Introduction: Historicizing Sayyid-ness: Social Status and Muslim Identity in South Asia

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Abstract

The introduction to the special issue provides a framework to think about the changing conceptions of Sayyid-ness in various historical contexts in South Asia. First, we review some of the sociological and anthropological literature on caste among South Asian Muslims, to argue for a contextualised and historicised study of Muslim social stratification in Muslims’ own terms. Second, we throw light on the fact that Sayyid-ness, far from being a transhistorical fact, may be conceptualised differently in different socio-political and historical contexts. For instance, Sayyid pedigree was at times downplayed in favour of a more encompassing Ashraf identity in order to project the idea of a single Muslim community. Far from projecting an essentialising image of Sayyid-ness, by focusing on historical change, the articles in this collection de-naturalise Sayyids’ and Ashraf’s social superiority as a ‘well-understood and accepted fact’. They further shift attention from the debate on ‘Muslim caste’, often marred by Hindu-centric assumptions, to focus instead on social dynamics among South Asian Muslims ‘in their own terms’. In so doing, these studies highlight the importance of the local, while pointing to possible comparisons with Muslim groups outside South Asia.

In order to be identified, groups were created among Muslims, but this practice is now considered to be bad. We should remember that to be called a ‘Sayyid’ is not a matter of pride, and that those who are not ‘Sayyid’ are in no way inferior. To God, piety is the only source of distinction, otherwise all Muslims are brothers. There is no doubt that for marriage we give preference to our baradari but if no proper match is to be found within the baradari we should look for good matches in other baradaris.¹

Sayyid Abdul Qayyum Chavavri’s introduction to his *Sadat-i Jajneri*—a compilation of genealogies of the Sayyid lineage linked with the town of Munger in Bihar—nicely illustrates the tension around Islam’s egalitarian principles. For Abdul Qayyum as for many Muslims, Islam is essentially an egalitarian religion, in which distinction depends on piety. All human beings descend from the same original couple—Adam and Eve. They all stand equal in front of God, their Creator. Abdul Qayyum acknowledges that divisions exist among Muslims for the sake of recognition but insists that they are not seen in a good light. He dismisses the importance of marriage circles (*baradari*) as a matter of preference that can easily be done without. He also sternly condemns the idea that some may find pride in being a descendant of Prophet Muhammad (i.e. in being Sayyid) or consider themselves superior because of it. These disclaimers may seem somewhat surprising at the opening of a 400-page compilation of genealogies of North Indian Sayyid families. By feeling bound to distance himself from claims of social superiority, Sayyid Abdul Qayyum thus lets on his unease with the very idea that presides over his work—that of the importance of pedigree.

From the early years of Islam, Muslims have considered proximity to Prophet Muhammad a reason for social distinction. In spite of Quranic enjoinder to equality among believers, Arabs carried over their notions of honour and ancestry as they converted to Islam. Those deemed to possess “great honour and unblemished ancestry” (*dhu l-hasab wa-l-nasab*) were called *sharif* (pl. *ashraf*). Initially denoting the heads of prominent families and those who bore arms, the term acquired a new meaning in the first centuries of Islam. By the ninth and tenth centuries, the word not only indicated elites or notables (*al-khassa*), as opposed to the masses (*al-amma*), but was also used “in the stricter genealogical sense” for “persons ennobled by prophetic or by other socially exalted blood lines”. Thus *sharif* came to define the descendants of Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and his cousin and son-in-law Ali. It sometimes designated a larger genealogical segment, such as the whole Banu Hashim tribe (hence the term ‘Hashimi’). This was the case in Abbasid times, when *sharif* included the descendants of the Prophet’s uncles al-Abbas and Abu Talib, stressing the Abbasids’ Hashimi pedigree in contrast to their predecessors, the Umayyads, who could not claim such affiliation to the Prophet. On the contrary, at times, the term *sharif* was restricted to the descendants of the Prophet’s grandson Hasan, while Husain’s descendants were designated by the term *sayyid*. Apart from *sharif* and *sayyid*, the expression *ahl al-bait* (or in Urdu and Persian *ahl-i bait*) meant the ‘people of the House’ of the Prophet, interpreted as Muhammad himself, Fatima, Ali, and their sons Hasan and Husain. Thus, already from the early years of Islam, there was great historical and geographical variation in the terms used and in the actual social group implied by ‘descendants of Muhammad’.

