Sayyid Ahmad Khan

David Lelyveld

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Summary and Keywords

The lifetime of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (“Sir Syed”) (1817–1898) spans profound transformations introduced to India and the wider world by the twin forces industrial capitalism and British imperialism. Sayyid Ahmad’s intellectual responses to a changing world and his leadership in the establishment of educational institutions, voluntary associations, and a broad public sphere all played a significant role in defining what it means to be Muslim, especially in India and what would become Pakistan but also in wider cosmopolitan and global networks.

The development, compromises, and contradictions of Sayyid Ahmad’s ideas and projects over time track the challenges he faced. If these efforts pointed the way to some sort of modernity, it was rooted in the Indo-Persian and Islamic formation of his early years and developed by selectively adopting bits and pieces of European ideologies, technologies, practices, and organizational arrangements. He has been claimed or condemned by advocates and opponents of a wide range of ideological and political tendencies under circumstances that he would barely have recognized in his own time: nationalism, democracy, women’s equality, and religious and literary modernism. At different points in his career one may find mysticism, scriptural literalism, and daring rationalism with respect to religious texts; charters for Muslim “separatism” and calls for Hindu-Muslim unity; demands for autonomy and political representation and opposition to it; bold critiques of British rulers; and proclamations of “loyalty” to the colonial state. A major figure in the advancement of the Urdu language, he later argued for the superiority of English, of which he himself had little, for the purposes of education and administration. Most of all, he helped establish an intellectual and institutional framework for contemporaries and future generations to debate and pursue collective goals based on religion, language, social status, or class interest.

Keywords: Mughal, Muslim, qaum, Urdu, Aligarh, Indo-Persian, education, British India, naicarī

From Mughal Sovereignty to British Dominance, 1817–1857

Although the East India Company had already seized control of much of India, it was still possible to imagine, at least in Delhi, where Sayyid Ahmad was born in 1817, that Mughal sovereignty prevailed symbolically over the practical administrative and military agency of the British (see figure 1). If effective power had long ago drifted away from the Red Fort, the culture associated with Mughal rule was alive and well, newly resplendent in the flourishing of Urdu poetry and the intellectual vitality of Muslim thinkers. In the words of Ghalib, the leading poet of the age, “it was as if the captive bird still gathered twigs for its nest.”[1]

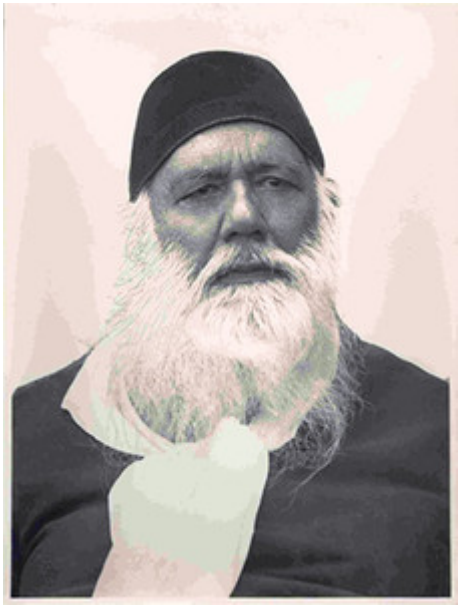

Figure 1. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, 1891. From a group photograph by Lala Deen Dayal, Hyderabad, 1891. Property of David Lelyveld.

Family and Education[2]

With a patrilineal genealogy as a Sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, Sayyid Ahmad could claim a certain if hardly uncommon sanctity. His lineage was displayed from his earliest publications to the inscription over his grave. An ancestor had migrated from Herat to India in the late 17th century and participated in Aurangzeb’s military campaigns in southern India, and his father had been a personal friend of the second-to-last Mughal ruler, Akbar II, in the early 19th century, but there is little evidence in his family background on his father’s side of any special prominence in the Mughal ruling class. As a boy, Sayyid Ahmad participated in court ceremonies and had access to some of the more restricted areas of the Red Fort, and he used this familiarity to good purpose in his later literary projects. Sayyid Ahmad’s father was also a close disciple of Shah Ghulam

`Ali, *shaikh* of the influential Naqshbandi Mujaddidi Sufi circle, a spiritual connection that the son honored throughout his life.

It was his mother's family, however, that was most significant in Sayyid Ahmad's upbringing. Throughout his life he took pains to assert his close connection to his maternal grandfather, Khwaja Fariduddin Ahmad (1747–1828), and late in life he wrote a short biography of Khwaja Farid as a self-made man of impressive achievements.[3] The book included an emotionally charged account of Khwaja Farid's daughter and Sayyid Ahmad's mother. Khwaja Farid's paternal grandfather, though also of a prestigious religious lineage, had come from Kashmir to Delhi as a merchant of silks and handicrafts in the 18th century, a period of sharp decline for both Delhi and the Mughals. Khwaja Farid himself left Delhi for Lucknow sometime in the late 18th century to study mathematics with the celebrated Allama Tafazzul Husain Khan, who among other things is said to have translated Isaac Newton's *Principia* into Persian. From Lucknow, Khwaja Farid had gone on to Calcutta, held various positions under the East India Company that included foreign travel and a lucrative post as tahsildar in Bundelkhand. When he returned to Delhi in 1814 after long absences, he was unknown in Mughal court circles but well recommended by influential British associates. His appointment as "Ameen of the Household," or *vazīr*, the position he held when Sayyid Ahmad was born, was negotiated with British approval, but he left it soon afterward for a life of study and contemplation.[4]

