

## *JESHO Lecture on Asian History*



# Meat Together: South Asian Muslim Visions of Sovereignty in the Age of Minority

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### Abstract

Historians of South Asia have long treated practices related to the consumption of meat—especially cow slaughter—as a flashpoint in late-nineteenth-century Hindu–Muslim conflict. Such clashes carried profound social and political consequences and exposed a shifting nexus between sovereignty and everyday life in post-Mughal North India. Against this backdrop, the present article argues that halal meat—and food more broadly—functioned as a medium of inter-communal rapprochement, challenging the colonial state’s claim to arbitrate Hindu–Muslim daily interactions. As Mughal rule ebbed and British power consolidated in the former Mughal territories of North India, South Asian Muslim elites (*ashraf* or *shurafa*; sg. *sharif*)—long accustomed to imperial primacy—found themselves in a polity in which demographic weight reshaped inter-communal relations. Under these new conditions, colonial technologies of governance recast Muslims as a political “minority,” compelling members of the *ashraf* to seek British protection against the dangers of an increasingly Hindu majoritarian arena—even as the Raj styled itself the sole “impartial” guardian of communal peace. These constraints, however, also catalyzed

alternative conceptions of sovereignty aimed at navigating the sociopolitical terrain of colonial South Asia. Focusing on the Urdu writings of the renowned Muslim educator and thinker Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–1898), the article shows that his advocacy of shared civic and dietary practices, alongside the preservation of Muslim ritual distinctness, sought to reconfigure Muslim–Hindu–British relations by rejecting the colonial claim to “impartial” sovereignty over everyday life. Grounded in Islamic jurisprudence and Mughal notions of impartiality, Sayyid Ahmad recast sovereignty as a shared dietary practice—realized in animal slaughter, cooking, eating, and cooperation—rather than a capacity vested in the state alone. Although he later retreated from some positions amid escalating cow-protection mobilization and the political challenge posed by the Indian National Congress (est. 1885), his writings show that halal food politics—with meat at its center—offered a radical vision of sovereignty as quotidian practice, one that unsettled British claims to impartiality and to governance over everyday life. In so doing, the article not only offers a new reading of one of South Asia’s most significant nineteenth-century Muslim writers but also recovers an underexplored history of sovereignty: the everyday as a site where coexistence rests on mutual, non-state-mediated ethical commitments—avoiding harm and respecting one another’s ritual domains—rather than on the domination of any single community.

### Keywords

sovereignty – South Asia – Islamic modernism – Islamic reform – food – halal meat – Islamic Law – minority – Hindu–Muslim relations – British colonialism – impartiality

### Introduction

In 1893, widespread acts of violence between Muslims and Hindus occurred during the Muslim holiday of *‘Id al-Adha* (Festival of Sacrifice)<sup>1</sup> across various British Indian cities, from Bombay to Rangoon. These events resulted from the growing activism of Hindu Cow Protection Committees, which since the early 1880s strived to ban the slaughtering of cows throughout colonial India. Members of the Committees and supporters of Hindu reform organizations, most notably the Arya Samaj (est. 1875), mobilized around the figure of the cow to wage violent attacks against Muslims whom they condemned for slaughtering

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1 Also commonly referred to as *Bakra‘Id* in Urdu.

cows during the Islamic holidays. In response to these attacks, an increasing number of Muslims in South Asia began to view the slaughtering of cows as a form of symbolic resistance to the encroachment of these organizations upon Muslim ritual spaces. In 1893, the Budapest-born Jewish orientalist Gottlieb Wilhelm Leitner (1840–1899), himself an employee of the colonial administration in Punjab, commented on these instances of violence. He wrote:

In Turkey, Egypt, Syria, and Persia where a cow might be sacrificed without causing the least offense to anyone, a sheep is preferred; why then should a cow be killed in India, where it is a most heinous crime in the eyes of the vast majority of the population, and when neither Scripture nor practice requires it throughout the Mohammeden [*sic*] world?<sup>2</sup>

This passage elucidates the pivotal change that occurred with regard to the relationship between Islam and sovereignty in the subcontinent during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Previously, Muslim rulers had governed large areas of the Indian subcontinent, irrespective of the number of their Muslim co-religionists. However, this condition changed with the gradual eradication of Mughal sovereignty since the late eighteenth century and its replacement with direct British rule in 1858. The colonial All-India censuses (1871–1941) institutionalized a majority–minority calculus across the subcontinent. Through policies and technologies of rule, British administrators reified “Muslim” as a bounded category while amplifying intracommunal fissures to undercut broader Muslim solidarities. As “numbers” were translated into political terms, Muslims were thus increasingly defined as a numerical minority in many parts of the subcontinent, with their political power tied ever more tightly to their population size. As Leitner observed, Muslims were forced to confront their numerical vulnerability and submit to the Hindu majority’s demand to refrain from cow slaughter.

However, Leitner’s statement was significant not only for its reflection on the emerging minority status of subcontinental Muslims. By echoing the claims of Hindu Cow-Protection Committees, his statement emphasized the mounting peril that a world devoid of “colonial impartiality” could pose for Muslims in the subcontinent. Here, I refer to “colonial impartiality” as the British colonial model of sovereignty over South Asia that emerged in full force in the aftermath of the 1857 Rebellion. *Impartiality*, as envisioned by British colonial officials, was the ability of the sovereign to distance itself from the politics

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2 G.W. Leitner, “The Cow Riots in India.” *The Review of Reviews* (Oct. 1893): 408.

of communal difference, which they regarded as an inherent aspect of life in the subcontinent. By framing impartiality in this way, they presented colonial sovereignty as the only means of managing what they perceived as longstanding tensions between Hindus and Muslims in the subcontinent.<sup>3</sup>

This British claim for impartiality was profoundly entangled with the emerging categories of “minority” and “majority.” As Anupama Rao has argued, the colonial state turned Hindus and Muslims into “quantitatively incommensurable” communities through the census. This condition paved the way to what became commonly known as communalism, the system under which the British colonial state positioned itself as a so-called neutral arbiter between religious “minority” and “majority” communities.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of these new political conditions radically transformed the Indian subcontinent. These conditions enabled the colonial state to arbitrate disputes pertaining to everyday matters, such as the slaughtering of cows, and the public arenas that facilitated them. Thus, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the everyday lives of Muslims in South Asia became subjected to a world defined by majoritarian claims, such as those put forth by Leitner and Hindu activists, on the one hand, and so-called colonial impartiality on the other. However, as I argue in the present essay, the everyday also served as a space for Muslims to envision alternative forms of sovereignty, challenging both the pervasive colonial policies and the majoritarian claims of Hindu reformists.

My focus on the everyday builds on a growing body of interdisciplinary approaches to sovereignty, which conceive of the concept not merely as “supreme rule over territory” but also as “social relations.”<sup>5</sup> In his recent groundbreaking study, SherAli Tareen has compellingly underscored the significance of this approach for historians, illustrating how the symbolic collapse of Mughal rule in the latter half of the nineteenth century led Muslim scholars to map sovereignty onto the very sites of everyday life. Tareen highlights that

3 This definition of the discourse of colonial impartiality draws upon insights from several studies, including M. Mukherjee, *India in the Shadows of Empire: A Legal and Political History, 1774–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 74–5; A. Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), in particular chp. 3; D. Gilmartin, “Rethinking the Public through the Lens of Sovereignty,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38:3 (2015), 371–86; F. Devji, “A Minority of One,” *Global Intellectual History* 7:6 (2022): 1060.

4 Rao, *The Caste Question*: 132.

5 See, for example, A. Wilson, “Everyday Sovereignty in Exile: People, Territory, and Resources among Sahrawi Refugees,” In *The Everyday Lives of Sovereignty: Political Imagination beyond the State*, ed. R. Bryant and M. Reeves (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021): 134–53.

one such key site was the slaughtering of cows, noting that “In the absence of political sovereignty, the cow and its life and death ... contained the promise of Muslim politics and sovereign power.”<sup>6</sup> For Tareen, thus, regardless of whether the cow fostered Hindu–Muslim togetherness or strife, its main symbolic significance was to articulate Muslim visions of sovereignty and dominance in everyday life, even amidst direct British rule over the subcontinent.

Like Tareen’s study, this essay examines how sovereignty was reimagined in everyday life by Muslim thinkers in the aftermath of Mughal rule. However, my analysis extends beyond the question of Muslim domination. I argue that Muslim thinkers in colonial India conceptualized sovereignty in ways that transcended the discursive confines of Muslim dominance in everyday life. By exploring the potential for inter-communal engagement in everyday spaces, these thinkers envisioned a radical alternative to both the state’s regulation of communal relations and the efforts of both Muslim and Hindu activists to assert the dominance of one community over the other. In so doing, they did not advocate for the removal of religion from daily life in favor of a civil alignment, nor did they promote shared Hindu–Muslim rituals. Rather, these thinkers contended that the preservation of ritual differences between Muslims and Hindus could create space for meaningful interaction and even mutual love (*muhabbat*) in daily life between members of both communities. As they presented it, this vision of sovereignty was a return to Islam’s core teachings—one they believed could bridge, rather than exacerbate, the growing divide between Muslims and Hindus.

To illustrate this model of everyday sovereignty, the essay explores a defining arena in Hindu–Muslim relations over the past two centuries: halal consumption—especially meat—and its attendant practices. In the Mughal period, meat was not generally a subject that provoked mass religious violence.<sup>7</sup> Yet, during the British colonial period, sensibilities regarding its consumption became a primary site of communal politics. On the one hand, these sensibilities prompted Hindus and Muslims to rise up together against the East India Company during the 1857 Rebellion, when Hindu and Muslim Sepoys suspected that their Enfield rifles’ cartridges were greased with cow and pork

6 S. Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023): 187.

7 This, however, does not mean that meat was not a subject of religious controversy in some instances. See, for example, Divya Cherian’s work on the eighteenth-century Marwar Kingdom, where vegetarianism became a key upper-caste practice that excluded Muslims and Dalits alike. For further information, see D. Cherian, *Merchants of Virtue: Hindus, Muslims, and Untouchables in Eighteenth-Century South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2023).

fat. Conversely, the consumption of meat also incited acts of inter-communal violence, such as the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century cow slaughtering riots that continue to this day to cast a shadow over Hindu–Muslim relations. These instances shared a common thread: meat and its consumption established boundaries and ways of excluding or marking exclusive identity.

Indeed, the formation and observation of dietary rules concerning meat reflect culturally specific conceptions of purity and pollution and thus tend to reinforce, regulate, and enshrine the segregation and autonomy of distinct cultural groups within a society.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, historians have accorded extensive attention to meat as a marker of identity in colonial South Asia, focusing on questions of violence and division, and on legal debates revolving around the figure of the cow, as well as on how these debates helped shape Muslim communal identities.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, I present an alternative perspective on the politics of halal food, specifically meat, and its role in reshaping Muslim political thought. I explore how these practices enabled Muslim thinkers to reconceptualize sovereignty and reimagine the position of their co-religionists in colonial India, extending their vision beyond the confines of their own community. I show that, far from being an obstacle for engaging non-Muslims, discourses and practices surrounding halal meat and food more broadly served to provide

8 K. Masud, "Food and the Notion of Purity in the Fatāwā Literature." In *La Alimentación en las culturas islámicas*, ed. M. Marín and D. Waines (Madrid: Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 1994): 89–110. Masud draws on Mary Douglas' focus on the role of food in marking social boundaries. See M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1984).

9 On the relationship between halal meat and Muslim identities in colonial India, see A. Lanzillo, "Butchers between Archives: Community History in Early Twentieth-Century Delhi." *South Asian History and Culture* 12:4 (2021): 357–70; on the Cow Question in the colonial period, see the following examples: A.A. Yang, "Sacred Symbol and Sacred Space in Rural India: Community Mobilization in the "Anti-Cow Killing" Riot of 1893." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22:4 (1980): 576–96; I. Copland, "What to Do About Cows: Princely versus British Approaches to a South Asian Dilemma." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 68:1 (2005): 59–76; R. De, "Cows and Constitutionalism." *Modern Asian Studies* 53:1 (2019): 240–77; C.S. Adcock, "Sacred Cows and Secular History: Cow Protection Debates in Colonial North India." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 30: 2 (2010): 297–311; Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, in particular Chapter 4 ("The Cow and the Caliphate"), 153–88. The issue of cow slaughter in contemporary India is a highly contentious one, particularly in the context of the violence perpetrated by members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; Indian People's Party) against Dalits and Muslims. For further reading on this topic, see, for example, P. Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat: Hindu Nationalism and Anti-Muslim Violence in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); and J. Sunder, "Religious Beef: Dalit Literature, Bare Life, and Cow Protection in India." *Interventions* 21:3 (2019): 337–53.

a potential avenue for inter-communal cooperation, ultimately seeking to remove the colonial state's role as a mediator between religious communities in the subcontinent.