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Social stratification, caste, and South Asian Islam

In South Asia, as in other parts of the Muslim world, such as Persia, Central Asia and Turkey, the descendants of the Prophet were usually referred to as sayyid (pl. sadat), or mir (a short form of amir), rather than sharif or ashraf. There, Sayyids stood at the top of the Ashraf, which designated the entire group of Muslims who claimed foreign descent, whether Arab, Turkish, Persian or Afghan. Sociologists generally contrast the Ashraf with the Ajlaf, i.e. descendants from Hindu converts. Scholars have pointed out that while Ashraf groups relate to their place of origin, the Ajlaf are organised along occupational lines, much like Hindu castes. They sometimes add a third category, the Arzal, whose occupation (notably, scavengers, sweepers and tanners) is seen as unclean by the others. These groups follow certain rules of endogamy and sometimes possess mechanisms of internal regulation (such as a council, or panchayat).

These observations have led scholars, and before them colonial administrators, to use the term ‘caste’ to describe the specificity of social stratification among Muslims of South Asia. As the colonial state multiplied systematic censuses in the late nineteenth century, administrators debated to what extent the term was applicable to Muslims. In the 1901 Census, they decided to apply the ‘caste’ category to Muslims, recording no less than 500 Muslim castes. After India and Pakistan gained independence, sociologists and anthropologists—the most prominent being Imtiaz Ahmad—engaged in empirical studies highlighting the existence of caste-like structures and practices among South Asian Muslims.

Much of the debate since then has revolved around the following questions: can we apply the term ‘caste’ to Muslims, or should it be reserved to Hindus? Are Muslims’ caste-like practices derived from Hindu practices or do they emanate from Islam’s own traditions of social stratification? In other words, should we regard Muslims’ caste-like practices as a form of acculturation of Islam to local Indian or Hindu practices (the assumption being that Indian culture is largely informed by Hindu beliefs and customs)? Or should we look at caste as a ‘structural phenomenon’ not specific to Hinduism but present in other religions and societies, inside and outside South Asia? These questions stem from the fact that the notion of ‘caste’ is, in theory, contrary to the egalitarian principle found in Islam’s foundational texts—the Quran and the Hadith.

This sociological and anthropological literature challenged homogenous representations of the so-called Muslim ‘community’ but did not provide a simple answer to the question whether Muslims can be said to have a caste system. Scholars who opposed the use of the term ‘caste’ for Muslims stressed the absence of a caste system among them, guided by an

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4 This dichotomy, although widely used by sociologists and anthropologists, has also been criticised for not corresponding to the categories used by the actors themselves. See Imtiaz Ahmad, ‘The Ashraf-Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social Structure in India’, Indian Economic Social History Review 3 (July 1966), pp. 268–278.


6 Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India (Delhi, 1973). The three other volumes edited by Imtiaz Ahmad, although not centred on the issue of caste, are also important contributions to the sociology of South Asian Muslims: Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Family, Kinship, and Marriage among Muslims in India (New Delhi, 1976); Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Ritual and Religion among Muslims in India (New Delhi, 1981); Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), Modernization and Social Change among Muslims in India (New Delhi, 1983).

overarching principle of purity and pollution and topped by a caste embodying purity, like the Brahmins in Hinduism.8 Dumont, for instance, deemed the Ashraf to be “contaminated by caste spirit although they have not completely succumbed to it”.9 Colonial administrators had earlier made similar comments after observing that the Ashraf intermarry, interdine, and do not follow any strict occupational specialisation.10 On the other hand, some scholars, like Imtiaz Ahmad, contend that caste practices across South Asian societies constitute structural features that are not religion-specific: South Asian Muslims, being part of their society, share the same principles of social distinction as other religious groups.11

With this caste-based framework in mind, scholars analysed Muslims’ social mobility in terms similar to what had been observed among Hindus. They termed ‘ashrafisation’12 what they saw as the Muslim equivalent of ‘sanskritisation’.13 These scholars argue that just as low-caste Hindus aim to improve their status by imitating behavioural norms of higher castes, Ajlaf Muslims use hypergamous marriage and adopt certain socio-cultural practices associated with Ashraf groups to rise in the social hierarchy.14 The term ‘ashrafisation’ needs to be distinguished from ‘Islamisation’, that is, the “wish [by groups or individuals] to distinguish themselves clearly from non-Muslims by purifying themselves of so-called un-Islamic customs and practices”.15 Both phenomena often overlap in practice. Yet, while ‘ashrafisation’ describes the dynamics of individual or caste mobility in the social hierarchy, Islamisation implies the discarding of practices that may be particular to one’s caste group or former religion.