Sayyid Ahmad was raised in the sprawling household of his maternal grandfather's, not his father's, extended family and the attached home of his mother, both of whom oversaw his early education in Qur`an, Arabic, and Persian texts. His maternal uncle instructed him in mathematics and astronomical instruments, and he also studied traditional Islamic medical texts. But much of his early life was taken up with the pleasures of archery, swimming, and attending gatherings of poetry, music, and dance. In 1838, at the age of twenty-one, Sayyid Ahmad began a career in the East India Company administration, first in Delhi, then in Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, and other localities, returning to Delhi in 1846 as a munsif, a lower court judge. It was only then that he took up more advanced studies in religious texts with some of the leading scholars in the tradition of the great 18th-century theologian, Shah Wali Ullah. On this basis he was able to claim an *isnād*, a pedagogical pedigree like his biological one, reaching back to the Prophet Muhammad.[5]

Writing and Printing

Sayyid Ahmad's entry into East India Company service coincided with the adoption of Urdu in place of Persian as the official language, alongside English, of administration and the courts of northern India and the rise of lithographic printing, which made it possible to supplement and carry forward the manuscript traditions that till then had dominated the production of Arabic, Persian, and Urdu texts.[6] In response to this stimulus or opportunity, Sayyid Ahmad took up an array of writing and publishing projects, sometimes at the behest of British patrons, sometimes as independent efforts. He wrote administrative handbooks and Urdu-language instructional material as well as pamphlets on mathemati-

cal, scientific, and religious themes. He also shared with his elder brother the publishing of one of India's first Urdu newspapers.[7]

Among his early works was an Urdu translation of his grandfather's Persian treatise on the proportional compass and an illustrated text on mechanics. In 1845 he set out to prove on the basis of principles of motion, if not quite Newtonian ones, that the sun revolves around the earth. What is interesting about this essay is that it makes practically no reference to God or scripture.[8] From his early years in Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, Sayyid Ahmad was drawn into religious controversies among Muslims as well as the aggressive efforts of Christian missionaries and their disputations with Muslim scholars.[9] In 1852, he published a Persian treatise that responded to the condemnation by Muslim reformists of certain Sufi practices. Love, he declared, is a condition of receiving divine inspiration, and one can cultivate the love of God by *taṣawwur-e shaikh*, silent meditation visualizing one's spiritual guide.[10]

Most of all, Sayyid Ahmad focused his attention in his early writings on the Indo-Islamic past, particularly centered on the Mughal dynasty and the city of Delhi. His first publication, *Jām-e Jam* (the cup of Jamshed, the magical goblet that confers ruling insight and power), 1840, was a lithographed chart of the rulers of Delhi from Timur to Bahadur Shah II.[11] Written in Persian, the publication was prepared for Robert N. C. Hamilton, Sayyid Ahmad's supervisor and mentor. It starts with a detailed account of the author's own Sayyid lineage as well as the distinguished career of his maternal grandfather. The work goes on to provide information about the chronological sequence of forty-three Timurid rulers under such headings as father's name, mother's name, *qaum* (ethnicity—mostly Chaghtai), various relevant dates (in the Hijri calendar), place of burial, and a brief comment. It notes that though the *'amaldārī*, that is, practical dominance, was now in the hands of the "company," the throne was still occupied by its present Mughal incumbent.[12]

The rulers of Delhi continued to occupy Sayyid Ahmad's attention. Following the example of his elder brother, he made a manuscript copy of Jahangir's memoirs based on a collation of ten manuscripts in library of Bahadur Shah II and commissioned by a British official.[13] Other scholarly editions of Indo-Persian historical classics followed: the *Ā'īn-e Akbarī* and the *Tarīk̲h̲-e-Firoz Shāhī*.[14] But the most substantial project of his early life was the production of a historical account and guide to Delhi, *Āṯār al-ṣanādīd* (Traces of the heroes), which appeared in two substantially different versions, first in 1847, then in 1854. The first edition was richly illustrated with lithographic prints of the major buildings of Delhi and vicinity, lengthy extracts of Persian poetry, and a mixture of registers in Persian and Urdu. It was in many respects a collaborative process, much of it probably written by a more senior literary figure, but also contained charming passages in what was to become Sayyid Ahmad's literary style, describing the pleasures and attractions of the living city as well as the ruination of cities past. The title, from a 16th-century poem by 'Urfi Shirazi, captured the mixed message of the book, a celebration as well as a warning:

az naqsh o nigār-e dar o diwār-e shikasta

āṯār padīd ast ṣanādīd-e `ajām rā

(The marks and decorations of ruined gates and walls/ reveal traces of the princes of Iran).[15]

