Scriptural evidence is often provided to negate the normative basis of a conception of strati-fication and hierarchy within Islam. Furthermore, in lieu of this proclaimed absence of a notion of hierarchy, citations from the Quran, various traditions of the Prophet[2] (narratives of his companions) or developments that took place during the early years of Islamic rule are cited to highlight *masavat* (equality) as a driving force that led to the spread of Islam across continents. Practitioners of Islam, however, have always had to confront the various forms of regional and social differentiations that characterise Muslim societies. These social differen-tiations reveal tensions in the discourse on the practice of Islam as (Muslim) authors deploy the normative tradition of Islamic egalitarianism to rationalise social inequalities and hier-archies.[3] Indeed, several practices and conceptions from within the lexicon of the Islamicate[4] world reflect an engagement with notions of hierarchy and social stratification as practiced by Muslim communities.[5] *'Ilm-al nasab* (the science of genealogy) is one such practice whose origins lie in pre-Islamic Arab society but which continues to shape and justify social strati-fication in contemporary Muslim societies.[6]

Despite the early existence of texts justifying social hierarchies among Muslims from within the Islamic tradition, in South Asia colonial ethnographers and later social scientists designated the Hindu caste system as the 'framework' or the 'environment'[7] within which to understand the emergence and practice of social stratification among the Muslims of 'Hindustan'.[8] Indian social scientists first debated caste among Muslims in the 1960s with regional studies subsequently being conducted by sociologists and anthropologists in the 1970s and 1980s.[9] Early anthropological studies relied on colonial accounts and census

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[2]Specifically the passage from his last sermon quoted above.

[3]As is well documented in Louise Marlow's *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge, 2002).

[4]Hodgson defines 'Islamicate' as referring "not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cul-tural complex historically associated with Islam and Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims." See G. S. Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), p. 59.

[5]On Hadramaut Sayyids, see for instance, A. S. Burja, *The Politics of Stratification: A Study of Political Change in a South Arabian Town* (Oxford, 1971), and on Central Sahara, see J. Scheele, 'Embarrassing Cousins: Genealogical Conundrums in the Central Sahara', in *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past,* (ed.) Sarah Bowen Sawant (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 89–101.

[6]For the formation and development of the science of genealogy in medieval Muslim societies, see K. Mor-imoto, 'The Formation and Development of the Science of Talibid Genealogies in the 10th & 11th Century Middle East', *Oriente Moderno* 18, 2 (1999), pp. 541–570; K. Morimoto, 'Keeping the Prophet's Family Alive: Profile of a Genealogical Discipline', in *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past*, (eds.) S. B. Savant and H. de Felipe (Edinburgh, 2014), pp. 11–23; Z. Szombathy, Zoltán, 'Genealogy in Medieval Muslim Societies', *Stu-dia Islamica* 95 (2002), pp. 5–35; E. Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility Across the Indian Ocean* (London, 2006) for the deployment of genealogy by Hadramaut Sayyids across the Indian Ocean. See also S. B. Savant, *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past* (Edinburgh, 2014) for a wider application of genealogy in Muslim societies to understand the past.

[7]The reasoning that caste and hierarchy existed within Indian Islam as a result of its contact with Hinduism can be discerned from the writings of colonial ethnographers. See W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of North Western India* (1896); J. C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North Western Provinces and Oudh* (1885); and J. Beames, *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore, and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India* (1869). Such reason-ing also permeated many of the writings of those who advocated for a modernist interpretation of Indian Islam. See A. Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in an Indian Environment* (Oxford, 1964), and M. Mujeeb, *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967).

[8]'Hindustan' is the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century usage for India deployed by vernacular Urdu sources explored in this article. For more on the usage of the term, see C. M. Naim, 'Interrogating "The East," "Culture," and "Loss," in Abdul Halim Sharar's *Guzashta Lakhnau'*, in *Indo-Muslim Cultures in Transition* (ed.) Alka Patel (Leiden, 2012), pp. 190–191.

[9]For debates on caste and social stratification among Muslims in South Asia, see G. Ansari, *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact* (Lucknow, 1960); I. Ahmad, 'The Ashraf–Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social

records to suggest that notions of hierarchy among Muslims in India owed their origins to the Hindu caste system even though Muslim and Hindu social stratification systems differed in their essence. Later, sociologists partly revised this claim, arguing that social stratification among Muslims did include many practices similar to the Hindu caste system. They relied on ethnographic studies to show that the practice of endogamy and hierarchy among occupational specialisations was common to both Muslims and Hindus. However, they continued to claim that social stratification among Muslims differed on two significant points. First, stratification among Muslims did not advocate the practice of ritual pollution, and, second, Islam did not provide any scriptural and religious reasons for a systematic basis for hierarchy and stratification among its believers.

This article seeks to re-open these debates and to contribute to the study of hierarchy and stratification among South Asian Muslims by historicising the notions of hierarchy studied by sociologists and anthropologists. Ethnographic studies from the 1960s to the 1980s took note of hierarchy-based practices performed by Muslims but they did not always trace their normative or scriptural justifications. By looking closely at the historical evolution of key terms and notions of hierarchy articulated by South Asian Muslims, the aim here is to throw light on the conception and practice of social stratification among Muslims—foregoing, in the process, overemphasis on the Hindu caste system as the sole reference point for all formulations on caste among Muslims.

The debate on hierarchy among Muslims in the subcontinent should be viewed against the backdrop of the Islamic reform movements in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hindustan.[10] The broad objective of these Muslim reformers was to advocate a pure Islam, rooted in scriptural tradition of the Quran and Hadith, calling for the *islah* (reform) of all *rasam o rivaj* (customs and traditions), which they regarded as *bid'at* (innovation). A significant part of the leadership of social and religious reform movements came from Sayyid or *sharif* backgrounds, and they articulated a set of conceptions regarding what it meant to be virtuous or pious, civilised or uncivilised, *sharif* (respectable) or *razil* (lowly).[11] Often the practices regarded as *bid'at* were seen as being associated with the Ajlaf (lit. the lower order) Muslims. The *'ulama* made copious use of citations from the Quran or various Hadith traditions in

Structure in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 3, 3 (1966), pp. 268–278; I. Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification Among Muslims in India* (Delhi, 1973); C. Lindholm, 'Caste in Islam and the problem of deviant system: A critique of recent theories', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 20, 1 (1986), pp. 59–73; S. Vatuk, 'Identity and Difference or Equality and Inequality in South Asian Muslim Society', in *Caste Today*, (ed.) C. J. Fuller (Delhi, 1996), pp. 227–262; M. A. Falahi, *Hindustan mein zat pat aur musalman* (Delhi, 2007); and A. F. Buehler, 'Trends of Ashrafization in India', in *Sayyids and Sharifs in Muslim Societies: The Living Links to the Prophet*, (ed.) K. Morimoto (London and New York, 2012), pp. 231–246. Joel Lee, "Who Is the True Halalkhor? Genealogy and Ethics in Dalit Muslim Oral Traditions". Contributions to Indian Sociology 52, 1 (2018), pp. 1–27. Joel Lee, *Caste, in Islam, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism,* (eds.) Z. R. Kassam *et al.* (Dordrecht, 2018), pp. 167–176.