The concept of ashrafisation resonates with commonly-held perceptions about social mobility, as expressed in the Persian proverb: “The first year I was a butcher, the next a Shaikh; this year, if prices fall, I shall become a Saiyid”.16 This saying humorously expresses the general mistrust for genealogical claims, often deemed baseless. Thus, many complain about the ubiquity of naqli, or fake, Sayyids or people of other Ashraf categories, such as Shaikhs.17

If the numerous case studies conducted since the 1970s have not solved the debate about the applicability of the term ‘caste’ for South Asian Muslims, they have redirected our attention to more productive questions. The main issue with the ‘caste’ debate is that it has revolved primarily around the definition of caste itself, instead of looking at the specificities of Muslim social stratification in South Asia. As a result, as Sylvia Vatuk argues, “attention is

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9Ibid., p. 263.
10John Collinson Nesfield, Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (1885).
12Cora Vreede-de Stuers, Parda: A Study of Muslim Women’s Life in Northern India (Assen, 1968).
14The best-known cases concern the Muslim weavers of Uttar Pradesh, see Deepak Mehta, Work, Ritual, Biography: A Muslim Community in North India (Delhi, 1997), and Muslim butchers, see Zarin Ahmad, Delhi’s Meatscapes: Muslim Butchers in a Transforming Mega City (New Delhi, 2018). The most visible sign of ashrafisation is the replacement of an occupational name by a new collective Arabic title meant to buttress new claims to Arab descent. The weavers thus changed their name from Julaha to Ansari while the butchers discarded the name Qasai for Qureshi.
15Vreede-de Stuers, Parda, p. 6.
17Imtiaz Ahmad, ‘Endogamy and Status Mobility among the Siddiqui Sheikhs of Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh’, in Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims in India, (ed) Ahmad, p. 184.
diverted from the task of analysing patterns of Muslim social stratification in their own terms” (emphasis added). Vatuk highlights the limits of this approach: “scholars may even be hindered in their descriptive enterprise, inasmuch as they are influenced to attend chiefly to those aspects of social organisation and ideology that have already been identified as central to ‘the Hindu caste system’, possibly neglecting others having special salience to Muslims”. Instead of focusing on caste alone, she invites us to look more broadly at “fields of inequality”, which may adopt different forms. She analyses the terms used by the actors themselves —khandan, baradari, zat—to show how Muslim norms are “elaborated, understood and subsequently reproduced” on the ground. The prime purpose, then, no longer is to determine whether or not the term ‘caste’ can be applied to Muslims, but to better understand how Muslims themselves think about inequality, identity and difference in localised contexts. This may or may not include the idea of ‘caste’.

Historicising Sayyid status and its political salience

This special issue is chiefly concerned with understanding the social and political role of Sayyids in South Asia since the latest part of the early modern period (mid-eighteenth century). As already mentioned, Sayyids are found in nearly all Muslim communities, where they are often attributed a special aura of respectability or charisma thanks to their affiliation with the Prophet’s family. Consequently, they often occupy a privileged, if not the highest, position in the social hierarchy, a position buttressed by moral norms among both Sunnis and Shias that command respect towards Prophet Muhammad’s kin.

As a result of such religious sanction and broader moral norms, Sayyids tend to play an important role in public life—notably as religious leaders and intellectuals—which stands in stark contrast with the dearth of publications on the subject.

This is that whereof God gives glad tidings to His servants, those who believe and perform righteous deeds. Say, ‘I ask not of you any reward for it, save affection among kinsfolk’. And whoever accomplishes a good deed, We shall increase him in goodness thereby. Truly God is Forgiving, Thankful.

