

Introduction

YASMIN SAIKIA AND M. RAISUR RAHMAN

Sitting high above ground in a basket suspended between two scaffolds parallel to the enormous Qutb Minar, Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), a young *munshi* (clerk) of the English East India Company, read and tried to reproduce the indecipherable inscriptions on the tower in his book *Asar-us Sanadid* (*Traces of Noblemen*, also called *Great Monuments of Delhi*).¹ The determination, courage, and resourcefulness demonstrated here were the hallmarks of Sayyid Ahmad's life, which was full of formidable challenges. With his imaginativeness and a keen sense of history, along with his conviction that evidence of progress is within the Muslim community, Sayyid Ahmad embarked on a progressive vision for Muslim community development in British India. His rationalist approach combined with an ethical outlook and passion transformed the lives of Muslims in India and abroad forever.

Sayyid Ahmad was born on 17 October 1817 in Mughal Delhi. He belonged to an aristocratic Muslim family who traced their genealogical roots to Prophet Muhammad.² In 1864, Sayyid Ahmad moved to Aligarh – a small town, approximately 100 miles southeast of the capital city – where he spent the rest of his life. In Indian nationalist historiography, Sayyid Ahmad appears, at times, as a promoter of Hindu–Muslim unity in his early years – to him, Hindus and Muslims were 'the two eyes of the beautiful bride that is Hindustan'. By contrast, Pakistani historiography remembers him as the architect of the two-nation theory, which eventually led to the creation of Pakistan. It is strange to attribute to him a historic event not anticipated during his time: he passed away in 1898 – forty-two years before the Muslim League raised the demand for the creation of Pakistan. Regardless of this contrasting retelling of history (one from India and the

¹ Altaf Husain Hali, *Hayat-e Javed*, trans. David J. Matthews (Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994), p. 51.

² George Farquhar Irving Graham, *The Life and Work of Syed Ahmed Khan* (Calcutta: Thacker, Spink & Co., 1909).

other from Pakistan), Sayyid Ahmad can be considered a true historical marker for Muslims in South Asia. Even today, he remains the unchallenged champion of Muslim modernization and community reform. Throughout his lifetime, Sayyid Ahmad envisaged a modern Muslim society by making efforts to promote modern Western education, scientific knowledge, rational thinking, religious pluralism, political accommodation, and participatory community associations founded on ethics and justice. The history he made holds Muslims to a public memory that remains inspirational even today. His thoughts and actions motivated a rational, scientific, and reformed outlook that considerably shaped the concept of *Musalman-e Hind*, the Indian Muslim.

Sayyid Ahmad was a multifaceted personality: he was a historian, ethicist, arbitrator and diplomat, administrator, advocate, writer, religious and scientific scholar, community organizer, and, most importantly, passionate educationist. His intense passion for a modern Muslim community led to the idea of secular education – a project he began in 1857 and continued until he died in 1898. Sayyid Ahmad had many new ideas for holistically improving the education and thus the lives of Muslims in India. The Muslims did not readily accept some of these ideas because they were not only novel but also controversial for the community. As a firm believer in consensus building through dialogue and discussion and by working at various capacities with his peers, Sayyid Ahmad established a path for Muslim reformation in India.

Although a believer in the Hindustani identity, Sayyid Ahmad did not think of cultural systems as fixed entities. For him, religion was only a set of beliefs, not an institution for political conflict, and using religion for political gain would have been bigotry. Because of his rational approach to find answers to everything with studied evidence, he would never accept such a narrow position. Since he believed that Hindus and Muslims were from the same cultural world – of and from Hindustan – the cultural and social wellbeing of Hindustan was a primary concern to him. In this scope of thinking, he included the British in Hindustan, whom he did not see as foreigners, but as representatives of another cultural system with much potential to contribute to India's advancement. Through this catholic approach to the different religious communities, Sayyid Ahmad could appreciate the transcendence of God beyond religion. He saw that religions were pathways, and the final truth was with God alone. Acknowledging the validity of the different worship systems of religions, he elaborated on this concept in his dispatches during his voyage to England in 1869: he wrote,

