,
You may be anything, but tell me, are you also Muslims?
Muhammad Iqbal (1913)[1]

[1]'Jawab-e Shikwa', *Kulliyat-e Iqbal* [Urdu] (Lahore, 1973), p. 203.

JRAS, Series 3, 30, 3 (2020), pp. 433–448
doi:10.1017/S1356186320000024

Late in 1895 a short item appeared at the bottom of the last page of an issue of *Tahzib al-akhlaq*, published in Aligarh, declaring that the use of the word 'Sayyid' for people who are not descended from Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, was incorrect and improper. The article was signed by Sayyid Ahmad, that is, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, now generally known in English spelling as Sir Syed. Not only implying the author's own ancestral claim to a certain deference, this short statement served as notice that others were misusing the term and making unwarranted assertions of high status among the Muslims of India.[2]

How Sayyid Ahmad Khan interpreted his own identity as a Sayyid in the course of his long life (1817–98) marks the development of his ideas about being a Muslim in India and his role as a leader in establishing a wider sense of an Indian Muslim community. It was during his lifetime that a new concept of community emerged under radically changing conditions of British colonial knowledge and power. The part Sayyid Ahmad played as mediator between colonial dominance and Muslim self-actualisation in nineteenth-century India helped set the groundwork for subsequent political developments with respect to group identity in India and what was to become Pakistan.

Colonial Knowledge and the construction of Sayyid identity

Newly formulated identities emerged out of the expansion and elaboration of British colonial knowledge about Indian society and its implementation in law courts, surveys of agricultural landholding, recruitment of civil and military personnel, and recognition of political constituencies. Colonial discourse established 'Religion' and 'Caste' as the all-encompassing sociological keys to understanding India and set about a far-reaching empirical project of delineating and coordinating these categories, along with 'Language', across grids of location, gender, age, occupation, literacy and 'infirmities' (such as blindness and insanity). From 1872 onwards, the Indian Census was organised to locate, count and aggregate every ten years the number of individuals throughout British India according to these criteria. At different times and with respect to different regions British administrators disagreed in their analysis and were often guided or at least influenced by Indian collaborators with their own ideas and agendas. Indians in turn used the enterprise of information gathering to demand recognition of and inclusion in newly conceived and consolidated group identities and to employ them in the business of political and social mobilisation.[3]

[2]'*Sayyid ka lafz ka ist'amal ghair bani Fatima par*', *Tahzib al-akhlaq* 2, 1 (second series), 1 Rajab, 1313 H. [18 December 1895], in *Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid*, (ed.) Mawlana Muhammad Isma'il Panipati Vol. 15, p. 160.

[3]Of the considerable scholarly debate on the role on colonial knowledge in the history of modern Indian social and political change I am particularly indebted to the foundational essays reprinted in Bernard S. Cohn, *An anthropologist among the historians and other essays* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 136–171, 224–254. See also Arjun Appadurai, 'Number in the Colonial Imagination', in *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*, (eds.) Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 314–339. For the role of Indians in the formulation of such knowledge, see Shahid Amin, 'Cataloguing the countryside: agricultural glossaries from colonial India', *History and Anthropology* 8 (1995), pp. 35–53; also Brian K. Pennington, *Was Hinduism Invented?* (New York, 2005). For pre-colonial anticipations, see most recently Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Caste and its Histories in Colonial India: A reappraisal', *Modern Asian Studies* 51, 2 (2017) (New Directions in Social and Economic History: Essays in Honour of David Washbrook), pp. 432–461. For the application of colonial knowledge to Muslims, see David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 3–20; Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in colonial North India* (Delhi. 1990), pp. 66–108.

Although British administrators were keen to point out local variation, inconsistency and general fragmentation, they made considerable efforts to develop a generalised system of classification that would encompass comparable units of analysis and coordinate what they took to be the fundamental axes of Indian society. 'Religion' construed the category 'Hindu' as comparable to 'Muslim', and 'Caste' could, with some reservations, be applied to Muslims as well. They defined castes in various ways as bounded social groups based on ancestry, marriage rules, ritual roles, occupational history and supposed 'racial' characteristics, all with subdivisions and territorial identifications. If castes were related to each other in a system of hierarchical ranking, founded on selected passages in Vedic and *dharmasastra* texts, the general principles could be extrapolated, according to British theory, beyond the writ of Brahmanical authority and extended to a congeries of social and cultural populations that were swept into the category 'Hindu' as well as to Muslims. Accordingly, Sayyids could be aggregated as a caste and, like brahmans, placed at the pinnacle of a hierarchy in terms of social status.

In the course of the nineteenth century, the model of social organisation that colonial authorities applied to Muslims construed inherited social status in terms of this caste-like system with so-called Ashraf Muslims comparable to Hindu twice-born *varna* and the emerging concept of 'Aryan', Indians whose higher status could be attributed to 'foreign' ancestry and conquest, often in the distant past. According to this model, the Ashraf (plural of *sharif*, eminent or exalted and used in other parts of the Muslim world for descendants of the Prophet) consisted of four birth-defined strata, supposedly in descending order of status:

1) Sayyid, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, usually claiming patrilineal descent from his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali;
2) Shaikh, descendants of the companions of the prophet, that is, also of Arab origin, but also used as a term for Sufi religious figures and extended more widely to people who have converted to Islam, perhaps in association with their Sufi preceptors;
3) Mughal, which might refer to Chagatai Turks or more broadly to people of Central Asian and even Irani background who were associated with the Timurid dynasty; and
4) Pathan, people descended from Afghan migrants to India.