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21Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner K. Daghi, Maria Masi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom, The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary (New York, NY, 2017), p. 1181. There are, however, multiple interpretations of this verse. According to Nasr et al., “here [the Prophet] enjoins affection among kinsfolk; that is, he is asking the Makkans to honour and uphold the ties of kinship that he had with them, as nearly all of the Makkans were related by virtue of being members of the same tribe, the Quraysh”. However, “Others say that the call to affection among kinsfolk is an appeal to follow the Prophet’s kin, specifically his cousin and son-in-law ‘Abi ibn Abi Talib and his daughter Fatimah and their descendants [...]. Still others understand the phrase to mean that one should love the Prophet as one loves one’s own kinsfolk or that one should love one’s kinsfolk and maintain relations with them”. Nasr, Daghi, Dakake, Lumbard, and Rustom, The Study Quran, p. 1181.
While many scholarly works touch on the status of Sayyids, very few are dedicated to it: only one book and one special issue attempt an overarching study, across disciplines and across the Muslim world, of Sayyids. Others have focused on specific regions, such as Morocco for which the term ‘charifisme’ was coined, or specific family networks of Sayyids, especially those of Hadramawt originating in Yemen. In South Asia, Sayyids have not been studied on their own but generally as part of the Ashraf. Beside these broad surveys, a few works touch upon certain aspects of Sayyids’ religious status, throwing light on sectarian differences. Shia Sayyids, in particular, have received greater attention than their Sunni counterparts because of the importance given to the Prophet’s family (ahl-i bait) in Shia Islam as religious custodians and community leaders. Since Sayyids often play a religious role in Sufism as descendants of saints and caretakers of shrines, scholars have also examined their status from the point of view of saintliness and charisma. By contrast, the place of Sayyids in Sunni reformist (Deobandi, Ahl-i Hadith) milieu remains under-investigated.

Some studies further deal with Sayyid lineages in specific regions or localities, but not as a principal object of inquiry. This is the case of Raisur Rahman’s and Mushirul Hasan’s works on small towns (qasbah) in what is today Uttar Pradesh. Sayyids have for a long time occupied a prominent position in these small towns. Indeed, Sayyid families often trace their arrival in the Indian subcontinent to commanders, courtiers, or religious specialists who either followed invading rulers or came to settle in India on their invitation, thus founding the numerous qasbah dispersed across the north Indian countryside. As a result, local histories in Urdu often give significant attention to Sayyids, for instance in the qasbah of Amroha. One can also find compiled biographies in Urdu (tazkirah) of prominent figures and histories of particular lineages, such as that of the Sadat-i Bahirah or the Sayyids of Bharatpur. Finally, biographers of famous Sayyid figures do not fail to mention their illustrious ancestry and the debates around it.

22These are, respectively, Morimoto (ed.), Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies; Biancamaria Scarca Amoretti (ed.), ‘The Role of the Sūfī/a in Muslim History and Civilization / Il ruolo dei sādīt/ašrāf nella storia e civiltà islamiche’, Oriente Moderno 79 (1999), pp. 541–570.
25One of the questions that future research could address is how Sayyid status is legitimised differently according to the sect (the three major sectarian groups in South Asia being the Sunni Barelvi, the Sunni Deobandi, and the Shia Ithna Ashari).
26Justin Jones, Shi’a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism (Cambridge, 2011); Elvire Corboz, Guardians of Shi’ism: Sacred Authority and Transnational Family Networks (Edinburgh, 2012).
29See, for instance, the text by Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi—Tariq-i Anroha (Delhi, 1930)—examined in this special issue by Soheb Niazi.
Yet in spite of all these studies, there still lacks a thorough reflection on the socio-political advantage conferred by Sayyid status in South Asia, a status which is rarely conceptualised in and for itself. According to Kazuo Morimoto,

The phenomenon, that is, the wide-spread presence of the *sayyid/sharif* and the reverence offered them by many Muslims, seems to have been regarded too much as an accepted fact. As a consequence, few serious endeavours have been made to elucidate the phenomenon in detail or to examine the process of its emergence and transformation from a constructionistic perspective. The result is that we have a largely superficial knowledge of the *sayyid/sharif*.32

Therefore, our aim here is to place the “furtherance of the understanding of *sayyid/sharif*” as a “principal goal” rather than as a “side issue” that is “merely touched upon”.33 Part of a broader research project on the composition of Muslim elites in South Asia—with a special focus on the social and political role of Sayyids—this special issue adopts a historical angle in order to contextualise what being Sayyid entails. Brining socio-anthropological questions and categories in the study of history, it aims to historicise Sayyids’ supposedly ‘natural’ or transhistorical superiority through a series of localised studies, spanning from the early modern to the postcolonial period.