I saw the way God was prayed to.... Some men bow down to idols; others address Him seated on chairs, with heads uncovered; some worship Him with head covered and beads on, with hands clasped in profound respect; many abuse Him, but He cares nought for this. He is indeed the only one who is possessed of the attribute of catholicity.³

He remained open to this way of thinking about religion as journeys to the indivisible God until his last breath. According to him, a society reflecting the aforementioned understanding should represent a degree of heterogeneity. Hindustan, the land of multiple religious practices, enabled this type of composite society. This was an idea he instilled in his new educational institution, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College, founded in 1877.⁴ The first graduate of MAO College, Ishwari Prasad, was a Hindu, who became an eminent historian.

The decade of the 1850s had a catalytic effect on Sayyid Ahmad. This decade included the last few years of the existence as well as the end of the mighty Mughal Empire. Following in the footsteps of many of his contemporaries of the *ashraf* (high born) background, Sayyid Ahmad mourned the decline of the Mughal Empire. The emperor's subjects could no longer ignore the imminent socioeconomic losses. For them, the present suddenly seemed like a dark cloud looming over the Indian sky; there was nothing but gloom. Sayyid Ahmad – whose ancestors were endowed by the Mughal rulers with land grants, titles, and honours – now began to reconsider the continuation of these privileges. Nevertheless, his elevated social standing equipped him with such capacity that he could face multiple challenges. He took advantage of his network with the elite, the educated, and the wealthy, while simultaneously reconciling with the loss of the Mughal royal power and possible resultant decline of the Muslim gentry. The Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the attack on his home in Delhi enforced this awareness further. His deep connection with the Mughal ruling power led to the qualms about leaving the Mughal world in Delhi for pursuing service and excellence under the Company Raj. However, unlike many others who were unable to think beyond the conflicting moment of the past

³ Graham, *Life and Work*, p. 84.

⁴ The Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental School founded in 1875 became a college by the same name in 1877 and in 1920 became Aligarh Muslim University.

and the present, Sayyid Ahmad leaped forward and carved out a new space for himself and his community. For this, he put his education to good use. He was trained in Urdu, Persian, Arabic, mathematics, astronomy, as well as religious subjects, such as Islamic jurisprudence, and had imbibed the courtly traditions of courtesy and diplomacy. Thus, to do away with the cloud of distrust and pave a path of good relationship between the Indian Muslims and their newly emerging English rulers, he decided to mediate on behalf of his *qaum*.

Sayyid Ahmad did not concentrate on saving the Mughals because he understood that British power was on the rise. The British brought a transformed political context, along with new utilitarian political dispensation of jobs and career advancement, all of which had replaced the old Mughal nobility. Sayyid Ahmad was an excellent representative for his social class of Mughal gentry – a composite community. He understood the need of investing in comprehending what made the British superior to the Mughals and then teaching his own community how to develop such qualities in order to be successful themselves. He began acting on this understanding at a personal level. He joined the service of the English East India Company in 1837, starting as a *munshi* and then rose to the rank of a subordinate judge (*sadr amin*), the office beyond which Indian natives were not promoted until 1860, when Indians were employed at the civil service ranks for the first time. Reaching the peak position in the hierarchy of an Indian's employment in the English East India Company service at the time, Sayyid Ahmad potentially developed an organic solidarity with the British, owing to his close association with them, such as that shown by Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833).