[10]B. D. Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982); O. H. Pearson, *Islamic reform and revival in nineteenth-century India: the Tariqah-i Muhammadiyah* (New Delhi, 2008); U. Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi, 1996); F. Robinson, *The Ulama of Firangi Mahal and Islamic Culture in South Asia* (Delhi, 2001); M. Pernau, 'The virtuous individual and social reform: debates among North Indian Urdu speakers', in *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in nineteenth-century Asia and Europe*, (eds.) M. Pernau *et al.* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 169–186. Brannon Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam,* (Berkeley, 2018).

[11]See Pernau, 'The virtuous individual and social reform'.

order to rationalise and justify social hierarchy.[12] Hence, writings on *'ilm al-nasab* produced in nineteenth-century Hindustan need to be read in the light of this reformist impulse.

This article accordingly highlights tensions between the normative egalitarian principles of Islam and Muslims' social practices through a study of three *tarikh* texts that were produced in a single *qasbah* town,[13] Amroha, in the Rohilkhand region of the United Provinces.[14] These *tarikh* texts, authored by Sayyid men from Amroha, narrated the *qasbah*'s history by deploying *'ilm al-nasab* as the primary mode of recounting the past. In the process, they provide us with an insightful analysis of the system of stratification and conceptions of hierarchy as envisioned locally and during the period in question. While these texts quote Islam's normative egalitarian traditions, they nevertheless justify social hierarchies on the basis of Islamic references;[15] and all three texts highlight that while historical enquiry was motivated by the principles of *nasab*, the function attributed to genealogy evolved over time.

The first section of this article examines two *tarikh* texts produced in the late nineteenth century that taken together mark the transition in Amroha from history-writing focused on the family to something that more resembled social history. The first text, *Ai'nah-i Abbasi* (1878),[16] authored by Maulvi Hakim Muhib-i Ali Khan Abbasi, provides an account of the genealogy and history of the Abbasi Sayyids of Amroha. The primary function of genealogy here was to narrate the history of a particular family and establish claims of genealogical descent on their behalf. By contrast, the second text under study, the *Tarikh-i Asghari* (1889)[17] authored by Sayyid Asghar Hussain Naqvi, presents a more comprehensive account of the history of the people of Amroha. It includes an ethnographic description of the *qasbah*s' various *muhallah*s' (localities) and discusses the lineage of each of their important inhabitants, thereby broadening the scope of *'ilm al-nasab* writing.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, discourses on *'ilm al-nasab* had come to reflect contestations for power and prestige played out in the *qasbah*s' political arena. The second section of this article therefore focuses on this later period, when local social competition tested existing claims based on genealogy. It traces the life and writings of Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi who worked closely with some of the leading literary figures at Aligarh and later produced a three-volume history of the *qasbah*. Abbasi's work incorporated colonial sources and 'modern' methods to narrate Amroha's social history. And in the volume

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[12]For instance, the leading Deobandi *alim*, Ashraf Ali Thanawi in many of his writings and sermons elaborates on notions of superior and inferior Muslims based on their genealogical descent, often providing citations from the Hadith and claiming such distinctions to be legal according to the Shariah. See Falahi, *Hindustan mein zat pat*, pp. 287–295.

[13]Several such historical works were produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in various *qasbah* towns of the United Provinces, such as Badayun or Bareilly. Further studies focusing on historical works in Urdu on local *qasbah* would add to a growing field. For one recent insightful work on *qasbah* life and society, see R. Rahman, *Locale, Everyday Islam, and Modernity: Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India* (Oxford, 2015).

[14]For an introduction to the *qasbah* of Amroha, see *ibid.*, and J. Jones, 'The Local Experiences of Reformist Islam in a "Muslim" Town in Colonial India: The Case of Amroha', *Modern Asian Studies* 42, 4 (July 2009), pp. 871–908; and S. M. A. Husain, *Medieval Towns, a Case Study of Amroha and Jalali* (New Delhi, 1995).

[15]On similar cases of deploying genealogy to affect power relations and social stratification in other Islamicate societies, see Burja, *The Politics of Stratification*, and Marlow, *Hierarchy and Egalitarianism*. Moin Nizami, *Reform and renewal in South Asian Islam*, (Oxford, 2017).

[16]Maulvi Hakim Muhib-i Ali Khan Abbasi, *Ai'nah-i Abbasi* (Amroha, 1878).

[17]Sayyid Asghar Hussain Naqvi, *Tarikh-i Asghari* (Amroha, 2009). First published 1879.

dedicated to *nasab,* genealogy functioned as a tool to establish and legitimise social hierarchies among Amroha's Muslim inhabitants at a time when these hierarchies were being bitterly contested.

When reading these three texts, we have to bear in mind the social and material context of their production. History-writing in Amroha was primarily a Sayyid occupation, and Sayyids wrote passionately on the significance of lineage and descent. Their publications became the basis on which they legitimised their claims to a superior status among local Muslims, whose town Amroha was often described as a *qasbah* of the *sadat* (pl. of Sayyid). These Sayyid authors deployed conceptions of hierarchy that evolved during the colonial period, based on notions of race, ethnicity, respectability and nobility, occupational distinctions and narratives referring to the history of early Islam. In effect, by writing on genealogy, they provided their own definitions regarding who could claim to be an 'authentic' Sayyid and what defined Sayyid-ness in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hindustan.

'Ilm-al nasab in Amroha: from family to social history

History-writing was a well-established genre in Arabic and Indo-Persian literature before it developed its vernacular Urdu form. Works on the history of Hindustan were first composed in the early thirteenth century and were still being reproduced, adapted, translated or annotated in the nineteenth century. Indeed, the enduring relevance of such texts for nineteenth-century historians can be gauged from the availability of translated versions and the frequency with which these works were cited as historical sources in the various Amroha *tarikh*s under scrutiny here.[18] These texts not only provided a historical background to nineteenth-century *tarikh* works but some of their ideas and concepts also made an impact on style, genre conventions and content.

Historical works in Urdu first began as translations and adaptations of Persian historical works and later formed an important genre of prose-writing in the vernacular language.[19] History-writing in Urdu retained, experimented with, and re-adapted the typical forms of Indo-Persian and Arabic literary traditions.[20] *'Ilm-al nasab* was one of the important

[18]Examples of such works that are cited as sources in the *tarikh*s of Amroha include Abul Fazal's *'Ain-i Akbari*, Abdul Al Qadir Badayuni's *Muntakhab al-tavarikh*, Firishta's *Tarikh-i Firishta*, and Ziya al-din Barani's *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi*. For a brief introduction to these texts, see P. Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India: Studies in Indo-Muslim Historical Writing* (London, 1996).

