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JUSTIN JONES

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The Local Experiences of Reformist Islam in a ‘Muslim’ Town in Colonial India: The Case of Amroha

JUSTIN JONES

*Centre of South Asian Studies, Laundress Lane, Cambridge, CB2 1SD, UK
Email: justin.jones@cantab.net*

Abstract

This paper discusses shifts within Islamic life, ritual and practice in the town of Amroha in the United Provinces of India, during the eventful period of approximately 1860–1930. Based primarily upon Urdu writings produced about or by Muslim residents of the town during this period, it examines the ways in which wider religious reformist movements such as those associated with Aligarh, Deoband and Bareilly were received and experienced within nearby smaller, supposedly marginal urban settlements. The paper argues that broader currents of religious reform were not unquestioningly accepted in Amroha, but were often engaged in a constant process of dialogue and accommodation with local particularities. The first section introduces Amroha and its *sharif* Muslim population, focusing upon how the town’s Islamic identity was defined and described. The second section examines a plethora of public religious rites and institutions emerging during this period, including *madrasas* and *imambaras*, discussing how these were used by eminent local families to reinforce distinctly local hierarchies and cultural particularities. A third section considers public debates in Amroha concerning the Aligarh movement, arguing that these debates enhanced local rivalries, especially those between Shia and Sunni Muslims. A final section interrogates the growing culture of religious disputation in the town, suggesting that such debate facilitated the negotiation of religious change in a transitory social environment.

Introduction

The history of movements of Islamic revival and reform in South Asia from the eighteenth century onwards has often been written from the perspective of their major urban centres. We have, for instance,

The author would like to thank Professor C.A. Bayly for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

excellent studies of the so-called 'Delhi reform tradition' of Shah Wali Ullah and Abdul Aziz, whose 'scholarly network centered in Delhi ... provided contacts with students and other *'ulama* from a wide area'.¹ Others have elucidated how a simultaneous Shia revival in north India was engineered from Lucknow, by Dildar Ali and his circle of *mujtahids*.² For the later period, we have expert assessments of the secularised, modernising advance of Aligarh College, the scripturalist resurgence from the *madrassa* (religious school) in the town of Deoband, and the powerful reassertion of shrine-based customs often referred to as the Bareilvi tradition.³ Each of these has discussed Islam in the terms of what one analyst has called an 'urban religion',⁴ implying that wide religious change was engineered by comparatively small intellectual circles in a finite list of particular urban centres. They used the facilities offered by their municipal locations, including social and intellectual connections, patronage by urban literati, access to print and other communications, combined with a largely urban culture of public organisation, in order to promulgate their reformist agendas to more marginal Muslim populations.

As such, existing historiography has tended to depict processes of Islamic reform as a form of one-way traffic, with somewhat universalistic agendas and norms constructed in certain towns, and then, imparted with some uniformity to the populations of others. Attempting to shift the focus away from how reformist Islam was promulgated and towards how it was locally understood and received, this paper offers a discussion of the Muslim populations of the smaller towns and rural settlements (*gasbas*) of the Gangetic plains. The Muslim *ashraf* ('noble' castes) of such urban environments have often been identified at the very forefront of the Islamic reformist movements of the colonial period, and portrayed as their rather

¹ Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton, 1982), p. 63. Especially important in this regard are Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times: A Study of Eighteenth Century Islam, Politics and Society in India* (Marifat: Canberra, 1980) and *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz: Puritanism, Sectarian Polemics and Jihad* (Marifat: Canberra, 1982).

² Juan R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley: California, 1988).

³ David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton: New Jersey, 1978); Metcalf, *Islamic revival*; Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Bareilvi and His Movement, 1870–1920* (Oxford: Delhi, 1996).

⁴ Janel L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Islamic city – historic myth, Islamic essence and contemporary relevance' in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1987), p. 156.

unthinking and submissive adherents. It has long been argued that the *sharif* ('noble') milieu of the townships of the United Provinces (U.P.) was the ideological and social base of the Deobandi, Aligarhist and other reform traditions, and ultimately, of the religio-political doctrine of Muslim 'separatism'.⁵ In each case, the scholarly emphasis has been on how the distinctions of local identity and kinship were subordinated to the more inclusive and expansive rallying cry of Muslim religious community in colonial India.

This paper investigates processes of religious and social change among the Muslim *ashraf* of just one town: Amroha, in Moradabad district of the U.P. It seeks to relocate attention away from text-based readings of ideological reformist movements, and towards the evolving small-town environments in which Islamic change was most immediately and most imminently experienced. Discussing the eventful period of approximately 1860–1930, it examines developments within municipal Islamic life and practice within the kind of town that has often been identified as the recruiting ground for wider reformist movements, at a time when they were at their most vigorous and pervasive. It argues that, rather than simply acting as a receptacle for reformist agendas imported from elsewhere, the Muslim *ashraf* of Amroha were caught in a constant process of negotiation between broader, standardised agendas and local distinctiveness. As such, wider processes of religious change were not simply unquestioningly reproduced in the *qasba*, but often prompted quite unique individual and collective religious configurations through their interaction with the local environment.

The paper opens with a descriptive social history of the town and its Muslim population, and then, discusses the experience of an apparent public rejuvenation of Islam in colonial Amroha, assessing how it was bound up with shifts in the meaning of being a *sharif* Muslim and discussing the interaction between local religious change and broader reformist movements in colonial India. A third section assesses the interaction of the town's *sharif* Muslims with the Islamic modernist agenda coming out of Aligarh, discussing how the Aligarh movement

⁵ Over half of Aligarh's students shared a background in the small north Indian towns and *qasbas*. Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, pp. 180–184. Metcalf cites the *qasbati* origins of many of the founders, teachers and pupils of Deoband's *madrasa*. E.g. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, p. 85. The *qasba* roots of many of the 'separatist' Muslim politicians of the colonial era are identified in Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims, 1860–1923* (Cambridge: London, 1974), pp. 358–418.

was perceived in a local context and how debates over Aligarh came to overlap with religious controversies. The final section discusses the development of religious disputation in Amroha, especially that between Shia and Sunni Muslims, investigating its role in the life of the town and its relationship with the broader reworking of religious identities in colonial India.

Amroha and the 'Ideal *Qasba* Society'

Composed of a fairly steady 35,000 inhabitants (of whom around 41% were Muslims),⁶ Amroha was comparable with towns like Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor or Budaun as one of the middle-sized townships of the North Western Provinces, larger than the archetypal rural township but far smaller than district towns such as Meerut, Moradabad or Aligarh. These middling towns have often been sidelined in scholarship, too small to earn the attentions of urban historians and too large for those who have identified the 'village community' as the most suitable arena for the writing of history.⁷ Moreover, it sat virtually equidistant between the major Muslim reformist centres of Delhi, Aligarh, Deoband and Bareilly, meaning that it frequently received communications, emissaries and printed materials from each of these centres. Despite being a centre of rich historical interest, Amroha has received little attention in English-language scholarship.⁸ However, the existence of a vigorous printing industry here from the 1880s gave rise to many vernacular publications from which a social history of the Muslim *ashraf* of Amroha, who left behind the richest legacy of literature and sources on their families and lifestyles, can be reconstructed.

Despite its size, Amroha was in many ways typical of the Muslim *qasbas*, the term assigned to the gentrified Muslim townships that emerged on the Gangetic plains during the Mughal period. Printed vernacular texts by local authors repeatedly describe Amroha as a *qasba*, while it is further qualified as such by the reliance of the

⁶ H.R. Nevill, *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, Volume XVI: Moradabad* (Allahabad, 1911), pp. 68, 176–177.

⁷ Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago: Chicago, 1981), pp. 158–164.

⁸ The only English-language discussion of Amroha of note is S.M. Azizuddin Husain, *Medieval Towns, a Case Study of Amroha and Jalali* (Hira: New Delhi, 1995).

town's Muslim gentries upon inherited landed wealth.⁹ Scholarship has long sustained a somewhat romantic image of these towns and their religious life according to the prototype of what authors have termed the 'ideal Muslim *qasbah* society', or the '*qasbah*-way of life'.¹⁰ By this interpretation, which has been widely influential in scholarship, the internal cohesion of these settlements was fostered through the ties of kinship and marriage alliances among its principal *sharif* Muslim families, and a common Indo-Persian literary culture shared by Muslim and Hindu gentries.¹¹

Amroha's main landowning clique was its *sayyids*, an influential and ancestrally distinguished community who feature prominently in this paper and warrant some initial introduction. An archetypal example of the rural Muslim gentries of the colonial U.P., they had been settled on revenue-free (*mu'afi*) grants of land since the late Mughal period, upon which they maintained a tenacious hold under Rohilla, Nawabi, and later, colonial rulers. They traced their ancestry to Sharf-ud-din Ali (known as Shah Wilayat), a descendant of the tenth Imam Ali Naqi, from Wasit in Iraq. He founded Amroha after his arrival in north India in the early fourteenth century, and it was his numerous descendants, it was said, who established the numerous *muhallas* (neighbourhoods) of Amroha as the town expanded.¹² This *muhalla*-based topographical structure has continued to determine the layout of the town, with

⁹ Amroha's wealth was mostly drawn from land revenues, and there was little industry to speak of. This said, the town acted as a market town for the *pargana* and there seem to have been small trades in pottery, toy making and other crafts, perhaps those connected to the periodic fairs held in the town during 'urs, Muharram, Ramlila and other religious festivals.

¹⁰ C.A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1983), p. 192; Claudia Liebeskind, *Piety on Its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Delhi, 1998), p. 47.

¹¹ This view has been wide-reaching and is common to Muzaffar Alam, 'Religion and politics in Awadh society: 17th and early 18th centuries,' in Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Ave Lallemand (eds.), *Islam and Indian Religions* (Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart, 1993), pp. 326–329, 333–335, 343–349; Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 189–193, 349–354; Mushirul Hasan, *From Pluralism to Separatism: Qasbas in Colonial Awadh* (Oxford: New Delhi, 2004), pp. 1–46; Gyanandra Pandey, "Encounters and calamities": The history of a north Indian *qasba* in the nineteenth century,' in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1984), 231–270; Khizar Humayun Ansari, *The Emergence of Socialist Thought Among North Indian Muslims, 1917–1947* (Book traders: Lahore, 1990), pp. 119–130.