Two incidents that occurred in the 1850s, in addition to the experience of working for and with the British, had a lasting impact on Sayyid Ahmad's mind, resulting in his subsequent actions. After he finished reading an illustrated, scholarly edition of *Ain-e Akbari* – a highly informative Mughal text written by Abul Fazal, the court historian of Emperor Akbar (1556–1605), which is considered the 'Constitution of Akbar', detailing his administrative system – Sayyid Ahmad undertook the laborious task of translating the text to Urdu. On completion, he requested his friend, the acclaimed poet Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869) to write a foreword (*taqriz*) for this translated version. Ghalib agreed but provided the *taqriz* as a Persian poem castigating the imperial Mughals for their inability to rule. Furthermore, he chastised Sayyid Ahmad for not reading the winds of change, advising him to learn from the British who had surpassed their oriental counterparts in every field: 'What is the point of celebrating Akbar's rule at a time when

the constitution of the modern world is being written in Calcutta (capital of British India)?' Taking this message to heart, Sayyid Ahmad finally realized the absence of something fundamental in the Muslim mind, which needed immediate attention and correction for his community to survive. Although he continued pursuing his interests in historical texts and wrote *Asar-us Sanadid*, detailing the ruinous monuments of Delhi, he decided to focus on understanding the British rulers and identifying their scientific and technological development skills, which helped them establish an empire in India. Moreover, within India, the Hindus and other non-Muslim communities had adopted English education and advanced into government and civil services, but his *qaum* remained uninitiated into modern education: they did not engage with the British, and based on superficial knowledge, concluded that modern Western education would result in the loss of their religion and Christianization. They were afraid and confused in their ignorance. The need for progress and awareness regarding the present changes in scientific knowledge and modern education became his mission, which he embarked on immediately after the 1857 rebellion.

The 1857 rebellion and its failure had significantly affected the north Indian Muslims. The British believed that the Muslims were the main conspirators of the rebellion, who tried to overthrow them; brutal punishments followed. The last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Shah Zafar II, was exiled to Rangoon (Yangon) and the British ensured the demise of the Mughal dynasty; the crown prince along with several other members of the royal family were executed. There were no Mughal heirs to the throne of Delhi. Indeed, the bloody end of the Mughal Empire by a mere foreign commercial company was as bizarre as it was cruel. Sayyid Ahmad, who was an employee of the Company, realized that the Muslims had to endure this pain until they moved ahead by learning the ways of the British, speaking their language, and engaging the subtleties of their thinking; for all this, English education was a must.

He felt that the British also needed to learn and appreciate their Indian Muslim subjects. To make sense of this necessity, he wrote an account of the rebellion, called *Tarikh-e Sarkashi-e Bijnor* (*The History of the Bijnor Rebellion*), which was based on his personal experiences as a sub-judicial officer, and his rationality as a historian found expression in another study called the *Asbab-e Baghawat-e Hind* (*The Causes of the Indian Revolt*). In both the aforementioned pieces, Sayyid Ahmad indicated the need for the British to learn about the Indian culture and people. Although he expressed solidarity with the British, he implored them to not mythologize the

Muslims as rebels but deepen their relationship with their Indian subjects through good governance and by including Indians, particularly the educated Muslims, in local governance because they were skilled at understanding the issues and problems of the people on the ground.

Sayyid Ahmad readily cooperated with the British; to emphasize his point, he published another pamphlet in 1860, called *The Loyal Muhammadans of India*, wherein he presented his case on behalf of the Muslims, who were considerably confused and prejudiced because of little contact with their rulers. Thus, he expressed regret that his *qaum* was misguided. Distancing himself from the participants of the rebellion, he cited examples of numerous Muslims, including his own sons, who served British interests and were favourably disposed to the British government. He regretted that the Muslims who sincerely performed their services remained mostly unacknowledged, while those Muslims involved in the rebellion and comprising just a small minority were flagrantly visible in the British eyes. With little evidence, the British had painted an entire community with a broad stroke and heaped on the epithet 'rebel', he complained in his writings publicly. For Muslims, he had another message, urging them to overcome their emotional reactions, discipline their responses even if they were discriminated, and enter into reasonable discussion with the British for improving their condition. He believed that the Muslims had to accept the British dominance and work with them towards resolving their own deprived status.