To demonstrate this argument, I primarily focus on the writings of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (henceforth Sayyid Ahmad; 1817–1898). Sayyid Ahmad is widely regarded as one of South Asia's prominent Muslim thinkers of the nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Born into an elite Muslim (*ashraf/shurafa'*; sg. *sharif*) family tied to the Mughal court,<sup>11</sup> he worked as a civil sub-judge for the East India Company. During the 1857 Rebellion, he saved the lives of British officials and their families, earning the honorary title of Sir. He later became known as the founder of the Aligarh Movement (1858). The latter provided the intellectual and social foundation for the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (M.A.O. College, est. 1875), through which he sought to cultivate a new generation of South Asian Muslim leaders. Central to this vision was the promotion of *shurafa'* culture and etiquette as a broader social ideal, alongside exposing the college's students to a broad range of educational subjects to prepare them for the challenges of colonial modernity.<sup>12</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad's vision also involved a sharp critique of the practice of *taqlid* (blind imitation) among Hanafi '*ulama'*' (religious scholars), prompting historians to identify Sayyid Ahmad as a key figure in the development of Islamic modernism and reformism in South Asia.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, his close ties

10 A substantial portion of the following biographical information about Sayyid Ahmad is derived from his writings and the Urdu biography authored by his close associate, Altaf Husayn Hali. See A.H. Hali, *Hayat-ijawid* (Mirpur: Arslan Buks, 2000, first published in 1901). For an edited volume that includes some of the most recent research on Sayyid Ahmad, see Y. Saikia and R. Rahman ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

11 For more on the role of the *ashraf* in the sociopolitical landscape of colonial India, see D. Lelyveld, "Next year, if grain is dear, I shall be a Sayyid: Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Colonial Constructions, and Muslim Self-Definitions." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30:3 (2020): 433–48. See also I. Ahmad, "The Ashraf-Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social Structure in India." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 3:3 (1966): 268–78; F. Devji, "A Shadow Nation: The Making of Muslim India." In *Beyond Sovereignty: Britain, Empire and Transnationalism, c. 1880–1950*, ed. K. Grant, P. Levine and F. Trentmann (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007): 126–45; M. Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-century Delhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12 Devji, "A Shadow Nation": 126–45. For a response to some of Devji's main arguments, see Lelyveld, "Next Year": 433–48.

13 The Hungarian-Jewish Orientalist, Ignaz Goldziher, had a role in constructing this image of Sayyid Ahmad. He argued that Sayyid Ahmad and his associates in Aligarh understood Islam's scriptures solely in accordance with European scientific methods, hinting that this school represented an "unauthentic" form of modernism. See I. Goldziher, *Schools of*

with the colonial state and his promotion of European ideas and methods of education provoked criticism from ‘*ulama*’ across South Asia, as well as from Muslim thinkers in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, who accused him of compromising Islam in favor with the British.<sup>14</sup> Recent scholarship shows that Sayyid Ahmad shared several theological and legal concerns with some of his fiercest critics—including Deobandi scholars—even as they diverged sharply over how to confront colonial rule.<sup>15</sup> Other studies reprise contemporaneous critiques, overlooking his sustained engagement with the Islamic discursive tradition and alleging that he participated in and reproduced colonial–orientalist discourses that led to the marginalization of Muslims in colonial South Asia.<sup>16</sup> A further body of scholarship reads him chiefly through the lens of “Muslim separatism,” treating him as an early proponent of the idea that Muslims form a separate nation in South Asia.<sup>17</sup> Historians have long challenged such readings of Sayyid Ahmad’s political thought,<sup>18</sup> yet the role of everyday life in shaping his vision of sovereignty remains largely underexplored.<sup>19</sup>

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*Koranic Commentators* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006, first published in 1920): 226. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, considered Sayyid Ahmad and his circles as a class who sought to introduce bourgeois life in their own society by “... working out of a liberal Islam compatible with the nineteenth-century West, similar to it in general outlook, and, especially, in harmony with its science, its business method, and humanitarianism.” See W.C. Smith, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (Lahore: Minerva Book Shop, 1943): 2. See also *Ibid.*: 5–46.

- 14 See J.a.D. al-Afghani and M. ‘Abduh, “al-Dahariyyun fi al-Hind.” *al-‘Urwa al-Wuthqa* (2001, first published in 1884–5): 444–52.
- 15 For example, see S. Tareen, “The Theological Foundations of Muslim Modernism and Traditionalism in South Asia.” *Modern Asian Studies* 58–2 (2024): 357–85.
- 16 For a demonstrative example, see I.R. Morgenstern Fuerst, *Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels and Jihad* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).
- 17 As a demonstrative example, see F. Robinson, *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces’ Muslims, 1860–1923* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1974). Farzana Shaikh, for instance, criticized Robinson and others for overlooking the normative commands of a long-standing tradition of Islamic thought that both enabled and limited Muslim politics in colonial India. However, Shaikh did not abandon the term “separatism” as a key aspect of Muslim politics in South Asia. See F. Shaikh, *Community and Consensus in Islam: Muslim Representation in Colonial India, 1860–1947* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- 18 See D. Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978); C.W. Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1978); F. Devji, “Apologetic Modernity.” *Modern Intellectual History* 4:1 (2007): 61–76; M. Pernau, “Fluid Temporalities: Saiyid Ahmad Khan and the Concept of Modernity.” *History and Theory* 58:4 (2019): 107–131; See also the articles in Saikia and Rahman ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*.
- 19 A rare example is Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*, mainly parts of chs. 5 and 6.



Far from championing Muslim separatism or normalizing colonial power in everyday life, Sayyid Ahmad sought to redefine the boundaries of British rule and reorient the politicization of religious difference in the subcontinent. Through theological, jurisprudential, and historical reasoning, he transformed halal food and meat into a battleground for debating colonial, Muslim, and Hindu views on religious difference. For Sayyid Ahmad, this ground revealed sovereignty as not just institutional authority or coercive power—it was also a promise of mutual love in everyday life shared by Muslim and non-Muslim subjects alike.

I explore this vision through key examples from Sayyid Ahmad's writings, beginning with his treatise, *Ahkam ta'am-i ahl-i kitab* (1868, "Laws Regarding the Food of the People of the Book"), published by the Hindu-owned Naval Kishore Press in Lucknow.<sup>20</sup> Often overlooked by historians, the treatise is commonly viewed as addressing Muslim dietary concerns and dining with Britons. However, it also offers a bold vision of sovereignty, rooted in Sayyid Ahmad's interpretations of Islamic legal regulations on halal food, particularly meat. This treatise reveals his vision for Hindu–Muslim relations beyond colonial mediation. Sayyid Ahmad sought to involve the British not as "mediators," but as co-eaters alongside Muslims and Hindus. In essence, he envisioned everyday life as a space where non-violent coexistence could only thrive through equality, not the domination of either the Muslim or the non-Muslim "other."

In the 1870s and 1880s, Sayyid Ahmad expanded his vision of unmediated Hindu–Muslim sovereignty, particularly amid rising Hindu–Muslim tensions over cow slaughter. However, in the 1890s, faced with Hindu violence over the cow issue, he retreated, seeking protection for his co-religionists. This shift revealed the vulnerabilities of his earlier model, as prioritizing everyday sovereignty over state protection inadvertently strengthened colonial power and paved the way for new forms of inter-communal violence. Even so, his model of Hindu–Muslim sovereignty persisted, shaping debates among Muslim scholars—including some of his staunchest critics.

Before delving into Sayyid Ahmad's "meat talk," I first examine how and why halal meat became a central issue in nineteenth-century colonial India, focusing on global dietary shifts and the evolving political-legal landscape.

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20 For more on this printing press, see U. Stark, *An Empire of Books: the Naval Kishore Press and the Diffusion of the Printed Word in Colonial India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009).

## 1 Producing the “Indian Muslim Carnivore”

In the nineteenth century, meat turned into a pivotal instrument of British colonial power in South Asia. The colonial state strategically utilized the issue of meat consumption to both create and solidify distinctions between Hindus and Muslims—distinctions that were often internalized by colonial subjects themselves.

Historically, meat was not widely consumed in South Asia and other parts of the world until the early nineteenth century. During this period, its status began to shift, as its consumption became a subject of intense debate within the broader context of a global “nutrition transition.”<sup>21</sup> This transition climaxed following the Industrial Revolution,<sup>22</sup> when European and American scientists began designating meat an essential product for a healthy and strong body.<sup>23</sup> Bolstered by technological advances, most notably new refrigeration technologies that enabled the long-distance transport of Australian and North American cattle in the nineteenth century, meat thus turned into a global staple protein for humans.<sup>24</sup>

Although some *ahadith* (sg. *hadith*; sayings and practices attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and his immediate circles) suggest that the Prophet Muhammad’s favorite dish was *tharid*—pieces of bread in a meat broth—other Islamic traditions advocate a variety of dietary regimes ranging from moderation in meat consumption (out of concern for health risks, addiction, cruelty to animals, and financial costs) to vegetarianism and even veganism.<sup>25</sup> While meat was nevertheless consumed by Muslims worldwide,<sup>26</sup> especially during *‘Id al-Adha*, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that its regular

21 See C. Otter, “Planet of Meat: A Biological History.” In *Challenging (the) Humanities*, ed. T. Bennett (Canberra: The Australian Academy of the Humanities, 2013): unpaginated.

22 As well as sugar, refined grains and fats. See *Ibid.*

23 *Idem.*, *Diet for a Large Planet: Industrial Britain, Food Systems, and World Ecology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020): 21–2.

24 A.J. Fitzgerald, *Animals as Food: (re)connecting production, processing, consumption, and impacts* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2015): 68.

25 K. Ali, “Muslims and Meat-Eating.” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43:2 (2015): 268–88; K. Blankinship, “Missionary and Heretic: Debating Veganism in the Medieval Islamic World.” In *Insatiable Appetite: Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, ed. K. Dmitriev, J. Hauser, and B. Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 260–91.

26 J. Hauser, “A Frugal Crescent Perceptions of Foodways in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt in Nineteenth-Century Vegetarian Discourse.” In *Insatiable Appetite*, ed. Dmitriev et al.: 302–4.

consumption became widespread among non-elites.<sup>27</sup> This indicates that the “nutrition transition” was, therefore, a key moment of dietary change for Muslims worldwide. This was all the more true on the subcontinent, where the colonial state began juxtaposing the so-called “carnivorous Muslims” with the so-called “vegetarian Hindus.”<sup>28</sup>

The changing diet of indentured laborers between the early nineteenth century and the late 1860s reflects this dietary transformation. Whereas in 1801 lists of food rations and products pertaining to Muslim and Hindu indentured laborers and troops on ships departing from Calcutta make no mention of any meat products,<sup>29</sup> in the late 1860s we see a different picture. In June 1869, a shipping health officer in Trinidad criticized what he regarded as the inadequate rice-based diet of Hindu workers, contrasting this with the healthier omnivorous dietary habits of Trinidad’s Muslims, who included subcontinental emigrants. As he noted: “they [i.e. the Muslims] certainly eat meat and other forms of animal food, and cannot fail to suffer from a continuous rice diet.”<sup>30</sup>

This identification of meat consumption with physical strength was indeed common among British officials who regarded meat as “a vital source of British power and stamina, a weapon of war and a tool of conquest.”<sup>31</sup> In fact, there was a general assumption among colonial officials that Muslims were physically stronger than Hindus due to their greater meat consumption. Such views even preceded the post-1857 Rebellion theory of “martial races”—the idea that certain subcontinental groups, among them Muslim and Sikhs, possessed inherent racial and biological qualities that made them “ideal” soldiers.<sup>32</sup>

27 N. Green, “Kebabs and Port Wine: The Culinary Cosmopolitanism of Anglo-Persian Dining, 1800–1835,” In *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim Contexts*, ed. D.N. Maclean and S.K. Ahmed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012): 108–9.

28 A growing number of middle-class Hindus began to consume meat during the nineteenth century as a result of the idea that meat could create a strong body, stirring inter-Hindu debates about vegetarianism. See U. Ray, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 155.

29 National Archives of India (NAI), Military Department Proceedings, Fort William, 29 May 1801, 713–9. I thank Ashutosh Kumar for sharing these materials with me.

30 NAI, Bengal EP, Emigration, July 1870, no. 10. I.

31 Otter, *Diet for a Large Planet*: 21. See also R. Mawani, “C Is for Cattle.” In *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*, eds. A. Burton and R. Mawani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020): 40.