Other Muslims were classified on the basis of indigenous Indian origin, usually Ajlaf or Arzal base or vulgar, and often sharing the caste designations of Hindu counterparts.[4]

The origins of this peculiarly South Asian construction are unclear. Before the nineteenth century there were various terms among Muslims in India to distinguish people with aristocratic, religious or literary claims to deference from the broader society of commoners. Louise Marlow has provided a rich intellectual history of the ideological debates among Islamic thinkers on the various formulations of hierarchy and equality in the early centuries of Islam in what we now call the Middle East.[5] Long before the era of British domination, Indian Muslim scholars participated in this intellectual tradition. Ideas of a "quadripartite social model", generally based on ethical theories of occupational function, articulated in the writings of Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–74 CE) and Jalal al-Din Davani (1427–1501), both Irani, were echoed

[4]Imtiaz Ahmed, 'The Ashraf-Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social Structure in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 3, 3 (1966), pp. 268–278.
[5]Louise Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2002).

and carried forward by Indian writers, notably Ziyaʿ al-Din Barani (1285–1327) and Abu'l Fazl (1551–1602).[6] There were also numerous ethnic and social designations in pre-colonial India and the wider Muslim world that played a role in determining the composition of military units, the distribution of administrative offices and the formation of factions. Muslims in the Mughal ruling class were often categorised broadly as Turani, Irani, Afghan and Hindustani; Hindus included Rajputs, Kayasths, Khatris, Marathas and others. Such designations had, in turn, subdivisions based on geographical origins, descent, religious affiliation and language.[7]

Early in the nineteenth century, probably about 1815, Mirza Muhammad Hassan Qatil wrote about the four *firqa* or classes of the Ashraf, Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans, by way of pointing out just how insecure such designations were. Those who pursued crafts or businesses in the bazaars, making and selling perfume or bread, caring for elephants, for example, could not be included among the *shurafa*; whatever their ancestry, they were considered *paji*, 'contemptible', not worthy of social intercourse with people of greater wealth and status.[8] Qatil was himself a convert to Islam, accepted at least by some as a Mughal, hence the title 'Mirza', a designation that denoted a cultivated style of life rather than any sort of ethnic identity.[9] For the poet Mirza Ghalib, however, he was just Dilvali Singh, 'the *khatri* of Faridabad'.[10]

Qatil's diatribe in the early years of British domination of northern India appears to be the first mention of this specifically Indian formulation of the four-part social order among Muslims. Writing about pre-colonial Bengal, Richard M. Eaton claims that Ashraf status based on "Arab, Central Asian or Afghan origin" was not merely a colonial construction but had deeper historical roots. He cites a late fifteenth-century Bengali text by Vipra Das that mentions the Sayyids, Mughals and Pathans of Satgaon. The secondary source from which Eaton derives this information, however, casts doubt on the authenticity of the text and notes that the other categories in the same verse—*makhdum*, *sayyid*, *mulla* and *qazi*—refer to piety and learning, not descent.[11] It is probably an error to read back this nineteenth-century construction to a precolonial past and to associate that past with modern ideas about caste.

In 1832, the *Qanoon-i Islam or the Customs of the Mussalmans of India,* written by Jaffur Shurreef in Dakhani Urdu at the behest of a British physician, G.A. Hercklots but only published in English, presented all Muslims within the framework of this four-fold division, indicated in honorifics attached to their names, while noting that there were marriages that crossed such boundaries.[12] In *Rasum-i Hind*, a popular textbook compiled by Master

[6]Ainslie T. Embree (ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (New York, 1988), pp. 431–436.

[7]M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966), pp. 14–33; Ali Anooshahr, 'Mongols, and Mongrels: The Challenge of Aristocracy and the Rise of the Mughal State in the Tarikh-i Rashidi', *Journal of Early Modern History* 18, 6 (October 2014), pp. 559–577.

[8]Mirza Muhammad Hassan Qatil, *Haft Tamasha* (Lucknow, 1875), p. 117 [Persian]; discussed in Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in nineteenth-century Delhi* (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 59–62.

[9]M. Hidayat Husain, 'The Mirza Namah (the Book of the Perfect Gentleman) of Mirza Kamran with an English Translation', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, new series, 9 (1913), pp. 1–13.

[10]Altaf Hussain, Hali, *Yadgar-i Ghalib*, reprinted edition (Lahore, 1963), p. 29 [Urdu].

[11]Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 97–103, citing Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims of Bengal (down to A.D. 1538)* (Dacca, 1959), pp. 153–154. Arthur F. Buehler in an otherwise useful review of the issue relies on Eaton to defend the precolonial relevance of the Ashraf-Ajlaf dichotomy. See his 'Trends in ashrāfization in India', in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: the living links to the Prophet*, (ed.) Kazuo Morimoto (London, 2012), pp. 232–240.

[12]Jaffur Shureef, *Qanoon-e-Islam, or, The customs of the Moosulmans of India*, translated by G. A. Hercklots (London, 1832), pp. 8–16.

Pyare Lal in collaboration with W. J. Holroyd for the Punjab Department of Public Instruction and published in 1862, there is an elaborate explication of the fourfold division and further subdivisions, referred to as *nasl* (lineage or pedigree). The *sultanat* (rulership) is the prerogative of Sayyids or others with Quraishi ancestry. Mughals too have a sacred lineage as descendants of the Biblical Noah; ancestors of the Pathans were Israelites from the time of Solomon. Frequently reprinted for use in the schools, this text was also part of the vernacular training in Urdu for British military and administrators.[13]

Starting in the 1840s, local British census operations set about locating and counting the population according to these ranked divisions.[14] Empirical research with respect to Indian society in the early part of the nineteenth century, largely motivated by the administrative goal of raising revenue from Indian agriculture, kept fairly close to the ground. Only later, did the focus shift "from the village community to caste and tribe", and even then the units of analysis tended to be confined to specific localities.[15] The only mention of "Syuds" in H. M. Elliot's 1844 *Glossary* is the Barha Sayyids, a specific kinship network, called a "tribe", in a rural region north and east of Delhi, describing their subdivisions, locations and historical reputation as warriors, especially under the Mughals, but with no discussion of rank within a social hierarchy.[16]

After and perhaps because of the 1857 rebellion, the colonial authorities introduced much more intensive, systematic and generalised investigations. In 1869, when John Beames expanded the Elliot glossary with data from the census of the North-Western Provinces conducted four years earlier, he started with the division between "descendants of foreign invaders" and "converts from Hinduism", though he went on to say that the distinction "is to a great extent ignored" by Muslims themselves. What they do recognise, he says, is the "fourfold classification, into Sayyid, Mughal, Pathan, and Shaikh". Muslims, however, "take great liberties with these titles", so that in the Punjab there "used to be" a proverb:

> Last year I was a weaver, this year I am a Shaikh.
> Next year, if grain is dear, I shall be a Sayyid.