¹² The history of the *sayyids* and their major families is available in the following works: Asghar Husain, *Tarikh-i-Asghari* (Moradabad, 1889); Mahmud

these neighbourhoods, named after and dominated by their leading *sharif* families, acting as intermediary units between public and private space.¹³

In the colonial U.P., *sayyids* were said to be more abundant in Amroha than in any town except Lucknow, numbering some four or five thousand individuals.¹⁴ Amroha's *sayyids* held relational ties with families in neighbouring settlements such as Nauganwan Sadat, and less directly, family and cultural connections with broader *sayyid* networks across Moradabad, Muzaffarnagar and Bijnor districts. Through the years of Mughal and post-Mughal history, many *sayyid* families apparently changed their religious allegiances at certain points, declaring themselves Shia or Sunni for advantages in wealth or status under the rulers of the day.¹⁵ Under the rule of the Nawab of Awadh before the British annexation of Rohilkhand in 1801, the town matured into possibly the most important and influential north Indian Shia centre after Lucknow. By the colonial period, a large majority of Amroha's *sayyid* families were Shias, while a small few remained Sunni and some *sayyid* families claimed strands of both religious denominations. These *sayyids* were not the only community of Muslim *ashraf* in the town, which also had many distinguished (mostly but not exclusively Sunni) *shaikh* and *pathan* families, many of whom had channelled their Mughal or Nawabi familial service backgrounds into employment in the colonial administration or the state of Hyderabad. An example of the latter, and among Amroha's most famous residents during the period, was Mushtaq Husain (Viqar-ul-Mulk), co-founder of the Muslim League in 1906.¹⁶

So entrenched was the importance of family background as a marker of personal respectability (*'izzat*) that *sharif* ancestry was boldly asserted. This can easily be seen in a plentiful genre of biographical writing which outlined the development of Amroha's

Ahmad Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha* (Delhi, 1930); Jamal Ahmad Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat-i-Amroha* (Hyderabad, 1934).

¹³ C.f. Janel L. Abu-Lughod, 'The Islamic city', pp. 163–164.

¹⁴ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, pp. 78–79; Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, p. 5; The Sunnis of Amroha to the Secretary of the North Western Provinces and Oudh, 29 February 1896, General Administration Department (GAD) 106C/64 of 1896, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow (UPSA); Anonymous on behalf of Sadat of Amroha, 4 August 1902, GAD 255/1903.

¹⁵ Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, pp. 263–267 gives numerous examples of families who converted from Sunni to Shia Islam and *vice versa*.

¹⁶ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 177; Francis Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, pp. 399–400.

leading Muslim families. Some works were records of individual *sayyid* families tracing their ancestral ties back to the Imams,¹⁷ while others were collective biographies (*tarikh-i-jami'*) which mapped the history of numerous *sharif* families of local prominence.¹⁸ These biographical genres existed in other north Indian *qasbas* but arguably no town in the region produced this literature with such regularity during the colonial period. Its effect was that knowledge of genealogy (*'ilm-i-nasb'*) was established as a category of learning in its own right, one that bound Amroha's civic history to the development of its most eminent families. So entrenched was the importance attached to personal *sharif* ancestry that certain aspiring families in the nineteenth century adopted anew honorific titles such as 'Sayyid' or 'Shaikh', sometimes eliciting protest from those jealously guarding such lineage.¹⁹

As such, Amroha was in one sense a diasporic space of various *sharif* families who claimed social authority on the basis of their frequently restated Middle Eastern or Central Asian origin.²⁰ On the other hand, contemporary Urdu accounts consistently evoke Amroha as a tight-knit and insular microcosm, a 'moral unit' with a powerful

¹⁷ One example is Nawab Ali Khan, *Shams ul-tawarikh* (Lucknow, 1898), an account of the influential local family of Amjad Ali Khan and his descendants, who feature prominently in this paper. Amjad Ali was a respected Shia *maulvi* (intellectual) and Deputy Collector of Amroha in the 1880s, while some of his close relatives and descendants became known for their work in law and government service in Kanpur and Lucknow. Further documentation in English pertaining to this family is available in Hamid Ali Khan (ed.), *The certificates etc of Hakim Mohamed Amjad Ali Khan, Hakim Mohamed Niaz Ali Khan, Khan Bahadur Shaikh Altaf Hasan Khan, and Munshi Shaukat Hasan* (Lucknow, 1899).

¹⁸ Examples include Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat* and Husain, *Tarikh-i-Asghari*.

¹⁹ For example, some families were accused of adding the prefix of 'Sayyid' to their names only after 1857, as a means of verifying the legitimacy of their *mu'afi* grants. A rebuke to such accusations by one individual is available in Sayyid Aal Ahmad Rizvi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha ke ek not par ijmalī nazar* (Aligarh 1930), *passim*. On the 'Musalmans of low caste who style themselves Sheikh for the purpose of respectability', see Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 77.

²⁰ On the sense of social distinction derived from foreign ancestry, and the role of *ashraf-ajlaf* discrepancies in Muslim social stratification, see Zarina Bhatti, 'Status and power in a Muslim dominated village of Uttar Pradesh', in Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification Among the Muslims* (Manohar: Delhi, 1973), pp. 89–106; Richard Kurin, 'The culture of ethnicity in Pakistan', in Katherine Ewing (ed.), *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam* (California: Berkeley, 1988), pp. 220–247; Cole, *Roots of north Indian Shi'ism*, pp. 72–84; Yoginder Sikand, *The Origins and Development of the Tablighi-Jama'at: A Cross-Comparative Study* (Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2002), pp. 18–20.

sense of its own distinctiveness.²¹ They describe the town as a garden (*chaman*), calling upon Persian-derived imagery of nobility (*'umran*) and decorum (*shirafat*).²² Like other such settlements, local authors would describe the town as a *haram*, a secure town or sanctuary, a term which was in Indo-Persian literature commonly associated with Mecca and as such gave the *qasba* an imminent connection with the site of the Prophet's revelation.²³ Indeed, such authors frequently located Amroha's legitimacy as a 'Muslim' town in its internal perfection of Islamic society. The town is depicted as insular and unchanging, peculiarly detached from the geographical and historical context of the north Indian plains surrounding it. The image is conjured of an isolated oasis of calm little changed from the Mughal period; even the 1857 rebellion was said to have had no memorable ramifications in Amroha.²⁴

These same vernacular accounts of Amroha describe the town's diverse array of lived religious traditions, offering a portrait of a syncretistic and assimilatory Islamic culture quite in keeping with the established scholarly image of the *qasba* society. Many of Amroha's oldest mosques, *'Eidgahs*, *imambaras* (edifices for, respectively, Eid prayers and Muharram commemorations) and *dargahs* (shrines) had existed since the Mughal period and defined the town's public space, while the festivals and anniversaries associated with them determined at once the daily life and annual calendar of the town.

These institutions and functions together composed a local religious life marked by the interdependence and overlap of religious systems somewhat detached from the more compartmentalising reformist movements of the nineteenth century. The annual functions associated with the town's forty or so shrines to local saints and *pirs* (holy men), including those of Sharf-ud-din Ali, Aza-l'ud-din and Nasir-ud-din, were widely attended by Muslim and Hindus alike. Local *sayyids* supported the commemorations of the town's founding saints

²¹ This phrase is borrowed from the discussion of how the village is continuously conceived and redefined in Magnus Marsden, *Living Islam: Muslim Religious Experience on Pakistan's North-West Frontier* (Cambridge, 2005), *passim*.

²² Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, pp. 12–19.

²³ An especially lucid example of the use of such language to describe Mecca drawn from the Indo-Persian literary culture of the north Indian *qasbas* is Ghulam Ali Azad Bilgrami's *Subhat ul-marjan fi athar Hindustan*, a section of which is available in Carl Ernst, 'India as a sacred Islamic land', in Donald S. Lopez (ed.), *Religions of India in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton, 1995), pp. 556–563.

²⁴ Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, pp. 9–12.

from whom they were themselves often descended, meaning that attendance at the *'urs* (death anniversaries) of the town's founders and other functions remained popular and vigorously observed.²⁵ At the same time, the numerous religious groupings within the town appeared to participate together in the rites of Muharram, the annual commemorations of the martyrdom of Husain grounded in Shia Islam, binding together the town's residents according to a Shia-tinged civic culture. Accounts of Muharram in Amroha describe all religious communities attending Muharram sermons and parading effigies of Husain's tomb, while the most ardent of Shias came out onto the town's streets to engage in *matamdari*, self-flagellation as a form of penitence.²⁶ The town produced a number of prominent Shia *'ulama* and poets of *marsiya*, a form of commemorative poetry recited during Muharram.²⁷ The overall impression, then, is of an acculturative, accommodative and *ashraf*-led local Islamic life which drew from a number of religious systems and traditions. Accounts of Amroha depict the town as the home of numerous Muslim *buzurgan* (nobles), *hakims* (Unani physicians), *musha'ikh* (scholars), *'ulama* (the 'learned'), *auliyan* (saints), *'arifan* (mystics), poets and *wa'izen* (preachers).²⁸ The lines separating these various and overlapping functions were ambiguous and blurred, giving the impression of a composite and intertwined body of local Muslim religious life and practice.

The close municipal interconnection and interdependence of Sufi, Shia and Sunni traditions meant that relations between Muslim schools and sects seemed to be cordial and cooperative for the large bulk of the nineteenth century. Descriptive tracts from the 1870s depict Shia *sayyids* of neighbourhoods such as Darbar-i-Kalan

²⁵ For an account of the management and thriving functions of some of these *maqbaras* and *dargahs*, see *ibid.*, pp. 28–39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 43–45; Husain, *Tarikh-i-Asghari*, pp. 25–32.

²⁷ The most important Shia *'alim* to emerge from Amroha was Sayyid Najm ul-Hasan, who became one of the most prominent Indian *mujtahids* of the early twentieth century. See Sayyid Murtaza Husain, *Matla'-i-anwar: Tazkira-i-Shi'a afazil-va-'ulama, kabir-i-bar-i-saghir-i-Pak-va-Hind* (Karachi, 1981), pp. 675–678. For some examples of and biographical information on Amrohavi poets of *marsiya*, see Misbah Ahmad Saddiqi, *Shoara-i-Amroha* (Rampur, 2004).

²⁸ These roles are seemingly used almost interchangeably in some accounts of notable Amrohavi families, e.g. Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, pp. 259–272; Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, pp. 22–28. The town had so many active *hakims* that it was described as a 'sanatorium' for visiting wealthy Muslims. E. Alexander, *Final Report of the Settlement of the Moradabad District* (Allahabad, 1881), p. 66.

and Shifayat Pota as conducting recitations of the Qur'an (*hifz*) in front of large mutual congregations of Shias and Sunnis, both in Amroha itself and in nearby towns.²⁹ Local Shia *hafiz* (reciters of the Qur'an) appeared to train students in their skills without sectarian discrimination. The best example of this is the local and well-regarded Shia *'alim* Amjad Ali Khan, a member of one of the most famous religious families of Amroha who authored numerous religious tracts and eventually became Deputy Collector of Amroha in the 1880s. He tutored many aspiring religious functionaries, who included not just his Shia co-religionists but also Bareilvi Sunnis.³⁰

The colonial period was a challenging era for the landed Muslim gentries of north India and as such for the *qasbati* environment itself, and Amroha was no exception. For some fifty years after the first government review of the district's land settlement in 1809, the established landowners of the North Western Provinces were subject to British legislation intended to undermine the holders of *mu'afi* grants, an economic group seen with unqualified disdain by the government.³¹ At the same time, landowning *sayyids* were under pressure on account of Muslim laws of inheritance as instituted in colonial India, which stipulated the automatic subdivision of estates among the descendants of a deceased landholder. In families where younger generations had maintained their ancestors' extravagance but not secured careers in service professions or commerce, this loss of land led to acute economic problems.³² Many of Amroha's landholders became heavily indebted to moneylenders; others were forced to sell their land to Hindu trading castes such as Banias or Khatris. Around half of the *sayyids*' collective land was lost in the short thirty years after 1850.³³ By the beginning of

²⁹ Khan, *Shams-ul-tawarikh*, pp. 113–114.