32 For two major examples discussing this topic, see H. Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); K. Imy, *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

While such policies often encountered suspicions from Hindus and Muslims alike,<sup>33</sup> they were nevertheless frequently internalized by Indians themselves. M.K. Gandhi, for example, recounted in his autobiography how his Gujarati-Muslim friend, Sheikh Mehtab, tried to convince him to abandon his family's staunch Vaishnava vegetarianism and embrace meat-eating instead. As Mehtab explained to Gandhi:

The English are able to rule over us, because they are meat-eaters. You know how hardy I am, and how great a runner too. It is because I am a meat-eater. Meat-eaters do not have boils or tumours, and even if they sometimes happen to have any, these heal quickly. Our teachers and other distinguished people who eat meat are no fools.<sup>34</sup>

In response to this speech, Gandhi identified Sheikh Mehtab's carnivore argument as a result of British colonial modernity, which, according to the Mahatma, his Muslim friend embodied.<sup>35</sup> Such arguments reflected a growing Hindu activism that sought to radically reduce the slaughter of animals, especially cows, on the Indian subcontinent. In some instances, although not in Gandhi's case, this activism extended to arguing that the slaughter of cows threatened to weaken and immiserate the Hindu population. For instance, an article published in the April 1890 edition of *Godharm Prakash* of Farukhabad argued that "the scarcity of cattle has led to the dearth of milk and clarified butter and has affected the fertility of the soil, and that consequently the Hindus have fallen off in physique and the agricultural classes have been reduced to a state of destitution." Thus, to rescue Hindus from the resultant physical debility, the author of the piece called on British animal protection activists to pressure their government to prohibit such practices.<sup>36</sup>

As part of such activism, Hindu intellectuals argued to Muslim audiences and colonial officials alike that Islamic law neither prescribed nor commended the slaughter of cows. For example, Mohana Mittra (1856–1925), a Bengali Hindu journalist, wrote in 1894 that neither the Qur'an nor *hadith* mandated

33 T.R. Metcalf, *The Aftermath of Revolt: India, 1857–1870* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1964): 48.

34 M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or the Story of my Experiments with Truth*, translated by Mahadev Desai, introduced by Tridip Suhrud and Foreword by Ashis Nandy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018): 77.

35 L.I. Rudolph and S.H. Rudolph, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006): 7–9.

36 10R/L/R/5/67, 225.

cow slaughter and thus no ritual obligation existed.<sup>37</sup> Still, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century such interventions drew consistent Muslim rebuttals defending meat eating in general and beef in particular. In fact, some Muslim scholars began to advance various justifications in support of the consumption of meat.

A case in point is a treatise published in 1878 by Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi (1832–1880), a prominent Hanafi scholar and one of the founders of the Islamic seminary in Deoband. Nanautvi rejected the claims of Hindus that meat-eating was an uncivilized act akin to the bestiality of wild animals. He proposed that not only was meat-eating natural for humans, but it was also a practice observed across the globe, serving as a marker of advanced civilization. He further asserted that even within Hindu communities, there existed groups who not only consumed meat but also offered animal sacrifices to their deities.<sup>38</sup>

Other Muslims scholars positioned the consumption of meat at the center of Muslim identity politics amidst the increasing activism of the Cow Protection Committees in the late nineteenth century. A treatise by Sami'ullah Khan, one of the founders of the M.A.O. College, reflected such emerging politics. Published in 1894, the treatise drew upon a range of evidence, inducing Hanafi jurisprudence, to argue that cows were God's favorite animals for sacrifice. Cows, it claimed, were slaughtered by the Prophet Moses himself, as well as by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. For those who did not agree with his juridical argument, Sami'ullah offered an economic reasoning for why cow slaughter would benefit Muslims. He claimed that cow slaughtering was economically beneficial since an average cow could be considered as a sacrifice offered to God by seven people, in contrast to sheep, which were more expensive per unit of weight and shared by fewer individuals. He further observed that it was a form of Hindu hypocrisy to focus exclusively on the Muslim practice of slaughtering cows during the 'Id celebrations, at a time when Christians in the subcontinent were engaged in the same practice on a daily basis.<sup>39</sup>

Admittedly, not all Muslim scholars accepted such arguments, rejecting the growing identification of their co-religionists in South Asia with meat-eating. There were even prominent Muslim members of the *ashraf* who supported

37 See S.M. Mittra, *Zabḥ al-baqr* (Lucknow: Matba'-'i Munshi Ganga Par Varma va Baradaran, 1894).

38 M.Q. Nanautvi, *Tuḥfah-i Lahmīyya* (Deoband: Matba'-'i Qasimi, n.d.).

39 See both the English and Urdu versions of the piece: M.S. [Khan], "The 'Id Sacrifice." *The Allahabad Review* 5:2 (1894): 14–28; M.S. [Khan], "Hindustan mein qurbani." *The Allahabad Review* 5:2 (1894): 9–20.

vegetarianism for health and moral reasons.<sup>40</sup> Yet notwithstanding these exceptions, the binary of the “carnivorous Muslim” versus the “Hindu vegetarian” gradually solidified and became politicized across the subcontinent during the nineteenth century. This solidification not only made meat a focal point of Hindu–Muslim relations but also marked the broader shift from Mughal to British colonial sovereignty and the attendant redefinition of the subcontinental legal sphere.

## 2 Different Shades of Impartiality: the Shift from Mughal to Colonial Sovereignty

In November 1858, following the trial and forced exile to Burma of the last Mughal emperor, Bahadur Zafar Shah (1775–1862), Queen Victoria issued a proclamation declaring direct British sovereignty over the Indian subcontinent. The proclamation marked the dissolution of the East India Company (EIC; 1600–1858), which had governed Britain’s Indian possessions on its behalf. The proclamation constituted a symbolic moment at which British sovereignty formally replaced the former socio-political order of the Mughal Empire.<sup>41</sup>

Although the British portrayal of the subcontinent as a region divided by antagonistic religious communities can be traced back to the early period of EIC rule over Bengal in the late eighteenth century, Victoria’s 1858 proclamation did reflect a rhetorical shift. Withdrawing from the EIC’s policy of liberal and reformist interventionism,<sup>42</sup> the post-1857 Rebellion rhetoric stressed a British colonial commitment to refrain from intervening in the affairs of any religious community or supporting any religion, including Christianity (which EIC officials had officially previously endorsed), at the expense of others. Positioning itself as a sovereign power committed to the so-called impartial governing of social and religious difference, the proclamation guaranteed to “disclaim the

40 A.M. Khwaja, *The Early Life of the First Student of the M.A.O. College* (Allahabad: Allahabad Law Journal Press, 1916): 44. During his 1884 travels to Egypt, Hamidullah, the son of Sami’ullah Khan (a member of the founding generation of the M.A.O. College), claimed to be a vegetarian in theory.

41 Queen Victoria, “Proclamation by the Queen in Council, to the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India (published by the Governor-General at Allahabad).” *The Gazette of India* (November 2, 1858): 1–4.

42 For more on this shift, see K. Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010); M. Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012): ch. 1.

Right and the Desire to impose our Convictions on any of Our Subjects,” by implementing “reason” and “impartial protection of the law.” It also stressed that Britain would “abstain from all interference with the Religious Belief or Worship” of its Indian subjects, while taking into account the “ancient Rights, Usages, and Customs of India.”<sup>43</sup>

At first glance—and as some historians have noted—this commitment to noninterference may have reflected Britain’s attempt to signal discursive continuity with the Mughal ethos of justice that preceded its rule.<sup>44</sup> The Mughal ethos of justice was centered around an early modern vision of impartiality—albeit quite different from the colonial one—that was prevalent amongst various polities across Asia, most notably the Ottoman and Qing empires.<sup>45</sup> This Mughal vision stressed the state’s commitment to securing justice and impartial governance (*‘adl* or *insaf*; derived from the Arabic root *nasf*, i.e. “taking the half, reaching towards the middle”) for Muslims and non-Muslims alike.<sup>46</sup> Unlike post-Enlightenment theories of impersonal governance, this Mughal vision of impartiality was not based on distance between the state and its subjects.<sup>47</sup> Rather, the Mughal political order was sustained by a personified imagination that stressed mutual love (*muhabbat*) between the emperor and his subjects,<sup>48</sup> a love that was gradually constructed through and conditioned by the reciprocal actions of both sides.

Set against this Mughal vision, the Raj’s framework of “impartiality” signaled a deeper rupture from Mughal modes of governing difference. At its core was a new conception of justice: in place of a Mughal framework grounded in *muhabbat*, the colonial state recast sovereignty as a stance of detached mediation

43 Queen Victoria, “Proclamation”: 2.

44 D. Gilmartin, “Imperial Sovereignty in Mughal and British Forms.” *History and Theory* 56:1 (2017): 85–86. As Gilmartin argues, while Queen Victoria’s 1858 Proclamation echoed a “Mughal” ethos of sovereignty at the level of discourse, the British colonial state marked a distinctive rupture from its predecessor, with its techniques of sovereignty—most notably “objectification” of its Indian subjects—as the key site of break.

45 Meng Zhang, “Empire of Impartiality: Managing Indebtedness to Foreigners in Eighteenth-Century China.” *Journal of Global History* 19:3 (2024): 323–43.

46 Muzzafar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India: C. 1200–1800* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004): 54–69; Kaicker, “Petitions and Local Politics”: 28–9. See also A.A. Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

47 A. Traninger and K. Murphy, “Introduction.” In *The Emergence of Impartiality*, ed. A. Traninger and K. Murphy (Leiden: Brill, 2014): 23. For a demonstrative example of such “impersonality,” see M. Weber, “Bureaucracy.” In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958): 216, 224.

48 Alam, *The Languages*: 55, 58.

between religiously divided communities.<sup>49</sup> Such disinterest, Victoria's proclamation stressed, was sustained by a commitment to non-interference in the ritual affairs of its subjects. This commitment very much served the colonial state's goal of provincializing Islamic law, a process that had already commenced during the 1790s under the EIC's rule.<sup>50</sup> By limiting the scope of the category of 'religion' to the domains of belief and worship, the colonial state further excluded the *Shari'a* from the ostensibly "secular" realms of colonial Public Law, restricting it to "successions, inheritance, marriage, and caste, and all religious usages and institutions."<sup>51</sup> Although such restrictions neither eroded Islamic law's place in Muslim life across South Asia nor foreclosed Muslim jurists' efforts to reshape the legal sphere from within—including through state mechanisms<sup>52</sup>—they nonetheless redefined the *Shari'a* as a communal jurisdiction to which other religious communities, such as Hindus, no longer had access.<sup>53</sup>

The legal transformations brought by colonial impartiality, however, encountered social (and dietary) realities that challenged the colonial claim of "non-interference." Standing at the intersection of the so-called "traditional" and "secular," the question of halal meat consumption offers a useful lens with which to comprehend this history. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, colonial India saw persistent tensions between the colonial state's aspiration to regulate hygiene on the one hand, and its purported policy of non-interference on the other. These tensions arose primarily due to the fact that animal slaughter (*zabiha*) was a matter of ritual worship and service

49 T.R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1994): 151.

50 On the formation of the "Anglo-Muhammadan" legal system, see S.A. Kugle, "Framed, Blamed and Renamed: The Recasting of Islamic Jurisprudence in Colonial South Asia." *Modern Asian Studies* 35:2 (2001): 257–313.

51 "First Report of Her Majesty's Commissioners Appointed to Prepare A Body of Substantive Law for India." 60, HC PP, 1864 (3312) XVI.359. Quoted from J.A. Stephens, *Governing Islam: Law, Empire, and Secularism in Modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018): 52. See also B.D. Ingram, "The Queen's Urdu: Translating Colonial Secularity in Victoria's 1858 Proclamation." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 52:1 (2024): 104–27.

52 See, for example, S.Z.M. Siddiqui, *Islamic Law on Trial: Contesting Colonial Power in British India* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2025).

53 On the history of Mughal legal practices, see N. Chatterjee, "Reflections on Religious Difference and Permissive Inclusion in Mughal Law." *Journal of Law and Religion* 29:3 (2014): 396–415; N. Haider, "Violence and Defiance of Authority in Mughal India: A Study of the Shoe Sellers' Riot of Shahjahanabad." *Studies in History* 36:2 (2020): 163–77; See also A. Kaicker, "Petitions and Local Politics in the Late Mughal Empire: the view from Kol, 1741." *Modern Asian Studies* 53:1 (2019): 21–51.



to God (*‘ibadat*).<sup>54</sup> This meant that *zabiha* ought to be included within the domain of colonial Personal Law.

Yet, like its European counterparts, the British colonial state in India sought to centralize and regulate meat production, driven by concerns that unsupervised animal slaughter could lead to disease and public disorder.<sup>55</sup> While Europe saw its first public abattoirs in the 1820s, the subcontinent's first public abattoir was established in Delhi in the early 1850s, with others rapidly following suit.<sup>56</sup> However, as the number of abattoirs expanded, so did British colonial complaints about their sanitary conditions. A 1864 report from the British Indian Home Department, for instance, singled out the Sudder Bazar in Poona, describing its “slaughter-yard” as a “pest in itself.” The report highlighted the unsanitary process of blood collection and disposal, noting that blood and waste “constantly dripped out” and saturated the ground.<sup>57</sup> In another example from 1873, the Sanitary Commissioner of Punjab expressed concern over Delhi's slaughterhouses, recounting his observation of meat being cut on “old charpois” (woven beds), calling it a “very objectionable practice” that should be stopped.<sup>58</sup>

Such reports indicated a growing interest on the part of the colonial state in matters of public health and regulation. This interest led to tensions between the colonial state and Muslim and Hindus alike. Illustrative of such tensions was the introduction of a bill for “the better regulation and supervision of public slaughterhouses in the suburbs of Calcutta” in the Bengal legislative council during 1866. When members of Calcutta's British Indian Association (1851–1954)<sup>59</sup> discovered that Hindu temples and other places of worship, where ritual slaughtering of animals was conducted, were not exempted from the bill, they protested and called for the bill's amendment. Eventually, the council agreed to add a clause that exempted both Muslim and Hindu places of worship from the stipulations of the bill.<sup>60</sup>

54 F. Armanios and B. Ergene, *Halal Food: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018): 253.

55 A.B. Sharan, *In the City, Out of Place: Nuisance, Pollution, and Dwelling in Delhi, c. 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 71.