Responding to the suggestions and criticisms of several British officials, duly acknowledged, the second version of *Āṯār al-ṣanādīd* was a substantially different book, stripped of the illustrations, most of the poetry, as well as the personal, informal voice of the author. Delhi is presented as a thing of the past, devoid of its contemporary life. Instead the second version of the book was arranged according to chronology, with dates carefully noted according to Christian, Islamic, and where relevant Hindu calendars. In place of the numerous illustrations that pervaded the first version, this one ends with replications of inscriptions in various languages and scripts, from the Sanskrit of the Iron Pillar to Arabic ones on mosques and tombs. The book presents a table of the rulers of Delhi, expanding on the earlier *Jām-e Jam*, this time starting with Yudishtara from the *Mahabharata*, and leading all the way to Queen Victoria, who appears on the chart to supersede Bahadur Shah, though he too is listed and the book was actually printed at the Red Fort. Both monarchs assumed their thrones in the same year, 1837.[16]

Sayyid Ahmad and the 1857 Rebellion

Early in 1855, soon after the publication of the second version of *Āṯār al-ṣanādīd*, Sayyid Ahmad accepted a promotion to *sadr amīn*, a higher-level judge, in the fairly rural and remote town of Bijnor north-east of Delhi. For over two years in that quiet setting, he supplemented his judicial duties by working on his comprehensive, not-quite-complete, illustrated edition of the *Ā'īn-e Akbarī* and gathering information for a book about the newly formed Bijnor District. Then in the hot, dry month of May, in the midst of the Ramadan fast, word reached Bijnor of a mutiny among the Indian soldiers based in nearby Mirat (Meerut). According to Sayyid Ahmad's later account, the challenge to established authority set off a spate of robberies and raids in the surrounding countryside, with different groups taking the opportunity to settle old scores. In the following weeks the various Rajput and Pathan magnates of the district began to mobilize their forces. "Our greatest anxiety was for the English officials and memsahibs. . . . A great flame of love arose in our hearts and . . . we resolved [to] sacrifice ourselves like moths [to protect them]." When a large contingent of well-armed Pathans appeared in the town, Sayyid Ahmad took it on himself to negotiate with the Nawab of Najibabad for safe passage across the Ganges for the British personnel and their families.[17]

After the departure of the British, the conflicts in Sayyid Ahmad's account are increasingly glossed as Muslim versus Hindu rather than caste or location. People were killed simply for being Hindu or Muslim. Sayyid Ahmad himself was allied with and protected by the Hindu Rajput zamindars and thus labeled an enemy of the Muslims. The conclusion he drew from this was that communal harmony relied on strong external authority, the kind of authority that only the British could provide. It used to be said, Sayyid Ahmad wrote, that the people are God's, the country is the *badshah*'s, and rule is the Company

Bahadur's: *khalq khudā kī, mulk bādshāh kā*, *hukm kampanī bahā durkā*. Until 1857, he may have been content with that formula. By the end of the rebellion, he had concluded that *mulk mālika viktorya shāh-e landan kā*, the land was Queen Victoria's. If his ideas about loyalty and betrayal till that time were with respect to particular persons, this amounted to a claim for the legitimate power of a unified state.

It was in the spirit of a more broad-ranging politics that he wrote his next important work, *An Essay on the Causes of the Indian Revolt*.[18] Sayyid Ahmad demonstrates a confident knowledge of Mughal and British administrative history and offers a remarkably hard-hitting indictment of the ways in which British rule had failed to live up to the culture and traditions of the earlier Mughal rulers. Denying any single cause, he nevertheless complained that the British had failed to communicate with the larger public and pursued policies that were bound to offend Indian sensibilities, particularly among higher-status sections of the population, most of all Muslims. Aggressive Christian missionary activity, including establishment of schools, and interference in family law with respect to women and inheritance caused, he said, widespread offense. Taxation policies that overturned previous criteria (tax on land rather than on the actual harvest), restricted access to higher positions in government, and most of all insensitivity and even disdain in their interactions with Indians, all served to undermine British authority. In this book and a subsequent set of pamphlets, Sayyid Ahmad took pains to absolve Muslims in particular from responsibility for the uprising. Written just after the rebellion and addressed to the British rulers, the work displayed extraordinary courage at a time when Indians, particularly Muslims, were subject to vicious punishment for "disloyalty." The Urdu original, however, was not available to an Indian public until after Sayyid Ahmad's death, when it was reproduced as an appendix to Altaf Husain Hali's biography.[19]

In Search of Reconciliation and Emulation, 1860–1870

When Sayyid Ahmad returned to Delhi, he discovered a scene of devastation. Close associates, including his uncle, had been shot by British soldiers and his mother was on the brink of starvation. The rest of his family, his wife and three children, had escaped, and he was able to bring them all to safety in Moradabad, where he had resumed his judicial and other administrative responsibilities, especially famine relief. His younger son, Sayyid Mahmud, by then ten years old, later recalled being summoned by his father and informed that from then on he must be loyal to the British queen and, what is more, he must learn English.[20]