[19]For an overview of historical works in Urdu, see J. A. Khan, *Early Urdu Historiography* (Patna, 2005), and A. B. M. Habibullah, 'Historical Writing in Urdu: A Survey of Tendencies', in *Historians of India, Pakistan and Ceylon*, (ed.) C. H. Philips (London, 1960), pp. 481–496. The first major historical account in the Urdu vernacular was the *Asar as-sanadid*, a history of the architecture and antiquities of Delhi, authored by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who also wrote the *Tarikh-i sarkashi zila Bijnor*, a journalistic account of unfolding events during 1857 in the district of Bijnor. Another form of historical writing that emerged in Urdu and also picked up from the Persian and Arabic tradition was the genre of *Sirat* writings, or life histories of the Prophet of Islam. Sayyid Ahmad wrote his own version of the *Sirat* as did Shibli Numani of the Darul Musanifeen in Azamgarh. A companion and contemporary of Sayyid Ahmad, Altaf Hussain Hali composed the *Musaddas* (1879) and the *Shikva-i Hind* (1895), which were epic poems that not only caught the historian's eye but, because they were in the poetic form, encouraged oral renditions of the history of Hindustan. A full-fledged account of the history of Hindustan was produced by Maulvi Muhammad Zakaullah Khan of Delhi College, who wrote the comprehensive *Tarikh-i Hindustan* in ten volumes. Zakaullah was an educationist and one of the prominent figures of the College. For a discussion of his work *Tarikh-i Hindustan* (1915–18), see Khan, *Early Urdu*, pp. 210–216.

[20]See F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography* (Leiden, 1968); C. F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, 2003); and N. A. Faruqi, *Early Muslim Historiography* (Delhi, 1979).

components and sources of Muslim historiography that was deployed for various purposes.[21] In its broadest sense, *nasab* is "a way of making sense of and shaping the past",[22] with the aim of developing a historical consciousness for communities based on a sense of common descent.[23] Such communities have been the central organising category for Muslim societies across the world. Claiming an affiliation to the *ahl-i bait* (Family of the Prophet) or Sayyid status, whether fictitious or otherwise, has been the most widespread way for communities to support their moral and material objectives with genealogical credentials.[24]

The 'roots' of this interest in genealogy can be traced back to pre-Islamic Arabian Bedouin society, and it continued to dominate medieval Muslim societies as an 'invented tradition' that sought to narrate an Islamic past to garner social status and prestige.[25] Szombathy points out that the importance ascribed to genealogy and matters of descent in medieval Muslim societies was mainly for political ends and specifically to distinguish Arabs from non-Arabs or to claim a Sayyid descent.[26] Hence, communities of common descent created synchronic and diachronic connections between families by tracing them back to their common origins. These connections were built through genealogies that were flexible and adaptive. Genealogical records, as Pernau argues, should be read as claims to social status rather than documenting biological status. Social status could be altered through the acquisition of a reputation for erudition and piety, as well as genealogical claims of descent from the Prophet. In the late nineteenth-century north Indian environment, communities of common descent were ultimately political communities, defined by a combination of both status and origin.[27] Even for groups with non-Arab or non-Sayyid descent tracing their lineage back to the Prophet's Quresh tribe or to the Ansar community in order to derive a Shaikh status was a way of upgrading their social standing and prestige. Szombathy uses the term "genealogical parasitism" to describe this broad tendency of lower status groups to deploy the 'patchwork' of an Arabic genealogical chart to claim a superior social position among their contemporaries.[28]

In Amroha, *'ilm al-nasab* attracted several Sayyid practitioners who produced *tarikh* texts written in Urdu, outlining the *qasbah*'s history—distinctly local in its content—and deploying *nasab* as a central mode of narrating the past of the town and its inhabitants. Yet *nasab* also evolved into a kind of social history based on accounts that increasingly reflected the social contestations produced by the changing material context of local *qasbah* politics. This evolution of history writing and its relation to *'ilm al-nasab* was reflected in the *tarikh* texts produced in Amroha from the late nineteenth to the early decades of the twentieth century.

The first *tarikh*s written in Amroha during this period were authored by Sayyid men, primarily as family histories providing the genealogical lineages of important men of their

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[21]For a discussion of genealogy as one of the important components and sources of Muslim historiography see Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, pp. 99–100, and Faruqi, *Early Muslim Historiography,* pp. 49–77. Peter Hardy discusses the work *Shajara i-ansab al-mubarak shahi*, a first of such texts, presented to Qutub al-din Aibak by the author in 1206, and a genealogical account of Mubarak Shah of Multan. See Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, pp. 116–117.

[22]S. B. Bowent (ed.), *Genealogy and Knowledge in Muslim Societies: Understanding the Past* (Edinburgh, 2014), p. 2.

[23]M. Pernau, *Ashraf Into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth Century Delhi* (Delhi, 2013), pp. 57–85.

[24]Morimoto, 'Keeping the Prophet's Family Alive', p. 11.

[25]Z. Szombathy, *The Roots of Arabic Genealogy: A Study in Historical Anthropology* (Piliscsaba, 2003).

[26]Szombathy, 'Genealogy in Medieval Muslim Societies', p.7.

[27]Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes,* pp. 63–64.

[28]Szombathy, 'Genealogy in Medieval Muslim Societies', pp. 5–35.

family, but often including famed men belonging to other prominent families of the *qasbah* as well. The *Ai'nah-i Abbasi* (1878)[29] is considered one of the first of these Amroha *tarikh*s and is representative of the family history genre, being primarily an account of the *nasab* of the Abbasi Sayyids of Amroha.[30] Its author Muhib-i Ali Khan Abbasi (1827–1906), an Abbasi Sayyid and *hakim* by profession, was well-versed in Persian and Arabic and could boast of knowledge of *tibb* (Unani medicine). Briefly during the 1857 Rebellion, he administered Amroha on behalf of the Nawab of Rampur and was bestowed with the *laqb* (title) of Khan for his services.[31] Another *qasbah tarikh* that was published a decade later, the *Tarikh-i Asghari* (1889),[32] differed from the conventional model of family history by incorporating a comprehensive social history of the *qasbah* in its structure. Its author Syed Asghar Hussain Naqvi (1822–1925) was a resident of the *Mohalla Guzri*. Born into a Sayyid family, his ancestors included important *mansabdars*[33] during the Mughal rule of Akbar and are mentioned in other *tazkirah*s and *tarikh*s.[34] In 1867, he contributed to the reconstruction of the Ashraful Masjid in the *muhallah* Shafat Pota and was an important member of the committee responsible for mosque welfare.