³⁰ Ibid, pp. 114–115. Amjad Ali's extensive religious writings include *Kanz-ul-ma'rifat* (Lucknow, 1891), a work on *kalam* (dialectic), as well as *Nasir-ul-Iman*, which is discussed below.

³¹ Thomas Metcalf, *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (California: Berkeley, 1979), pp. 68–69; Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 85. A more detailed account of British land policy in the district and its effects is available in Lance Brennan, *Land Policy and Social Change in North India: Rohilkhand 1800–1911* (Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1978).

³² 'Owing to constant subdivision . . . the state of the Amroha Saiyids in particular is far from satisfactory. Their number is very large, as they increase their property diminishes . . . until the large majority of them learn that they must seek their livelihood elsewhere than from the land, matters will not improve'. H.J. Boas, *Final Report on the Eleventh Settlement of Moradabad District* (Allahabad, 1909), p. 10b.

³³ Alexander, *Final Report*, pp. 29–31; Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 88.

the twentieth century, Amroha's *sayyids* were characterised by colonial observers as a 'generally impoverished body' sliding ever further into debt and degeneration.³⁴

The narrative of the decline of the '*qasba* society' thereafter is well known. The *qasba*'s insularity was compromised by urbanisation, the development of communications, the integration of north Indian markets, high inflation, and in Amroha's case, the coming of the railway in 1900.³⁵ At the same time, the infiltration of Western education and the erosion of local Sufi and syncretistic religious practices by reformist strands of Islam came to undermine the distinct cultures of these townships.³⁶ Finally, the emigration of Muslim gentries in 1947 and *zamindari* abolition soon afterwards collectively hastened the demise of the *qasba*.³⁷ However, the receding *qasbas* did not simply persist in their traditional, unchanging and insular ethos until their ultimate deterioration. Instead, the residents of such *qasbas* during the colonial period were engaged in constant dialogue, seeking ways to maintain the distinctiveness of their township as a cohesive unit during a time of massive socio-economic change. As is demonstrated by subsequent sections of this paper, the religious life of the *qasba* underwent a prolonged period of reassessment and reconstruction as various voices attempted to amalgamate established religious life with the modern pressures inflicted both inwardly and outwardly upon the former sanctuary of the *qasba*.

Muslim Religious Life and *Ashrafisation* in Colonial Amroha

Two assumptions in particular have informed studies of Islamic renewal in colonial India. The first, as discussed above, is that reformist movements were defined in intellectual centres such as Deoband, Bareilly or Aligarh, and thereafter, promulgated more widely by

³⁴ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, pp. 97, 176; also Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, pp. 340–341.

³⁵ 'The Mutiny marks a turning point, for thereafter the prices rose sharply, owing to a series of famines and the development of communications, accentuated by the introduction of railways and the growth of trade'. Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, pp. 46–47. For a discussion of the economic decline of the *qasbas*, see Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 355–358.

³⁶ Liebeskind, *Piety on Its Knees*, pp. 251–264.

³⁷ These arguments are evident in Hasan, *From Pluralism to Separatism*, pp. 46–51, 245–281.

the networks of *'ulama* and other religious functionaries educated in these towns. The second is that these movements facilitated an *'ashrafisation'* of religious life in north India, by which distinctly *sharif* concerns and cultures such as religious knowledge, social etiquette and refined language became propagated as the norm for all Muslims. A parallel to processes of *'Sanskritisation'* among Hindu reformists, the dissemination of relatively uniform reformist agendas offered the practices and cultures of the noble Muslim *ashraf* to lower caste (*ajlaf*) Muslims, facilitating wide participation in the *'great traditions'* of Islam and constructing a sense of shared religious commonality able to transcend class and locality.³⁸ This impression has come about through a text-based assessment of religious change during this period, giving less attention to the ways in which dialogues of religious renewal were received in particular Muslim-dominated towns.

Focusing tightly upon religious change as experienced in Amroha suggests that, rather than linking the local *ashraf* into wider dialogues of Muslim religious renewal, these religious movements took on distinct local forms somewhat at odds from these wider agendas. Rather than building a standardised inventory of religious tenets rooted in *sharif* values, the town's *ashraf* used religious reform to boost their local esteem against the encroachment of outside influence, reasserting and renegotiating their social prominence as lasting and viable distinctions for the colonial period. As such, rather than the promulgation of uniform precepts across the province, there was instead a constant dialogue between universalistic programmes for religious renewal and the distinctiveness of local religious leadership and practice.

As was demonstrated above, the *sayyids* had long been the major patrons of religious life in the *qasba*, and their engagement only strengthened following the challenges to their prosperity and social eminence that emerged during the colonial period. Crucial in understanding religious change in Amroha is their creation of numerous *waqfs*, religious endowments established in perpetuity according to Islamic law. Some studies have shown that Muslim elites in U.P. commonly created such endowments in the colonial period as a means of consolidating their fortunes, keeping their estates intact

³⁸ See especially Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 252–260.

and preventing their subdivision or sale by their heirs.³⁹ Accounts of Amroha correspondingly allude to the foundation of numerous such trusts, especially in the three decades from the 1860s–1880s.⁴⁰ While created to prevent economic deterioration, however, these trusts also came during the period to have an unprecedented religious impact. The British understanding of *waqf* law as manifested in the courts, especially after the Endowments Act of 1863, tended to see *waqfs* as valid only if they substantially supported some public, religious or charitable purpose, while 'family' foundations (*waqf-al-ul-aulad*) were declared void.⁴¹ The implication of this was that any Muslim individual establishing such a trust had reason to attach it to some public religious institution, which meant either tying it to one already existing or creating a new one.

This spate of endowment creation, and the specification of British law which demanded the attachment of personal fortunes to religious or charitable causes, partially explains the rapid emergence of various public religious institutions in colonial Amroha. Such institutions were a means by which *sharif* communities of Amroha exercised the twin functions of securing their family wealth and consolidating their public influence.

In addition, they would go on to initiate a subsequent and substantial renovation of local religious life. New mosques were constructed, and others were enlarged.⁴² Additionally, the colonial era was notable for the creation of several important *madrasas* (religious schools), which were generously funded through endowments newly drawn up by wealthy town residents. So-called *madrasas* had existed in Amroha from the eighteenth century, founded and managed by individuals in the side rooms of mosques or private homes, or within the institutional structures and patronage networks of *khanqaqs*

³⁹ E.g. Lance Brennan, 'The illusion of security: The background to Muslim separatism in the United Provinces', in Mushirul Hasan (ed.), *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilisation* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1993), pp. 341–346.

⁴⁰ Various examples, some of which are cited below, are available in Sayyid Ali Abbas Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane* (Amroha, 2003), passim. Another batch of *waqfs* were apparently founded in the 1920s–1930s, perhaps those decades in which social and economic pressures were felt most acutely by *sharif* families. Ibid, pp. 66–67, 116.

⁴¹ Asaf A.A. Fyze, *Outlines of Muhammadan Law: Fourth Edition* (Oxford: New Delhi, 2003), pp. 301–302; Gregory C. Kozlowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985), pp. 150–151.

⁴² Most importantly, the Shia *jama' masjid* (Friday mosque), first constructed around 1817, was substantially enlarged in 1865–1866. Khan, *Shams ul-tawarikh*, pp. 114; Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, pp. 44–45.

(Sufi orders).⁴³ They tended to be small and informal affairs, reinforcing a personal teacher–student relationship and buttressing lines of kinship and personal acquaintance as the prime conduits of religious learning. Perhaps taking the lead from the creation of fresh Islamic schools elsewhere in the province, Amroha emerged from the 1880s as the location of some of the largest and most influential *madrasas* in north India, on both Shia and Sunni sides. Despite obvious variances in their curricula, these *madrasas* were similar in their adoption of formalised curricula and collective methods of teaching.

Amroha's first Sunni *madrasa* of this period was the Madrasa-i-Khurshid Jahi, founded by Sayyid Zahoor Hasan of Katkoi *muhalla* in 1881–1882, with Madrasa-i-Muhammadiyya appearing the same year. It was quickly eclipsed by the Madrasa-i-Islamia, founded by the legendary *'alim* of Deoband Sayyid Qasim Nanautawi and modelled upon the Deobandi curriculum. The *madrasa* was overseen by a committee of local *'ulama* and Sunni residents of the town, and ultimately included some 250 students from as far afield as Punjab, Bihar and Bengal.⁴⁴ Developments were no less dramatic among the town's Shias, as resident *sayyids* established several influential Shia schools. The first was Sayyid-ul-Madaris, which began as an Urdu *maktab* (school) and matured into an Arabic *madrasa* from 1894. It contained some 120 students and produced *'ulama* and *zakirs* (reciters) who became widely present across India.⁴⁵ No less significant was Imam-ul-Madaris, founded in 1901.⁴⁶ Nor-ul-Madaris followed in 1904. It was financed through a *waqf* founded by several *sayyids* of the town and managed by Sayyid Murtaza Husain, one of the most famed Shia *'ulama* produced in Amroha.⁴⁷

The formation of these several *madrasas* identifies Amroha not as a passive recipient of an Islamic revival primarily propelled from elsewhere, but at the very heart of the religious and intellectual networks which promulgated reformist trends within Islam during the colonial period. Many of the foremost Sunni and Shia *'ulama* of colonial

⁴³ As is the case with, for instance, the Madrasa-i-Mu'aziya (founded 1726–1727), Madrasa-i-Maulvi Dost Muhammad and Madrasa-i-Mir Kullu (founded 1758–1759). Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, pp. 138–141.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 142–144.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 144–145; Khan, *Shams ul-tawarikh*, p. 114; *General report upon public instruction in the North Western Provinces and Oudh 1912*, V/24/916, Oriental and India Office Collections, London (OIOC), pp. 99–100.

⁴⁶ Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, p. 146; Naqvi, *Tarikh-i-sadat*, p. 44.