Christianity and Science

At about this time, Sayyid Ahmad drew on the reward money he had received for rescuing the British party in Bijnor to purchase a printing press that used moveable type rather than lithography.[21] He purchased print fonts not only for Urdu but also for Arabic, English, and Hebrew so that he could produce a multilingual text, a Muslim commentary on

the Bible. He also employed a British assistant to translate from English and a Jewish tutor to interpret passages in the Torah, which he proposed to study in light of both Islamic thought and contemporary European scholarship.[22] His concern here was to establish a claim that the Bible, despite questions about the accuracy of its textual transmission, is fundamentally consistent with the Qur`an, which is by definition the true and eternal word of God: "whatever has been revealed by God to his prophets is all true."[23] By 1863, however, Sayyid Ahmad began to alter his approach by applying the English word "nature" as a criterion for interpreting the Book of Genesis and reading scripture, at least in part, as allegorical (*tamṣīli*) and figurative (*tashbīh*, *miṣāl*) rather than factual. Since the purpose of divine revelation, he says, was "to regulate our morals" (*tahẕīb-e aḵẖlāq*), the message had to be "available to all mankind in proportion to their capacities" and remain valid and understandable "in every stage of the gradual progress of learning and science."[24] But, he said, there was really no contradiction. "We acknowledge that Nature [*naicar*] is the Work of God, and Revelation [*waḥi*] is his Word [*kalām*]; that no discrepancy should ever occur between them for asmuch [sic] as both proceed from the same Source."[25]

Turning then to the "progress of learning and science," Sayyid Ahmad temporarily put aside his religious studies and turned his attention to a new kind of public activism. Late in 1863, he travelled to Calcutta to address a newly founded Mohammadan Literary Society. Speaking in Persian, he described the destruction of the great centers of learning and the circumstances of those who used to be the leaders of society. What is required now is a new energy, he said, motivated by *ḥubb-e qaumī*, the love of one's community. Here he used the word *qaum* in a new way—not Pathan, Chaghtai, or German like the rulers of Delhi—but *ham kaishān* and *ham kishwarān*, solidarities based on belief and place. Although speaking to a Muslim group, there is only passing reference explicitly to Muslims, whereas place is defined as the region from the Bay of Bengal to Sindh.[26]

The Calcutta lecture and a pamphlet Sayyid Ahmad published at the same time called for a concerted effort to translate contemporary knowledge from English to Urdu, on the assumption that works in other European languages were likely to be available in English. The organization for pursuing this project had its first meeting in early January, 1864, in Ghazipur, where Sayyid Ahmad was then posted. The following year it shifted to Aligarh, when Sayyid Ahmad was transferred there. Called the Scientific Society, it was funded by subscriptions and donations from British, Hindu, and Muslim supporters, mostly government officials. It employed one translator for English and a "maulvi" for Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. With an elaborate structure of by-laws and publication of its proceedings, the society was Sayyid Ahmad's first venture as an institution builder. Sayyid Ahmad moved his printing press to a new "Institute" building at Aligarh, where there were meetings, lectures, and a demonstration garden. Unfortunately it only managed to publish about fifteen books, mostly history. It deliberately avoided religious books.[27]

The most important production of the Scientific Society was its weekly, later bi-weekly, journal, started in 1866 as the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, or in Urdu, *Aḵẖbār-e Scientific Society*. With a two-column, partially bilingual format, it closely resembled the layout of

the official government gazette. Despite a small circulation, numbering in the hundreds, the journal appears to have been influential in stimulating debate and spreading information about a wide range of topics. Sayyid Ahmad used the journal for a variety of issues, including representation of Indian concerns to the British Parliament, the establishment of an Urdu-medium university, promotion of village schools, and the shortcomings of passenger facilities on the railways. It championed the cause of Urdu in response to the early challenges of those who wanted Hindi or at least the *nā gari* script to supersede it, but there was little in the way of religious discussion or expressions of Muslim concerns. Sayyid Ahmad himself contributed frequent essays and the texts of lectures that covered a wide range of topics and exemplified a new, idiosyncratic style of Urdu prose. Along with these articles there were short bulletins of news received by telegraph, government notices, and commercial advertisements.[28]

Pilgrimage to England

Probably the most influential, perhaps notorious, articles that appeared in the journal were Sayyid Ahmad's account of his journey to England in 1869. When Sayyid Ahmad set off on a journey to England in 1869, one of his projects was to produce a book about what he would see and experience. The plan was to send in articles to the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, then revise them, adding suitable illustrations, all by way of inspiring the Urdu reading public to learn the secrets of Britain's worldly success. His younger son, Sayyid Mahmud, had won a government scholarship that would allow him to study at Cambridge and qualify as a barrister. The account of the voyage out, written as a diary, is filled with high spirits and close observation. He describes with pleasure the friendly and helpful people he interacts with, Indian and British, first in Bombay then aboard the ship, and gives detailed accounts of the speed of the ship, the technology of navigation, bathing and toilet arrangements, as well as ship board games. He took particular note of the prevalence of Urdu (as opposed to Hindi). In Aden and Egypt, Sayyid Ahmad was able to use his knowledge of Arabic, but his command of English by his own account was rudimentary.