Having said all that, Beames then gave the precise census count of Sayyids in the province: 170,248 out of a total Muslim population of 4,075,206, compared to the Hindu population of 25,971,420.[17] For Oudh, still a separate administrative entity, in 1869, the count of Sayyids was 51,679.[18] Over the following years, census operations continued to extend and consolidate data, so that in 1891, the general census submitted to the British Parliament reported

[13]Pyarelal Ashob Dihlvi, and W. J. Holroyd, *Rasum-i Hind*, reprinted edition (Lahore, 1961), pp. 258–260.

[14]For example, A. A. Roberts, 'Population of Delhie and its suburbs', 18 July 1847, in *Selections from the Records of Government, North-Western Provinces*, NO. XIII, pp. 152–157.

[15]Richard Saumarez Smith, *Rule by records: land registration and village custom in early British Panjab* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 74–77.

[16]*Supplement to the Glossary of Indian Terms*, reprinted edition (Roorkee, 1860), pp. 50–51.

[17]'Numerical Strength and Distribution of the Muhammadans in the North-Western Provinces, according to the Census of 1865', in Henry M. Elliot, *Memoirs on the history, folk-lore, and distribution of the races of the North Western provinces of India: being an amplified edition of the original supplemental glossary of Indian terms*, edited, revised and rearranged by John Beames (London, 1869), Vol. 1, pp. 184–186, 192.

[18]J. Charles Williams, *Report on the Census of Oudh* (Lucknow, 1869), Vol. 1, p. 74. Juan Cole, using the 1891 census, has taken such figures at face value as an accurate analysis the Muslim population in *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 73.

that there were 1,430,329 Sayyids in all of British India out of 34,348,085 "Musulmans of Foreign Title". There were, according to the report, about 57 million Muslims in all, "an extraordinary collection of heterogeneous elements", making up about one-fifth of the total population of India.[19] The data was further broken down by district, so that along with Muslims in general and other demarcated Muslim populations, it was now possible to locate 'Sayyids' as an aggregate category on the map of India.[20]

Beneath this accumulation of data, at once gross and misleadingly precise, there was a good deal of fine print expressing reservations, doubt and debate. Confronted with bounded, 'fuzzy' or overlapping categories, British officials felt compelled to develop a coherent theory for the sake of administrative utility and their own intellectual satisfaction.[21] John C. Nesfield resisted calling divisions among Muslims "castes" because, according to him, they were not associated with caste-like rules of marriage or linked to occupations. He nevertheless divided Muslims of India between those who were descendants of "foreign invaders" and those who were converted as a result of conviction, opportunism or coercion to Islam, though he maintained that the distinction was uncertain because "like the Aryans", foreign Muslims tended to marry indigenous women "as their physiognomy plainly testifies". Nesfield went on to recount the fourfold division along with the same proverb about rising prices—in this case from *qasab* (butcher) to Sayyid. He also declares that "almost all Sayyads are Shiahs", in contrast to the overwhelming majority of other Muslims. Although not a "caste", Sayyids, like Brahmans, are respected regardless of their "personal character or pecuniary status".[22] Nesfield regretted that the 1881 census omitted statistics on the subgroups of Muslims, a feature that was restored and greatly elaborated in 1891, with Sayyids further divided into some twenty-five subgroups based on lineage, not necessarily from Fatima, or on geographical origin in the distant past, which were then cross-tabulated by district of residence in the present.[23]

The most striking colonial construction of Sayyid as a social category was its use in military recruitment, where they were included in the so-called martial races of India. Recruiters were warned, however, that "great care should be taken to distinguish the genuine Saiyid from the spurious article. . .. Lazy to a degree, thriftless and poor, the only profession they regard as worthy of them is the profession of war. They retain to an almost ridiculous extent their pride as a conquering race, and being of good physique make capital soldiers".[24]

[19] *General Report on the Census of India, 1891* (London, 1893), pp. 167, 207. The report notes that the titles do not necessarily indicate actual 'foreign' descent.

[20] Joseph E., Schwartzberg, *A Historical Atlas of South Asia* (Chicago, 1978), plate X.C.2, p. 107.

[21] For more recent critiques of this enterprise see: Arjun Appadurai, 'Is Homo Hierarchicus?', *American Ethnologist* 13, 4 (1986), pp. 745–761; Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India.* (Princeton, 2001), pp. 3–60, 127–227; Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas*, revised edition (New York, 2010).

[22] John C, Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, Together with an Examination of the Names and Figures Shown in the Census Report, 1882: 28th February 1885* (Allahabad, 1885), pp. 122–124.

[23] William Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta, 1896), Vol. IV, pp. 302–308.

[24] P. D. Bonarjee, *A Handbook of the Fighting Races of India,* (Calcutta, 1899), p. 183. The author is identified as Assistant in the Military Department of the Government of India. Cf. Kaushik Roy, 'Race and Recruitment in the Indian Army: 1880–1918', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, 4 (July 2013), pp. 1310–1347. The classic critique of this

Sir Syed as a Sayyid

Inordinate pride, natives who did not know their place, such was the language of colonial condescension that Sayyid Ahmad Khan called out in his forthright analysis of the 1857 Rebellion:

> The lowest European felt that he could treat "*ashraf log*" with disrespect and contempt. They don't believe that any Indian could be considered – using the English word – a "gentleman".[25]

H. M. Elliott commented with some sarcasm on Sayyid Ahmad Khan's "pride of ancestry" when he took notice of him and his first publication at the end of the eighth and final volume *of The History of India as told by its own historians*.[26] In 1840, as a very young man, "Munshi" Sayyid Ahmad Khan had printed a lithographed chart in Persian of the Timurid dynasty, prepared at the behest of Robert Hamilton, the Commissioner of Agra, where Sayyid Ahmad had just started his career in the East India Company service. The preface included an account of his Sayyid ancestors going back to the late seventeenth century as well as his Kashmiri maternal grandfather.[27]