⁴⁷ Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, p. 145; Husain, *Matla'-i-anwar*, p. 636.

north India were deeply involved with these Amrohavi educational institutions, while the numbers of teachers and students attributed to these *madrasas* implies that Amroha was comparable with towns such as Delhi, Lucknow or Deoband in its ability to attract aspiring students from other centres. These students, once trained, would then carry their Amrohavi learning back to their native townships, and in some cases, found institutions in their image.⁴⁸

Alongside the foundation of these *madrasas*, another example of the establishment of religious institutions upon new endowments was the creation of numerous *imambaras*, buildings for the collective observance of Muharram. These same decades after 1863 were marked by the sudden emergence of a plethora of *imambaras*. Imambara Shabbir Ali (founded 1868), Imambara Shaikh Abdullah and Imambara Misma't ul-Chaji (both c.1870), Imambara Randon (1878) and Imambara Miswa't ul-Jiwani (1880s), were just a few examples of this wider trend, along with similar structures in the houses of *sayyid* families in Haqani and Daneshmand *muhallas*.⁴⁹ Not all of those individuals founding such *imambaras* were *sayyids* and not all were Shias, but most were both. Some of these *imambaras* were substantial public buildings; others were simple structures within private homes, but by the terms of the trusts upon which they were founded they were termed as essentially public spaces, admitting the population of their *muhalla* during the weeks of Muharram.

Significantly, the construction of these new *imambaras* enhanced the public vigour of Muharram and expanded local participation, extending it to assumedly peripheral sections of the population. Some made a point of including the Sunni and Hindu as well as Shia residents of their neighbourhoods, while a number of others were built to serve women.⁵⁰ Distinguished Shia *sayyids* of *muhallas* such as Darbar-i-Kalan, Saddu and Pachdara financed the construction

⁴⁸ For example Sayyid Sibte Nabi, a resident of the outpost of Nauganwan Sadat adjacent to Amroha who came to Amroha to study in Nor ul-Madaris, returned to his own settlement to found the Bab-ul-'ilm *maktab* around 1914. Husain, *Matla'-i-anwar*, p. 261.

⁴⁹ Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 68–70, 78–79, 91–93, 125; Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, pp. 367–371. Further *imambaras* were founded in the 1920s–40s, including Imambara Misma't-ul-Nisa in 1927 and Naqalon Imambara in 1928. Two of the town's largest *imambaras* were founded in 1942 and 1946 in Daneshmand and Bagla *muhallas* respectively. Ibid, pp. 39, 127; Husain, *Medieval Towns*, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁰ These include Imambara Miswa't ul-Wahiden (founded 1873–1874), Imambara Miswa't ul-Khatun-i-Daulat (c.1880s) and Imambara Imamia Khatun (1928). Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 78–79, 90–92, 140–141.

of *ta'ziyas* (effigies of Husain's tomb) and invited renowned *zakirs* (preachers) to offer narrations of the Karbala tragedy within their neighbourhoods, establishing Amroha as a frequent stop for religious functionaries from various north Indian towns.⁵¹ The fact that in many cases these religious functions took place within the dwellings of *sayyids* blurred the lines separating household from *muhalla*, and private from public religious space.

Several major inferences result from this assessment. The first, contradicting the classic image of the *qasba* as a backwater of unchanging local cultures, is that there was a major transformation of the public religious life of the town in the several decades after 1863. The foundation of Islamic schools, construction of new mosques and *imambaras* and expansion of public Muharram rites all identify early twentieth century Amroha as a very different place from that of earlier generations. In one sense, we could understand this as a reassertion of religion by the town's *ashraf* in the public space as a visible symbol of cultural resilience. All these religious institutions, vigorously patronised by local families isolated by socio-economic modernisation and funded by religious endowments, represented efforts to sustain Muslim religious life outside the framework of the colonial state.⁵² The collective Islamic life of Amroha may have constituted a form of resistance to a colonial present that was perceived as threatening and encroaching, the public representations of Islam reinforcing the *qasba*'s insularity and representing for its *sharif* inhabitants an 'alternative world' to that outside the town limits.⁵³ Colonial rule, ran a local saying, did not exist in Amroha.⁵⁴

In turn, the increased public exhibitionism of Islamic practices was frequently accompanied by the enhancement of religious boundaries during the period. It was perhaps the construction of new mosques in the town that prompted the introduction of a contentious phrase

⁵¹ Famous preachers and reciters who visited Amroha during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries included Mir Anis, Zahoor Hasan and Maqbul Ahmad. Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 63, 76–77, 83, 91–92; All India Shia Conference, *Ro'idad-i-ijlas-i-*chhata-i-Al Indiya Shi'a Kanferans munaqida 18–20 Aktuber 1912* (Lucknow, 1913), p. 182.*

⁵² See especially Francis Robinson, 'The Muslims of Upper India and the shock of the Mutiny', in Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia* (Oxford: Delhi, 2000), p. 151; Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 11–12.

⁵³ The phrase is taken from Sandra Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in Colonial North India* (California: Berkeley, 1989), p. 6.

⁵⁴ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 176.

proclaiming Ali to be *Khalifa-bila-fasil*, 'Caliph without interruption' implying the illegitimacy of the first three Caliphs, into the *azan* (call to prayer) of a number of Shia mosques in several neighbourhoods in the early 1890s.⁵⁵ At the same time, the construction of new *imambaras* seemed to encourage their managing *sayyids* to introduce flamboyant and distinguishing features of their own into the processions. Customs and rites such as *matamdari*, the *tabut* (wooden tomb representation) and the *duldul* (a replica of Husain's steed), all of which were previously occasional exceptionalisms within Amroha, were commonly enshrined in the deeds of the endowments and introduced as a matter of course in various neighbourhoods in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁶ Additionally, the construction of several *madrasas* contributed to the careful and public delineation of the boundaries between Shia, Sunni, Sufi and other Islamic schools and systems. Such differentiation was likely just as strong between variant Sunni groups; it seems probable that the presence of the Deobandi Madrasa-i-Islamia would have hardened the division between its members and the local Sunni majority who attended the town's *dargahs* and were broadly categorised as Bareilvis.⁵⁷ As such, the numerous religious organisations and institutions created during the period brought with them an enhanced consciousness of difference between Islamic schools and systems, and collectively superseded strands of religious life often categorised as syncretistic or acculturative.

A further deduction is that many *sharif* Muslims of Amroha engaged strongly with public religious life less to bind Amroha into processes of Islamic renewal propelled from elsewhere or to construct Muslim communal solidarities across the specifics of kinship, but rather to shore up a distinct local culture established upon *sharif* notions of respectability. Instead of attempting to offer an *ashrafised* Islam to the population as a whole, this analysis demonstrates that those very rituals and institutions which were invigorated in Amroha

⁵⁵ Petition from Musammat Zainab of Darbar Kalam mosque, 10 October 1895; Residents of Mohalla Darbar Kalam Amroha to Government of India, 19 October 1895; The Shias of Amroha to Mac Donnell, Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Provinces and Oudh, 19 December 1895, GAD 106C/64 of 1896. It was often newly built mosques into which this phrase was introduced. Husain, *Matla'-i-Anwar*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 78–79, 94, 106; Official translation of a petition from Saiyid Gulsham Ali resident of Mohalla Qazizada and others, Amroha, 20 January 1896, to Government of India, GAD 106C/64 of 1896.

⁵⁷ For instance, as in Shamra'l ud-din Ahmad, *Shikast-i-'azim ba'i-ada-i-Qur'an-i-karim* (Lucknow, 1920), pp. 1–2.

substantially reinforced the social eminence of those *sharif* castes who founded and financed them, and their presence within the everyday life of the *qasba*. Their funding by the endowments of established local gentries kept the guardianship of this Islamic renewal in far more traditional hands than has often been admitted.⁵⁸ The *imambaras* and the endowments which funded them most frequently carried the names of their founder or an earlier member of his family, as did as the rites associated with them such as the *majalis* (sermons) and *juloos* (processions).⁵⁹

Furthermore, those institutions and practices patronised by the *ashraf* were often those designed to express their ancestral and ethnic distinction. Indeed, both ‘Sufi’ and ‘Shia’ elements were locally put towards this same common purpose. Visitations to *dargahs* and the veneration of the town’s founding saints reinforced the status of their *sayyid* descendants as modern exemplars. At the same time, the rites of Muharram projected the virtues of the 12 Imams, and by extension, of those same living *sayyids* who now managed such practices.⁶⁰

As such, *ashrafisation* in Amroha entailed an enhanced insularity into genealogical and local particularity. These findings somewhat contradict the suggestions of some analysts that differences between *sharif* and *desi* (‘native’) Muslims were communicated in linguistic or cultural terms, while Islam acted as a ‘shared cultural system’ and a source of common affiliation.⁶¹ Instead, they suggest that particular religious rites and practices were used to communicate and consolidate ethnic distinctions. Ancestral merit was reasserted as a viable marker of moral excellence and leadership in a colonial context.⁶² In fact, it could be further argued that this *ashrafisation* of Islam gave the notion of being a *sharif* Muslim some form of cohesion.

⁵⁸ E.g. Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, p. 144. This contrasts with the funding of the *madrasa* at Deoband and other such schools by multiple public donations as discussed in Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 248–252.

⁵⁹ To give just one example of this standard practice, the *juloos* and *majalis* administered from Imambara-i-Shaikh Auliya were named after Karam Ali Khan, the father of the man who founded them at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Naqvi, *Amroha ke ‘aza khane*, p. 63.

⁶⁰ To give one example of how the rites of Muharram could heighten the status of *sayyid* ancestry, one text of this period which glorifies Muharram rites distinguishes the collective descendants of the Prophet (‘*bet-i-nasb*’) from other Muslims, and suggests that the Qur’an itself demands reverence for the relatives of the Prophet. Sa‘id Abid Ali, *Fazilat-nama-i-ta‘ziya* (Bhraich, 1908), p. 4.

⁶¹ Kurin, ‘The culture of ethnicity’, p. 221.

⁶² This take on the *ashrafisation* of Islam in Amroha bears some resemblance to what Oskar Verkaaik has called the ‘ethnicisation of Islam’, by which religious practices tend to divide along, communicate and enhance ethnic distinctions. Oskar Verkaaik,

At a time when economic decline and the subdivision of estates had the capacity to cause numerous squabbles within and between *sharif* families, some form of family and caste solidarity could perhaps be maintained through shared participation in religious institutions and management of rites which carried the names of exalted family members.