It was on this journey that Sayyid Ahmad took steps to adapt to European lifestyle, starting with the way he dressed. The contemporary Ottoman style of a well-tailored, high-buttoned frock coat, European trousers and shoes, plus a red fez served as a good compromise and became the mark of a modern Muslim. European table manners made it possible for him to share meals with his European fellow passengers. Critics back in India noticed and condemned his insistence that it was permissible for a Muslim to eat chicken slaughtered by Christians. By the time he had been in England for half a year, his correspondence had turned into a fiercely emphatic affirmation of British cultural superiority. The British were justified, he said, in treating Indians with contempt. In comparison to an Englishman a person at any level of Hindustani society could be considered a *maili kuchaili vaḥshi jānvar* (dirty, ragged, wild animal).[29]

At the same time and in the spirit of his earlier analysis of the 1857 Rebellion, Sayyid Ahmad was aggressively critical of some influential British authorities and policies with respect to education and hostility to Muslims. In a pamphlet published in London soon after his arrival, he condemned government-run English-medium schools for undermining the language and intellectual traditions of India and preparing students for jobs as ticket collectors on the railways and post-office clerks.[30] He also responded to newspaper articles, later compiled into a book, by W. W. Hunter, an influential British official in India, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen?* In his response, published first in a British Indian newspaper as well as the *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, Sayyid Ahmad rebutted the idea that Islam was incompatible with British rule and that English education was the best way to uproot the religious commitments of India's Muslims.[31]

Alongside this public expression of alarm and disillusionment, Sayyid Ahmad was writing anguished personal letters to his friend, Sayyid Mahdi `Ali, later known as Nawab Muhsin ul-Mulk.[32] These letters document Sayyid Ahmad's preoccupations during his journey abroad: an anxious defense of the historical origins and ethical principles of Islam in response to the Islamophobic writings of Sir William Muir, the lieutenant-governor of the North-Western Provinces, who not only was the chief executive of the government in which Sayyid Ahmad served but also the main patron of his journey and his son's scholarship.[33] While visiting schools and factories and socializing with more- or less-prominent British counterparts, Sayyid Ahmad devoted most of his time to writing, with assistance from his English-knowing son and others, an uncharacteristically prolix apology for Islam, published in English and Urdu and aimed both at a British public and also at the relatively few English-educated Muslims, whose faith may have been challenged.

Aligarh: The College and the Movement

While in England, Sayyid Ahmad Khan conceived of a plan for Muslims in India to take the task into their own hands of establishing and running an educational institution and an intellectual movement based on contemporary knowledge. He called on Sayyid Mahdi `Ali to help organize an association to promote these goals by establishing a school and starting a new journal to be devoted to the religious and practical betterment of Indian Muslims. The journal was to be called by the traditional name *Tahẕīb ul-aḵẖlāq* (the purification of morals) or, in English, the *Mohammedan Social Reformer*.[34]

The Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College

The college that Sayyid Ahmad and his colleagues established differed radically from his earliest intentions and in many ways turned out to be, at least for him, a disappointment. During his time in England, he had imagined a whole system of education reaching across all sections of Indian Muslims and delivering scientific knowledge and technological skills. He also wanted the education of Muslims to be independent of British government control, though open to private British and other non-Muslim benefactors. The college

that he wanted would have an enlightened religious foundation, free of sectarian conflict, respectful of both Sunni and Shi`a traditions. And though students would learn English, there would be an Urdu-medium “oriental” track, as indicated in the college’s name. Sayyid Mahmud elaborated these goals in a scheme that emulated the latest reforms at Cambridge University, and like Cambridge, the college would be primarily residential.[35]

The first thing that had to go was Sayyid Ahmad’s own religious ideas, especially the notion that it was possible to interpret religious scripture in the light of contemporary science. Almost from the outset, Sayyid Ahmad’s personal association with the project invited fierce opposition from influential Muslims who opposed his *naicari* (naturist) approach to God and his creation. In rules adopted for religious instruction, Sayyid Ahmad and his writings were explicitly excluded. What Sayyid Ahmad could do was help recruit respected religious scholars who stood at some distance from his own more radical ideas, to teach Arabic and Persian.[36] Much as he was devoted to the success of the college at Aligarh, he considered its education inferior to the achievements of Islamic scholarship of earlier times. For the present day, however, he came to the conclusion that Urdu was ultimately too poetic to develop the precision of contemporary European knowledge.[37]

Perhaps Sayyid Ahmad’s most heartfelt motive for establishing the college at Aligarh was his belief that only Indians could properly run their own educational institutions with the necessary cultural and religious sensitivity. He wanted the college to be autonomous. Very soon, however, he and his colleagues were persuaded that they needed British government funding to supply a significant portion of the college’s expenses. This was supplemented by substantial assistance from so-called native states like Hyderabad, Bhopal, and Rampur, which were impelled or constrained by British official control. British certification was believed to be necessary to recruit students, most of whom hoped for careers in government or law. That meant setting the curriculum to prepare for examinations administered by the provincial educational authorities for the lower school and the Calcutta and later Allahabad Universities. Aligarh’s participation in the British educational system stood in contrast to the madrasa at Deoband, founded in 1867, which devoted itself entirely to Islamic studies and retained its independence.[38] Sayyid Ahmad also came to rely increasingly on recruiting British faculty, particularly from Cambridge, to teach and in his last years to essentially run the college. In 1889, this commitment to retaining and elevating the British faculty provoked a serious split among Aligarh’s co-founders, many of whom seceded from the college.[39]

But if the Aligarh College did not live up to Sayyid Ahmad’s hopes, he remained committed to its success. The college was designed to promote an ethic of self-confidence, solidarity, and civic service, and to raise up a new generation of leaders in the far-flung Muslim community of India. Students were drawn largely from similar backgrounds, the sons of literate, Urdu-knowing professional fathers, now preparing for newly required English-language skills, but they were geographically dispersed and had diverse ethnic and sectarian backgrounds.[40] The college had a significant number of Hindu students, a few

large landholders, but it was not open to artisan or peasant classes, and not, during Sayyid Ahmad's lifetime, to women.[41]