We thus move away from an approach that takes Sayyids’ transhistorical dominance for granted, to privilege instead an approach that examines how their social position was historically produced by contextualised discourses and practices. Not enough attention has been paid to the *evolution* of the very practices through which social hierarchies are enacted, reproduced or questioned. Nor has there been much focus on the *shifting narratives* through which Sayyids have defined themselves—as Sayyids or as Ashraf—and made a claim to social or political leadership. Some studies have attempted to paint a grand systemic picture of South Asian Muslim social stratification, hence reinforcing the idea that Sayyids’ superior status constitutes a transhistorical fact, little affected by political, social or economic upheavals.34 These studies contribute, albeit unconsciously, to projecting the image of a static, stratified Indian society, not so different from that spread by colonial ethnography. By contrast, this issue aims to shift attention, in Bernard Cohn’s words, “from the objectification of social life to a study of its constitution and construction”.35 It explores the construction and the changing meanings of Sayyid-ness, considered here as a socio-cultural category.

To highlight historical transformations, this issue deliberately focuses on periods of transition—the decline of the Mughal empire, the advent of colonial rule, the emergence of mass nationalism and the formation of postcolonial states. These periods of change tested

32Kazuo Morimoto, ‘Toward the Formation of Sayyido-Sharifology: Questioning Accepted Fact’, *Journal of Sophia Asian Studies* (2004), p. 88. Kazuo Morimoto uses the combined term ‘*sayyid/sharif*’ to describe the social eminence of the descendants of the Muhammed as a pan-Islamic phenomenon. In this special issue, however, ‘*sharif/ashraf*’ is used in its South Asian meaning to designate the groups of Muslims claiming foreign descent (Sayyid, Shaikh, Mughal and Pathan).

33Ibid., p. 91.

34The study of ‘Muslim caste’ in Uttar Pradesh by Ghaus Ansari, although often hailed as the beginning of socio-anthropological studies on caste among Muslims, is a case in point. The book, for instance, does not even mention the massive outmigration of UP Muslims that took place at the time of Partition in 1947, less than fifteen years before its publication. Ghaus Ansari, *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact* (Lucknow, 1960).

existing hierarchies, fuelled tensions among competing elites, and opened up opportunities for new emerging groups. Such phases of transition make shifting hierarchies and intra-elite competition visible and are therefore useful in understanding reformulations of Sayyid-ness and claims to socio-political superiority. Indeed, it is often in these contexts of rapid socio-political transformations that Sayyid authors elaborated normative discourses on Sayyids’ social position. As Shayan Rajani argues in his article, these accounts were more prescriptive than descriptive: Sayyid authors laid claims to a status that they did not necessarily possess. Yet, these narratives give us precious indications on Sayyids’ self-perception and self-presentation, particularly at times when they felt threatened by the rise of new elite groups. By looking at Sayyids’ attitudes and discourses in these phases of transition, the articles in this special issue therefore ask how their social status was reformulated in these contexts. In other words, was their status enhanced or minimised? How did they try to either improve or preserve their position as a group?

Such questions cannot be answered without taking into account the profound impact of colonisation on Indian society. Several contributions focus on the colonial period, often regarded as a moment of rupture leading to a deep transformation of Indians’ social institutions, especially caste and religion. Postcolonial scholars have thus argued that the idea of caste as a rigid, overarching structure emerged during the colonial period, out of interactions between British representatives and Indian ‘experts’. While the ‘colonial’ formulation of caste shaped, partly at least, Indians’ understanding of their own group identities, Indians themselves participated in the colonial enterprise of knowledge production and administrative classification. As suggested above, this ‘colonial’ formulation of caste could concern Sayyids both as participants and as an object of study. This was the case, for instance, when Sayyid authors mobilised the Ashraf/Ajlaf distinction, also found in colonial censuses and gazetteers, to account for social hierarchies among Muslims in their local historical narratives, as in the case of Amroha examined by Soheb Niazi. Historians have also shown that in the same period, religious reformist movements that emerged in reaction to colonial rule played a key role in reformulating ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ identities as pan-Indian categories. Among Muslims, the boundaries and the meanings attached to social categories underwent significant change. Margrit Pernau thus examines the gradual transformation of “Ashraf into middle classes”. She highlights the changes in the conception of respectability: status no longer depended on descent alone but also, increasingly, on individual behaviour, lifestyle and piety. These evolutions, however, were never straightforward. As Pernau herself suggests, in that period, education, the appropriation of a certain cultural habitus, piety and economic status sometimes compensated for a lack of required lineage, but not always.