Lastly, this analysis demonstrates that Amroha was not simply a receptacle for universalistic currents of Islamic reform, but an arena in which they were constantly engaged in negotiation with local interests and practices. The clearest example of this is the *sayyids*' collective patronage of, respectively, the flamboyant public rites of Muharram and the veneration of local saints, both of which consolidated the local authority of the town's *sayyids*. The major pioneers of the nineteenth century renewal of Shia Islam in north India were heavily critical of such practices, equating them with superstition and Hindu idolatory.⁶³ However, the local synthesis of 'Shia' and 'Sufi' customs in Amroha suggests that, rather than reformist Islam simply being imposed upon Amroha from other urban arenas, a more complex dialogue was at work. Muslim individuals and communities within the town found themselves having to engage in a constant negotiation between widespread, collective dialogues of Islamic reform and Amrohavi distinctiveness, bringing about solutions that were often complex and contradictory, and manifestly local rather than universal.

A Tale of Two Towns: Amroha and Aligarh

As well as the uncritical receivers of reformist strands within Islam propelled from elsewhere, the Muslim *ashraf* of the *qasbas* have often been portrayed as the major adherents of the political notion of Muslim 'separatism', or the mobilisation of Muslim religious commonality as a basis for public and political organisation. As was shown above, scholarship has frequently identified the Muslim gentries of smaller towns and rural townships as the natural proponents and supporters of 'communal' Muslim organisations like Aligarh College. However, a focus upon the intellectual centre of Aligarh and the leaders of the 'Aligarh movement' has overshadowed the

Migrants and Militants: Fun and Urban Violence in Pakistan (Princeton: Princeton, 2004), pp. 21–22.

⁶³ E.g. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 57, 157; Cole, *The Roots of North Indian Shi'ism*, pp. 152–156.

ways in which these dialogues were received beyond the campus of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College itself. This section assesses the Aligarh movement not from the vantage point of Aligarh but from the perspectives of Amroha's *sharif* communities. It shows how debates over Aligarh's strategy for communal modernisation were refracted through the particularities of local circumstances and prompted often quite divergent and contrary manifestations. In particular, the Aligarh movement substantially energised antagonism among Amroha's Muslim gentries, and as a result, became a central issue in the growth of Shia-Sunni antagonism within the town.

While the campus of Aligarh College sat barely 130 km away from Amroha across the plains of the North Western Provinces, the embattled *sayyid* gentries of Amroha could scarcely have differed more from the Muslim *ashraf* gathered in Aligarh. At the heart of their differences was the persisting crisis of Muslim identity during the post-Rebellion period and the search for an appropriate response to colonial modernity. Those Muslims clustered around Aligarh sought accommodation with the colonial administration, substituting loyalty to kin and *qasba* for a modern Muslim middle class bound by common youth and vocational learning.⁶⁴ Meanwhile, as was argued above, a sense persisted among the *sayyids* in Amroha that colonial rule had brought with it ruin rather than betterment, carrying with it economic decline and challenges to landownership. Thus, while Aligarh College was in essence a newly fabricated communal space largely unconscious of the ties of family and kinship from which its inhabitants had been recruited, the efforts of Amroha's *sayyids* to adjust to encroaching modernisation often involved an increased insularity around the distinctions of family lineage and the exclusivity of the *qasba*.

These grievances perhaps explain the reluctance among *sayyid* families in Amroha to partake with much motivation in government-led forms of education. Instead, the enviable local support and endowed wealth offered to the new religious schools enabled them, by contrast with government schools, to provide free education to their students. Many of Amroha's impoverished gentry families, thus sent their sons to the burgeoning selection of Arabic schools which were 'apparently flourishing'.⁶⁵ Colonial government, perceiving the *sayyids*

⁶⁴ This is the argument of Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation*, passim.

⁶⁵ From E.M. Cook, 4 February 1911, Education Department 21/1911, UPSA. This was a matter of concern for government, who perceived Amroha's young,

as a community in special need of assistance, made some stubborn but unsuccessful attempts to encourage educational reform among its families. For instance, the Shia schools Sayyid-ul-Madaris and Imam-ul-Madaris were both persuaded to introduce some elementary English coaching, explicitly in order to 'encourage Western education among the old Muhammadan families of the neighbourhood'.⁶⁶ Coming from the other direction, Amroha was the single town of U.P. used as a test case for the introduction of compulsory Islamic education for Muslim students into government schools, an aberration from standard policy which by some verdicts single-handedly persuaded some Muslim families to enrol their sons in such establishments.⁶⁷ However, neither of these efforts were particularly successful in encouraging Western education among Amroha's *sayyid* families.⁶⁸

As such, and while many of the town's predominantly Sunni *shaikh* and *pathan* families embraced Aligarh College as their means to social and economic betterment and preparation for careers in administration or law, comparatively few *sayyids* broke the trend of their collective immersion in religious education. This could be clearly seen in 1910, when a number of the town's residents formed the Anjuman-i-Sadat-i-Amroha, an organisation whose proclaimed functions were rejecting the reformist agenda conjured at Aligarh, promoting *shari'a*, upholding Islamic education and expunging non-Islamic innovations.⁶⁹

madrassa-trained Muslims as 'discontented and fanatical and disloyal'. From E.F.L.Winter, 19 November 1905, *ibid*.

⁶⁶ A special arrangement was made between the government and Sayyid ul-Madaris, allowing an annual quota of five of the *maktab*'s pupils to be admitted freely to the town's Government High School. Yakub Ali, headmaster of Amroha Government High School, to Inspector of Schools, Rohilkhand Division, 12 November 1910, *ibid*.

⁶⁷ *General Report on Public Instruction for the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (1894–1895), p. 82; *General Report on Public Instruction for the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (1895–1896), p. 54.

⁶⁸ For instance, the arrangement between Sayyid-ul-Madaris and the government school had limited success: a large proportion of its few beneficiaries withdrew or were expelled from the High School for unsatisfactory work. De La Fosse to Secretary to U.P. Government, 21 January 1911, Educational Dept. 21/1911.

⁶⁹ All India Shia Conference, *Ro'idad-i-ijlas-i-chhata*, pp. 183–184. Shortly after its foundation Aftab Ahmad Khan, the Joint Secretary of the All India Muslim Educational Conference affiliated to Aligarh College, visited Amroha to promote Aligarh's educational model. Despite initially accepting the message, the Anjuman-i-Sadat-i-Amroha did not offer sustained support and instead sought solace in the expansion of Imam-ul-Madaris and the foundation of a new seminary for the training

This suggests that the Aligarh movement did not successfully recast the Muslim *ashraf* of Amroha into a unified, overarching Muslim middle class. Instead, local enmities between the *sayyid*-dominated landed nobility and developing, *shaikh*-led professional class within the town impeded any collective acceptance of Aligarh's message. Instead, the designs of the Aligarh movement were perceived through the prism of distinctly local concerns and conflicts. In particular, social and class rivalries in Amroha were amalgamated with religious polemic. As was argued above, the transformation of public religious life in late nineteenth century Amroha had hardened differences between Shia and Sunni institutions and practices, and the opposing responses of the predominantly Shia *sayyids* and predominantly Sunni *shaikhs* to the Aligarh movement identified this debate as another space of Shia–Sunni contestation. This can be seen through a look at the Aligarh-inspired Urdu press of western U.P. Carrying a critique of the landed *ashraf* of towns such as Amroha for their resistance to educational modernisation, it often articulated this partially in the language of sectarian controversy. In 1911, a contributed article by an Amrohavi Sunni on the Muslim University movement, published in both Moradabad's *Naiyar-i-Azam* and *Paisa-ul-Akhbar* of Meerut, claimed that 'the result of the absence of education and the extensive ignorance among the Shia *sayyids* of Amroha is that they have absolutely no sense of the pace of the times'. Such papers incited these *sayyids* to dissociate themselves from the Aligarh College, cease to participate in the All India Muslim Educational Conference and refuse to offer contributions to the Muslim University Fund.⁷⁰

It was not just the message of Aligarh which came to be perceived through the prism of Shia–Sunni difference, but the key personages of the movement. Nobody demonstrates this more clearly than the local resident Mushtaq Husain, the Secretary of Aligarh College from 1907–1913. In wider U.P. politics, he was known for his attempts to bridge the gap between proponents of secular and religious education, which included his scheme to introduce Islamic education for Muslims into government schools,⁷¹ and during his secretarial appointment at

of Shia preachers. Hashmi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha*, p. 147; Sayyid Mumtaz Husain (ed.), *Risala-i-kifan-posh lidaran-i-qom* (Amroha, 1915), p. 106.

⁷⁰ Husain (ed.), *Risala-i-kifan-posh lidaran*, p. 18. The campaign and fundraising for a Muslim University at Aligarh reached their height at this time, around 1910–1912.

⁷¹ As outlined in Mushtak Husain, *A Scheme for the Introduction of Religious Instruction in Government Schools and Colleges, Proposed by Vikar-ud-dowlah Vikar-ul-Mulk Nawab Mushtak Husain Khan Bahadur, Intisar Jung of Amroha* (Aligarh, 1894).

Aligarh, the introduction of a compulsory paper on 'Islamic religion'.⁷² To the *sayyids* of Amroha, however, he was renowned as the leading Sunni *shaikh* on the Municipal Board, who had tried to impose a local prohibition on the reference to Ali in the new Shia *azan*. His role in local religious controversies, as discussed in the next section, ensured that the *sayyids* came to see the Aligarh movement as a sectarian effort aiming to subjugate the Shia minority.

The consolidation of a Shia–Sunni axis in local debates about Aligarh furthermore ensured that, over subsequent years, Amroha's *sayyids* were consistently at the forefront of those wider north Indian Shia organisations that stressed their separateness from the 'Muslim' communal counterpart. As Aligarh became the centre of an aspiring all-India educational project for Muslims, so Amroha became one of the foremost centres of an alternative vision for Shia distinctiveness in education. For instance, Amroha became the main platform for a national organisation known as the Anjuman-i-Wasifa-i-Sadat-va-Mominin, founded in 1912. The foundation collected contributions in order to create financial grants for the education of Shia students, as a strategy for lifting their community out of degeneration.⁷³ While claiming a national and international presence, the foundation's membership lists, the origins of contributors to its journals and the location of its administrative and publishing activities all reveal it to have been largely an *anjuman* of Amroha.⁷⁴ The *anjuman* was broadly similar in its objectives and language to Aligarh College and its affiliated bodies, stressing the need for educational modernisation and vocational learning. However, the organisation's parochial dichotomy of '*sayyids*' and '*mominin*' ('followers') distinguished it from the collective 'Muslim' community addressed by Aligarh and served to restrict the organisation's membership to Shia *sayyid* families.

Even more influential in securing the detachment of Indian Shias from Aligarh was *Ittehad*, the most influential vernacular newspaper of Amroha, edited by a dynamic young local *sayyid*, Mujahid Husain

⁷² Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, p. 400.

⁷³ Sayyid Aijaz Husain Rizvi Jarchvi, *Anjuman-i-wasifa-i-sadat-va-mominin, silvar jjubili nambar* (Delhi, 1937), pp. 1–2.