Sayyid Ahmad's maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin Ahmad appears to have been more significant to him as a child than his own father, Sayyid Mutaqqi. It was in his grandfather's haveli overlooking the Faiz Bazaar, south of the Red Fort, and in a house built by Sayyid Ahmad's mother across the road that Sayyid Ahmad had grown up amidst a large, extended family of uncles and cousins on his mother's side. His father seems to have lived elsewhere, near the Jama Masjid, and there is no mention of any relatives on the father's Sayyid side of the family. Grandson of a Kashmiri silk merchant, Khwaja Farid was a widely travelled, self-made man, who had spent a short time as *amin* or chief minister for the penultimate Mughal emperor, Akbar II, long after the Mughals had lost virtually all their practical power. In a short biography that Sayyid Ahmad wrote late in life he discussed the Middle Eastern lineage on his mother's side, taking care to separate it from the more indigenous Kashmiris. Marrying a daughter to a Sayyid was a conventional way to advance the family status and also to keep her close to home.[28]

Sayyid Ahmad considered that belonging to the Prophet's lineage set him apart from the rest of his grandfather's household. Later in life, he wrote down a dream he recalled from childhood, casting himself in the third person and calling himself simply 'Sayyid':

expression of colonial racism is Nirad C. Chaudhuri, 'The Martial Races of India', *Modern Review* 48 (July, September 1930), pp, 41–51, 296–307; 49 (January, February 1931), 67–79, 215–228.

[25]Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Asbab-i sarkashi-i Hindustan* (Agra, 1859), pp. 167–168, available at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/oourdu/asbab/urdutext1859.html (accessed May 2019). Note that all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

[26]H. M. Elliott, *The History of India as told by its own historians: the Muhmmadan period*, (ed.) John Dowson, Vol. 8 (London, 1877), pp. 430–431.

[27]Munshi Sayyid Ahmad Khan Dehlvi, *Jam-i Jam* ([Agra]: *bi chapa-e sang lithografik* [1840]); see *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, (ed.) Muhammad Ismai'il Panipati, Vol. 16 (Lahore, 1965), pp. 2–3, 13–74. For the manuscript of this text, dated 1839, see Charles Rieu, *Catalogue of the Persian Manuscripts in the British Museum*, Vol. 1 (London, 1966), Or. 145, pp. 284–285, available at http://www.archive.org/details/catalogueofpersio1brituoft (accessed May 2019; thanks to C. M. Naim).

[28]For further detail and references, see David Lelyveld, 'Young Man Sayyid: Dreams and Biographical Texts', in *Muslim Voices: Community and the Self in South Asia*, (eds.) David Gilmartin, Sandra Freitag and Usha Sanyal (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 253–272.

> . . . He dreamed that he was going from the house where he stayed to his maternal grandfather's house, which was just across the street. There in front stood a very large elephant with a *gaddi* [cushion] tied to its back. It ran forward to kill him. He ran for shelter to his grandfather's house . . . A bit later he went into a pavilion, which looked out on one side over the bazaar or the street. As it happened the elephant was standing below It wrapped him in its trunk and threw him on to the cushion on its back. On the cushion there was a man, who laid him out flat on his back and began to cut his throat with a knife but couldn't get it to cut. The elephant driver said, "He's a Sayyid. You can't cut the neck from the front. Cut it from the back". He turned him over and put the knife in his neck. At that moment Sayyid said the full *kalima*. The cruel man couldn't move the knife. Then there appeared from the direction of the *qibla* [toward Mecca] a person dressed in green and carrying a green staff in his hand. He struck the cruel man forcefully with his staff. Along with the elephant, he was annihilated. Sayyid, as it were, fell from its back on to the ground and woke up. If that cruel man had really killed [him], what a good death that would have been.[29]

Other dreams recalled from childhood feature a journey to Mecca and the presence of Hazrat ʿAli, nephew and son-in-law of the Prophet and ancestor of Sayyids. In his youth, then, being a Sayyid meant that he was personally blessed.

In 1841, Sayyid Muhammad, Sayyid Ahmad's elder brother, made a handsome illuminated manuscript copy of the memoirs of Jahangir for a British patron. That manuscript, now in the British Library, concluded with a five-page colophon repeating the detailed genealogy that Sayyid Ahmad had published the year before. It also mentioned that Sayyid Ahmad would be publishing a printed version.[30] The two brothers had started a lithographic press, the Maṭbùa Sayyid al-Akhbar, emphasising the Sayyid auspices of their enterprise. Also, in 1841, the press had published the first edition of Mirza Ghalib's Urdu *diwan*. It took Sayyid Ahmad twenty years to fulfil the promise of a printed version of the *Jahangirnama*, but in the meantime in 1846 he had done his own manuscript version, now in the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford, collating ten manuscripts.[31] He was therefore presumably familiar with what Jahangir had to say about a '*sadah* (simpleton) *sayyid*' but also about the Barha Sayyid '*qaum*': "Some people harbour doubts about the trueness of their lineage, but their bravery is an incontrovertible proof of their being Sayyids".[32] In the absence of any commentary, the most that can be made of Sayyid Ahmad's engagement with this historical text is that he must have been aware that the meaning and status of a Sayyid in the past could have a range of connotations.

[29]*Ibid*., p. 259, based on '*Sir Sayyid ke cand khwab*', Altaf Husain Hali, *Hayat-i Javid* (Kanpur, 1901 [1st ed., British Library Rare Books and Mss. 14109.bbb.7], Appendix [separate pagination]. Reprinted in Muhammad Ismaʿil Panipati (ed.), *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, Vol. 15 (Lahore, 1963), pp. 173–174. Thanks to C. M. Naim for revising my translation.

[30]Hermann Ethé, *Catalogue of Persian Manuscripts in the India Office Library* (Oxford, 1903), No. 2833.

[31]Eduard Sachau and Hermann Ethne (eds.), *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindustani, and Pushtu Manuscription in the Bodleian Library*, Part I: Persian Manuscripts (Oxford, 1889), No. 221, p. 118 [Elliot 406], For further details see David Lelyveld, 'Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Public Sphere: Urdu Print and Oratory in Nineteenth century India', in *Islamicate Traditions in South Asia: Themes from Culture and History*, (ed.) Agnieszka Kuczkiewicz-Fras (New Delhi, 2013), pp. 136–146.