It was Sayyid Ahmad who was largely responsible for the design and construction of the campus and its buildings, for the hiring and firing of faculty, for managing and raising funds, and for the general supervision of most aspects of college life. If he didn't interfere with the curriculum, he made his presence known in extra-curricular activities and ceremonial occasions. He attended and sometimes participated in the college debating society, and he was the ultimate authority in matters of student discipline. Sayyid Ahmad maintained a wide correspondence and toured the towns and cities of northern India making speeches at sizable public gatherings, fund raising and recruiting students. For many of the students, as for the wider public, during his own lifetime and well into the future, the Aligarh College (and in 1920, twenty-two years after his death, the Aligarh Muslim University) looked to Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as its presiding genius.

Intellectual and Literary Achievement

In the *Aligarh Institute Gazette and Tahẕīb ul-aḵẖlāq*, the journal that started publication upon Sayyid Ahmad's return from England in December 1870, and in many other publications, usually printed on his own press, Sayyid Ahmad's prodigious literary output covered a wide range of topics and inspired others to write along the same lines or in contrasting ways. Sayyid Ahmad himself relied on translators, including his British-educated son, to acquaint him with the form and content of English writing. Some of his essays were based on older English examples of the sort Indian students were studying in school.[42] English made its influence felt in his free use of English words and even in some of his sentence structure. Along with his essays, he became famous as an orator and set an example for the numerous public meetings that became part of the life of much of India in the late 19th century. Some of his writing was humorous and some was imaginatively lyrical, but most of all it was presented in the form of logical argument for a particular cause. A good example of Sayyid Ahmad's clarity and moral seriousness is his essay, published as a pamphlet, in condemnation of slavery.[43]

After his retirement in 1877, he devoted much of his time to religious studies, especially his commentary on the Qur`an. Printed on his press with Arabic on the left, an Urdu translation on the right, and commentary on the bottom, Sayyid Ahmad advanced his principles for reading scripture in the light of contemporary knowledge as well as the influence of the great Islamic thinkers of the past. His commentary on Sura Yusuf, for example, relies on "physiology" and "psychology," how the brain and the nervous system process perceptions into images and memories. He moves on to selective quotations (in Arabic with Urdu translations) from Ibn Sina, Al-Razi, and Shah Waliullah, all in support of his general proposition that whatever one dreams must be based on prior experience. Following Shah Waliullah, he argues that some people are particularly perceptive and able to make more of their dreams. If Hazrat Yusuf (Joseph in the Old Testament) was

able to predict famine and plenty, it was because he understood the nature of Egyptian agriculture and the flood patterns of the Nile River.[44]

Sayyid Ahmad's enterprises in the form of publications and public gatherings drew in a significant number of followers, antagonists, and participants in ongoing debates on religious, literary, social, and political issues. Mohsin ul-Mulk, a close friend and benefactor of the college, engaged in intensive, if friendly debates with Sayyid Ahmad on religious issues. Altaf Husain Hali, Sayyid Ahmad's biographer, was inspired to take up the cause of "natural poetry," the overthrow of ghazal aesthetics and the call to a new historical consciousness among Muslims.[45] Shibli Numani, who taught Persian and Arabic at the college, benefitted from Sayyid Ahmad's support and example even while he was a severe critic of his religious ideas. Nazir Ahmad, another critic of Sayyid Ahmad's religious ideas, participated by writing novels and delivering speeches closely associated with the Aligarh intellectual milieu. From farther afield, there were journals and other publications devoted to denouncing Sayyid Ahmad, even to the extent of declaring him a heretic, but by their very activity they participated in the public sphere that he had done so much to galvanize.[46]

Muslim Politics

From his response to the 1857 Rebellion, Sayyid Ahmad called for active Indian participation in government as well as the maintenance of autonomous sectors of Indian-run institutions. His writings and speeches, his journals and organizations, were all means to mobilize an active public life that would give Indians a voice in the exercise of power. Who these Indians would be varied over time, but his most important efforts were on behalf of a relatively privileged minority of people literate in Urdu and usually Muslim, reaching across northern India from Patna to Lahore, but also connected to Hyderabad, Bombay, and Calcutta. In the 1860s, his organizational efforts, such as the Scientific Society and the short-lived British Indian Association, were largely regional and included significant Hindu representation. Frequently critical of specific British official policies and practices, Sayyid Ahmad had allies as well as opponents within the British ruling establishment.

After Sayyid Ahmad returned to India in 1870 his activities focused on an idea of the Muslims of India as a *qaum*, a word that used to mark ethnic identity but now came to mean something like a national community. He claimed for this community the prestige of foreign origins and a history of past rulership that entitled it to be represented beyond the population statistics that the British census had compiled. Drawing on British social analysis, he argued that the upper castes among Hindus were also foreign and that lower classes in general were not prepared for political participation. In this respect, his ideas were not much different from dominant British attitudes with respect to their own society. The experience of 1857 and the subsequent rise of the Hindi-Urdu dispute, anti–cow slaughter agitation, and other assertions of social conflict glossed as Hindu versus Muslim convinced Sayyid Ahmad that India could only be held together by a superior external force.