56 *Ibid.*: 70–3.

57 NAI, Home Department, Public, Part B, Proceedings, nos. 55–57, 1864, p. 12.

58 NAI, Home Department, Public, Proceedings, no. 260, May 1874, p. 5.

59 An organization of upper-class Bengalis who sought to improve the work of local administration.

60 British Indian Association (Calcutta), *Proceedings at the fourteenth Annual General Meeting of the Association, etc. Feb. 14, 1866* (Calcutta: N.P., 1866): 3. Such protests reflected more than a “successful utilization” of the British colonial legal field. Rather, it brings to mind Paolo Sartori's argument on the concept of justice in Tsarist Central Asia. As Sartori

But the crown government also benefited from such religious sensibilities. For example, in 1886 legislators in Bengal received complaints from Hindus and Muslims alike that ghee sold in Calcutta's bazaars was adulterated with beef and lard—beef commonly avoided among Hindus and lard prohibited under Islamic law. Colonial legislators proposed amending a 1876 bill to comprehensively reform food hygiene in Bengal. The suggested reforms included more frequent inspections by colonial officials of businesses involved in the selling and production of food, as well as harsher punishments for code violators. By instrumentalizing their subjects' fears of the impurity of animal flesh, British officials thus found justifications to conduct wide-ranging public health reforms.<sup>61</sup>

Although they produced varying outcomes, these examples highlight a fundamental tension in the theory and practice of colonial impartiality—rooted in the colonial state's inability to establish a clear legal divide between what its officials deemed as the “private” and “public” spheres.<sup>62</sup> On the one hand, the colonial state sought to regulate dietary and hygienic norms and commitments but, on the other, it pledged—while continuing to police the boundaries of communal identity—to refrain from intervening in the ritual practices of its Indian subjects. These colonial interventions were more than mere reflections of the tensions and paradoxes inherent in secular governance and its legal regimes.<sup>63</sup> While these interventions turned everyday ritual into an increasingly politicized domain during the second half of the nineteenth century, they also elicited diverse responses among colonial subjects. It is this context that gave rise to Sayyid Ahmad's meat-centered politics in the North-Western Provinces and Oudh (Avadh), the epicenter of the 1857 Rebellion and its aftermath.

### 3 Beyond “Colonial Impartiality”: Sayyid Ahmad in the Aftermath of the Rebellion

Having allied with the British Empire after saving the lives of English officials and their families during the 1857 Rebellion, Sayyid Ahmad considered

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argues, “... redress depended less on an institutionalized system of adjudication than on a web of interpersonal power relations.” See P. Sartori, *Visions of Justice: Sharia and cultural change in Russian Central Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016): 4.

61 IOR/L/PJ/6/187/file 1749.

62 Such tensions also affected other regions of the British Empire. See, for example, Nur-fadzilah Yahaya, “The Question of Animal Slaughter in the British Straits Settlements during the Early Twentieth Century.” *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 43: 126 (2015): 173–90.

63 T. Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2003).

Victoria's 1858 proclamation as a new era in the subcontinent. He was particularly appreciative of the proclamation's guarantee of equal protection for the religious practices and beliefs of Victoria's Indian subjects.<sup>64</sup> However, his interpretation of impartiality was starkly divergent from that of the colonial state. Rejecting the idea that impartiality could be based on the sovereign's detachment from his/her subjects, he argued that an "Empire of Impartiality" could function only if there existed a close relationship between the state and the members of religious communities under its rule.

Instead of defining impartiality as "not being motivated by private considerations,"<sup>65</sup> Sayyid Ahmad emphasized the importance of proximity between sovereign and subjects. He rejected the classical liberal view, which regarded intimacy as a form of 'partiality' in which an individual "would further his best [friend's] interests, manifest concern or respect for his autonomy, or help him to become a more excellent human being."<sup>66</sup> Rather, he argued that the connection between impartiality (*bi-tarafdari*) and intimacy was what allowed a polity to foster positive partiality (*tarafdari*) among the state's subjects toward its rule and institutions. Sayyid Ahmad did not see positive partiality as a zero-sum game, where one religious community triumphs over another. Instead, *tarafdari* had to be universal, reflecting the sovereign's ability to balance the diverse beliefs and concerns of all subjects. Thus, it was intimacy and proximity, not distance, that would secure the subjects' support for a particular model of sovereignty and its associated institutions.

This position resulted from his experiences during the 1857 Rebellion. Serving as a *sadr amin* (civil sub-judge) for the EIC in Bijnor district during the rebellion, he bore witness both to the colonial policies that led to this anti-colonial uprising against the EIC, as well as the rebellion's brutal suppression by Britain.<sup>67</sup> On the basis of his experiences, he came to view the pervasive British colonial interventions in the ritual spheres of its subjects as a key cause of the rebellion. He discussed this position in his renowned work, *Asbab-i sarkashi-i Hindustan* (known in English as *The Causes of the Indian Rebellion*; 1859).

64 S.A. Khan, "Khitab-i shahanshahi [*Akhbar Scientific Society Aligarh*, March 24, 1876]." In *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, vol. 9, ed. M.I. Panipati (Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-i Adab, 1992): 41–2.

65 B. Barry, *Justice as Impartiality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1995): 11.

66 S. Keller, *Partiality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013): 113. I thank Guy Bar Sadeh for the reference.

67 S.A. Khan, "Tarikh-i sarkashi-i Zillah Bijnor [originally published in 1858]." In *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, vol. 6, ed. Panipati: 351. See also D. Lelyveld, "Of Mixed Loyalties: Sayyid Ahmad Khan's account of the Uprising in Bijnor." *Biblio* (March–April 2007): 32–3; Y. Saikia, "Sir Sayyid on History: The Indian Rebellion of 1857 and Rethinking the 'Rebellious' Muslim Question." In *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, ed. Saikia et al.: 24–34.

In this treatise, he placed particular emphasis on the EIC's disrespect towards its subjects' religious rituals, arguing that "there was no doubt that our government was not informed about the conditions that caused suffering to its subjects" and that it "did not create love (*muhabbat*) and friendship during its hundred-year reign." He urged the British government to learn from the subcontinent's history, invoking the example of the Mughal Empire between the reigns of Akbar I and Shah Jahan (1556–1658), who, he claimed, made this region into their home and produced friendly relations (*mil-jul*) with their subjects through religious tolerance.<sup>68</sup>

In invoking *muhabbat*, Sayyid Ahmad conceptualized love not as an insatiable, passionate love (*ishq*), but rather as a temperate one, one which is constructed gradually by both the sovereign and subjects.<sup>69</sup> Such a conceptualization was rooted in the early modern idea that rulers had to foster a sense of mutual love with their subjects solely on the basis of reason (*aql*). By tempering love, the rulers would be able to refrain from favoritism or excessive attachment to any particular community under their sovereignty, "... just as a husband needed to be careful in dividing his affection among his wives, concubines and slaves."<sup>70</sup> Offering his own take on the Mughal period, Sayyid Ahmad argued that the acquisition of *muhabbat* was not a matter of chance, but rather a result of the Mughal rulers' ability to become an integral part of the subcontinent, despite initial perceptions of them as being foreign interlopers from Central Asia.

For Sayyid Ahmad, however, the maintenance of love was not solely dependent on the sovereign's refraining from favoritism. Rather, he contended that the sovereign power was required to maintain ritual boundaries between the various religious communities under its reign, viewing this maintenance as a key aspect of sovereignty and the prerequisite for the implementation of impartiality. In his *Asbab-i sarkashi-i Hindustan*, Sayyid Ahmad placed particular emphasis on what he viewed as the EIC's disruption of marked ritual boundaries between caste Hindus and Muslims. Some of these acts of disruption, he highlighted, were connected to ritual concerns over the purity of food. For example, he referred to the EIC's implementation of the prison messing system, initially introduced in jails across Bengal in the 1840s. To punish

68 S.A. Khan, *Causes of the Indian Revolt: Three Essays*, ed. S.A.D. Quraishi (Lahore, Sang-i Mil Publications, 1997, first published in 1859): 57–58, 66.

69 M. Pernau, *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2019): 91–2. See also F. Orsini, "Introduction." In *Love in South Asia: A Cultural History*, ed. F. Orsini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 16–7. I thank Margrit Pernau for these references.

70 Orsini, "Introduction": 17.

its prisoners, the EIC forced Hindus to consume meals prepared by cooks who did not belong to their caste and eat alongside other prisoners.<sup>71</sup> As he claimed, whereas Muslims were not directly affected by this messing system, they supported the Hindu protests since they saw this policy as a sign of British interference in its subjects' ritual domains.<sup>72</sup>

Adhering to this position, Sayyid Ahmad himself implemented clear ritual boundaries between Hindus and Muslims during the relief efforts of the 1860 famine in the Moradabad district in North India. Acting as a sub-judge in the British Indian civil service, he did not distinguish between the famine's Hindu and Muslim victims, except in one respect: he segregated between the kitchens of different Hindu castes and those of Muslims. By segregating these cooking spaces, Sayyid Ahmad adhered to dietary rules that reflected the prevalent social order in North India, arguing that the crown government ought to avoid any interference in the ritual autonomy of its subjects.<sup>73</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad's attempt to maintain strict demarcations in matters of ritual appears to align with the self-perception of the colonial state as an "impartial sovereign" governing a clearly demarcated domain of religious communities. Yet, in contrast with the self-image of the colonial state, Sayyid Ahmad did not view ritual separation as an end in itself. Rather, he suggested, it served three main goals. First, it would ease the internal-Muslim debates between members of Muslim *firqa* (schools of belief), which steadily grew in the aftermath of the rebellion.<sup>74</sup> Second, ritual separation would enable Muslims to 'cleanse' themselves of what he deemed the segregationist influence of upper-caste Hindu dietary customs, which, he believed, had led Muslims to mistakenly think that engaging with non-Muslims over food was prohibited under Islamic law. Third, ritual separation was a prerequisite for the formation of unmediated inter-communal relationships, a condition that would, in turn, deprive the colonial state of its role as an alleged impartial mediator in the everyday interactions of its subjects, while fostering a form of political devolution in which Hindus and Muslims could negotiate their relations independently and according to their own volition.

71 D. Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 110.

72 Khan, *Causes of the Indian Revolt*: 45–6.

73 See Hali, *Hayat*: 121.

74 On this topic, see S.A. Zaidi, *Making Muslim: Reading Publics and Contesting Identities in Nineteenth-Century North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); S. Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame University, 2020).

In the following sections, I examine how Sayyid Ahmad conceptualized these ideas in practice, particularly through debates related to the consumption of halal food and meat, beginning with his treatise, *Ahkam ta'am-i ahl-i kitab*.

#### 4 Negotiating Ritual and Inter-Communal Sociability: *Ahkam ta'am-i ahl-i kitab*

Published in 1868 in Urdu, with sections in Arabic and Persian, Sayyid Ahmad's treatise was a response to the growing criticism he faced for his close ties with the British government.<sup>75</sup> Fellow Muslims criticized him for dining with British officials and consuming meat not slaughtered by Muslim butchers. In defense, Sayyid Ahmad drew on Islamic law and theology to justify such practices.<sup>76</sup> In other words, he employed various tools in his legal repertoire to create a body of rulings that would open the door to shared dining, first with "People of the Book" (in this case, Britons), and later with other non-Muslims (most notably Hindus) more broadly.

Sayyid Ahmad's decision to center his treatise around Islamic legal rulings on the food consumed by the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitab*) warrants further exploration. The term, *ahl al-kitab*, which primarily refers to Jews and Christians, is a topic of discussion in longstanding debates between various Islamic schools of jurisprudence. Throughout history, Muslim jurists have grappled with how to reconcile the various Qur'anic verses regarding Muslim interactions with kitabis (Jews and Christians). Qur'an 5:5 states: "The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you, as your food is lawful for them." However, Muslim scholars have also had to balance this verse with other Qur'anic statements about the purity of *kitabis* and the conditions under which their food can be deemed halal.<sup>77</sup>

Nevertheless, the title of Sayyid Ahmad's treatise is somewhat deceptive, as it engages with a multitude of subjects, most notably the broader question of inter-religious interactions—particularly Hindu-Muslim relations—and intra-Muslim differences in everyday life. Structured as a series of responses to the commonly held doubts (*shube* in Urdu) of his fellow believers regarding dietary matters, it includes a diverse array of references, most notably verses from the *Qur'an* and selected *ahadith*, as well as works of *tafsir* (exegesis of the Qur'an) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and selected fatwas written in

75 Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*: 234–5.

76 For further background on the treatise, see Hali, *Hayat-i jawid*: 167–9.

77 Armanios and Eugene, *Halal Food*: 65–7; Masud, "Food and the Notion of Purity": 90.

Arabic and Persian (from the early Islamic period to the nineteenth century) as secondary sources.