[32]Jahangir, *The Jahangirnama: Memoirs of Jahangir, Emperor of India*, translated and edited by W. M. Thackston (New York, 1999) pp. 55, 401. Cf. Persian text: *Tuzak-i Jahangiri* (Lucknow, 1914), p. 31, available at https://ia800604.us.archive.org/35/items/Jahangirnama/Jahangirnama.pdf (accessed May 2019), For Sayyid Ahmad's printed version, see http://sirsyedtoday.org/books/read/default.aspx?bid=292 (accessed May 2019).

What these projects exemplify is Sayyid Ahmad's role as a gatherer of information, especially historical, for his British patrons. His major work of the period, *Asar us-sanadid* (Traces of the Notables), also 1846, an illustrated description of old and contemporary Delhi, has little to indicate his ideas about the status of Sayyids or a distinction between different ranks of Muslims based on ancestry. The brief descriptions of the people of Delhi do not make such distinctions, but in the biographies of Delhi notables at the end of the book, the ancestry of some, but not all, of them is noted. The first and most prominent entry is Shah Ghulam ʿAli, the Sufi master who Sayyid Ahmad particularly revered. It mentions that he was descended from the ʿAlvi *sadat*, which deviates from the strict definition of descent from Fatima that Sayyid Ahmad later insisted on. Hazrat ʿAli had children by other wives. The poet Shaikh Ibrahim Zauq is described as one of the *bani Nuh*, the children of Noah, that is, all humanity.[33] That might be a subtle aspersion, given the politics of poetic rivalries and the fact that Zauq's student, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, was excluded from the list of chosen poets. But so far, despite the fact that 1846 was the year in which the British authorities in Delhi started counting people by their supposed caste status, there is little evidence to indicate that Sayyid Ahmad considered that hierarchy on the basis of ascribed identity was particularly salient in his understanding of society.

A decade later, Sayyid Ahmad was caught up in the 1857 Rebellion and soon after wrote some significant accounts and analyses of the nature and meaning of that event from his point of view. There is much to say about these writings, but with respect to his identity as a Sayyid or anything like an Ashraf-Ajlaf distinction, the evidence is limited. One may speculate that he used his social and intellectual standing to negotiate with the nawab of Najibabad for the safe evacuation of the British residents of Bijnore district. His account of that incident certainly suggests a sense of moral superiority in facing a large number of rough Pathans, especially since the nawab was the nephew of the notorious Ghulam Qadir, who was responsible for the blinding of the Mughal emperor Shah Alam nearly seventy years earlier. Sayyid Ahmad also speaks with condescension of one of the rebel leaders as a member of the shaikh *qaum*, as well as of Gujjars, Jats and others who he thought were unruly ruffians. In *Asbab-i sarkashi-i Hindustan* Sayyid Ahmad calls the rebels *badzat*, literally ill-born in Persian, but this is not necessarily a statement about social status. In the general disorder of the time, the *ra'is* and *ra'iyyat*—the notable and the subject, both Hindu and Muslim—fell into a more chaotic fragmentation that, Sayyid Ahmad believed, only the external power of the British could restore to order.[34]

Sayyid Ahmad's use of the term '*ashraf log*' as equivalent to 'gentlemen' (in Urdu transliteration) departs from the fixed ascriptive status promulgated in the British social surveys or the usage of the term in other parts of the Muslim world to indicate descent from the Prophet. In the course of the nineteenth century, words like *shurafa, sharafat, sharif* took on an increasingly flexible usage of genteel respectability that referred at least as much to comportment and literary education as to descent, and frequently applied to non-Muslims as well as Muslims. The various organisations that Sayyid Ahmad established in the wake of 1857, such as the Scientific Society, first in Ghazipur, then Aligarh, listed many of the dues-paying

[33]*Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid,* Vol. 16, pp. 215, 463.
[34]Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Tarikh-i sarkashi-i zila' Bijnor* [1858] in *Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid,* Vol. 6, pp. 272–452.

participants, government employees, lawyers, landholders and others, with the honorific *ra'is* as a default category of respectability, something like notable or the Victorian usage of the term 'esquire'.[35] Certainly elitist, these usages were nevertheless part of a changing configuration of social prestige that the censuses and ethnographies did not try to capture.[36]

In one of the first such efforts, a boys' school established in 1859 in Moradabad that taught simple arithmetic and Persian, Sayyid Ahmad, serving as president of the local committee, enlisted his ten-year-old son, Sayyid Mahmud, in a school of Hindus and Muslims, most of whom are described as poor and educationally unprepared. It is noted that the poor boys' *talaffuz*, the pronunciation of words, did not meet "correct", presumably Delhi, *sharif* standards.[37] The school was designed to set them right. In another initiative a few years later, Sayyid Ahmad joined in a petition to the Governor-General calling for a comprehensive system of vernacular education that would reach the entire population of British India.[38]

Sayyid Ahmad's journey to England in 1869–70 brought him in contact with a range of people of different backgrounds and classes. He was particularly impressed with a Muslim woman on the ship, an ayah caring for the children of a British family. She was, he said, no less a wonder than the soon-to-be opened Suez Canal. She was from Kanpur and her *qaum* was Pathan. When an Englishman provocatively challenged Sayyid Ahmad to say if she and he were of the same *qaum*, he said with enthusiasm, yes she was, that every human being is descended from the same father (*nasli bha'i . . . ek bap se paida hu'e*) and all Muslims are brothers (*mazhabi bha'i*).[39]

But the shock of arrival in Britain challenged his universalism and turned Sayyid Ahmad from a cheerful cosmopolitan to one who had to confront an overwhelming sense of the inadequacy of his own background. He no longer blamed the British in India for their condescension; in comparison to an Englishman, he wrote, a person at any level of Hindustani society could be considered a *maili kuchaili vahshi janvar* (dirty, ragged, wild animal).[40] The great difference was the general level of education—even the servants read newspapers. The only response was to promote a comprehensive programme of education in India. At the same time, Sayyid Ahmad felt an overriding need to show that one could be a good Muslim and still participate in the work of social and intellectual progress.

In earlier work, soon after the 1857 Rebellion, Sayyid Ahmad had sought to reconcile Islam and Christianity by writing a Muslim commentary on the Bible. In that text, he

[35]For example, in *Ru'dad Scientific Society*, 9 January 1864 (Ghazipur, 1864).