   Thus, the authors of both texts were embedded within the Sayyid milieu. Thanks to their education, they were well-versed in Persian and Arabic. Both associated themselves with the vestiges of pre-colonial India. Khan was part of the Nawab of Rampur's administration and Naqvi was an important representative of the Mughal state's *mansabdar*s. The *tarikh* texts that they composed and the sources that they used to narrate the *qasbah*'s past reflected their own positions of power and linguistic knowledge.

   The *AiA* begins by narrating the brief history of various Islamic prophets and other virtuous figures from the common pantheon of stories and tales derived from Islamic history. Khan considered his *khandan* (family)—the Abbasi Sayyids of Amroha—as the *ahl-i bait* and traced their lineage to Hazrat Abbas, considered to be the founder of the Abbasid Caliphate.[35] The *AiA* offers a detailed account of the genealogy of the Arabic tribe of the Banu Hashim to establish a link between the Abbasis of Amroha to the rulers of the Abbasid Caliphate. A brief history of the Abbasid Caliphate is narrated to highlight the importance of the *ahl-i bait*, Sayyids and Abbasis during their rule. Quoting several sources, Khan emphasises the prominence given to the kin of Hazrat Abbas by appointing them in key administrative positions during the life of the Prophet, Umayyad and Abbasid rule, and in Hindustan during the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods.[36]

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[29]Henceforth abbreviated as *AiA*.

[30]*AiA* was published on 9 April 1878 in *Nayar-i Azam* (a local weekly newspaper published by the Matla-i Ulum Press in Moradabad) and printed in the form of a 44-page pamphlet. *Nayar-i Azam* itself was first published in 1876 and edited by S. Ibn Ali. See A. H. Israeli, *Moradabad ke akhbarat* (New Delhi, 2010), pp. 57–59.

[31]Referred to as Khan from now onwards to avoid confusion with the other author Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi.

[32]Henceforth abbreviated as *TiAs*.

[33]*Mansabdar* was a military unit within the Mughal administrative system. It reflected the rank, position or status of political power of the title's holder.

[34]One such example being another historical work from Amroha, the *Tarikh-i vastiya*, as quoted in *AiA*, p. 114.

[35]The Abbasid Caliphate was the third of the Islamic caliphates to succeed the Prophet Muhammad. The Abbasid dynasty was descended from Muhammad's youngest uncle, Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib (566–653 CE), from whom the dynasty takes its name.

[36]*Tarikh-i Firishta* was quoted to highlight the importance of the kin of the Abbasids and the Banu Hashim during Sultan Muhammad Tughluq Shah's rule. See *AiA*, p. 31.

According to Khan, the earliest forefathers of the Abbasis of Amroha were two brothers, Maulana Math and Maulana Babban. Khan traces the lineage of his *khandan* to Maulana Math's son Lala Muhammad, who he claims was born in the Punjab. While Khan admits that the name is a Hindi one, he underlines that Maulana Babban was a *muezzin* (reciter of the call to prayer) at the Emperor Akbar's court of Agra.[37] The two brothers Babban and Math moved to Amroha and worked as *mu'allim*s (teachers) of the prince. They were granted *mu'afi* (revenue free) lands, the rights to which continued to be passed on to their descendants.

Compared to the *AiA*, the *TiAs* is more comprehensive in terms of its scope and length. Structurally it is divided into two broad thematic parts. The first is the historical section where Naqvi draws on a number of sources to establish basic historical facts about Amroha, while the second is ethnographic, describing various aspects of the *qasbah* as he saw them in their contemporary light. The historical part of the work accordingly provides geographical and demographical details about the *qasbah*. It narrates its history found in the common sources of Indo–Persian historiography on the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal rule, but significantly it also includes historical details from the colonial government gazetteers and records. The second part of the text incorporates a discussion of important customs, traditions and festivals celebrated by the inhabitants of Amroha, including the great festivals of Eid, Diwali, *Shab-i Barat*, Dusehhra, Holi, Muharram and others, as they were celebrated in Amroha in Naqvi's time. He also paints a description of the *qasbah*'s main religious sites, notably nine major *dargah*s and several important mosques.

Differences in the structure and content of the two texts also appear in the nature of the sources that they cite. The debate on history in the vernacular places emphasis on style, genres and sources used in vernacular historical texts.[38] The original text of the *AiA* has no footnotes, annotations or a separate document under the title of *makhiz-i talif* (bibliography).[39] Various sources reoccur occasionally throughout the text, but are mostly paraphrased or provided without any proper citations. At the end of the volume, Khan simply lists his *makhiz* (sources) as the following historical works: *Rozat al-sufa*, *Tarikh-i Firishta*, *Waqkidi*, *Rozat al-ahbab*, *Kitab al-ansab*, *Muntakhab al-tawarikh* and *'Ain-i Akbari*.[40]

The *TiAs* uses all of the classic literature that the *AiA* cites. However, in addition, the *TiAs* also quotes extensively from colonial sources, such as the early *Gazetteers* covering divisions of the North–Western Provinces and contemporary census figures, to provide factual details regarding the geography and demography of Amroha.[41] At the end of this volume,

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[37]*Ibid.*, p. 52.

[38]For the debate on vernacular history, see P. Chatterjee (ed.), *History in the Vernacular* (Ranikhet, 2008). While the debate on history in the vernacular allows us to consider the value of detailed histories from across the different regions of India, the categories that it employs for analysis—such as distinctions between early modern and the colonial modern, or the juxtaposition of the vernacular modern with colonial modern—are far too smooth and unproblematic. The argument that the vernacular modern marks a 'difference' of approach and form as opposed to the colonial modern needs to be problematised through close readings of historical works and tracing the specificities of the evolution of their various adaptations during the colonial era.

[39]Historical dates are always provided in the Islamic year. The only occasion when a date according to the Gregorian calendar is given is in the last sentence of the text which mentions that it was published on 9 April 1878. As an appendix, the *shijra* of his *pir*, the *naqshbandiya-i mujadiddiya* is attached, in the form of 22 couplets, along with a *ghazal* of ten couplets praising the virtues of excellence possessed by his *pir o murshid*.

[40]*AiA*, p. 111.

[41]Between 1874 and 1886, Edwin Atikinson (1840–1890) published a series of 14 volumes under the title *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the North-Western Provinces*. The volume on Rohilkhand Division was first

an appendix is attached with a list of 144 *mansabdar*s at Amroha, which includes their names, the quantity of *mansab*s and the ruler whose patronage they enjoyed.[42]

Naqvi mentions that the *qasbah*'s *sadat* had been awarded revenue-free lands under the patronage of various rulers ever since Firoz Shah Khilji, and these continued into the nineteenth century. Their claim was commonly accepted and also observed in the land settlement reports prepared by colonial officers, who acknowledged that in Amroha more than half the land had been revenue free for the *sadat* since Firoz Shah Khilji's time.[43] However, once the British began collecting and re-assessing land revenue in the region, the land settlement efforts became a cause of concern for the *mu'afidar*s. Naqvi accordingly points out that from 1801 to 1833, owing to change in revenue policies, the *mu'afidar*s faced troubles in relation to the confiscation of some of their *mu'afi* land.