When the Indian National Congress was first convened in 1885, its leaders expected Sayyid Ahmad to join the cause. He had long ago called for Indian representation in the governing councils of India and access to the highest levels of the civil service. Despite his linguistic limitations, he had himself served on the viceregal council in the late 1870s. He vigorously supported the Ilbert Bill that would give Indian judges power over European defendants, and his son, Sayyid Mahmud, had reached the high position of judge on the Allahabad High Court.

His decision, late in 1887, to oppose the Congress was influenced by a hostility to anything like popular democracy, though it could hardly be said that this was what the Congress was calling for. If there were to be elected representation, Muslims would inevitably come out as a minority in most of India and in India as a whole. Furthermore the Congress had antagonized the ruling British establishment and the press, and joining it would threaten British patronage of the Aligarh College. When Badruddin Tyabji, a Muslim from Bombay, became president of the Indian National Congress, Sayyid Ahmad saw this as a threat to his own and Aligarh's aspiration to be the leading force in Indian Muslim politics. His response was to create an alternate congress, the Muhammadan Education Congress, later Conference, that would eschew politics altogether in favor of promoting Aligarh's educational project to a wider Muslim public. At the same time, Sayyid Ahmad delivered a blistering speech denouncing Hindu Bengalis as unworthy of political leadership. Theodore Beck, the British principal of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, then became chief organizer and propagandist for this campaign of opposition, enlisting students during vacations to gather petitions against the Congress.[47]

Sayyid Ahmad's own anti-Congress politics were short-lived, but others carried them forward after his death, when the Muslim League was spun off the Muslim Educational Conference in 1906 and was to claim for itself political representation of the Muslims of India, leading decades later in 1940 to the demand for the creation of some sort of a separate Muslim state. Aligarh students and alumni were to play a role in the nationalist struggles of later times, including many supporters of a secular and undivided India, but all that was well beyond the political goals that Sayyid Ahmad had in mind. For him, as for the early founders of the Indian National Congress, the goal had been enfranchisement within the British Empire as a way of maintaining a wider pluralism in a very plural society. That goal has remained relevant in the Republic of India, where Aligarh Muslim University remains a center and symbol of Indian Muslim presence in a different world of ruthlessly competitive capitalism and popular democracy. And in India, Pakistan, and the wider world Sayyid Ahmad's commitment to reason, experiment, debate, and independent judgment has opened up fresh ways of being Muslim in a changing world.

Discussion of the Literature

Study of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh movement has concentrated on politics and religion. Before and after partition of India and the birth of Pakistan in 1947, it became important to scholars to understand the roots of political "separatism" among Indian

Muslims, and books and articles were largely partisan, divided between those who considered Pakistan to be a hopeful opportunity or a tragic mistake. Others were concerned with Sayyid Ahmad's religious ideas and the formulation of Muslim "modernism." Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a Canadian scholar of Islam, wrote some of the most interesting early studies in two rather different books, the first somewhat Marxist, the second more concerned with the relationship between religious ideas and social thought among Muslims throughout the world. In both books, he considered Sayyid Ahmad, along with Muhammad Iqbal and others, as seeking to discover in Islamic sources an ideology for the modern world.[48]

There is a good deal of literature that seeks to blame Sayyid Ahmad and Aligarh for undermining the cause of Indian nationalism by assembling the most damaging quotations, largely out of historical context.[49] On the other hand, Sayyid Ahmad has been celebrated for initiating a separate Muslim politics and mobilizing a following to pursue political goals. Pro-Pakistan historiography treats him as a hero but also do some people who are committed to recognition of Muslims as full members of the Indian polity.[50]

Scholars of religion have been interested in the ways in which Sayyid Ahmad reached into the Islamic scholastic past and developed new, independent approaches for textual analysis. The politics of partition still loom over some of even the best work, but much of it reads Sayyid Ahmad's work in its own terms.[51]

Other work on Sayyid Ahmad Khan has been concerned with his role in the development of Urdu language and literature.[52] Also of relevant interest are studies of the history of the Aligarh College and its relation to other institutions among Indian Muslims in the same era of late British India.[53]

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The **Uttar Pradesh State Archives** in Lucknow has many records relevant to the career of Sayyid Ahmad and to issues of education, publication, and politics. Similarly, the **National Archives of India** in New Delhi has much relevant material, though finding the relevant sources takes time and patience. The best indexed source of primary materials can be found in the India Office Records at the **British Library** in London, which also has an extensive collection of manuscripts and printed books.

Thanks to the Internet, many previously hard-to-find sources in various languages are now available online via Google and **internet archives**.

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Notes:

(1.) Frances W. Pritchett, "A Desert Full of Roses: The Urdu Ghazals of Mirza Asadullah Khan 'Ghalib'."

(2.) English renderings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's name varied in his own time and have ever since. His signature in English was "Syed Ahmed," and in Urdu he signed his letters and some of his published writing as "Sayyid Ahmad" without the "Khan," a Mughal hon-

orific that he neither inherited nor passed on. After he was knighted in 1888, he was generally referred to as “Sir Sayyid,” typically rendered in English as “Sir Syed.” It is most accurate to consider “Sayyid’ as the closest thing to a surname, though he is often indexed under Khan or Ahmad Khan. The best source for basic biographical information is Ḵẖvājah Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Ḥayāt-e jāvīd* (Lahore: ‘Ishrat Pablishing Hā‘ūs, 1965). For the best English translation of Part I see David Matthews, *Hayat-e-Javed* (New Delhi: Rupa, 1994).