⁷⁴ The organisation claimed members and presence across Punjab, U.P. and Bihar, and even as far as Najaf, London and Oxbridge. Despite this, in its commemorative edition of 1937 perhaps approaching half of listed members and donors are cited as residents of Amroha. *Ibid*, *passim*.

Jauhar.⁷⁵ Established in 1911, it was initially a newspaper focused upon local issues, discussing matters such as land tax and criticisms of the appointment of a Sunni headmaster in Amroha's High School.⁷⁶ However, aspirations for a wider readership quickly persuaded the newspaper to focus less upon municipal concerns and more upon issues impacting on Indian Shias beyond the limits of the *qasba*. From around 1913 onwards, a series of Shia–Sunni disagreements took place within Aligarh College. Claims were made that Shias were underrepresented among trustees, teachers and students, that Shia religious freedoms were curtailed, and that Shia religious education was neglected or subordinated to its Sunni counterpart.⁷⁷ However, it was *Ittehad* that elevated a series of small, campus-based administrative issues into a broader and far-reaching Shia condemnation of Aligarh for its Sunni-tinted administration and syllabus.⁷⁸ It conveyed the overall impression of Aligarh as a Sunni-run institution, unsuitable for Shia trustees and students.

The episode did wonders for *Ittehad*. The newspaper absorbed and projected wide-ranging Shia grievances about Aligarh College, in the process evolving into the most widely circulated Shia newspaper of north India and informing Shia perspectives upon Aligarh far beyond Amroha itself.⁷⁹ Some Shia educationalists raised concerns that the editor of *Ittehad*, was exploiting such issues to 'make a living', and giving

⁷⁵ A brief biography of Mujahid Husain Jauhar (b.1872–1873) is available in *ibid*, p. 12.

⁷⁶ *Ittehad* (Amroha), 24 April and 24 September 1913, United Provinces Native Newspaper Reports (UPNNR), OIOC.

⁷⁷ These grievances included the claims that Shia religious functionaries were not supported by the college, that Shias did not have their own mosque, that religious rites were restricted, and that the college would be renamed after the Caliph Umar. Husain (ed.), *Risala-i-kifan-posh lidaran*, pp. 68–87. I have discussed this issue in more detail in Justin Jones, 'The Shi'a Muslims of the United Provinces of India, c.1890–1940' (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis: Cambridge, 2007), pp. 140–146.

⁷⁸ The newspaper ran a sustained discussion of the decline of Aligarh through the inventive medium of a mock-dialogue, conducted by renowned historical and present figureheads of such politics from Sayyid Ahmad Khan onwards. It depicted Sayyid Ahmad in conversation with a number of subsequent trustees and politicians of Aligarh, and portrayed his supposed frustration at their desertion of his legacy and the descent of Aligarh into sectarian controversy. This format compares with Sayyid Ahmad Khan's influential periodical *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*, and less directly, with Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*. See Husain (ed.), *Risala-i-kifan-posh lidaran*, *passim*.

⁷⁹ The number of distributed copies increased by some 350% between 1911 and 1915, primarily during its discussions of the Aligarh question. 'Listings of the vernacular press', 2 June 1911 and 2 July 1915, UPNNR.

vent to 'imaginative, scurrilous and malicious outpourings'.⁸⁰ Indeed, *Ittehad* consistently supported, and urged contributions towards, the major effort to ensure Shia detachment from Aligarh College, the foundation of a separate Shia College, finally established in Lucknow in 1917.⁸¹ Once the campaign for the Shia College began, the *sayyids* of Amroha were among its most enthusiastic supporters. Shia College committees were given 'great reception' here, while *sayyids* collectively pledged donations 'far in excess of their whole possessions'.⁸² Amrohavi women, it is rumoured in the town even today, offered their jewellery to help fund the campaign.

In fact, Mujahid Husain Jauhar's opposition to the Aligarh project was not limited to his sustained criticism of Aligarh College itself. Alongside the columns of *Ittehad*, he wrote and published a number of instructive tracts for women, a common literary genre in colonial India, which could be understood in this context. One of his tracts elaborated the appropriate lifestyle, morals and habits of the *sharif* Muslim woman, discussing issues such as home-making, manners, cooking and the raising of children.⁸³ Other writings of his, including papers in *Ittehad*, emphasised the need for the *sharif* woman to observe *purdah*, arguing that opponents of the custom were morally vacuous.⁸⁴ It has long been argued that the introduction of systematic education for women was one of the most visible and distinctive concerns of the Aligarh reformists in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and thus, the role of women became the key battleground over which various reformists and their detractors focused their debates.⁸⁵ Mujahid Husain's consignment of women to wholly domestic roles, with no reference to any form of education, thus firmly confirmed the home and the domestic sphere as the key arena of resistance to

⁸⁰ Fateh Ali Khan Qizilbash to James Meston, 17 July 1916, Education Dept. 'A', 152/1914, UPSA.

⁸¹ Jones, 'The Shi'a Muslims of the United Provinces', pp. 157–165; Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims*, pp. 234–235.

⁸² 'Extract from a fortnightly report, dated 12 March 1916', from the Commissioner of Rohilkhand Division; Meston to Fateh Ali Khan Qizilbash, 29 May 1916, Education Dept. 'A', 152/1914.

⁸³ Sayyid Mujahid Husain Jauhar, *Hayat-i-niswan* (Amroha, circa 1925), passim.

⁸⁴ Sayyid Mujahid Husain Jauhar, *Masnawi Mewa-i-shirin* (Amroha, 1915), passim; Jauhar, *Hayat-i-niswan*, pp. 115–116; *Ittehad*, 1 March 1914, UPNNR.

⁸⁵ Abdul Rashid Khan, *The All India Muslim Educational Conference: Its Contribution to the Cultural Development of Indian Muslims, 1886–1947* (Oxford: Karachi, 2001), pp. 116–141; Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Oxford: New Delhi, 1998), passim.

Aligarh's reformist discourses, inaugurating a powerful reassertion of what were perceived as traditional manners and customs.

This discussion suggests that the Aligarh movement was not, as has often been implied, unconditionally accepted by the established Muslim gentries of north Indian townships. Its agenda for modernisation was not identically mirrored in Amroha, but prompted a largely independent process of contestation which took local concerns as its reference points. As such, the Aligarh movement failed to win the support of many of Amroha's *sayyids* and enhanced local rivalries, from the 1890s becoming particularly intertwined with a wider elaboration of disagreements between Shia and Sunni residents. Studies have long assumed that the doctrine of Muslim 'separatism' which informed the Aligarh movement transcended Muslim sectarian differences; however, this study of the local-level experience of this discourse suggests a highly conversational relationship between the experiences of Muslim communal organisation and sectarianism. Moreover, the sectarian configurations generated in the *qasba* could, by virtue of the printing press and the influence of some of the town's more eminent personages, have an active influence upon wider discourses of Muslim communal modernisation. Local sectarian conflict in Amroha, in other words, impacted on Shia perceptions of Aligarh College across north India, demonstrating that debates within the smaller towns of U.P. could influence national reformist discourses just as effectively as vice versa.

Religious Conflict and Disputation in Amroha

Communal conflict in colonial U.P. has often been interpreted as a phenomenon bound to the evolving environment of the major cities. This impression owes in part to studies of the ritualised consolidation of religious differences as competing 'others' in urban public arenas,⁸⁶ and to studies linking the communal politics of inter-war U.P. to the social tensions accompanying massive immigration and urbanisation.⁸⁷ It owes yet further to the many examinations of the urban riot as the *prima facie* of north Indian communalism. The urban face of religious conflicts has further entrenched understandings of

⁸⁶ Freitag, *Collective action and community*, passim.

⁸⁷ Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2001), passim.

the communal serenity of the *qasba* which, it is assumed, remained at best entirely insulated from such communal tensions, or at worst occasionally witnessed minor embodiments of conflagrations that were primarily defined and expressed in the cities. Occasional communal 'encounters and calamities' were described by authors within these townships as aberrations from a docile norm rather than a defining feature of local life.⁸⁸

However, Amroha came to experience religious and communal conflicts among its residents with unfailing regularity during the colonial period, rivalling in their frequency and intensity any of the better analysed conflagrations in larger towns. Moradabad's *District Gazetteer* remarked that 'probably no other town in the United Provinces has given more trouble to the administration in proportion to its size than Amroha'.⁸⁹ The frequent instances of communal conflict in Amroha followed particular routinized forms, and were often sparked during religious festivals or by the publication of controversial texts. This contrasts strongly with perceptions of Amroha as 'a quiet town . . . with a history of Hindu-Muslim amity',⁹⁰ as well as with the traditionally idyllic portrayals of U.P.'s Muslim-dominated townships as pockets of communal harmony.

Moreover, presenting a powerful antidote to the somewhat bipolar narrative of Hindu-Muslim communalism that has often been applied to colonial north India, Amroha represents a peculiar communal triangle by which Shia and Sunni Muslims and Hindus alike were all involved in mutual conflicts, in some cases with two parties uniting against the other. As was described above, from the 1880s onwards, Shia patrons introduced a motley selection of new and aggressively Shia practices, including the amended *azan* and novel Muharram rites, into the public space in numerous municipal neighbourhoods. These various interpolations resulted in public disturbances and lengthy local court cases as eminent Sunni residents sought to have bans imposed on such practices, poisoning Shia-Sunni relations considerably.⁹¹ Around 1900, an altercation occurred between Hindus and Sunnis over the issue of cow sacrifice, with Shias playing no part.⁹² Two years later,

⁸⁸ Pandey, 'Encounters and calamities', pp. 250, 258.

⁸⁹ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 176.

⁹⁰ Mushirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (Hurst: London, 1997), p. 146.

⁹¹ As documented thoroughly in GAD 106C/64 of 1896.

⁹² Anonymous on behalf of Sadat of Amroha, 4 August 1902, GAD 255/1903.

an ostentatious Brahmin Hindu wedding coincided with the *'ashura*, the solemn peak of Muharram, prompting a riot between Shias and Hindus with a comparable Sunni abstention.⁹³

The ascendancy of such manifold and interconnected religious conflicts in the *qasba* setting suggests that they need to be incorporated into a full assessment of the experiences of religious and social change in Amroha. One important aspect of the reworking of religious identities in the *qasba* environment was the creation of numerous active religious associations and schools among Amroha's citizens. Those many new Islamic institutions discussed above, as well as Christian Missions and the Arya Samaj alike which were both highly active in the town from the 1870s,⁹⁴ all contributed to the construction of doctrinal boundaries between particular religious communities.