The reasons for such troubled relations with the colonial authorities were described in detail in the 1881 land settlement report, which stated that the Sayyids of Amroha were the largest propertied class but that they had their own set of shortcomings:

> Owing to their dislike of engaging in any trade or of cultivating their lands themselves, and to their increasing number and expensive habits, the Saiads [sic] have, as a rule, became involved, and owing to the different constitution of society under our rule, they have also lost much of their former position and influence.[44]

Naqvi points out that that land settlement efforts were accompanied by the coming together of several *mu'afidar*s of Moradabad District, from the *tehsil*s of Bachraon, Bijnor and Amroha, to form associations to struggle for their rights.[45] Finally, it was Sir John Stratchey (1823–1907), the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-Western Provinces, whom Naqvi thanked for intervening and ensuring that the rights of the *mu'afidar*s were secured.[46]

For the purpose of analysis, two aspects of each of these *tarikh*s are significant. For the *AiA* it is the resolution of the tension between notions that value the prominence of *ahl-i bait* and egalitarian ones that value piety as the highest virtue. As far as the *TiAs* is concerned, the most striking aspect of this volume is its treatment of genealogy which is elaborated through an ethnographic account of the *muhallah*s of Amroha.

Nasab or genealogy has a complicated status within Muslim social thought. As noted earlier, as a principle it is often denied value with regard to the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Even a

published in 1879 (with five subsequent reprints) and the volume titled 'Shajahanpur, Moradabad and Rampur' (with nine subsequent reprints) appeared in 1883. The revenue settlement of land in Rohilkhand began in the early nineteenth century after the Nawab of Oudh was forced to cede half of his territories to the British in 1801. The first and second land settlements for Moradabad District took place in 1803 and 1806. Subsequently land settlement reports were published for the district. The ninth land settlement report for Moradabad District, published in 1881, describes several aspects of *qasbah* Amroha.

Both Atkinson's reports and land settlement reports would have been available to Naqvi as he wrote his history of Amroha, as strikingly much of the demographic, geographic and statistical data matches the information in these reports.

[42]Out of the 144 names listed in the appendix, 131 have the title Sayyid attached to them (six of them have the additional title of Qazi, five have Hakim, and five have Shaikh). See *TiAS*, pp. 238–247.

[43]*Final Report on the Settlement of the Moradabad District* (Allahabad, 1881), p. 14 (henceforth FRSMD).

[44]*Ibid*., p. 21.

[45]*TiAs*, pp. 51–53.

[46]*Ibid*. Patronage was an important aspect of Sayyid identity and both authors do not hesitate to thank their patrons. In fact, Naqvi begins his text by dedicating a section to John Strachey, thanking him as well as other colonial officials for their support.

text like the *AiA,* which is primarily a reflection on the significance of *nasab*, is unable to begin the discussion without a disclaimer—that belonging to an important lineage such as Hashmi or Qureshi is not as important for Allah as *zati sharafat* (personal piety).[47] This is substantiated by an Arabic quote that reads "for Allah only he is respectful who is pious".[48] However, several instances are described to stress the importance of *nasab*; specif‐ically the following Hadith is invoked:

> Allah has given all the virtues to the sons of Hazrat Ismail and among their offspring, all virtues to the Quresh, from among the Quresh, all virtues to the Banu Hashim and from among the Banu Hashim, all virtues to me.[49]

Thus the prominence placed on the *ahl-i bait* is derived from this Hadith tradition. Banu Hashim was the tribe of the Prophet and within this subgroup can be found the *ahl-i bait*, defined as the family of the Prophet. It is the *ahl-i bait* who can claim the title of a Sayyid and, thus, as a logical extension of this Hadith—which states that the Banu Hashim is super‐ior to all others—it is claimed that Sayyids are superior to all other Muslims. This claim is reflected in the construction of a distinction between the *sadat* and the *shurfa* (pl. of *sharif*). Khan describes Amroha as a *qasbah* of the *sadat* and asserts that the *shurfa* are fewer in number than the *sadat*.[50] He points out that, counted together, there are 700 families of both *sadat* and *shurfa* who receive *muʿafi* or *jagir* (revenue free) patronage, but that it is belonging to the *ahl-i bait* that grants a special status for the *sadat* which the *shurfa* do not possess.

However, given the fact that there were several families in Amroha apart from the Abbasis who could claim descent from the Banu Hashim clan or the *ahl-i bait* and through this a Sayyid status, the distinction between various Sayyid families also became important. It was in this context that piety as the criteria for virtuousness overrode *nasab*. While some could claim to be the *ahl-i bait*, piety—conforming to the narrative of the egalitarian spirit of Islam—would establish who among the Sayyids was most virtuous.

While the *AiA* emphasises the importance of the *ahl-i bait* and produced a genealogical account that was in the form of family history, the *TiAs* narrates a genealogical history of the *qasbah* through an ethnographic description of its various *muhallah*s. It also includes a description of all local Muslim families, moving beyond Sayyids to include *Ashraf* (lit. the nobles) Muslims as well. Indeed, its most significant aspect is the way in which it lays out the genealogy and lineage by way of an account of the *muhallah*s. The discussion of the *qas‐bah* at the level of the *muhallah* represents a step towards the localisation of genealogy itself. As each *muhallah* is described through the various important men who resided there, this is followed by a brief mention of their genealogical lineages. The deployment of *muhallah*s for

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[47]This underlying tension between *nasab* and piety—the question as to which of the two should be privileged—is a running theme in all three texts under study here.

[48]*AiA*, p. 22.

[49]Original Text – "*Allah tʿala ne kunana ko hazrat Ismaʿil ki aulad mein fazilat di aur kunana ki aulad mein quresh ko sab se zyada fazilat di aur quresh mein se bani hashim ko fazilat di aur bani hashim mein se mujh ko fazilat di*". Quoted from Muslim Sharif, as found in Khan, *AiA*, p. 23. See Fn. 61 for similar Hadith quotations in other texts.

[50]*AiA*, p. 74. This evaluation is misleading. According to the 1872 census, while the total Muslim population of Amroha was counted at 69,976, the number of Sayyids was only 6,704; more than the number of Mughals or Pathans, however, a sizeable proportion of Muslims (58,354) were categorised under the Shaikh category. See FRSMD, p. 23.

the description of the *qasbah* and its important men was not radically new, as an emphasis on urban ethnography was also a component of the *tazkirah* tradition. Sunil Sharma discusses how the *tazkirah* can also take the form of an urban ethnographic account, dwelling on nostalgia or boasting about the golden years of an Islamic past.[51] But in the *TiAs* the discussion of the genealogical lineage of important men is categorised on the basis of *muhallah*s, an approach that seems unique when compared with other *tarikh* works produced in Amroha at the time.