Although the proactive positioning of the Muslims as loyal and good subjects abated the immediate problem for a short while, it could not cure the down-sliding backwardness of the Muslims. Who would be the patrons of the Muslims and pull them out of their moribund condition, he wondered. No one seemed willing to save the Muslims. After writing the treatises on the rebellion and clearing the Muslims of their alleged involvement in the diabolical design to oust the British, he rationally concluded that only through education and social reform could his community elevate to a position based on their own work and thus benefit the entire Indian community. To resolve the problem faced by the Muslims, Sayyid Ahmad encouraged the formation of voluntary associations, scientific societies, and educational bodies because he believed these organizations were the best avenues not only for shaping policy but also for learning to work with others (even those who have conflicting opinions). He realized that the Muslims needed to eradicate their mental, psychological, and cultural blocks against the British. By implementing educational advancement and founding the

MAO College based on the principle of volunteer work, 'an effective instance of reform from below'⁵ could be established.

Sayyid Ahmad became a firm advocate of increasing Indian involvement in government and civil services, much like his contemporaries, the early nationalists such as Surendranath Banerjee (1848–1925) and Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917). Believing that change affected through diverse layers of government, wherein legislative, judicial, educational, commercial, and voluntary organizations combined and functioned at varied capacities, to be the best way to reach consensus on problems and search for solutions, he supported the nationalists' appeals for enhanced Indian involvement in the management of Indian administration.

Eventually, through his rational and studied approach towards resolving problems, Sayyid Ahmad won the trust of the British. The British recognized him as an ally. He was nominated to the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1878. Ten years later, in 1888, when he received the Knight Commander of the Order of Star of India (KCSI), Sayyid Ahmad Taqvi bin Sayyid Muhammad Mutaqqi became Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Since then, all those in South Asia whose lives Sayyid Ahmad touched or continues to shape refer to him as *Sir Sayyid* or *Sir Syed* – a term denoting respect, honour, and endearment simultaneously. For an Alig (an alumnus of Aligarh Muslim University [AMU], a university that spawned from the MAO College), it is sacrilegious to call him simply Sayyid Ahmad or Sayyid Ahmad Khan – names we have used throughout the book, privileging academic treatment over emotional register, but with due respect to such sentiments. Herein, some authors have also used *Sir Sayyid*, as it is customary among the scholars studying the Aligarh Movement and South Asian Islam.

Many of Sayyid Ahmad's Muslim contemporaries considered his attachment and loyalty to the British as a problem, not an asset. During the establishment of the MAO College, he had faced stiff opposition from a large section of the Muslim community, which was not in favour of modern English education. Consequently, he appealed to his critics to reflect on the changes in the world of scientific knowledge and education and consider these seemingly foreign factors with a peaceful and reasoned discourse. However, refusing to accept his persuasive reasons, his peers acquired a *fatwa* from Mecca declaring him a *kafir* (infidel). Undeterred by this, in 1864, he established the Aligarh Scientific Society for promoting scientific

⁵ Sheila McDonough, *Muslim Ethics and Modernity: A Comparative Study of the Ethical Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan and Mawlana Mawdudi* (Waterloo, Canada: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1984).

and technological knowledge by making English scientific books available in the vernacular. In *Tafsir-ul Qur'an* (Qur'anic exegesis), published in a series over 1880–1904, he adopted a rational outlook towards understanding the Qur'an. While touching upon many topics, his main thrust in the *Tafsir* was to show the compatibility of the Qur'an and the new arts and sciences. He continued to promote Western science and technology, thus inviting the wrath of the orthodox clergy who derogatorily labelled him a *naicari*, who intended to corrupt Muslim minds and turn them agnostic.