In his introduction, Sayyid Ahmad lamented what he considered as the common practice of his time—namely, the tendency of some of his South Asian Muslim co-religionists to ostracize and excommunicate other subcontinental Muslims, including himself, for engaging in social interactions with non-Muslims and consuming their food.<sup>78</sup> He argued that such actions resulted from Muslims' espousal of segregative dietary practices that were common among members of various Hindu castes. By imitating these practices, he explained, South Asian Muslims set themselves apart from their co-religionists elsewhere—for example, Muslims in Eastern Turkestan—who, he claimed, routinely shared meals with non-Muslims.<sup>79</sup>

For Sayyid Ahmad, the refusal of some of his fellow Muslims to engage in culinary interactions with non-Muslims was a consequence of their lack of knowledge of their own religion. As he posited, the Qur'an permitted the consumption of the food of kitabis—with the exceptions of forbidden (*muharramat*) foods such as pork and alcohol—and dining with them. He lamented that many of his co-religionists were unaware of this Qur'anic permissibility and branded those who acted upon it—including himself—as unbelievers (a practice known as *takfir*). Rejecting the practice of *takfir*, he argued that all Muslims, regardless of their sectarian affiliation, should be regarded as a unified community characterized by its diversity:

Amongst us, the Muslims, there are many schools of belief (*firqa*) to the extent that we call one another infidels. All of these schools of belief consider themselves the *umma* of the Prophet Muhammad. Therefore, all those schools of beliefs are the people of the Qur'an, which was revealed to them. Their differences in matters of practice and belief notwithstanding, these people cannot be considered as not belonging to the people of the Qur'an. In the same manner, all of the Jews and Christians, whatever their own beliefs are, cannot be ostracized [from their own religion].<sup>80</sup>

78 S.A. Khan, *Ahkam ta'am-i ahl-i kitab* (Kanpur: Matb'-i Munshi Naval Kishore, 1868): 3–4.

79 In 1872, Sayyid Ahmad published an Urdu translation of excerpts from the travelogue of the British traveller Robert Barkley Shaw, who visited Chinese Eastern Turkestan in 1871; Shaw noted Muslims there who criticized their Indian co-religionists for avoiding eating and drinking with non-Muslims. See S.A. Khan, "Musulmanan-i Yarqand [*Tahzib al-Akhlaq* 2 [1872]. 536–556]." In *Maqalat-i Sir Sayyid*, vol. 2, ed. Panipati: 232–62; R. Shaw, *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand, and Kashgar (Formerly Chinese Tartary) and Return over the Karakoram Pass* (London: John Murray, 1871).

80 Khan, *Ahkam*: 8.

Sayyid Ahmad lamented that the diverse and inclusive category of *Muslim* had been narrowed by members of different *firqa* who rejected the Muslimness of their co-religionists over differences in practice. Instead of solely promoting a singular form of Islam, he advocated a vision of an *umma* unified in its diversity. Such principle of unity of difference, he noted, was shared by Jews and Christians as well, notwithstanding their existing denominational differences. As we can see, for Sayyid Ahmad the figure of the *kitabī* served as a useful point of rhetorical comparison, facilitating his argument for Muslim unity in difference.

Similarly, Sayyid Ahmad utilized the topic of the legality of *zabiha* by *kitabīs* to present his perspective on the doctrinal divergences among the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence. To do so, he responded to the prevalent doubts among some of his co-religionists about whether the British slaughtered animals in accordance with the *Shariʿa*, which, in most cases, required “invocation of the name of God (*tasmīyya*) [and the] cutting of windpipe, carotid arteries and gullet of the animal.”<sup>81</sup> Rejecting such doubts, Sayyid Ahmad called upon Muslims to follow the verse (Qurʾan 5:5): “The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you as your food is lawful for them.” Drawing on this verse, he stated that even if the British had slaughtered their animals in a way that did not accord with Islamic law and invoked the name of Jesus instead of the *tasmīyya* during the act of slaughtering itself, such meat should still be considered *halal*.<sup>82</sup>

As this position suggests, Sayyid Ahmad stressed that the rules for lawful slaughtering were solely incumbent upon Muslims and not upon *kitabīs*. To support this view, he avoided the position of Hanafi *madhhab* (the dominant school of jurisprudence in South Asia), arguing that its corpora did not have many materials on this question. Instead, Sayyid Ahmad chose to consult the Maliki *madhhab*, referring to the *tafsir* (commentary of the Qurʾan) of the North African scholar Abu Bakr Ibn al-ʿArabi al-Maliki (1076–1148). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this text would become of central importance to Muslim thinkers beyond the subcontinent, who advanced similar claims to those put forth by Sayyid Ahmad regarding the lawfulness of *kitabī zabiha*.<sup>83</sup> Al-Maliki claimed in his commentary that even if an animal had

81 Ibid.

82 The Qurʾan does not give guidance on how one should slaughter animals properly, stipulating only that one should not slaughter them by “strangling, beating, a fall from height, or the goring of animal horns.” See Armanios and Ergene, *Halal Food*: 61.

83 For example, Muhammad ʿAbduh, the Grand Mufti of Egypt during the years 1899–1905. In 1903, ʿAbduh issued a *fatwa* to a Muslim immigrant in Transvaal (in modern-day South Africa) who asked him whether Islamic law permitted the growing Muslim community



been slaughtered by Christians without following the conditions prescribed by the *Shari'ā*, such meat was still lawful for Muslims.<sup>84</sup> Seeking to justify the reference to Maliki rather than Hanafi jurisprudence, Sayyid Ahmad explained that:

Even if a person is a follower of one of the four Sunni imams [or] if he follows in some matter another imam, then it is [considered] lawful. Particularly, it is lawful in such a situation in which the [required] text is not available in one's school of jurisprudence. Therefore, in such tradition, the followers can act upon any of the four schools of jurisprudence.<sup>85</sup>

By invoking Maliki jurisprudence, Sayyid Ahmad strategically circumvented *taqlid*—the hermeneutical approach that emphasizes adherence to a single school of jurisprudence, a subject of ongoing and contentious debate among Muslim scholars across a range of contexts, including South Asia, since the fourteenth century.<sup>86</sup> Rather than adhering to this constraint, he used an alternative legal method that resembled to the eleventh- and twelfth-century approach of *takhayyur* (“legal eclecticism”). The latter allowed for temporarily adopting a Sunni *madhhab* different from one's usual affiliation to address specific legal issues.<sup>87</sup> This approach, though central to Sayyid Ahmad's thought,

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(mostly comprised of Malay and Indian immigrants) in Transvaal to eat meat slaughtered by Christian butchers, even if the latter did not pronounce the *tasmīya*. See J.O. Voll, “Abduh and the Transvaal Fatwa: The Neglected Question.” In *Islam and the Question of Minorities*, ed. T. Sonn (Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press, 1996): 27–40; N. Friedlander, “Muḥammad ‘Abduh (1849–1905): The Transvaal Fatwa and the Fate of Animals.” In *Animal Theologians*, eds. A. Linzey and C. Linzey (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023): 236–56.

84 A.B. Ibn al-'Arabi, *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003): 44–5.

85 Khan, *Ahkam*: 23.

86 A. Mustafa, *On Taqlid: Ibn Al Qayyim's Critique of Authority in Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013): 1–60. Such critiques were central to the thought of Shah Waliullah Dihlavi (1703–1762), a leading Mughal-era scholar whose work informed competing theological orientations across South Asia—from Deoband to Aligarh—and shaped ideas of figures such as Sayyid Ahmad. See Marcia K. Hermansen's introduction to her translation: Shāh Walī Allāh, *The Conclusive Argument from God: Shāh Walī Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh al-Bāligha*, trans. Marcia K. Hermansen, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies* vol. 25 (Leiden; New York; Köln: E.J. Brill, 1996), xxix–xxxiv.

87 B. Krawietz, “Cut and Paste in Legal Rules: Designing Islamic Norms with *Talfiq*.” *Die Welt des Islams* 42:1 (2002): 4 [footnote no. 5]. For the connection between *takhayyur* and *talfiq*, see the following studies: N.J. Coulson, *A History of the Islamic Law* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971): 197–201; Anderson, *Law and Reform in the Muslim World* (London: Athlone Press, 1976): 56. Beyond *takhayyur*, Muslim scholars and thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries advanced other critiques of *taqlid*,

was also embraced—though not exclusively—by reformist movements and Muslim constitutionalists across British India, the Ottoman Empire, and Khedival Egypt in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While, in some contexts, Muslim thinkers and jurists practiced *takhayyur* to justify the adaptation of European constitutional models in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states,<sup>88</sup> for Sayyid Ahmad, it remained firmly anchored in the long-standing legal traditions of the four Sunni schools, underscoring his commitment to engaging with the broader Islamic legal discourse rather than dismissing it entirely.

In the following year, Sayyid Ahmad took his position toward *zabiha* to the extreme. Traveling to Britain from Bombay in 1869 in the first-class cabin of a British steamer, he discovered that the ship's butcher and cook on board were European Christians.<sup>89</sup> As he noted, the butchers wrung the necks of the chickens and did not slit their throats, which made them *haram* (prohibited) according to the four schools of Sunni jurisprudence. Sayyid Ahmad nevertheless ate the chicken, arguing that consuming such meat was permissible based on what he called the “discerning *Shari‘a*.”<sup>90</sup>

Here, Sayyid Ahmad also introduced a new argument (which he later abandoned). Drawing on conversations with European passengers on board the steamer, he claimed that birds, like fish and locusts, did not have the same amount of blood as four-legged creatures.<sup>91</sup> While there is a consensus among the four Sunni *madhahib* that birds are land animals,<sup>92</sup> he advanced the idea that chickens were like sea animals—i.e. animals for which Sunni *fiqh*, in most cases, does not have strict slaughtering regulations<sup>93</sup>—and that therefore

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notably *talfiq* (amalgamation), which combines opinions across Islamic schools of jurisprudence. For an illustrative case in the twentieth-century Soviet Union, see P. Sartori and S. Shikhaliev, “Talfiq as Liberation: Encountering ‘Alī al-Ghumūqī and Global Islam in Twentieth-Century Dagestan,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 35, no. 2 (2025): 253–72.

88 See, for example, A. Layish, “The Contribution of the Modernists to the Secularization of Islamic Law,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 14:3 (1978): 268–9.

89 S.A. Khan, *Safarnamah musafir-i Landan* (Aligarh: Sir Sayed Akedimi, Aligarh Muslim University, 2009): 80; “Instructions to be Observed by Pursers and Clerks-In-Charge on Board of the Steam Ships of the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (London: Order of the Managing Directors, 1860),” 7, P&O/10/10. It is important to note that the Qur’an does not give guidance on how one should slaughter animals properly, but only that one should not slaughter them by “strangling, beating, a fall from height, or the goring of animal horns.” See Armanios and Ergene, *Halal Food*: 61.

90 Khan, *Safarnamah*: 80.

91 Ibid.: 79–80.

92 See, for example, W. al-Zuhayli, *al-Fiqh al-Islami wa adillathu*, vol. 3 (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1984): 507–8.

93 Armanios and Ergene, *Halal Food*: 64.

there was no need to cut their throats.<sup>94</sup> The implication of such an argument for Sayyid Ahmad was not only the extension of the variety of halal food for Muslim passengers on European steamships. Rather, it enabled him to demonstrate that the *fiqh* classification of animals into particular categories was malleable in accordance with scientific discoveries.

Many of Sayyid Ahmad's contemporaries, however, did not agree with his arguments about *zabiha*. A key example is the critique invoked by Deputy Collector, Sayyid Imdad 'Ali of Kanpur. Like Sayyid Ahmad, Imdad 'Ali received colonial honors and pensions for his showing loyalty to the British crown during the 1857 rebellion.<sup>95</sup> Unlike Sayyid Ahmad, however, he was a staunch opponent of any deviation from Hanafi *fiqh*, which he viewed as central to regulating the daily practices of Muslims in British India.

In 1868, Imdad 'Ali published a treatise, *The Support for the condemnation of the Rulings Concerning the People of the Book (Imdad al-ihṭisab 'ala ahkam-i ta'am-i ahl-i kitab)*, in which he largely based his claims on longstanding corpuses of Hanafi *fiqh*, as well as *ahadith* and *tafasir*. He opined that Sayyid Ahmad's dietary theory did not conform to the logic of Islamic law, and accused him of adjusting scriptural prescriptions, which prohibited eating the food of *kitabīs* and dining with them. According to Imdad 'Ali, Sayyid Ahmad had abused Islamic Law to promote his own selfish interests rather than truly adhere to its prescriptions.<sup>96</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad's decision to eat the chicken on the steamer provoked further criticism from Imdad 'Ali in 1870. He denounced Sayyid Ahmad's interpretation of the Qur'anic verse 5:5, through which he justified the permissibility of *kitabi* food. As he argued, this verse did not refer to meat and thus contradicted Sayyid Ahmad's argument that the twisted-neck chicken was lawful. He then added that even if *zabiha* was included in the category of *ta'am* (food), the Qur'an still prohibited eating the meat of strangled animals (in his opinion, this category also concerned animals slaughtered by wringing their necks). By overlooking how Jews and Christians have slaughtered their animals, Sayyid Ahmad's logic, he argued, would lead to the consumption of pork and other prohibited foods.<sup>97</sup>

94 Khan, *Safarnamah musafirān-i Landan*, 79–80.

95 For more on this rivalry, see Lelyveld, "Of mixed loyalties": 33. For Imdad Ali's critique against the views of Sayyid Ahmad and the Aligarh movement associates during the 1870s, see also S.A. Zaidi, "Contested Identities and the Muslim Qaum in Northern India: c.1860–1900." PhD diss. (University of Cambridge, 2009): 47–52..