*Muhallah*s in Amroha featured a dominant family or group of families, but also often included other working class communities living adjacent to the dwelling of the important families. Naqvi lists c. 51 *muhallah*s in Amroha—Shafat Pota, Bhangi Tola and Danishmand, to name just a few.[52] It is worth noting here that Naqvi uses the Ashraf-Ajlaf distinction to point to various Muslim social groups. Often he also mentions non-Muslims who inhabit various *muhallah*s. Naqvi's corpus is thus exceptional as it provides a history of the *qasbah* through an ethnography of the local *muhallah*s, offering key insights into local history and events.

By the twentieth century the social landscape had significantly altered, with non-Ashraf Muslim social groups forming their own associations and organisations and becoming an important element present within towns and cities across the United Provinces. Genealogy remained the central mode of narrating the past, but it now had to confront social and material transformations and so took up a form that was based on contestations and refutations.

'Ilm-al nasab as Contestation: Social Stratification in Amroha

Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi was born in Amroha in 1885, the same year that the Indian National Congress was founded. He not only witnessed the highs and lows of many significant movements, struggles and processes of nation-building, but actively contributed to the corpus of historical works focusing on the Muslim past.[53] These works were shaped by the needs and challenges faced by Sayyid and Ashraf Muslims over the course of the twentieth century in north India. His three-volume series on the history of Amroha is marked by a passion for rigour, precision and objectivity. Yet his writings more often than not offended

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[51]Sunil Sharma, 'If There Is a Paradise on Earth, It Is Here: urban ethnography in Indo-Persian poetic and historical texts', in *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800*, (ed.) Sheldon Pollock (Durham and London, 2011), pp. 240–256.

[52]*TiAs,* pp. 80–235, and FRSMD, pp. 20–21. Each of the names of the *muḥallah*s was linked to the people who inhabited these spaces or to the descendants of some of its former prominent inhabitants. Shafat Pota was so called because the offspring of a Sayyid named Mohammad Shafat inhabited the locality, *TiAs,* pp. 154–164. Danishmand was inhabited by Sayyid Rizvis, and was so-called because its ancestors were considered wise and clever, *TiAs,* pp. 130–135. A part of Bhangi Tola was inhabited by the community which Naqvi calls 'Halalkhor', indicative of those who do menial occupations, *TiAs,* p. 103. For more on the Halalkhor Muslims, read the excellent work on this community, Joel Lee, 'Who is the true Halalkhor? Genealogy and ethics in Dalit Muslim oral traditions', *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 52, 1 (2017), pp. 1–27.

[53]Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi's works deserve an intellectual history project of its own. Besides the three volumes explored here, and his *Tahqiq sayyid o sadat*, he also published works on the historical figures of Muawiya and Yazid. The first volume explored here, *Tarikh-i Amroha* (1930), a history of the town, incorporated colonial sources and modern methods. The second volume, *Tazkirat al-karam* (1932) (henceforth *TaK*) was based on a traditional form of the *tazkira* genre and discussed the lineage of important individuals and families at Amroha, including notable *ulema* and sufi saints. The third volume, *Tahqiq al-ansab* (1934) (henceforth *TaA*), was exclusively focused on genealogy, incorporating debates and social contestation on lineages and descent among Muslim groups residing in the *qasbah*.

representatives of local Muslim communities, whether Sayyid or Shaikh, Shia or Sunni, Julaha (weavers) or Qasab (butchers).

Reflecting back on his childhood Abbasi attributes his passion for knowledge about the lineages of his ancestors and the lives of notable *'ulama* and Sufi saints to the *'ilmi mahaul* (intellectual milieu) of his *sharif* household. Abbasi was born in a Sayyid family whose lineage was said to go back to Prophet Mohammad's uncle, Hazrat Abbas (ibn Abd al Mutallib), the progenitor of the greatly revered Abbasid dynasty.[54] After completing his school education in Amroha and owing to the demise of his father, Abbasi was sent to Bareilly and eventually to Lucknow for the pursuit of further studies. The grand city of Lucknow introduced the young Abbasi to a world of knowledge and wisdom, enabling encounters and friendships with the foremost Muslim intelligentsia of the time whose members frequented the erstwhile capital of Awadh.[55] In his account of his days in Bareilly and Lucknow, Abbasi writes that he would consume a vast number of historical works in various libraries without any sense of time passing by. He specifically mentions devouring the literature of the Aligarh school and especially reading every page of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's writings published in the journal *Tahzib al-akhlaq*.[56] During his time in Bareilly, Abbasi was also introduced to the poet litterateur Altaf Hussain Hali who duly encouraged and motivated him, inquiring of his well-being through regular letters.[57] At Hali's request in 1907, Abbasi joined the office of the All-India Muslim Educational Conference (AIMEC) where he worked continuously for 14 years in various posts, such as Personal Assistant to Aftab Ahmad Khan, Literary Assistant, Assistant Secretary, or Superintendent Head of Office.[58]

Abbasi's autobiographical account is a set of reflections, notes and observations of a historian commenting back on the trajectories of his life. His biographical story represents the journey of a Sayyid Sunni Muslim hailing from a *qasbah* town, who shared a wide network of Sayyid and Sharif solidarities available across various towns and cities in the United Provinces that moulded his thoughts and ideas.[59] The reformist movement in Aligarh, for instance, was a distinct milieu that shaped and captured the imagination of several generations following its emergence in the late nineteenth century. Besides being well acquainted

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[54]In an autobiographical section, reflecting on his childhood Abbasi remembered how as a child he would listen with utmost interest to the oral tales of Hazrat Abbas and other saints and prophets from his elders. See TaK, p. 28.

[55]Of particular importance was Viqar ul-Mulk, an assistant and comrade of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and a close acquaintance of Abbasi's father who took on the crucial role of a guardian. Through Viqar ul-Mulk, Abbasi was acquainted with Abdul Halim Sharar and Shibli Nomani, and it was in their company that he developed an interest in the fields of history and literature and spent time reading the various *akhbarat* (newspapers) and *rasa'il* (journals) available at his behest. See *ibid.*, p. 30.

[56]*Ibid.*, p. 31. For more on Aligarh and its journal, *Tahzib al-akhlaq*, see Margrit Pernau, 'From Morality to Psychology: Emotion Concepts in Urdu, 1870–1920', *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 11 (2016), pp. 38–57.

[57]See 'Letters Addressed to Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi', in Altaf Hussain Hali, Maktubat-i Hali, Hissa Awwal, (Panipat, 1825), pp. 117–119.