Other non-Muslim Indians considered him a turncoat who had abandoned his pursuit for Hindu–Muslim unity and joined communitarian politics to pursue his interests of improving the Muslim condition and increasing his proximity to the British. He disapproved the pan-Indian nationalist organization Indian National Congress (INC), founded in 1885; this was considered an anti-Indian move. Several sources, including Jawaharlal Nehru and W. C. Smith, defended Sayyid Ahmad, suggesting that he opposed INC because of its aggressive anti-British tenor. Sayyid Ahmad believed in the politics of justice and participatory association of equals. How could the uneducated Muslims irk the British, the dominant force in India, he asked. It took him nearly two decades to win the trust and assistance of the British for establishing the MAO College. He was convinced that first the Muslims needed to equip themselves with knowledge and training for addressing the real problems affecting them. For this, he knew that political organizations or loyalty to a single body was not the solution because affinity groups, such as INC where everyone had the same ideas was not going to be a problem-solving association. Different from the latter-day politics of Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), who viewed the INC as a predominantly Hindu organization, Sayyid Ahmad did not even consider the Hindu–Muslim question; he rather approached the Hindus to assist him and oppose INC politics by founding the United Indian Patriotic Organization in 1888. His opinion regarding the INC was similar to that of the Maharaja of Banaras. Unfortunately, in 1893, he renamed United Indian Patriotic Organization as Muhammadan Defence Association, thus making his contemporaries misjudge his interests.

For Sayyid Ahmad, the Indian Muslims were part of the national and international cultural mainstream. During the Hindi–Urdu language controversy, he sided with his own Urdu-speaking community. Did this make Sayyid Ahmad someone who solely privileged Urdu-speaking community? To answer this question, we must first understand his lifelong commitment to Urdu language and literature, just as we need to understand the nuanced position that Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) undertook over the

language question. Although he prioritized Muslim interest, Sayyid Ahmad did not envision it to be antithetical to Hindustani or Hindu interest, as evidenced by his position on the Hindi–Urdu controversy. He argued that Urdu and Hindi were actually the same language. Moreover, Urdu being the *lingua franca* of India deserved government support. Nevertheless, he did not promote Urdu in exclusivity of Hindi by opining that good and accessible Urdu should not be Arabized or Persianized. Although Urdu had become a dynamic and useful language through his publications and writings, he never attempted to make it a language confined to the Muslims alone.

His journey to London in 1869 deepened his conviction regarding his work for the betterment of the Muslims, as penned in his travelogue *Musafiran-e Landan*. He believed that travelling widened one's understanding and interaction with different people, enabling exchange and learning. Deeply touched by the civility and education of the British men and women he met during his stay in London, he began encouraging Indians to emulate their learning for improving their conduct and lives. He was awestruck by the scientific temperament evident in the metropolis. His trip to London led to his own self-discovery; he implemented what he learned in the vision of his college.

He founded the MAO College as a residential university, as per the Oxbridge system. At the MAO College, students and teachers from varied backgrounds lived together, which he believed would foster community feelings and friendships emerging from this association would better and further dignify the Indian community. On 8 January 1877, Lord Lytton, the Viceroy of India, laid the foundation stone of the college. With British aid, Sayyid Ahmad put the small town of Aligarh on the map of India. From the beginning the college had an inclusive outlook. In 1880 there were seven Hindu students and eight Muslim students and in 1881 an equal number of eight Hindu and eight Muslim students. The pattern remained uniform in the subsequent years. In fact, in 1885 and 1887 there were more Hindu students than Muslim students enrolled in the college. Only in 1888 did the number of Muslim students increase to thirty-nine while Hindu students remained steady at thirty. The same can be said about the staff of the college. In 1886, the school had four Hindu teachers of the total six teachers and in 1894 there were two Hindu teachers out of seven Indian teachers.⁶ Two of his friends and compatriots, Nawab Viqar-ul Mulk (1841–1917) and

⁶ Shan Muhammad, *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: A Political Biography* (Meerut: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1969), p. 235.