96 I.'A.A. Abadi, *Imdad al-ihṭisab 'ala ahkam-i ta'am-i ahl-i kitab* (Kanpur?: Bihari Lal Printing Press, 1868/1285).

97 IOR/L/R/5/47, 140–1.

Such criticism toward Sayyid Ahmad was not unique during the period in question, even amongst some of his closest associates. A case in point was Mahdi 'Ali Khan, better known as Muhsin al-Mulk (1837–1907), Sayyid Ahmad's close associate at Aligarh. A Shi'i convert to Sunni Islam, in 1872 al-Mulk published an article in *Tahzib al-Akhlaq* where he compared the dietary views of Sayyid Ahmad and Imdad 'Ali.<sup>98</sup>

Like Sayyid Ahmad, al-Mulk too was critical of Imdad 'Ali's sole reliance on Hanafi *taqlid*, accusing him of ignoring God's commands about the lawfulness of *kitabī* food as a result of misunderstanding the *hadith* and *fiqh* sources he had used.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, al-Mulk had certain reservations about Sayyid Ahmad's dietary views, referring to the example of the chicken.<sup>100</sup> As al-Mulk explained, even if there was no prohibition on eating *kitabīs'* food, its preparation still had to conform to the rulings of the Qur'an. As there was no proof that rules governing *zabiha* prescribed different slaughtering methods for Muslims and *kitabīs*, Muslims could only consume the meat of animals slaughtered in one way, i.e. by slitting the animal's throat, esophagus, and two jugular veins. Lamenting in 1869 to Muhsin al-Mulk about the backlash his positions had received, Sayyid Ahmad gloomily noted that such objections, like those of Imdad 'Ali, demonstrated how far Indian Muslims had departed from the practices of their coreligionists outside of the subcontinent, noting Khedival Egypt as a main example.<sup>101</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad's focus on the question of *zabiha*, however, was not only a matter of Muslim-*kitabī* or inter-Muslim relations and Islamic reform. He engaged with the question of *zabiha* to think through the socialization between Hindus and Muslims via food. While *takhayyur* offered a solution for cases in which a Christian or Jew was the butcher, the solution did not apply in the case of Hindus. But these latter were also part of the story of *zabiha*, given that British officials in the subcontinent frequently hired non-*kitabī* cooks, most notably Hindus, to work in their kitchens.

Sayyid Ahmad indeed followed the common consensus among Sunni Muslim scholars, who considered meat slaughtered by Hindus as unlawful. Simultaneously however, he claimed that even if Hindus touched and prepared food for their British employers, then the consumption of such food was lawful

98 S.M.'A. Khan, "Ta'am-i ahl-i kitab: muhakama-i Maulwi Sayyid Ahmad Khan ki kitab taa'm-i ahl-i kitab aur us ke jawab imdad al-ihitasab." In *Sayyid Mahdi 'Ali Khan, Tahzib al-Akhlaq* (Lahore: Naval Kishore, 1910): 195. This article was originally published during 1872 in *Tahzib al-Akhlaq*.

99 Ibid.: 198–201.

100 Ibid.: 201.

101 Khan, *Safarnamah*: 209–10.

until proven otherwise. Arguing that Britishers functioned as purifying agents by virtue of their custodial authority, Sayyid Ahmad stated that even if outcast Chamaars (a caste of hereditary leather-workers) prepared food that would be served to Muslims, such food should not be prohibited if a British—i.e., a *kitabī*—were to be present during the food preparation.<sup>102</sup>

At first glance, the British presence here might seem to confirm the inevitability of colonial mediation. Sayyid Ahmad's argument does the opposite: it transforms the British from external arbiters into usable ritual instruments. While he accepted the Sunni consensus that meat slaughtered by Hindus is unlawful, he also contended that food prepared by Hindus for British employers remains lawful unless proven otherwise; the British, as *kitabīs*, can supply a purifying presence—even when the cooks are Hindus. Read this way, Sayyid Ahmad's position did not concede control to the colonial state. Rather, by instrumentalizing the British *kitabī* presence, it sought to return practical agency to Hindus and Muslims, widening Hindu–Muslim commensality and blunting caste segregation. In so doing, Sayyid Ahmad considered the British in such instances not as impartial arbiters but as participants whose presence in animal slaughter and preparation of food further enables—rather than forecloses—direct inter-communal engagement.

At the same time, however, for Sayyid Ahmad, the restriction on Muslim consumption of meat slaughtered by Hindus—and the need to find creative solutions to address this limitation—was an isolated case. In fact, as he argued, there was no prohibition on eating food prepared by Hindus, except for meat. Sayyid Ahmad specifically emphasized that consuming foods that did not require special slaughtering—such as fish, bread, rice, eggs, sweets, and the like—was permissible, regardless of whether they were prepared by *kitabīs* or non-*kitabīs*. In limiting dietary restrictions to animal flesh, he aimed to avoid unnecessary debates over the purity of other foods and to encourage new forms of Hindu–Muslim engagement centered around non-carnivorous foods.<sup>103</sup>

By claiming that Hindus were not bodily impure, Sayyid Ahmad operated within a longer tradition of Islamic scholarship, referring to a *fatwa* issued by Shah 'Abdul 'Aziz (1745–1823) of Delhi, the son of the renowned subcontinental Muslim scholar Shah Waliullah. 'Abdul 'Aziz considered it permissible for Muslims to drink from Hindu wells and wear Hindu clothes, conceding that such conduct was allowed since it did not concern matters of *din*.<sup>104</sup> Sayyid Ahmad

102 Khan, *Ahkam*: 24, 34–7.

103 Ibid.

104 Ibid.: 25–30.

made a similar call for Muslims to adopt non-*din* practices of food consumption that benefited the Muslim *umma*.

Central to this argument were the longstanding debates over how to interpret the saying by the Prophet Muhammad: "Whoever resembles a people is one of them" (*man tashabbaha bi-qawm fa huwa minhum*).<sup>105</sup> Unlike many of his contemporaries who invoked this *hadith* to prohibit any interaction with Britons and Hindus, Sayyid Ahmad argued that as long as Muslims did not adopt the *din* of others, then there was no harm in resembling non-Muslims in daily practices. He claimed that this *hadith* referred solely to a state of war with non-Muslims. In such an environment, Muslims had to wear particular clothes in order to be properly identified for burial according to Islamic law. Such circumstances of war, he argued, were not applicable to the present time.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, for Sayyid Ahmad, as SherAli Tareen has forcefully argued, the objection of Muslim scholars in the subcontinent to the imitation of non-Muslim non-ritual practices in everyday life was "... symptomatic of a petty and regressive vision of religion that impeded rather than facilitated the political and spiritual growth and prosperity of South Asian Muslims."<sup>107</sup> In Sayyid Ahmad's view, such objections reflected an "unholy alliance" between the common people (*awamm*), Sufi *pirs*, and the '*ulama*'.<sup>108</sup> He observed that the '*ulama*' class bore a distinctive responsibility in forging this alliance, as they opted to align themselves with the masses by endorsing their abstention from dining with non-Muslims.<sup>109</sup>

Here, Sayyid Ahmad polemicized against a primary rationale employed by Muslim scholars in South Asia to justify such prohibitions, alluding to the common view that shared meals with non-Muslims would have a pernicious potential since they could enable sentiments of mutual love between Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>110</sup> The concept of love (*muhabbat*) was central to this objection.<sup>111</sup> Muslim scholars throughout history interpreted the abovementioned *hadith* of resemblance (*tashabbuh*) by building on the rich corpora of

105 See M.K. Masud, "Cosmopolitanism and Authenticity: The Doctrine of Tashabbuh Bi'l-Kuffar ("Imitating the Infidel") in Modern South Asian Fatwas." In *Cosmopolitanisms in Muslim contexts*, ed. Maclean and Ahmed: 160. For an extensive discussion about the question of imitation within the framework of inter-Muslim debates in South Asia, see Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*: chs. 5–6, 189–252.

106 Ibid.: 48–9.

107 Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*: 252.

108 Khan, *Ahkam*: 52–3.

109 Ibid.: 85–6.

110 Ibid.: 54–5.

111 Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*: 198–9.

Sufi and legal thought concerning the discourse of love. In the modern period, the utilization of such discourse served to highlight Muslim distinction and superiority in their everyday life.<sup>112</sup>

For Sayyid Ahmad, too, love served to emphasize the distinction between Muslims and Hindus in matters of ritual. However, this distinction did not preclude the possibility of love between Muslims and Hindus (or any other non-Muslim community) in other spheres. Distinguishing between love (*muhabbat*) grounded in religion and love in all other domains, he wrote:

We Muslims love our religion's ancient scholars, the pious [people] and those who love God. We do not love them for any kind of worldly desires or cunning and artful [reasons], nor for any reason of worldly favors, neither do we love them in relation to [the rest of the] society. The love that we have toward each other is only in [matters] of religion, since they were the scholars of our religion, the pious [people] of our school of jurisprudence, or the friends of the *umma* upon which there is mercy and in which we are found. Therefore, such a form of love with anyone apart from Muslims is undoubtedly not only forbidden (*haram*), but also an act of unbelief (*kufṛ*). [However], there is no harm in other kinds of love [toward non-Muslims], apart from the love [in matters of religion] .... As mercy and kindness are common in the Muhammadan religion (*din-i Muhammadi*), it is our duty to show such mercy and kindness toward all the people, whether they are People of the Book or unbelievers, making ourselves into the example of the Muhammadan religion's mercy and affection in order to convince all people in the truthfulness of our religion after looking at our example.<sup>113</sup>

Invoking love as a political lexicon, Sayyid Ahmad cultivated two forms of affiliation: ritual distinction for Muslims, and a shared, non-ritual civic bond extending to Hindus and Britons alike. His selection of terminology is also of significant importance. While there were numerous terms that he could have employed to describe the sentiments of Muslims towards non-Muslims (e.g., *mawaddat*, *tawaddud*, *mawalat*, *dusti*, which he used interchangeably in the text to describe "friendship"), he chose the word *muhabbat* to underscore the notion that love, at least in some spheres, could also be directed towards non-Muslims, irrespective of whether they were kitabis or non-kitabis.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Khan, *Ahkam*: 61.

Like the *muhabbat* between sovereign and subjects, which was built upon mutual actions and responsibilities for mutual love to be attained in everyday life, so too were Muslims and non-Muslims also obliged to assume certain responsibilities. As Sayyid Ahmad argued, gatherings involving Muslims and non-Muslims were the space within which such mutual-love can be attained. While Muslims had to show love toward their non-Muslim neighbors, he claimed, the latter had to be mindful of the religious sensibilities of Muslims in such gatherings, noting that Muslims were prohibited from attending Hindu or any other non-Muslim public gatherings that involved anti-Muslim rhetoric.<sup>114</sup> He justified this stance by referring to the hostility between Muhammad and the unbelievers of the Quraysh tribe, who openly denied and mocked the Prophet's beliefs during their gatherings.<sup>115</sup> Sayyid Ahmad thus envisioned the attainment of inter-communal *muhabbat* as centrally dependent on the reciprocal actions of both Muslims and non-Muslims.

He further emphasized this point in his conclusion, which he chose to write in Arabic. Although he did not explain his shift from Urdu, this choice likely aimed to assert his intellectual authority, given that Arabic was a central language of religious scholarship across the Muslim world. It suggested his intent to engage not only with his Muslim contemporaries and British officials but also with Islamic scholars more broadly. The wide-reaching topic of the conclusion, relevant to Muslims within and beyond the subcontinent, likely justified the switch to Arabic, as he addressed the legality of Muslims living under non-Muslim rule. Reflecting on colonial sovereignty in South Asia and its perceived sources of legitimacy, he wrote:

The polytheists [i.e. Hindus] and the Christians in our land are not people under our communal protection (*ahl dhimmatina*); rather, we, the community of Muslims, are their subjects and neighbors, living under their security. We spread through their lands and they do good to us in numerous ways because they reign over us with justice and they do not prefer one community over the other. Among their rules is the complete equality in rights of worshipers, whether they are Jews, Christians, polytheists, or Muslims. Moreover, they do not prevent the performance of Islamic religious obligations, such as prayer, fasting, charity, and the *hajj*. They do not meddle in [the matters] of carrying out the Friday and holiday prayers, but only [involve themselves in matters] of oppression, corruption, and anything uglier than these. They cast their legal verdict in issues

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.: 67–8.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.: 69.



relating to a specific school of Islamic law, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, and so forth according to what has been transmitted to us in our Islamic law. And hence, it is logical that we would prefer them in comparison to ourselves and that we shall choose them [as rulers] as they protect us, take care of our wealth and guard our life in the best possible way as we have explained. Therefore, it has already been obliged upon us to obey the ruler's rulings concerning worldly life.<sup>116</sup>

While his reference to British rule over Muslims is clear, it remains uncertain whether Sayyid Ahmad's remarks about Hindus were concerned with sovereignty over Muslims—for example, in Hindu-ruled princely states—or merely relations with Hindu neighbors. Either way, his claim that non-Muslims may govern Muslims so long as the latter can freely fulfill their religious obligations was not novel; it engaged longstanding juristic debates, traceable to the early Islamic period, over the definition of *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam).<sup>117</sup> What was distinctive in Sayyid Ahmad's formulation, however, was his insistence that impartiality—not confessional identity—is a central attribute of sovereign authority. He argued that colonial rule was acceptable only insofar as it upheld impartiality in everyday life, especially in matters of ritual. More importantly, he contended that the legitimacy of the state rested on its absence from the daily lives of its subjects. He understood this absence not as detachment but proximity—an acknowledgment that unmediated interactions between religious communities were crucial for fostering a non-violent everyday life and, ultimately, for the flourishing of the polity.