These developments were combined with the elevated social tensions at work in the *qasbas* during the colonial period. The economic burdens upon the *sayyids* came in turn to strain landholder–tenant relations, as the *mu'afidars* refused to implement the government-supported transition from grain to cash rents to ease the pressures upon the producers.⁹⁵ Moreover, as absentee landlords, many of Amroha's *sayyids* co-opted local 'headmen' in their surrounding villages as managers, operating in relative independence from their overlords and able to claim an additional chunk of dues for themselves. This system of 'double tenure' was described by the government as 'cumbrous' and as an example of 'tyrannous management', and evidently generated substantial mutual enmity between Shia landholders and Hindu and Sunni agriculturalists.⁹⁶

Further social strains emerged out of the manoeuvrings for social and political control within the town in the wake of the devolution of power to local councils through the Municipal Councils Act of 1882. The Act apparently benefited a number of younger, Aligarh-educated town residents trained as administrators or pleaders who, as new 'masters of wealth and property', came to seek civic influence,

⁹³ Ibid; E.F.L. Winter, Magistrate of Moradabad, to Commissioner of Rohilkhand Division, 13 November 1902, *ibid*.

⁹⁴ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, pp. 80–82. The Arya Samaj, an especially strong organisation in Rohilkhand and the Doab, held high-profile annual meetings in Amroha from around 1900. Muhammad Ashfaq Husain Saddiqi, *Mujadila-i-hasna* (Moradabad, 1918), p. 2.

⁹⁵ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, pp. 108–109; Alexander, *Final Report*, pp. 25–26.

⁹⁶ Alexander, *Final Report*, pp. 25–31.

magisterial posts and seats on Amroha's Municipal Board.⁹⁷ This undermined the *sayyids*, who had previously maintained a local monopoly on such careers, initiating a conflict between the established Shia landed aristocracy and aspiring, mostly Sunni, professionals. It also established the local state machinery, such as Amroha's Municipal Board and the local courts, as the central arena of competition between religious communities as each group sought to have the practices of their adversaries curbed or prohibited. The district administration found little way to react to such problems except to lament the 'party intrigue' and 'factional jealousies' endemic in the town and to occasionally juggle the posts of deputy collector, district magistrates and municipal commissioners between religious communities.⁹⁸

At the same time, changing conditions within the town accentuated quarrels within as well as between particular *sharif* families. The combination of increasing economic hardship and the compulsory subdivision of estates among a landowner's descendants led to disputes within particular families, as impoverished individuals sought through the courts to secure their right to a portion of a relative's inheritance or the trusteeship of a family *waqf*,⁹⁹ or to repudiate the credentials of other claimants.¹⁰⁰

These examples demonstrate that the lines separating the manifold family feuds, socio-economic rivalries and religious contestations in the town were often blurred and ambiguous. Indeed, rather than simply being related to the broader narrative of the construction of north Indian 'communalism', religious conflict in Amroha is best understood as arising out of a multiplicity of complex debates stirred in colonial Amroha within and between families and communities at a time of massive flux. The fact that *sharif* Muslim families held such longstanding patronage of the religious life of Amroha meant that the social, political or economic transformations affecting them were

⁹⁷ Official translation of a petition from Saiyid Gulsham Ali resident of Mohalla Qazizada and others of Amroha, 20 January 1896, to Government of India, GAD 106C/64 of 1896.

⁹⁸ Nevill, *District Gazetteer XVI*, p. 176.

⁹⁹ As, for instance, a row between three alternative trustees to an existing *waqf* which reached the High Court in 1923, with each trying to prove their rightful descent. Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 97–98. On the tendency for religious endowments to provoke such family conflicts, see Kozłowski, *Muslim Endowments and Society*, pp. 80, 92–93.

¹⁰⁰ Rizvi, *Tarikh-i-Amroha ke ek not par*, passim.

often expressed in upheavals in public religious practice. As such, the manifold disputes between or within such families could apparently inform struggles which were communicated as religious or 'communal' conflicts among town residents.¹⁰¹

Manifestly communal conflicts in Amroha were thus not standardised confrontations between fixed religious communities, but rather they provided a means for the continuous negotiation and re-working of religious identities at a time of massive social transition and religious change within the *qasba*. Part of this re-working of religious identities was the practice of aggressive religious disputation, which encompassed both the propagation of polemical writings and the holding of religious debates (*munazara*). Contradicting the claim of some observers that these activities were matters solely for theologians carrying minimal public significance,¹⁰² in Amroha they became an integral part of municipal religious life during the period, and tarnished communal relations considerably. As the means by which religious change was engineered, this local vituperative religious culture is worthy of sustained investigation.

Polemical religious literature was something of an emerging genre in colonial north India in the late nineteenth century,¹⁰³ but was one of particular vitality in Amroha. The arrival of several printing presses cemented Amroha as one of the central producers of this literary culture, and a series of controversial texts published from the 1890s undermined the more integrated religious and intellectual relationships among the town's Muslim *ashraf* in earlier decades. In 1892, the Shia 'alim Amjad Ali Khan, the former Deputy Collector who in earlier years had tutored individuals of various religious affiliations, wrote *Nasir-ul-Iman*, a Shia polemic against the Caliph

¹⁰¹ One example of this is the *sayyid* family who had always led the Muharram processions in Pachdara *muhalla*, hitherto with the collaboration of many of the *muhalla*'s Sunnis. When the leading representative of the family died with no designated male successor, the *sayyid* residents of the *muhalla* convened a meeting and decided that they should manage the proceedings collectively. From this point, the rituals became increasingly resonant of Shi'ism and relinquished Sunni participation. Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 63–64. In another example of how upheavals within *sharif* families could affect public religious life, a family dispute is shown to have disrupted the death anniversaries of a saint in Saddu *muhalla*. Husain, *Medieval Towns*, p. 28.

¹⁰² Hasan, *From Pluralism to Separatism*, pp. 36–37.

¹⁰³ Much has been written on this brand of polemical literature. E.g. Kenneth W. Jones (ed.), *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages* (New York: Albany, 1992).

Umar.¹⁰⁴ The act forced retirement from his municipal post as Honorary Magistrate, the government instead replacing him with a Hindu in a typical attempt to diffuse the smouldering Shia–Sunni conflict.¹⁰⁵ The publication of such polemical religious literature by the town's established *sayyids* continued into the twentieth century. One of the most prolific such authors was Hamza Ali, an elderly *sayyid* of Lakra *muhalla* who published a series of Urdu treatises designed for public consumption aggressively refuting the legitimacy of the Sunni Caliphate.¹⁰⁶

It could be argued that such texts debated universalistic points of doctrine, and thus, linked Amroha into wider currents of religious polemic. On the other hand, sectarian diatribes published in Amroha were often distinctly local in that they selected issues with particular relevance in their specific context. For example, one target of notable appeal to Amrohavi Sunni polemicists was *taqiya*, the Shia principle that one's religion may be concealed in times of persecution. Texts were written from Amroha equating *taqiya* with *nufaq* (treachery), sections of which were even printed in the national press.¹⁰⁷ This focus upon the concealment of faith could be interpreted as a matter of limited local consequence, given the new public exuberance of explicitly Shia practices. Conversely, it could be argued that *taqiya* provided Sunni polemicists in the town to touch a particular nerve among their local audience. The long history of the conversion of particular *sharif* families to and from Sunni and Shia Islam was well known in Amroha, and the notion of the concealment of one's religion gave Sunni propagandists the ability to dismiss flawed individuals within their own school not simply as lapsed Sunnis, but as quasi-Shia. *Taqiya* thus allowed newly invigorated Sunni intellectuals to demand

¹⁰⁴ The Sunnis of Amroha to the Secretary of the North Western Provinces and Oudh, 29 February 1896; Official translation of a petition from Saiyid Gulsham Ali, resident of Mohalla Qazizada and others, Amroha, 20 January 1896, to Government of India, GAD 106C/64 of 1896.

¹⁰⁵ *Rahbar* (Moradabad), 16 January 1893, UPNNR. At about the same time, the town's Shia *munsif* (judge) authored a similarly controversial sectarian treatise, *Hamla-i-Haidari*. It was said that Shias began to recite passages from both these texts in the streets, while some Sunnis accused the town's Shias of using their grasp over the local state machinery to shield the authors from reprimand and prevent the recall of the texts. *Nizam-ul-Mulk* (Moradabad), 10 February 1893 and *Urdu Akhbar* (Moradabad), 24 March 1893, UPNNR.

¹⁰⁶ E.g. Sayyid Hamza Ali, *Haq ki kasoti* (Delhi, 1916), *passim*.

¹⁰⁷ Sayyid Hamza Ali, *Tashih ul-aqa'id* (Amroha, 1919). A Lahore newspaper serialised these debates in 1904 (pp. 1–2). *Taqiya* is also debated publicly in Ahmad, *Shikast-i-'azim*, pp. 6–7.

immediate and explicit correctives of religious practice from those within their own school, while depicting this as the vilification of a Shia adversary.

The religious controversies that informed this textual correspondence were further communicated in the form of public debates. Known as *munazara*, these staged public confrontations between debaters (*munazirs*) of different religious communities were in the ascendant in the colonial period,¹⁰⁸ but Amroha became one of their most notable centres. Debates here between various religious communities became regular features of civic life, invariably attracting a large audience and drawing celebrity to the town. One major *munazara* occurred in 1917 after, it was claimed, the local Arya Samaj made a series of attacks upon Islam. In response, a number of town residents set up a makeshift organisation called the Anjuman-i-Asha'at-i-Islam and invited Murtaza Hasan, principal of the Bareilvi-run Madrasa-i-Imdadia of Moradabad, to visit the town with a number of his students to repudiate their accusations.¹⁰⁹ Over several days, an assembly was held between Murtaza Hasan's circle and Babu Ramchand, a Hindu debater from Delhi. The ensuing debate, depicted as an ordered set of interrogations and defences passing from the representative of one community to the other, covered issues including God's creation of the universe, the relationship between man and God and the source of man's intellect.¹¹⁰ In 1920, a similarly bold and prestigious *munazara* was hosted in Amroha by the *sayyids* of Darbar-i-Kalan *muhalla*, this time between Shia and Sunni debaters. Again, the disputants were individuals of considerable eminence invited from outside Amroha, in this case Sibte Hasan, one of the most famous Shia *mujtahids* of India, and Abdul Shakoore, a polemicist of Lucknow affiliated to the Sunni Bareilvi school.¹¹¹ The debate, focusing upon the question of whether the Shia religion was rightfully founded upon the Qur'an, belied its initial premise through a wide discussion of diverse subjects over several days, including the alteration of the Qur'an, the belief in the absence of the twelfth Imam and *taqiya*. Written accounts of the *munazara* depict the Sunnis winning a resounding victory and the Shias

¹⁰⁸ Such debates have been discussed widely in scholarship, and have often been interpreted as a product of the aggressive attacks on indigenous religions by Christian missionaries. Metcalf, *Islamic Revival*, pp. 215–234; Avril Ann Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* (Curzon: Richmond, London, 1993), passim.