Mohsin-ul Mulk (1837–1907), along with many donors, patrons, parents, and students from different communities, be it Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh, assisted him in realizing his dream of imparting modern education. The MAO College was not a mere educational institution, it opened windows of social and cultural opportunities for its students. Initially, the MAO College was an institution that served upper class and upper-caste men. The Nawabs' and landlords' sons were easily admitted and accommodated. However, we must understand that even Cambridge University, on which Sayyid Ahmad planned to model his institution, was completely elitist in this era. The MAO College was also a product of its time. Nevertheless, the college did become more open, diverse, and inclusive with time. With the expansion of the student body, the MAO College transformed itself into a plural community, wherein all were imparted education in the liberal arts and sciences.

Sayyid Ahmad's fundraising efforts also reflect the plural character of the institution. Examples of such efforts included investing of personal funds, appearing publicly as a beggar to collect money, and agreeing to dance at the state fair to raise money; these and other such anecdotes are recounted even today. Through these efforts, he enlisted the support of many British donors, such as Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy of India, who donated 10,000 rupees, which then was quite a sizeable amount. For his cause, Sayyid Ahmad also reached out to not only his lay supporters but also the princely rulers. Collectively, these efforts allowed him to enforce a new network of Indian supporters. Numerous Hindu donors, including the Maharajas of Banaras, Patiala, and Vizianagaram, also joined his cause. At the time of Sayyid Ahmad's death in 1898, the college had 285 Muslim and 64 Hindu students. After a campaign to convert it into a university, the MAO College became AMU after an act passed by the Government of India in 1920. AMU serves as a catalyst or model for similar developments across South Asia. The Aligarh Movement for the sociocultural and political regeneration of the Muslims originated in and spread out from this institution.

During Sayyid Ahmad's lifetime, there was an uproar regarding the moral decay and degeneration of the Muslim society, similar to that seen currently. Addressing these issues openly and rationally, Sayyid Ahmad hoped to improve the social conditions of his fellow Muslims. Through the *Scientific Society Magazine* and *Tahzib-ul Akhlaq (Muhammadan Social Reformer)*, he began discussing the problems that the rapidly changing Muslim community was encountering, such as polygamy, religious fanaticism, and hypocrisy – all of which he condemned. He urged people to emulate culturally advanced nations and select the good, but reject the

undesirable. Through *Tahzib-ul Akhlaq*, he sought total Muslim reformation – by not only imparting lessons on table manners and public behaviour but also advocating balanced religion and human progress. For him, religion was about love and service to humanity, not a hurdle to progress.

His passion for scientificity and a rational understanding of the biological world inspired him to engage in interfaith dialogue. In his *Tabyin-ul Kalam* (Commentary on the Bible), he attempted a comparative study of religions; by contrast, in *Tafsir-ul Qur'an*, he offered new interpretations of the Qur'an considering the contemporary changes and realities. The orthodox elements of the Muslim community resented all these publications. Those who disagreed with him called him an 'atheist', 'agnostic', *kafir*, and even *dajjal* ('false messiah' or 'the antichrist' in Islamic eschatology). Despite these assaults, Sayyid Ahmad remained steadfast and resolute, while continuing his work for what he believed to be in his people's best interest. Explaining and summarizing his deeds, speeches, and writings of religious and secular nature that helped articulate his ideals, dreams, and vision in this limited space is difficult.

Sayyid Ahmad wrote a commentary on the Bible reflecting his approach towards religious and scriptural pluralism. This attempt at comparatively studying religions in India was the first of its kind in the nineteenth century, as K. A. Nizami has indicated.⁷ He also credits Sayyid Ahmad for having laid the foundation of a new *ilm-ul kalam* (scholasticism). In a recent essay,⁸ Charles M. Ramsey argues that Sayyid Ahmad rejected dispensational supersession, which is the notion that a legislative prophet's authority supplants an earlier authority. That is, all prophets appearing in different places and periods originated from the same source. In *Tabyin-ul Kalam*, Sayyid Ahmad also considered the authenticity of Psalms, Pentateuch, gospels, and other Christian religious texts.