[58]Working for the AIMEC Abbasi travelled across the country to its various branches, organised meetings and conferences, and met important Muslim politicians and intellectuals. Abbasi remembered his time in Aligarh as intellectually rewarding. There he was acquainted with the needs and challenges faced by Sharif Muslims, especially those pertaining to their difficulties in pursuing education. At Aligarh, he was also familiarised with intellectual debates on literature, history, psychology and philosophy; recalling how he was introduced to discourses on rationalism which led to his opponents charging him of atheism. See M. A. Abbasi, Tarikh-i Amroha, (Delhi, 2014), First Published 1930. Henceforth *TiA*, p. 35.

[59]For an excellent study of the life and networks of Sharif men in Aligarh, see David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Princeton, 1977), and Pernau, 'The virtuous individual and social reform'.

with some of its leading men, as Abbasi's biographical journey reveals, his works are marked by the discourses taking place at Aligarh. In his *intisab* (dedication) of the *TiA*, Abbasi reflects on the task of writing about a period spanning a vast historical time and calls out to future generations to take note of their ancestors and their past. While the *TiA* was primarily a historical work that narrated the past, Abbasi was concerned about issues that were shaped by the discourses in Aligarh—the future of the *qaum* (community) and its *taraqqi* (progress).

In the *Muqaddima* (prologue) of the *TiA,* Abbasi elaborates on the temporal aspects of the life of the *qaum*, the intertwining of the *hal* (present) with the *mazi* (past) and the *mustaqbil* (future). The life of the *qaum* is described in distinct stages, from *bachpan* (childhood) to *javani* (adolescence) to *budhapa* (old age), with each stage being marked by *taraqqi* (progress) or *tanazzul* (decline). Abbasi acknowledges the revolutionary advances made in the nineteenth century by his predecessors and places his work within the framework and terminology that characterised that of the reformers of Aligarh.

> The eyes of the slumber induced people of the East are getting dazzled by the great works and inventions of science of the people of the West. By witnessing the civilised people, the people of Hindustan have been awakened in matters of civilisation, culture and society, such that even in the matters of faith and belief, a revolution is spreading. By following civilised people, rather the spirit of imitation, has moved from the realm of ideas to practice. In these circumstances, just by the thought, that the events of the past and the life and deeds of our ancestors can prove beneficial for the present generation, I began to write the history of our predecessors.[60]

Among the leading figures of Aligarh, Hali proved to be particularly influential in Abbasi's life. This influence appears explicitly in the *dibacha* (preface) of Abbasi's third volume on *nasab*, which begins with a reference to the poet's classic work *Shikwa-i Hind*.[61] However, Abbasi's reverence for Aligarh and its reformers was not unqualified. The advocates of the *qaum* faced a tension between normative claims on Islam's egalitarianism, on the one hand, and empirical social inequalities and hierarchies, on the other. In Aligarh, the *qaum* was confined to its Sayyid and *sharif* proponents. In Amroha, the contested discourse of *nasab* challenged the concept of a unified Muslim *qaum*. This tension was taken up by Abbasi, who accepted the Aligarians' broad framework, but nevertheless addressed issues of social contestations in his volume on *nasab*.

In the preface to the *TaA*, Abbasi quotes Hali's *Shikva-i Hind* that stressed that both the Arab and the Ajam (non–Arab) identities hold a special status within the *qaum-i muslim* (community of Muslims or *ummah*). The contemporary situation in Amroha, Abbasi laments, was marked by a pride in genealogical descent that went against the egalitarian spirit of Islam: not only *Arabi* and *Ajami* Muslims, but also *Hindi* Muslims were plagued by the false pride of *nasab*, which led to contestations regarding lineage and descent among these groups. Abbasi points out that *Hindi* Muslims had begun to organise conferences and *anjuman*s (associations)

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[60]Original Urdu: "*Mashriq ke khafta aqvam ki ankhen ahl-i maghrib me mahiyural aqval karnamon aur science ki barq pash sannayiyon se kher o huri hai. Taraqqi yafta qaumon ki dekha dekhi khafgan-i hind ne bhi bedari ki karvaṭen badalni shuru ki hai, tahzib mein, tamaddun mein, mashrat mein, hatta ke moatiqadat mein inqilab-i azim barpa ho raha hai. Iqbalmand qaumon ki taqlid balki naqqali ka jazba-i khayal se guzar kar 'amli surat ikhtiyar kar chuka hai. In halat ke andar mahaz is khayal se daur-i mazi ke vaqat aur aslaf karam ke savaneh hayat maujuda nasl ke liye shayad kuch mufid aur karamad sabit hon, tazkirah-i salf likhna shuru kiya*" (*TiA*, p. 6).

[61]*TaA*, p. 1. Altaf Hussain Hali's classic Urdu poem *Shikva-i Hind* was published in 1895.

to claim Sayyid, Shaikh or Ashraf status. If Hali had been alive to witness this false pride of genealogical descent, Abbasi claims that he would have added a section on *nasab* to his epic poem.

Hali did indeed write a short essay regarding his views on *nasab* that was published in 1894 in the *Tahzib al-akhlaq*, entitled 'Hasb o nasab'.[62] Hali distinguished between *nasab* and *hasb* (merit) by pointing out that while the former was biological (in the sense that every human since Adam had possessed it), *hasb* was instead inherited. Any sense of *tafavvuq* (superiority) that marked contemporary society, Hali explained, was according to the notions of *hasb* and not based on any sense of pride in one's *nasab*. *Hasb* reflected a status or rank whose inheritance could be derived from social or economic capital. Regardless of its importance, Hali stated, any status deriving from *hasb,* following Ibn Khaldun, only lasts for four subsequent generations, beyond which an individual had to earn respect and status through one's deeds and *'amal (*practice). In contrast to Hali's dismissal of the value of *nasab,* the Deoband *'alim* Ashraf Ali Thanawi in several of his sermons stressed the significance of both *hasb* and *nasab*. The latter is considered especially important in matters regarding the directive for marriage, *kafa'ah*,[63] whose validity is established by a Hadith tradition that is commonly quoted in most discussions on genealogy across the Islamicate world.[64]

Abbasi gives credence to these views of nineteenth-century Islamic reformers who termed certain rituals and traditions practiced by lower Muslims classes as *bid'at* (innovation) owing to their similarities with the practitioners of Hinduism. For Abbasi, social divisions among Muslims, or more specifically *nasal parasti* (discrimination based on race and ethnicity) as practiced by the *Hindi* Muslims, was the result of the company of the *asnam parast* (idol worshippers).[65] In his view, any such distinctions based on race and ethnicity, though against the spirit of the egalitarian principles advocated by Islam, were rationalised through an interpretation based on a temporal division of the history of Islam. Abbasi thus contrasts the Islam that was based on *masavat*, as it was practiced in the age of the Prophet, with Muslims' contemporary practices in Amroha, plagued by distinctions based on race, ethnicity and genealogical pride. Although he insists on the prominence of *parhezgari* (piety) and *'amal* (practice) as the sole criteria for respect and virtue within the normative egalitarian tradition of Islam, Abbasi devotes an entire volume to *'ilm al-nasab*, an indicator of the ongoing importance of genealogy. The real objective of this volume, Abbasi explains, was to correct the wrong interpretations of family trees projected by "hypocrite voices" in Amroha that he believed to be biased and prejudiced.[66] A false sense of pride based on *nasab* had taken the present time back to the

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[62]Hali, 'Hasb aur Nasb', in Hali, *Kuliyat-i Nasr*, Altaf Hussain Hali, Kuliyat-i Nasr, (Lahore, 1967), p. 215.