¹⁰⁹ Saddiqi, *Mujadila-i-hasna*, pp. 2–8.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, passim.

¹¹¹ Ahmad, *Shikast-i-azim*, pp. 2–4.

as failing to answer the questions appropriately, and predict that the results of the *munazara* will reach all corners of India.¹¹²

These accounts clearly identify Amroha as a focal point for colonial north India's emerging culture of public religious disputation. As *munazara* developed in Amroha, it increasingly took on the character of overt theatre. Debates had a carefully selected audience which balanced religious communities, scribes were present to record the proceedings, and the disputants were requested to speak in a clear and stylised manner.¹¹³ In each of these cases, the *munazara* was conveyed as a confrontation between just two declared religious communities, each of which was fixed, intransigent and clearly delineated. At the same time, both carried implicit messages which were just as important as what was openly discussed. For instance, Bareilvi Sunni representatives took part in both debates, in the first instance carrying the mantle of Islam and in the second speaking for Sunni Islam; in each case, we can infer a statement of heavy provocation towards Shias, Deobandis and other variant schools present in the town. In other words, the outwardly bipolar format of these debates rather disguises their esoteric role in the widespread reassessment of religious identities and spokespersonship in a changing environment. They facilitated a series of delicate contestations over who had the right to speak for Islam, and in what context.

In some senses, *munazaras* represented the integration of the *qasba* into broader cultures of religious confrontation in north India. 'Ulama of national fame travelled for miles to grace the small outpost of Amroha with their presence, while the plentiful appropriation of printing houses ensured that word of such debates travelled far beyond the town limits. On the other hand, it could be argued that the *munazara* constituted a novel expression of a distinct, *sharif* local culture, and thus, reinforced the cherished distinctiveness of the *qasba*. Judging by written accounts of *munazara*, these debates were uniformly attendant to the titles and dignities of their participants, were conducted in eloquent and antiquated Urdu, and henceforth, described in terms of elegance (*hasna*) and hospitality (*mehmani*).¹¹⁴ As such *munazaras*, despite their pointed barbs and their evident fracturing of the public peace, simultaneously reinforced a sense of the *qasba*'s integrity and

¹¹² Ibid, passim, especially p. 11.

¹¹³ Ibid, pp. 4–5.

¹¹⁴ Saddiqi, *Mujadila-i-hasna*, pp. 1–4.

constituted a form of resistance to wider configurations of religious community in north India.

Indeed, such was the local vigour of these disputations that they often appeared to work against the currents of national political dialogues, and even appeared to peak during the era of popular nationalism and communal unity around 1916–1922. The account of a visit to Amroha by Husain Ahmad Madni, the famed nationalist *'alim* and leader of the Khilafat movement, shows how communal exchanges could thrive in the *qasba* context in complete defiance of broader constructions of community which professed the need for accord within the population:

'After alighting [at Amroha], I found out that a *munazara* was about to start among Shias and Sunnis . . . but the Khilafat movement was currently very strong, and the great demand of the time was to establish unity and agreement between all Indians generally and Muslims particularly . . . whoever started [the *munazara*] was not prepared to stop it, in case the reputation of his community was tarnished . . . I appealed to both sects, politely but forcefully, that these kinds of actions were inappropriate at this time when it was improper to admit division . . . the Shias and Sunnis blamed each other'.¹¹⁵

Taking these written polemics and public symposia together, it is apparent that the traditional image of the harmonious, composite nature of Islamic life in the *qasba* is somewhat undeveloped. Confutation and conflict were integral components of the evolving religious life of Amroha during the colonial period. However, the examples above perhaps reflect less the teleological expansion of broader 'communalism' from the cities to formerly harmonious environments, but more a series of anxieties among the population over the rapid changes within the *qasba*. Indeed, it could even be postulated that the confined social milieu of this smaller town, entailing the close interconnection of the actors engaged in the patronage of local religious life and innumerable municipal social and political conflicts, offered a greater immediacy to communal contestations in Amroha than in the more compartmentalised larger cities.

In effect, religious polemic and disputation came to fulfil two important civic functions in Amroha. First, it facilitated a wide and multi-layered negotiation of religious identities and leadership during a period of massive social and religious transformation. Changing

¹¹⁵ Sayyid Husain Ahmad Madni, *Naqsh-i-hayat, haisa-i-dom* (Karachi, 1981), p. 122.

structures of wealth, population, land ownership and municipal control, combined with adjustments in local religious life following the foundation of innumerable new *madrasas*, *imambaras* and religious societies, all prompted the need for debating the manifold issues of who was a Muslim, which practices should be adhered to, and who should speak for 'Islam' in numerous different contexts. Second, at a time when local economic decline, wider urbanisation and shifts in municipal population called into question the identity of the *qasba* as a cohesive moral unit, printed polemic literature and *munazara* offered the town's *sharif* Muslims a means of flaunting their cherished learning, their command of local literary cultures, and their involvement in the patronage of civic Islamic life. Despite the appearance of factional conflict, then, religious disputation cemented their vision of the *qasba* as an integrated whole bound by its *sharif* heritage, and insulated it from an often hostile colonial modernity. Communal disputation, as well as integration, could thus solidify the distinctiveness and resilience of the *qasba*.

Conclusion

This examination of Muslim religious practice and debate within just one small and overlooked north Indian township reveals the limits of confining our knowledge of Islamic reformist movements to the scholarly networks of their assumed urban centres. Far from the resilient, unchanging and syncretistic local culture described in both vernacular and academic portrayals of the *qasbas*, Amroha's religious character and composition experienced a far-reaching series of transformations during the colonial period. However, this does not simply indicate the impartation of a text-based or universalistic 'reformist' Islam to smaller, marginal towns. Broader currents of religious reform were not unquestioningly received in Amroha, but were often engaged in a constant process of dialogue and accommodation with local particularities. The uneasy synthesis by Amroha's *sharif* Muslim families of the customs of *dargah* attendance and Muharram observance, and the perhaps surprising entanglement of the Aligarh movement with Shia–Sunni controversy, are both testament to the distance of local experiences of religious change from the reformist dialogues current in their supposed intellectual centres.

The plethora of new religious institutions, invigorated public rites, active printed sphere and developing culture of religious disputation in Amroha all reveal that local religious life was constantly evolving according to a number of complex and sometimes contradictory pulls. In this sense, shifts in local religious life collectively reflected the transitory social and economic context of the colonial township, when understandings of being a Muslim or Hindu, a Sunni or Shia, a *sayyid* or *shaikh*, were all subject to a process of contestation and reconstruction, as by extension was the distinct character of the *gasba* itself. New religious rites and associations represented efforts by particular individuals and communities within the town to engage in dialogues of change, to have a voice in religious leadership and to rework the forms of religion adhered to in a shifting and delicate social environment. Moreover, these religious institutions and practices were often used to define and express local distinctiveness and resilience, stressing the autonomy and self-determination of local religious life rather than its assimilation into wider currents of reform or constructs of religious community.

The often-lauded integrity of Amroha as a self-determining and insular 'moral unit' was thrown into question not just by socio-economic change, but also by the infiltration of standardised religious agendas from outside. The fact that Deobandi, Aligarhist and other reform movements did secure particular disciples within the town only contributed to this sense of unease, as allegiance to these movements came to overlap with the manifold personal, social and religious controversies at work in the pressured local environment. In this sense, this analysis has implications for the way in which we discuss inter-Muslim religious conflict, which was in the ascendant in colonial India. Existing literature on the apparent growth of disputation between various Islamic sects and schools has tended to emphasise the primacy of Islamic reformist doctrines and the expansion of religious knowledge from the eighteenth century onwards, and the ensuing elaboration of elemental differences of doctrine and leadership.¹¹⁶ By contrast, this assessment would suggest that Muslim sectarianism was the consequence of the diverse anxieties introduced into local environments by a number of competing dialogues and agendas for reform. Sectarian confrontation was a means of debating issues such as

¹¹⁶ As is implied by Rizvi, *Shah 'Abd al-'Aziz*; Cole, *Roots of north Indian Shi'ism*; Metcalf, *Islamic revival*.

Muslim religious leadership and practice in the atmosphere of anxiety and flux in the evolving *qasba*.

There is little to contradict the fact that the turmoil of the 1940s did a great deal to damage the unique and evolving culture of the individual *qasba*. Sources for Amroha after the 1930s are patchy, but indicate the flight of many *sharif* families (including many of the town's *ulama*) to Karachi and other large urban centres. The religious buildings, endowments and institutions funded by the town's *ashraf* increasingly fell into ruin, and some virtually ceased to exist. Some were awkwardly funded from abroad by the descendants of former residents; others were forced under the custody of U.P.'s Waqf Boards; others still came under the control of a local organisation, the Anjuman-i-Tahaffuz-i-Azadari ('Society for the preservation of mourning rites'), a makeshift alliance which conserved the buildings and functions of the formerly glorious *imambaras*.¹¹⁷ Attendance at the *dargahs* appeared to drop considerably, a fact that could be assigned to the impact of religious reformists who denounced such activities,¹¹⁸ but may instead owe more to the emigration or impoverishment of their major patrons since independence.

Yet still the post-independence history of Amroha would suggest that, far from unthinkingly mimicking national or provincial currents of political debate or communal relations, these small towns maintained a distinctly local design of relationships between religious communities. During the 1950s, Amroha's elections to the Legislative Assembly evolved along obviously communitarian lines; Hindus seemed to vote largely for the Jan Sangh candidates, while Shia and Sunni Muslims, respectively, voted for candidates of their own denomination.¹¹⁹ In municipal elections, however, politics concurrently evolved along apparently contradictory lines. In the years after *zamindari* abolition, some sections of the Muslim *ashraf* and high caste Hindus together formed the so-called Citizen's Board to represent the former 'respectable' interest on Amroha's Municipal Board. On the other side were the majority of Muslim *ajlaf* and low caste Hindus, together organised under the banner of the

¹¹⁷ This information is drawn from Naqvi, *Amroha ke 'aza khane*, pp. 12–19, 40–42, 47, 64–65, 68–69, 112–113, 116–117.

¹¹⁸ Husain, *Medieval towns*, pp. 21–22.

¹¹⁹ The latter fact prompted Congress to substitute its Shia candidate of 1952 for a Sunni in 1957.

Islah-i-Aqwam alliance.¹²⁰ This axis of politics continued through the decade. The fact that lines of communal configuration in Amroha could simultaneously be so contradictory in respective spheres of society and politics implies that a separate local experience of constructions of community was sustained. It also suggests that the fraught contestations between families, classes and religious communities for the definition of the *qasba* during the colonial period continued into the new context of independent India.

¹²⁰ Syed Qurban Ali Naqvi, *Social Change and Political Participation* (Commonwealth: New Delhi, 1989), pp. 79–82.