(3.) Sayyid Aḥmad Ḵẖān̲, *Sīrat-e Farīdiyah: Sar Sayyid ke nānā ḵẖavājah Farīduddīn Aḥmad Ḵẖān̲ aur dīgar afrād-e ḵẖāndān ke ḥālāt*, ed. Ḵẖalīq Anjum (New Delhi: Anjuman Taraqqī-yi Urdū, Hind, 2010).

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(6.) Douglas Dewar, *A Hand-Book to the English Pre-Mutiny Records in the Government Record Rooms of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh* (Allahabad: Government Press, United Provinces, 1920), 7; and 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: Manohar, 2013). See also C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 199–200, 238–243; and Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2017), 10–15.

(7.) Ḥāli, *Ḥayāt-e Javīd*, 71–72; Sayyid Aḥmad Ḵẖān̲, *Qavā‘id-e ṣarf o naḥv-e zabān-e Urdū*, ed. Abu Salman Shahjahanpuri (Karachi: Idārah-yi Taṣnīf o Taḥqīq-e Pākistān, 1990); and Muhammad `Atiq Siddiqi, *Ṣuba shimāli o maghribi kē a<u>kh</u>barāt o maṭbu`āt (1848–1855)* (Aligarh: Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu – Hind, 1962), 103–104.

(8.) Mawlānā Muḥammad Ismā‘īl Pānīpatī, ed., *Maqālāt Sar Sayyid*, vol. 16 (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1965), 75–206, 485–500; and Christian W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978), 147–149.

(9.) Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 61–69; and Avril A. Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

(10.) Mawlānā Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Pānīpatī, ed., *Maqālāt Sar Sayyid*, vol. 15 (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqī-yi Adab, 1965), 181; and Bruce B. Lawrence, "Mystical and Rational Elements in the Early Religious Writings of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan," in *The Rose and the Rock: Mystical and Rational Elements in the Intellectual History of South Asian Islam*, ed. Bruce B. Lawrence (Durham, NC: Duke University Programs in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia [and] Islamic and Arabian Development Studies, 1979).

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(12.) Pānīpatī, *Maqalat-e Sir Sayyid*, 16:13–74. See also Edward Edwards, *A Catalogue of the Persian Printed Books in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1922), col. 98.

(13.) Ed Sachau and Hermann Ethe, eds., *Catalogue of the Persian, Turkish, Hindustani, and Pushtu Manuscripts in the Bodlein Library*: *Part I; Persian Manuscripts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1889), 118. Some twenty years later he produced a printed version: Syud Ahmed, ed., *Toozook-e Jehangeeree* (Allygurh: Printed and published by the author at his private press, 1864 ad, 1281 h.). See Edwards, *A Catalogue*, col. 307.

(14.) *Āʾīn-e Akbarī*, ed. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, hasb-e farmaish Shaikh Qutb uddin wa Muhammad Isma`il Saudagaran-e Dehli, dar Matbu`a Isma`ili . . . 1272 h. [1855 ce]; *The Tārikh-e Feroz-shāhi of Ziaa al-Din Barni* (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, 1862); and Edwards, *A Catalogue*, col. 5, 743.

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(21.) Ḥāli, *Ḥayāt-e Javīd* [1965 ed.], 118, 130; and see also Iftikhār 'Alam Khān, *Sir Sayyid aur Scientific Society* (Delhi: Maktaba Jami'a, 2000), 15.

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(28.) Abbas, *Print Culture*, 32–87, 113–138.

(29.) Aṣghar `Abbās, ed., *Sar Sayyid kā safar nāmah, musāfirān-e Landan: Maḥ tāzah iẓāfaun, muqaddamah, farhang aur ta`līqāt* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 2009).

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(32.) Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Pānīpatī, ed., *Maktūbāt-e Sar Sayyid*, vol. 1 (Lahore: Majlis-e-Taraqqi-e-Adab, 1976), 413–480.

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(35.) David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 113–139.

(36.) David Lelyveld, "Disenchantment at Aligarh: Islam and the Realm of the Secular in Late Nineteenth Century India," *Die Welt des Islams* 22 (1984): 85–102.

(37.) Sayyid Ahmad Khan's testimony to the Education Commission, *Aligarh Institute Gazette* 17, August 5, 1882, Suppl. 62.

(38.) Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 87–137.

(39.) Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 271–272.

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(45.) Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

(46.) Sayyid ʻAbdullāh, *Sar Sayyid Aḥmad Khān aur un ke nāmvar rufaqā kī Urdu naṯr kā fannī aur fikrī jāʼizah* (Aligarh: Education Book House, 2001).

(47.) Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 302–348.

(48.) Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (London: V. Gollancz, 1946); and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Islam in Modern History* (New York: New American Library, 1957).

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(50.) S. M. Ikram, *Modern Muslim India and the Birth of Pakistan*, 7th ed. (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1997); Hafeez Malik, *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Muslim Modernization in India and Pakistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980); Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India, 1966); and Shan Muhammad*, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: A Political Biography* (Meerut: Meenaksi Parkashan, 1969).

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(53.) Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*; and Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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David Lelyveld

Columbia University