Sayyid Ahmad combined engaging with other religious faiths with his conviction to liberate religion of superstitions, particularly those hindering progressive thinking. Much like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, he considered miracles a deviation from factual reality and believed in the reconciliation of science, technology, and religion. He also attempted to find common ground

⁷ Khaliq A. Nizami, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India), pp. 120–1.

⁸ Charles M. Ramsey, 'Sir Sayyid and the Religious Foundations for a Pluralist Society', in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: Muslim Renaissance Man of India – A Bicentenary Commemorative Volume*, edited by A. R. Kidwai, pp. 288–307 (Delhi: Viva Books, 2017).

between 'modern science' and religion. Although he accepted Darwinism, he established a well-considered approach outlining its continuity with previous Islamic theories of development. He compared his position to the theory of evolution by natural selection. Similarly, he emphasized reason as his guiding principle; this explains his distrust of miracles and angelology, without refuting revelation. Thus, Sayyid Ahmad's approach towards religion aimed at finding common ground between religions, without unsettling long-held beliefs and simultaneously challenging discrepancies, despite reason and rationalism.

K. A. Nizami opined that Sayyid Ahmad's approach towards social reform was twofold: persuading people to abandon their old habits and customs, which impeded their social advancement, and encouraging them to take up the new scientific and rational approach. G. F. I. Graham, Sayyid Ahmad's biographer, included him among the foremost Muslims with a force of character, influence over his fellowmen, and literary ability. Theodore Beck, who was the first principal of the MAO College, was one of his greatest admirers.

In his *magnum opus* on the first generation of Aligarh students, historian David Lelyveld showed the multiple sides of Sayyid Ahmad and the institution he created.⁹ Lelyveld demonstrated the intermediary nature of the college having picked up the best elements from the British and Muslim cultures to create something new for the community. The newly emerged curriculum favoured English education; nevertheless, Islamic theology remained a part of this educational programme. Together, they generated a consciousness that helped create and foster the 'Indian Muslim'. The game of cricket, *mushairahs* (poetic assemblies), the debating society, student union elections, and several other extracurricular activities inculcated public roles and political ambitions among its students. Its impact can be noted through the significant role of Aligs within and beyond India and South Asia. The legacy Sayyid Ahmad envisioned and established lives on.

A social reformer, educationist, institution-builder, politician, prolific writer, and religious thinker, Sayyid Ahmad was a tireless worker whose actions determined the fate of the millions of Indians. His MAO College served as a movement opening vistas for Indians; it improved their understanding of their role in the modern world through English education and, more practically, improved the socioeconomic condition

⁹ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton, University Press, 1978).

of his community. From its inception as the MAO College to its current form as AMU, Sayyid Ahmad's educational mission emerged as a beacon of hope for Muslims, women, other minority groups, and the less privileged. Sayyid Ahmad had inspired the idea of mediation for finding a balance between the community and the British in the colonial era; even now, in the postcolonial nation-state of India, AMU continues to teach Sir Sayyid's concept of pluralism and rationality. The *Musalman-e Hind* or 'Indian Muslim' community was born out of the particular historical backdrop of 1857 and Sayyid Ahmad's vision. The Indian Muslim is one who straddles Indianness and Muslimness without paradox, just as Sayyid Ahmad donned the black Western suit, sported a long, white flowing beard, and put on a *fez* cap – this imagery can alleviate the current environment of suspicion and hatred. For Sayyid Ahmad, the prognosis of the Indian Muslim is someone who is aware of the surrounding, takes ownership, maintains dignity, and is part of the plural society and evolves with changing times. This *Companion* is a small step to engage with this larger-than-life individual. His ideology and attendant historical transformations warrant wider attention than most scholarly and non-scholarly debates have paid. On *Sir Sayyid's* bicentenary birth celebrations, his ideas are far more relevant in the twenty-first century than ever before, to understand the Muslim question better – in India and globally.