While sympathetic to colonial sovereignty, Sayyid Ahmad's treatise was more than an effort to legitimize British rule. It represented a nuanced stance on inter-religious social engagement and the theorization of social difference. At the heart of his argument was the preservation of Muslim distinctness in ritual. He asserted that maintaining Islamic practices as a distinct space, separate from other communities, would not obstruct but rather empower Muslims to engage more fully with the wider world—fostering meaningful, everyday interactions with Hindus and other non-Muslims.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.: 87–8.

<sup>117</sup> See, for example, K.A. El Fadl, "Legal Debates on Muslim Minorities: Between Rejection and Accommodation." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 22:1 (1994): 127–62; M.K. Masud, "Being Muslim in a non-Muslim Polity: Three Alternate Models." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 10 (1989): 118–28; Idem., "Minorities in Islamic History: an Analytical Study of Four Documents." *Journal For Islamic Studies* 20 (2000): 125–34.

Strikingly, Sayyid Ahmad's insistence on everyday Muslim distinction echoed Deobandi scholars' claims that ritual separation functioned as a modality of Islamic quotidian sovereignty.<sup>118</sup> His objective, however, diverged from those of his Deobandi rivals: by delineating Hindu and Muslim ritual domains, he sought to open space for inter-communal engagement beyond ritual practice. Muslim Distinction, not domination, was the point—an affirmation that Islam encourages, rather than prohibits, ordinary relations of friendship and affection with non-Muslims.

## 5 Cows and the Hindu–Muslim Sovereignty of Everyday Life

Sayyid Ahmad's vision of sovereignty in everyday life cannot be disconnected from the much better-known story of Hindu–Muslim strife over cow slaughtering across the northern parts of the subcontinent. Historical evidence shows that the issue of cow slaughtering did become invested with political meaning at certain junctures in the pre-colonial period. Illustrative precedents include Akbar's (r. 1556–1605) prohibition of cow slaughter, as well as the ban instituted by the Marathas upon their occupation of Delhi in 1757.<sup>119</sup> But it was only in the nineteenth century that this topic gradually became a central theme of Hindu–Muslim relations when the EIC, in the name of the Mughal emperor, lifted the Maratha ban on this practice in Delhi in 1803.<sup>120</sup>

The colonial intervention in the cow question continued to intensify throughout the following decades, with policies that differed from province to province. In some cases, colonial officials across the northern parts of British India sought to regulate and control cow slaughtering by prohibiting or sanctioning it in accordance with principles of minority-majority difference—that is, in view of the respective numbers of Hindus and Muslims in each province. In others cases, however, the colonial state decided over such matters

118 On such Deobandi views and their debates with Sayyid Ahmad, see Tareen, *Perilous Intimacies*: 227–252.

119 De, "Cows and Constitutionalism": 241; Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes*: 192.

120 The practice of cow slaughtering was temporarily banned during the 1857 Rebellion in the territories captured by the rebels supporting Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor. See: "Syed Nazar Ali, thanadar, Chandni Chowk, to the kotwal, 28 July, 1857." In *Besieged: Voices from Delhi 1857*, ed. M. Farooqui (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010): 158. I thank Gianni Sievers for this reference.

in accordance with what its officials believed was the “common custom” that preceded colonial rule.<sup>121</sup>

Such policies prompted a range of responses such as the Hindu and Sikh Namdhari movement (est. 1867) in Punjab, which aimed to reinstate the ban on cow slaughter. In 1871, Namdhari followers murdered several Muslim butchers whom they blamed for cow slaughter.<sup>122</sup> The emergence of Hindu reform movements, most notably the Arya Samaj (est. 1875),<sup>123</sup> and their members’ establishment of Cow Protection Committees throughout the central and northern parts of the subcontinent in the early 1880s, led to an escalation of anti-Muslim propaganda. Utilizing improved forms of transportation, railroads in particular, and print media, members of these committees traveled across various parts of the subcontinent to propagate their views, creating increased tension between Hindus and Muslims.<sup>124</sup>

Even before these anti-cow-slaughter campaigns of the 1870s–80s, Sayyid Ahmad recognized the issue’s potential to inflame Hindu–Muslim relations; he first addressed it in an Urdu essay published in October 1869. There, he situated cow slaughtering as part of a broader question of how Hindus and Muslims could attain mutual love and sympathy (*ba-ham muhabbat va ham-dardi*). For Sayyid Ahmad, the rising tensions among Hindus and Muslims over ritual were a result of people’s failure to discern between “two kinds of zealotry (*ta’assub*)”:

The first kind [of zealotry] would stay within the limits of moderation, creating in the heart respect for one’s religion while facing others and inspiring people to abide with the fundamental principles of one’s religion. The second one, by transgressing the limits of moderation, would cause conflict between members of two religions, and by doing so it would create this situation which provokes unjustified disorder. Therefore, the first kind of zealotry is allowed by Islamic Law, which all of its practitioners regard as necessary, and the second one is the basis of

121 For an example of such colonial debates, see the Punjab province’s discussions and correspondences during 1890: NAI, Home Department, Public, Proceedings, Part A, July 1890, nos. 328–36.

122 P. van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994): 91. See also IOR/L/R/5/48, 420, 493 (Lahore’s *Kuh-i Nur*, July, August 1871).

123 This movement’s founder, Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), was known for his vocal objection to the slaughtering of cows. See his treatise on this topic: D. Saraswati, *Gokrananidhi: Ocean of Mercy Upon the Cow* (India: Sarvadeshik Arya Pratinidhi Sabha, 1980, originally published in 1881).

124 van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*: 92.

disorder which spoils the religion of everyone. Even if it became permissible, we see that the religious zealotry found among Indians is one that turns them for no reason into each other's enemies and denies the fact that they are fellow-countryman. Apart from chaos and animosity it would not bring anything.<sup>125</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad posited that the first kind of zealotry did not possess malevolent qualities and that it could serve a constructive purpose, namely the establishment of discrete ritual spaces for both Hindus and Muslims, "the majority population" of the subcontinent, as he termed both communities. This separation in matters of ritual, he explained, would allow each community to practice their religion without any external interference, while creating an environment that ensured respect toward their beliefs on the part of those who did not share their religious identity. Yet, as he lamented, it was the second type of zealotry—one that triggered tumult (*fasad*)—that most Muslims and Hindus adopted. He stated:

Hindus regard the eating or slaughtering of cows as very bad practices. Some Muslims, for the mere purpose of committing mischief whenever they have an opportunity, provoke them by slaughtering cows in front of Hindus' houses and alleys, as well as throwing [cows'] meat to vultures and ravens in front of them. But somebody should ask these Muslims if this kind of mischief is in conformity with [Islam's] religious customs, or if such unreasonable mischief would make them worthy of a divine reward. In my opinion such practices lead only to riots. If Hindus were to look at the blood or meat of cows, this would never weaken their religion, but it would merely invoke in their hearts animosity toward Muslims due to this mischief.<sup>126</sup>

Such *ta'assub*, Sayyid Ahmad opined, was a further proof that some of his co-religionists had abandoned the teachings of Islam, for, he claimed, the *Shari'a* did not support such acts against Hindus. This *ta'assub*, he noted, was also prevalent among Hindus, leading to anti-Muslim acts of violence, even though they were not prescribed by the teachings of Hinduism.<sup>127</sup> Calling upon

125 S.A. Khan, "Hindustaniyon ko ba-ham muhabbat va ham-dardi peyda karna chaayie." In *Shazarat-i Sir Sayyid*, ed. A. Abbas (Azamgarh: Dar al-Musannifin Shibli Akedimi, 2017): 59.

126 Ibid.: 59.

127 Ibid.: 59–60.

Hindus and Muslims to avoid turning the issue of meat into an object of religious violence, Sayyid Ahmad articulated an argument that stressed how such behavior ran contrary to the religious rulings (*ahkam*) of both Hinduism and Islam. Here, Sayyid Ahmad restated his vision of Islamic reform. This vision was not centered around the acceptance of external influence but rather about the non-obvious juxtaposition of greater sociability between religious communities and greater “purity” of ritual inside one’s community.

Once again, as in the preceding section, we see how Sayyid Ahmad’s argument was based on the premise that the attainment of mutual love is contingent upon actions that are in accordance with the mutual avoidance of wrongdoing and the non-infringement upon the rituals of members of other communities. Such mutual love, as this argument suggests, could only be a consequence of direct interaction between Hindus and Muslims, rather than a result of colonial duress or mediation.

For Sayyid Ahmad, the focus of some Muslims on their right to slaughter cow was again a result of Muslims’ misunderstanding of their own religious commands, leading them to imagine cow slaughter as a religious question. In fact, the keeping of ritual boundaries segregating Muslims from Hindus were the only way, he believed, to prevent Muslims from conceptualizing the slaughter of cows as a core Muslim principle. He articulated this view in another essay he published in October 1887. Expressing his satisfaction with reports that Muslims in the UP town of Meerut had refrained from sacrificing cows during the *Id al-Adha*,<sup>128</sup> he stressed that indeed there was no ritual hindrance against sacrificing sheep and goats instead of cows during the holiday. At the same time, however, Sayyid Ahmad emphasized that Muslims’ choice as to whether or not to slaughter cows had nothing to do with religious commands. As he argued, ending the practice of slaughtering cows was solely dependent on the good intentions of his co-religionists:

We say that if by giving up their insignificant right to slaughter cows there could be a Hindu–Muslim unity, then Muslims should abandon this right. For the blessing of unity (*dawlat-i ittifaq*) [between Hindus and Muslims] is of much worthier value than this insignificant [legal] right.<sup>129</sup>

Sayyid Ahmad offered a vision of equal Hindu–Muslim legal subjecthood which sought to transcend religion as a basis for civil cooperation, one which resembled—albeit with a different terminology of *dawlat-i ittifaq*—the Mughal

128 S.A. Khan, “Meerut mein ‘Id al-Adkha.” *Aligarh Institute Gazette* (October 4, 1887): 1126.

129 Ibid.

imperial principle of *sulh-i kull* (universal conciliation/universal peace; lit. “peace with all”).<sup>130</sup> Originating in the period of Akbar, Mughal officials, according to Rajeev Kinra, deployed *sulh-i kull* for “encouraging (indeed enforcing) norms of civility and convivencia, not just between conflicting sectarian groups but also among the entire gamut of social classes, ethnic groups, and other types of community.”<sup>131</sup> The distinctiveness of *sulh-i kull* in the context of the Mughal Empire was not merely an acknowledgment that a Muslim polity could accommodate religious diversity, a prevalent practice among Muslim states since the advent of Islam. Rather, as A. Azfar Moin posits, *sulh-i kull* marked a pivotal shift in the political history of Islam as it transformed the impartial accommodation of religious differences between Muslims and non-Muslims from a mere practice of governance into a fundamental duty of the Muslim sovereign.<sup>132</sup>

For Sayyid Ahmad, however, in the political context of British India, sovereignty in everyday life did not entail the state’s supervision. His idea of sovereignty departed from *Sulh-i Kull* as it lacked any idea of the state serving as arbiter. Instead, his vision of sovereignty was premised mainly on the idea of direct Hindu–Muslim engagement. In fact, he believed, if Hindu organizations would cease to polemicize against the right of Muslims to practice cow slaughtering through religious propagation and the British Indian judicial system, then Muslims could voluntarily abandon cow slaughtering to advance the attainment of mutual love with Hindus.<sup>133</sup>

By the late 1880s, however, the political context had radically changed. Amidst the changing political landscape in South Asia, Sayyid Ahmad retreated from his vision of everyday sovereignty. One major reason was the rise of the Indian National Congress (INC; est. 1885). Even if it claimed to represent all Indians, Sayyid Ahmad identified the INC as a party governed first and foremost by Bengali Hindus that sought to promote Hindu majoritarian politics. Moreover, the increasing intervention of the colonial judicial mechanisms

130 For more on the history of this principle, see A. Amanat, “Persian Nuqtawī and the Shaping of the Doctrine of “Universal Conciliation” (*sulh-i kull*) in Mughal India.” In *Unity in Diversity: Mysticism, Messianism and the Construction of Religious Authority in Islam*, ed. O. Mir-Kasimov (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 367–91; A.A. Moin, “Sulh-i Kull as an Oath of Peace: Mughal Political Theology in History, Theory, and Comparison.” *Modern Asian Studies* 563 (2022): 721–48; R. Kinra, “Handling Diversity with Absolute Civility: The Global Historical Legacy of Mughal *Sulh-i Kull*.” *Medieval History Journal* 16:2 (2013): 251–95.