[36]A good source for the range of such words is in the work of another Sayyid Ahmad, namely Sayyid Ahmad Dihlavi, *Farhang-i Asafiya,* 4 vols. (1888–1901), available at https://rekhta.org/ebooks/farhang-e-asifiya-volume-001-syed-ahmad-dehlvii-ebooks/ (and following volumes) (accessed May 2019). See Walter N. Hakala, *Negotiating Languages: Urdu, Hindi, and the Definition of Modern South Asia* (New York, 2017), pp. 115–133.

[37]*Report of the Primary Examination of the Moradabad Mudrissa held on 1st January 1860* (Meerut, 1860?). English portion and other relevant documents reprinted in Hafeez Malik (ed.), *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Educational Philosophy: A Documentary Record* (Islamabad, 1989), pp. 11–16.

[38]British Indian Association, N.W.P. *Article on the public education of India and correspondence with the British government concerning the education of the natives of India through the vernaculars* (Allygurh, 1869). This has both English and Urdu texts, with some significant differences. Sayyid Ahmad is quoted within the text, which suggests that he was not the major author of the rest of it. See https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=z5BeAAAAcAAJ&printsec=frontcover&pg=GBS.PA1 (accessed June 2019).

[39]Asghar ʿAbbas (ed.), *Sar Sayyid ka safarnamah, musafiran-i Landan* (Aligarh, 2009), pp. 101–102; translation in G.F.I. Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan, C.S.L.* (Edinburgh, 1885), pp. 103–104.

[40]*Ibid.*

cited his own pedagogical lineage—his teacher and his teacher's teacher reaching back to the Prophet.[41] In London, he undertook a response to a work of Christian polemics hostile to Islam by Sir William Muir, the Lieutenant Governor of the Northwestern Provinces. In that work, he devoted a chapter to demonstrating that the Prophet Muhmmad was a patrilineal descendant of the biblical patriarch Abraham and included a fold-out genealogical chart that went all the way back to Adam. On the other side of that chart, he continued from Muhammad to himself, his late elder brother, and their sons.[42] His status as a Sayyid was now brought forward as at least one criterion for him to speak with authority in defence of Islam.

If Sayyid Ahmad's reflections on education reveal his assumptions about social stratification, they were not necessarily based on ideas of lineage or heredity. In a pamphlet about the shortcomings of British educational projects in India that he published while in England, he called for a comprehensive system of universal education that would provide at least basic literacy to working people (that is, men; he was not ready to support institutional schools for women).[43] Education "in any country" should be organised in "three degrees": the highest for the true innovators in the arts and sciences "whose names will be . . . handed down to posterity as the benefactors of mankind". The second would be for those who have studied the best literature and are capable of teaching it. And the "lowest degree" would be to enable people "to perform the part assigned to them in society" and "besides . . . their manual labour, can read easy, popular books, newspapers, & c., conduct their correspondence, keep their accounts and so forth."[44] Sayyid Ahmad does not indicate how people would be selected for these several tracks. There is nothing in the pamphlet about lineage, family of origin or for that matter religion.

But while still in London, Sayyid Ahmad came to feel an overriding urgency with respect to the education of the Muslims of India, a population increasingly defined by virtue of British rule and the census as an aggregate, "a population of about thirty millions of British subjects". What he had in mind was a top-down project starting with "a good College after the system of Oxford and Cambridge" to prepare a new generation of intellectual leaders.[45] It remained a challenge in the years ahead to reconcile his notion of Muslims as a former ruling class, centred on 'Hindustan', the Gangetic heartland, and the Urdu language, to the much wider and various populations of Muslims of different classes, regions, and languages in both British India and the British-dominated princely states, and beyond that to the wider world.

[41]Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *The Mahomedan Commentary on the Holy Bible [Taba'in al-kalam fi tafsir al-Taurat wa al-Injil 'ala millat-i al-Islam]*, Part 1 (Ghazeepore, 1862), pp. 58–59.

[42]Syed Ahmed Khan Bahador, *A Series of Essays on the Life of Muhammad and Subjects Subsidiary Thereto* (London, 1870), pp. 318–319. See Avril A. Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: The Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 158–168, 195–212. What the genealogical chart lacked was the women in Sayyid Ahmad's ancestry and therefore any evidence about kinship patterns in the past. In his own and immediately subsequent generation, marriages tended to be with close relatives from his mother's family, but otherwise there is little to indicate that ancestral lineage, sayyid or something else, was a significant consideration. My best source for further research are extensive interviews that I had many years ago—1969 and 1975—with Hashim Muhammad Ali, a grandson of Sayyid Ahmad. See also Iftikhar 'Alam Khan, *Sar Sayyid, darun-i khana* (Aligarh, 2006).

[43]See David Lelyveld, 'Syed Ahmad's Problems with Women', in *Hidden Histories: Religion and Reform in South Asia*, (eds.) Syed Akbar Hyder and Manu Bhagavan (Delhi, 2018), pp. 91–107.

[44]Syed Ahmed Khan, *Strictures upon the present educational system in India* (London, 1869), reprinted in Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Educational Philosophy*, pp. 101–102. I have not found an Urdu original for this text. Malik also includes the response by Siva Prasad. See Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, pp. 107–109.

[45]'Circular from the Mahammedan [sic] Anglo-Oriental College Fund Committee, Benares, 1869', in Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Educational Philosophy*, pp. 97–99.

What Sayyid Ahmad chose to do was to set in motion a process of public deliberation, persuasion and negotiation that would develop the institutions to mobilise a wider following and address the social and religious questions raised by changing circumstances. Essential to that task, in his view, was formulating a broad, liberal understanding of Islam, something he felt himself qualified to do by virtue of both his independent reading of the revealed texts and, as a Sayyid, his privileged access to the example of the Prophet Muhammad.