Abenante and Soheb Niazi highlight the impact of religious reform movements. By presenting individual piety as the main source of respectability, these movements upheld the egalitarian principle that they saw as central to Islam. Condemning descent-based hierarchies, they put to the test the idea of inherited charisma, thus questioning—explicitly or not—Sayyids’ superior status. In the case of Multan studied by Diego Abenante, reform movements facilitated the emergence of new religious leaders, who directly challenged the authority of established pins of Sayyid background. As a result, paradoxically, “the Multani Sayyids though theoretically the representatives of a ‘greater’ Islamic tradition [became] associated with popular Islamic practices”. Moreover, as highlighted by Soheb Niazi, the introduction of representative institutions and the formation of low-caste Muslim associations jeopardised Sayyid families’ claims to lead Muslim communities.

Faced with these challenges, Sayyid authors grappled with notions of caste, piety and descent to claim or justify a superior status for Sayyids. Soheb Niazi thus shows that some Sayyid authors tried to make a distinction between, on the one hand, ‘nasal parasti’ (the obsession for ethnic and racial distinction) and zat-pat (caste-based hierarchy), which supposedly characterised occupational Muslims marked by their past Hindu milieu, and, on the other hand ‘nasab’ (genealogy), rooted in Islamic history and principles, which highlighted Sayyids’ connection to the Prophet. In other words, while they dismissed distinctions based on nasal and zat-pat as a marker of Hindu influence and as alien to Islam’s egalitarianism, these authors considered that Islam did legitimise hierarchies based on ‘nasab’. In their attempt to reconcile the principles of the foundational Islamic texts with social hierarchies, they further recognised the importance of individual piety, a point repeatedly highlighted by reformist movements. But in their writings piety became a marker of distinction among Sayyids, not among all Muslims. These contortions show the efforts—and difficulties—of Sayyid authors to reformulate Sayyid status during the colonial period as they sought simultaneously to show their conformity to Islamic principles, as defined by reformist movements, and to claim social superiority for Sayyids at a time when new social forces threatened this privileged status. As suggested at the beginning of this Introduction, such tension between Quran and Hadith’s egalitarian principles and actual social hierarchies among Muslims still fuels debates to this day. This tension is perceptible, for instance, in the recent emergence of contestation from self-identified pasmandah (marginalised) Muslims in India, who reject the leadership of the Ashraf.39

While the colonial period appears as a key moment in the reformulation of their status, not all Sayyids chose to put forward this aspect of their identity to claim or retain a privileged position. Eve Tignol and David Lelyveld point out that in north India, the modernist elites of the Aligarh movement placed little emphasis on Sayyid lineage, in spite of the fact that a large section of its members were themselves Sayyids, starting with its founder, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Lelyveld argues that even though Sayyid Ahmad Khan considered that “being a Sayyid meant that he was personally blessed”, he seldom referred to this privileged

status in his writings nor did he try to organise Sayyids as a separate group. According to Lelyveld, Sayyid Ahmad preferred instead to “use his individual persona modelled on the Prophet to unite Muslims as a qaum”. Tignol further shows that, following in Sayyid Ahmad’s footsteps, his disciples at Aligarh portrayed the broader Ashraf groups—rather than Sayyids alone—as the ‘natural’ leaders of the ‘Muslim community’, who deserved special consideration from the British on account of their ‘political importance’. At a time of rapid political change, these men privileged a more comprehensive sharif identity, now considered as the politically-relevant category to act as an all-India Muslim leadership. This formulation of a collective sharif identity had a long-lasting legacy. It is this idea of a cohesive Muslim community led by the Ashraf that the Muslim League later drew inspiration from—while also relying, particularly in Sindh and Punjab, on networks of pirs who were often Sayyid, to build a pan-Indian Muslim constituency.40 It is again this conception of an Ashraf-led Muslim community that pasmandah organisations started contesting in the 1990s.