131 R. Kinra, “Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism.” *ReOrient* 5:2 (2020): 157.

132 Moin, “Sulh-i Kull”: 722–3.

133 Khan, “Meerut mein”: 1127.

in the cow question only further exacerbated Hindu–Muslim violence. In 1888, the Northwestern Provincial High Court in Allahabad ruled that the cow was not a sacred object according to section 295 of the Indian Penal Code. The ruling permitted Muslims to slaughter cows without concern for potential legal consequences resulting from any perceived offense to Hindus' religious sensibilities. British officials faced growing suspicion among Hindus, but it was above all Indian Muslims who became the subject of violence and disgust for the proponents of Hindu reform movements.<sup>134</sup> As the politics of the street initiated by supporters of the cow protection committees increased, Muslims also began to seek the assistance of the colonial state to protect their communal right to slaughter cows.<sup>135</sup>

Amidst these changing political conditions, Sayyid Ahmad was drawn to seek the protection of the colonial state. In a petition that he sent in 1890 on behalf of thousands of signatories from across the subcontinent to the British Parliament, he argued that although Muslims constituted “only one-fifth of the inhabitants of India, they are the largest single community and number not less than 50,000,000 souls.” Using this enumerative claim alongside the questionable idea that only Muslims constituted a unified religious community, the petition noted that notwithstanding the large numbers of Muslims, some colonial municipalities discriminated against their practices and prohibit cow-killing. As the petition stated, this prohibition was “a measure that would deprive the poor Mohammedans [*sic*] of their most important articles of food.” The signatories thus called upon the British government to refrain from such prohibitions and protect the Muslim minorities in these provinces.<sup>136</sup>

Although he still framed his stance in civil and economic terms, Sayyid Ahmad relinquished his earlier vision of sovereignty in everyday life. He now relied on the colonial state and its so-called “impartial legal mechanisms” for the protection of his co-religionists. But such reliance did not prevent the violence surrounding the figure of the cow. In 1893, South Asia witnessed the eruption of cow slaughter riots across the subcontinent, marking a further significant shift towards the violent politicization of everyday life.

134 van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*: 92. For more on the relationship between feelings of disgust and violence in South Asia, see Ghassem-Fachandi, *Pogrom in Gujarat*: 20.

135 De, “Cows and Constitutionalism”: 241.

136 S.A. Khan, “The Bill.” In *The Correspondences of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and His Contemporaries*, ed. S.A. D. Quraishi (Lahore: Sang-e Mewl Publications, 1998): 139–40.

## 6 Epilogue: the Politics of Meat between Colonial Impartiality and Anti-Colonialism

As evidenced by Sayyid Ahmad's shift to colonial mediation, his meat-centric vision of sovereignty did not yield any tangible outcomes. The practice of meat consumption in general and cow slaughter in particular continued to be a pivotal locus of Hindu–Muslim conflict and the perpetuation of communal differences. Moreover, Sayyid Ahmad's decision to seek recourse within the colonial legal system so as to protect his co-religionists from the growing Hindu anti-cow slaughter activism can be viewed as an initial step towards Muslim activism for the purpose of attaining “minority rights” via the colonial legal system. This approach was exemplified by the activism of the All-India Muslim League and its advocacy for separate electorates after its establishment in 1906, an approach that challenged the Indian National Congress's claim to speak for a single, unified Indian nation. The Muslim League's activism resulted in 1909 in the allotment of seats in the British Indian Councils exclusively for Muslims, regardless of their actual numbers. Muslims in South Asia thus gradually came to rely on “minority safeguards” provided by the colonial state, rather than on a direct Hindu–Muslim agreement.

At the same time, however, this course of events did not result in a single outcome. In the following decades, increasing numbers of Muslims were adopting a similar anti-cow slaughtering stance that was similar to that which Sayyid Ahmad had previously invoked. Some of these cases also involved Muslim thinkers who held views on various theological and legal positions that differed from those held by Sayyid Ahmad. The scholars affiliated with Lucknow's Nadwat al-ʿUlama (est. 1894) represent a case in point.<sup>137</sup>

Though critical of Sayyid Ahmad's over-reliance on British educational models, some Nadwat-affiliated scholars did share a distinct similarity to Sayyid Ahmad's vision of sovereignty in everyday life. One of the Nadwat's founding figures, the Azamgarh-born Shibli Nu'mani (1857–1914), Sayyid

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137 Members of this scholarly movement had sought to establish a balance between two opposing viewpoints: the traditional Hanafi-based educational program at Deoband's Dar al-ʿUlum and the Oxbridge-modeled curriculum of Sayyid Ahmad's M.A.O. College. The Nadwat's proponents thus promoted comprehensive reform of Islamic educational institutions and sciences alongside advocacy for the improvement of the study of Arabic among South Asia's Muslims. For more on this important movement, see, for example, J.P. Hartung, “The Nadwat al-ʿUlama’: Chief Patron of Madrasa Education in India and a Turntable to the Arab World.” In *Islamic Education, Diversity, and National Identity: Dini Madaris in India Post 9/11*, ed. J.P. Hartung and H. Reifeld (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006): 135–57.



Ahmad's former colleague at the M.A.O. College, is an illustrative example. While his role in establishing the Nadwat signified his rejection of the Aligarh Movement's Anglicized educational project, Nu'mani was in agreement with Sayyid Ahmad's earlier views on the question of cow slaughtering. This is demonstrated by an incident that took place during one of Nu'mani's classes at the Nadwat in the 1910s. As 'Abdur Razzaq Malihabadi, one of Nu'mani's students, recounted in his memoirs:

One day I was sitting at [the lesson] next to my respected lecturer [Shibli Nu'mani] and also another student was there. A student declared that a Hindu–Muslim riot had erupted. The reason for this [riot] was that Muslims wanted to slaughter a cow and Hindus snatched the animal and attacked them. I became very enraged after hearing this. I said that “Hindus are very mischievous people, what right do they have to interfere in the religious affairs of the Muslims? Muslims have the right to slaughter cows. After all, why do Hindus want to snatch this right away from Muslims? The cow, in the opinion of Hindus, is indeed sacred, but Muslims do not accept her sanctity. Therefore, Muslims have a full right to slaughter cows.”<sup>138</sup>

Responding to Malihabadi, Nu'mani calmly inquired, “what would you say if a Shi'a were to curse the honorable *sahaba* [the Prophet Muhammad's companions]?” Considering the practice of cursing as a direct attack on Islam, Malihabadi angrily replied: “if Shi'as were to curse [the *sahaba*] then we would eat them alive.” Upon hearing Malihabadi's reply, Nu'mani asked “But why? You regard the *sahaba* as good, but the Shi'as consider a lot of them as bad. Therefore, they should be free to express their dislike for those they dislike.”<sup>139</sup> Perplexed by the answer, Malihabadi answered that Sunni Muslims “... cannot hear bad words about the *sahaba*. If the Shi'as would like to say bad words in their houses then they may say them. However, the consequence of speaking badly on the *sahaba* in front of us is such that they hurt our religious feelings and they provoke us.” At this point, Nu'mani replied:

Hindus take a similar position against Muslims in regards to the matter of the cow. Muslims do not consider the cow as sacred but Hindus do. Therefore, if you demand from Shi'as respect for your feelings then, on

138 'A.R. Malihabadi, “Aap biti.” *Azad Hind* (1960): 186.

139 Ibid.

the basis of which argument could you deny the fact that Hindus demand from you respect for their feelings?<sup>140</sup>

As this dialogue highlights, Nu'mani outlined to Malihabadi that it was necessary to remove religious rituals that caused distress to non-Muslims from shared spaces in which Hindus, Muslims, and Shi'i and Sunni Muslims interacted. In other words, Nu'mani emphasized that maintaining ritual distance between [missing] could facilitate rather than impede inter-communal coexistence. Impacted by his teacher's words, Malihabadi ultimately espoused Nu'mani's perspective, describing it as his "first enlightenment" (*pehli raushni*).<sup>141</sup>

Such a position was not only articulated in the theories of Sayyid Ahmad and some of the proponents of the Nadwat, but also across the Ottoman Empire and Egypt—for example, by the Ottoman Syrian-born scholar, Muhammad Rashid Rida, the editor of the renowned Cairene periodical, *al-Manar* ("The Lighthouse", 1865–1935). Himself a close associate of Nu'mani, Rida visited British India in 1912. Speaking in the North-Indian Hanafi seminary of Deoband, he criticized Muslims who advocated cow slaughtering:

I have heard with great sadness that there are many such Muslims in India who consider themselves as distinguished from pagans only by dint of their eating cow meat. Is there no other mark of Islam among these Muslims apart from eating cow meat?<sup>142</sup>

Such positions demonstrate well that Islamic solidarities or the call for "purifying" ritual practices did not necessarily entail the emergence of "communalism," and, in fact, in various instances they instead served to diminish and prevent Hindu–Muslim conflicts. In later years, Malihabadi continued to encounter similar views in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt, where he had spent several years during the 1910s. Visiting Istanbul just before the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he described how he was mocked by Ottoman Turkish subjects he had met in one of the city's coffeeshops:

When I was in Istanbul a few Turks in a coffee house extremely contemptuously asked me, after finding out that I was Indian, "why are you Indians enslaved?" I said that "the reason for our enslavement is that Hindus and Muslims fight one another, and a main reason for the conflict

140 Ibid.

141 Ibid.

142 "Allama Sayyid Rashid Reza." *al-Qasim* 2:12 (1330 AH): 32–3.

is the cow. Muslims insist on eating cows and Hindus insist on preventing the slaughter.” After hearing this, the Turks mocked me with hostility and began saying that “this conflict is so shameful. Hindus are so contemptible and so are the Muslims when they are sacrificing the freedom and honor of their country for such a mundane matter.”<sup>143</sup>

Malihabadi eventually drew upon such encounters by espousing a trans-communal position through the anti-colonial politics of the All-India Khilafat Committee (est. 1919) and the Gandhian Noncooperation Movement (1919–1922), in which he played a notable, though often overlooked, role.

This essay has examined the pivotal role of meat in shaping new conceptions of sovereignty where ritual and daily life intersected, following the 1857 Rebellion and the dismantling of Mughal rule. Colonial policies and global dietary shifts forged the notion of the Muslim carnivore, transforming meat consumption into a key marker of Hindu–Muslim distinction. Yet, these conditions also offered Muslim thinkers an opportunity to reframe religious difference and put into question the colonial control over their everyday life.

Amidst these political upheavals, Sayyid Ahmad engaged in new ways with the question of halal food in general and meat consumption in particular. Sayyid Ahmad’s writings offered his fellow Muslims a range of historical, theological, and jurisprudential examples in support of his view that Muslims were permitted—with specific limitations—to eat with and consume the food of the British (and *kitabīs* in general), and, with the exception of meat, that of Hindus as well.

Sayyid Ahmad argued that Muslims must reject what he perceived as non-Muslim influences in their rituals to succeed in this endeavor. By maintaining clear distinctions in their practices, he believed Muslims could cultivate relationships of *muhabbat* with their non-Muslim neighbors. For Sayyid Ahmed, Islamic reform was defined not only by “Western influence” or the “abandonment of *taqlid*,” but by a nuanced balance: fostering sociability between religious communities while preserving a distinct sense of “purity” in Muslim rituals. Though unstated, and despite strong opposition within and beyond his Aligarh circles, Sayyid Ahmad’s position had significant political potential—namely, to help Muslims and Hindus overcome the British-imposed colonial barrier between them.

Challenging as it was to realize under colonial modernity, this potential was likewise central to how Sayyid Ahmad framed his position on the cow slaughter

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143 S.H. Bharti, *Maulana ‘Abdurrazzaq Malihabadi: monogiraf* (Kolkata: West Bengal Urdu Akedimi, 2014): 126–7.

debate. Instead of relying on colonial protections, census data, or Islamic theological arguments, he argued that the solution hinged on the good intentions of both Hindus and Muslims. This stance directly opposed that of Gandhi, for example, who also condemned cow slaughter as a pretext for communal violence but grounded his call for non-violence in Hindu religious terms, rather than addressing the issue in civil terms.

By framing halal food and its production as a point of commonality between Muslims and other inhabitants of the subcontinent, Sayyid Ahmad proposed a model of sovereignty that sought to regulate interactions with non-Muslims in colonial India. This model both upheld Muslims' ritual autonomy and encouraged inter-communal cooperation. At its core was the replacement of "colonial mediation" with a Hindu-Muslim relationship of *muhabbat* founded on reciprocal good intentions—in short, the sovereignty of everyday life. In so doing, Sayyid Ahmad sketched a profound, albeit unrealized, alternative to the politics of meat and to the broader dynamics of inter-communal and majoritarian violence in colonial South Asia.

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