Upon his return to India, Sayyid Ahmad succeeded in stimulating and organising an active public discussion of the social basis of what he hoped would be a long range and comprehensive vision for the entire Muslim population. An opinion was expressed by some of the participants in these discussions that Muslims avoided British-sponsored schools because they mixed the *sharif* with the *razil*, the respectable with the vile, that these should be kept separate, and that the poor should not receive any education at all. In response, members of Sayyid Ahmad's committee declared that such a view was contrary to Islam. Sayyid Ahmad went further by saying that the distinction was just hypocrisy because people tended to attribute high social status, *sharafat* or *rizalat*, according to wealth or poverty, rather than good manners or family background. His vision of education was that it should be available to all but portioned out according to the functional needs of the different social class (*jama'at*) as defined by occupation. Muslims, according to the committee, were descended from upper or middle class, frequently well-educated migrants from other lands, or converts from higher status Hindu communities, not the lower orders (*nichli qaumen*) that were counted among the Hindus and beyond the reach of civilisation.[46]

The school and college that emerged from these deliberations in 1875–77, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, was in many ways a reduced and compromised version of Sayyid Ahmad's greater vision, but it was a genuine attempt to create a unified community of Muslims, while accommodating a significant number of Hindus as well. In recruiting students there were mixed motives: a desire to attract students from wealthy and socially prominent families as well as relatively poor ones, many of whom required financial assistance. Residential accommodations were divided into *pakka* and *kacca* classes allotted according to cost rather than social status. Over the following years, students came from widely dispersed geographic backgrounds, but mostly from the region stretching from Lahore to Patna. In the one available survey of Muslim students by 'caste' in 1875, in response to British government guidelines, 28 out of 87 were Sayyids and all could be counted as Ashraf. This, however, appears to be the only mention of the four-part concept of Ashraf construction so familiar in the British accounts. In following years there were notable examples of prominent students and teachers and associates of Aligarh—Shibli Numani, Shaikh Abdullah, the Ali brothers, Nazir Ahmad—who did not have that sort of ancestry. Such matters rarely get mentioned. Instead it was the major goal of the college to create a sense of 'brotherhood' and a common standard of culture for students, whether Punjabi or Hindustani, Sunni or Shi'a. In Sayyid Ahmad's vigorous campaign tours to raise funds and recruit students from throughout northern India and even to Hyderabad, he exemplified

[46]Syed Ahmed Khan, *Report of the Members of the Select Committee for the Better Diffusion and Advancement of Learning Among Muhammadans of India*. (Benares, 1872) [Urdu Section], pp. 3–4, 23–24, 30–31. For further detail, see Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, pp. 120–124.

in his adaptation of Turkish dress and Delhi Urdu a new standard of *sharafat* emulated not only among Aligarh's students but by a significantly wider public.[47]

The Aligarh College developed a controversial reputation for exclusiveness that interfered with the larger project of mobilising a united sense of identity among the Muslims of India. In 1887, Aligarh students expressed their solidarity by going on strike to defend their right to beat the boarding house servants.[48] That same year, the newly-established Muhammadan Educational Congress (later Conference) debated for two days whether or not it was desirable to establish numerous small rural schools for the entire Muslim population or to concentrate on higher education under the guidance of British professors to train a future generation of leaders, who would be able to take on that more ambitious task of popular education suitable to the needs of the community. The latter position, supported by Sayyid Ahmad, failed decisively. The majority supported popular elementary education.[49]

In 1895, when the *Aligarh Institute Gazette* announced a fund-raising campaign to build a new student boarding house, 'Sadat Manzil', apparently a residence especially for Sayyids, the idea attracted some criticism as contrary to the principles of Islamic equality. In response, the journal explained that there had been no intention to separate Sayyids from other Muslims, but rather to raise funds from Sayyids, and provide scholarships for poor ones.[50] In fact, nothing came of the project.

Such conflicts and contradictions were most famously expressed in Sayyid Ahmad Khan's opposition to the newly formed Indian National Congress. Motivated by ideology and political exigency, he fell back uncharacteristically on the language of ethnic exclusiveness, denouncing the possibility that a low rank, *adna darja*, person, whatever his educational qualifications or personal abilities, could be put in a position of authority over people born into a higher social class. And despite his often-expressed admiration for the achievements of Bengali intellectuals, he now summoned up the worst colonial stereotypes to mock their alleged lack of physical strength and personal courage.[51]

One solution that Sayyid Ahmad tried out to bridge the gap created by claims of Muslim exclusivity was to see parity with the supposedly 'Aryan' Hindu identity that emerged in nineteenth-century European 'scientific' racism.

> The Aryan communities (*qaumen*) among the Hindus are not indigenous (*rahne wali*) to India. They came from other countries as conquerors and settled here. Muslims came in the same way, and many of them have Aryan blood. . . . They have eaten crops from the same soil, drunk water from the same rivers, breathed the same air. That makes Muslims too into Hindus, that is residents of India (Hindustan).[52]

[47]Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, pp. 166–185, 253–299.

[48]*Ibid*., pp. 265–269.

[49]*Muhammadan Aijukaishanal Kangras ka dusra salana jalsa* (Lucknow, 1887), pp. 67–120. (See in this special issue the article by Eve Tignol, which interprets this debate somewhat differently).

[50]*Aligarh Institute Gazette*, 25 January 1895, pp. 93–94; 8 November 1895, p. 1081.

[51]Sayyid Ahmad Khan, *Mukammal Majmu'ah Lekchars Wa Ispichiz* (Lahore, 1900), pp. 345–360. See Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, pp. 304–308.

[52]'*Hindu aur Musalmanon men irtibat*' [undated] in *Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid,* Vol. 15, p. 41. See Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (Berkeley, 1997); Romila Thapar, *The Aryan: Recasting Constructs* (Gurgaon, 2011).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186320000024 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Of course, this succeeded in excluding most of the population of India, both Hindu and Muslim, and buying into the notion that India was properly ruled by a succession of 'foreigners': Hindu, Muslim and now British. Sayyid Ahmad appears to have assumed that all Muslims, if not actually descended from supposed outsiders, could be considered as if they were. He appears to have ignored the possibility that many, if not most, might be construed as other than Ashraf.