Notwithstanding the crucial importance of the colonial period in the construction of social and religious categories, a few scholars have also pointed out that some transformations were in fact at work prior to the colonial conquest. Susan Bayly thus argues that the institution of caste was not ‘invented’ by the colonisers and was “certainly much more than an orientalist’s ‘imaginings’”.41 Similarly, in this special issue, Shayan Rajani shows that debates concerning Sayyid status predated the advent of British rule. Indeed, they throw light on the way in which the decline of the Mughal Empire affected local social structures, thereby creating new opportunities and challenges for Sayyids. Thus, Rajani questions the assumption that pre-colonial stratification was and remained based primarily on birth. He argues that, in fact, the “open Persianate culture” of the Mughal court “put great emphasis on prioritising the accomplishments and merits of individuals”, be they political, military, spiritual or literary. It is with the decline of Mughal rule that an author like Mir Ali Shir Qani—a Sayyid—departed from court hierarchies to give precedence, in his description of local Sindhi society, to Sayyids on the basis of their prestigious lineage. By reading an eighteenth-century tazkirah as a normative text, Rajani shows that if Qani valued individual merit, he reserved the topmost position for Sayyids out of a deep concern for maintaining social order in the absence of a strong Mughal sovereign. This comes as a useful corrective against the idea that there was a linear evolution from the pre-colonial to the colonial period, which involved a gradual ‘modernisation’ of Sayyid or sharif status, slowly shifting attention from descent to merit.

This also confirms that Sayyids’ self-presentation qua Sayyids was highly contextual. Their self-fashioning largely depended on the shifting power relations and hierarchies in which they found themselves. If, as was the case in the examples cited by Niazi and Rajani, Sayyid authors sometimes deemed it appropriate to put forward their Sayyid-ness, Tignol has also shown that in nineteenth-century north India, others preferred to put forward their belonging to a larger category—the Ashraf, considered as more politically relevant. Similarly, in his study of post-colonial Pakistan, Simon Fuchs highlights the paradoxical silence of Shi’s scholars on the question of Sayyids’ religious role and status. According to him, both reformist

41Susan Bayly, Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age (Cambridge, 2001), p. 2.
and traditionalist scholars—including those who happened to be Sayyid—confined their discussions of Sayyids’ status to legal questions. This silence, he argues, need not mean that Sayyid identity was no longer meaningful. In fact, it could mean the opposite: in a phase of intense struggle over religious leadership, both reformist and traditionalist leaders deliberately avoided talking about Sayyids’ role “as they could not tolerate alternate centres of authority”. Thus, Sayyid-ness may have lost some of its salience in public discourse during and after the colonial period. This does not mean that it lost all its relevance. As Fuchs suggests, Sayyid status continued to be seen—and feared—as a potential source of authority, well after Partition.

The articles in this special issue thus illuminate the tensions around Muslim social stratification, visible in Sayyid Abdul Qayyum Chavavri’s quote with which we opened this Introduction. They also show that the underpinnings of Sayyid-ness evolved according to time, place and socio-political exigencies. While the pre-eminence of Sayyids was sometimes asserted, in other contexts it was downplayed. In this way, the uses of the ‘Sayyid’ category in texts and in social practices took part in historically-specific tussles over power, social hierarchy and religious authority.

By tracing the evolutions of the uses and meanings of Sayyid-ness among South Asian Muslims from the early modern period to post-independence, this collection of articles aims to contribute, more largely, to the development of an emerging field of study—‘sayyido-sharifology’, a point developed in Kazuo Morimoto’s Afterword. According to Morimoto, the purpose of ‘sayyido-sharifology’ is to seek a “holistic understanding”, though by no means monolithic, “of sayyid/sharif as a category of people that are widely distributed throughout various Muslim societies”. Far from projecting an essentialising image of Sayyid-ness, by focusing on historical change these studies de-naturalise Sayyid and Ashraf social superiority as a “well-understood and accepted fact”. They further shift attention from the debate on ‘Muslim caste’, often marred by Hindu-centric assumptions, to focus instead on social dynamics among South Asian Muslims ‘in their own terms’. In so doing, these studies highlight the importance of the local, while pointing to possible comparisons with Muslim groups outside South Asia.

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