The Exemplary Sayyid

"Islam doesn't ask anyone if he is a Turk or a Tajik, a resident of Africa or Arabia, China proper or greater China [*cin o macin*], whether he was born in Punjab or Hindustan, whether his colour is black or white. Those who accept the creed of the Prophet are a single *qaum*".[53] As Faisal Devji has shown, Sayyid Ahmad and his colleagues struggled with the problem of identifying who the Muslims were and how universal or particular their loyalties might be. At times, as in his opposition to the Indian National Congress, Sayyid Ahmad took pains to establish his unity with the upper classes, Hindu and Muslim, of his region, Hindustan proper.[54] At other times, he bitterly denounced the false pride of Sayyids who think their only merit is in their pedigree, the ignorant, *jahil sharif*, the offspring of supposedly aristocratic families—*nawabzad* and *'amirzad*, who live their lives in dissipation and have no interest in education or social service.[55] And he was quite capable of including supposedly non-Ashraf Muslims in his sympathies, as in this description of Mewati Muslims:

> The Qazi performed the marriage and the Brahmin led the bride around the fire . . . There was nothing on the basis of which they could call themselves Muslims, except their faith in God and his Messenger. But I assure you, I consider their faith to be much more solid than my own faith (why should I mention somebody else's).[56]

According to Devji, such statements were largely "instrumental", efforts of a Muslim professional and official "gentry" "to advance their position in the world" within the framework of British colonial domination, by displacing the wealthy, supposedly aristocratic landholders and attempting "to coerce lower-standing Muslims into a community led by them" and "dominated by the shurafa as a united entity".[57] "This was done," he goes on, "precisely by abstracting the terms Sayyid and Shaykh from the ethnic *qaum*s upon which they had been predicated", and combining them with the ethnic categories Mughal and Pathan.[58] Another, more generous interpretation of Sayyid Ahmad's efforts is to see

[53]'*Qaumi itifaq*', in *Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid*, Vol. 5, p. 167. Undated but similar to a speech in Ludhiana in 1884 quoted in Faisal Devji, 'A Shadow Nation: The Making of Muslim India', in *Beyond Sovereignty*, (eds.) Kevin Grant, Philippa Levine and Frank Trentmann (London, 2007), p. 127.

[54]Devji, 'A Shadow Nation', p. 133. See United Indian Patriotic Association, *Showing the seditious character of the Indian national congress and the opinions held by eminent natives of India who are opposed to the movement (*Allahabad, 1888), available at https://books.google.com/books/about/Showing_the_Seditious_Character_of_the_I.html?id=veO1AAAAIAAJ (accessed June 2019).

[55]'*Hindustan ke mu'azziz khandan*' [1876], in *Maqalat-i Sar Sayyid,* Vol. 5, pp. 87–96.

[56]Lecture on Islam, Lahore, 1884, translated by Christian W. Troll, in his *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a reinterpretation of Muslim theology* (New Delhi, 1978), p. 310.

[57]Devji, 'A Shadow Nation', pp. 129–130.

[58]*Ibid.*, p. 130, but with no source to indicate that Sayyid Ahmad or his colleagues actually used this four-part construction.

them as a way of asserting a universal ideal, rooted in the founding inspiration of Islam, and a programme designed ultimately to lead a wider population to that ideal. There were competing claims to leadership, Devji notes, including *'ulama* and merchant communities on the western coast, but both in response to the colonial system and to the Aligarh example, they used much of the same language that constructed Muslims in the genealogical metaphor of a *qaum*, displacing the great diversity of other ways of being Muslim, including the universal appeal to the worldwide community of believers, the *ummah*, that in fact Sayyid Ahmad sometimes expressed.[59]

Also playing the 'instrumental' game, of course were the British rulers of India who saw in Sayyid Ahmad a 'good Muslim' who could lead the larger population of Muslims in India into compliance with colonial authority. The Aligarh College benefited from British financial aid, both official and private, Sayyid Ahmad's son became the first Muslim High Court Judge, Sayyid Ahmad became 'Sir Syed', and he was treated with respect as 'A Descendant of the Prophet'.[60] When the British government sent his grandson to Oxford in 1906, it was to cultivate him as the future leader of India's Muslims.[61]

If Sayyid Ahmad was 'abstracting the term Sayyid', it was an expression of his own subjectivity and also a personal claim to a position of exemplary leadership to be followed in the next generation by the students of the Aligarh College. Even his critics and opponents, even if they were themselves Sayyids, invariably referred to him as *Sayyid sahib* or in the last ten years of his life and ever after, by the name he acquired with his knighthood. There may have been, according to British census figures, a million and a half Sayyids in British India, but only one 'Sir Syed'. Aside perhaps from the ill-fated Sadat Manzil, there was no attempt to organise Sayyids as a united ethnic category. Instead Sayyid Ahmad sought to use his individual persona modelled on the Prophet to unite Muslims as a *qaum*.

> My *dādā* [paternal grandfather], the pride of the world's beings, Muhammad Mustafa (may peace be upon him), had in his last moments the utterance "my *ummat*, my *ummat*" on his blessed lips. Although without doubt it gives me great pride that I am from the generations of the Prophet, I also belong to that *ummat*. My wish is this, that in my last moments the utterance on my lips should be "my *qaum*, my *qaum*".[62]

As Devji points out, his reach was limited, and it was left to future generations to turn such efforts into a project of political mobilisation and representation. But in Sayyid Ahmad's own terms, the construction of an aggregate Muslim community in India had meaning within the framework of an imperial formation, not a nation state or a democratic polity. The concepts

[59]Faisal Devji, 'Qawm', in *Key Concepts in Modern Indian Studies*, (eds.) Gita Dharampal, Monika Kirloskar-Steinbach, Rachel Dwyer and Jahnavi Phalkey (New Delhi, 2015), pp. 217–219.

[60]Title of an article by the Aligarh principal, Theodore Morison, in *The National Review* (London) 31, 184 (June 1898), pp. 578–586.

[61]'Allowance of £300 a year to Mr. Saiyid Ross Masood whilst at English University', Judicial and Public [J&P] 3164 – 1906, India Office Records, British Library.

[62]Quoted and translated in Devji, 'A Shadow Nation', p. 129. I have made some small changes in Devji's translation. The original source is a speech that Sayyid Ahmad gave to the Anjuman Islamiya in Rai Bareilly in 1883, reprinted in Muhammad Ismai'il Panipati (ed.), *Khutbat-i Sar Sayyid*, Vol. 1 (Lahore, 1972), p. 365.

and institutions that he established were ways for others in later times to figure out what being a Muslim might mean in a changing world.

David Lelyveld
William Paterson University
dl1490@gmail.com

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186320000024 Published online by Cambridge University Press