[63]M. A. Falahi, *Hindustan mein zat pat aur musalman* (Delhi, 2007), pp. 288–292. Thanawi explains that, though piety is the criteria for the highest standard in the after world, *nasab* was as important in this world. Altaf Hussain Hali, Kuliyat-i Nasr, (Lahore, 1967), p. 215.

[64]"Know you that upholding sufficiency *(kafa'ah)* in matrimony is a duty. And it is by way of pedigree in four degrees, thusly. First: to be Arab. Non-Arabs are not equal to them. Second: to be of Quraish. Other Arabs are not equal to them. Third: to be of the Sons of Hashim. Others among the Quraish are not their equals. Fourth: the descendants of Fatima al-Zahra (daughter of the Prophet), through her sons Hasan and Husain; others of the Hashimis are not their equals." As quoted in Ho, *The Graves of Tarim,* p. 174. Ho attributes the following passage to a Hadrami Sayyid, Umar al-Attas, in nearby Sumatra, in his rejoinder to Muhammad Rashid Rida in 1936. Abbasi quotes a similar passage in Urdu, in his discussion on the lineages of the 'Musalmans' of Amroha, see *TiA*, p. 169.

[65]*TaA,* p. 1.

[66]*Ibid.,* p. 3.

ahd-i jahiliyyat (dark ages), and all the principles of *hurriyat* (freedom) and *masavat* (equality), characteristic of the early days of Islam during the life of the Prophet, had been destroyed. This temporal distinction between an egalitarian golden period of early Islam and the contemporary dark ages was common to the understanding of some of the reformers of Aligarh. According to them, *masavat* was the ideal of Islam, but *zat pat* or *unch nich* (caste hierarchies) existed among Muslims in Hindustan due to the Hindu environment. Within this framework, caste hierarchies practised by lower-class converts were implicitly regarded as *bid'at*.

While these reformers dismissed caste-based hierarchies, they turned toward the notion of *nasab* to account for (or even justify) tension between the normative egalitarian ideal of Islam and existing hierarchical practices among Muslims. They pointed out that, unlike *zat pat*, *nasab* was part of the Arabic-Islamic tradition and 'authentic' sources could be cited to justify its importance. Although, in theory, piety and its *'amal* were the criteria for virtue and excellence, in the contemporary world—where status hierarchies were under question—an emphasis on *nasab* allowed Sayyids to legitimise their claim to the apex position among Muslims. Indeed, such intense emphasis on *nasab* suggests that these discussions regarding genealogy and descent were not merely a literary exercise. Rather, they constituted a response to the social and material transformations taking place across the United Provinces in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Owing to changes in the economy with the spread of industrialisation, Muslims hitherto considered to be lower-class, specifically Julahas (weavers) and Qasabs (butchers), began organising themselves in order to promote the uplift of their respective communities. The 1920s saw the founding of the All India Jamiatul Quresh (AIJQ) and the All-India Jamiat al-Ansar, representing butchers and weavers respectively. Both had a strong presence in *qasbah* towns located across the United Provinces.[67] In particular, the former was well entrenched in Amroha in the person of Haji Zafar Ahmad, its all-India general secretary and one of its leading voices at the local level. The Qasabs, like the Julahas, were looking to challenge Sayyid and Ashraf hegemony. In the process, they engaged with the discourse of *nasab* to claim Shaikh status for themselves. Haji Zafar Ahmad, for instance, published a text in 1934, entitled *Suhel-i Sehmi*, which questioned Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi's claims regarding the Qasabs being of *Hindi* origin, and so inferior to Sayyid and Ashraf Muslims who claimed to be of Arab origin. But this engagement with the discourse on *nasab* was itself directly tied to confrontations over political and economic power. With the introduction of local self-government and municipal boards, local politics created space for new political actors representing their communities' interests.[68] Land disputes further fuelled contestations over social hierarchies.

Understanding the way in which the material context of the ownership of land was tied to discussions on lineage and descent provides useful context and sheds light on Abbasi's

[67]See Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge, 2014). Santosh Kumar Rai, "Social Histories of Exclusion and Moments of Resistance: The Case of Muslim Julaha Weavers in Colonial United Provinces." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review*, vol. 55, no. 4, 2018.

[68]For Muslim politics at the local level of the municipal board during this period, see F. Robinson, *Separatism Among Muslims: The Politics of the United Provinces' Muslims 1860–1923* (Cambridge, 1975). Both Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi and Haji Zafar Ahmad were Honorary Magistrates for the Amroha Bench of the District Court of Moradabad, an important institution for local politics during this time. Haji Zafar Ahmad was a member of the bench from 1934–9, while Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi joined the bench in 1940.

scheme of stratification with respect to Amroha Muslims. Indeed, it was a dispute in the early 1920s concerning land rights in the village of Garhi located in Amroha *tehsil* that brought to the fore the economic implications of social stratification. The case, which involved a piece of land previously owned by a Sayyid and transferred to a Qasab, was first decided by the District Judge of Moradabad, before whom hearings took place between 1922 and 1924.[69] The case eventually reached the Allahabad High Court, which overruled the judgement of the lower-level District Court. The arguments provided by the District and High Courts are highly revealing of the bigger picture. The second and the third defendants, who were Qasabs, had sold their house to another butcher, the first defendant. The *zamindar* sued them, declaring that the sale of the land was invalid, and demanded the possession of the sites as well as the removal of the Qasabs' constructions. The courts took up a single point, namely whether "Qasabs are not Sheikhs and therefore cannot claim rights of transfer given to Sheikhs".[70]

The most important document providing local land record and rights of transfer was the *vajib al-arz* (record of rights), which attributed "a transferable right in their houses" to "seven classes of persons and no others".[71] These seven classes comprised "Tambolis, Brahmans, Banias, Shaikhs, Sayyids, Mughals and Pathans".[72] The view taken by the trial court was that the four Muslim groups were merely illustrative rather than exhaustive, and that the custom applied to all Muslims whether or not they belonged to the specified classes. The High Court Judge, however, differed in his interpretation of the *vajib al-arz* and provided three counter-arguments.

First, the High Court Judge argued that if the *vajib al-arz* had been intended to include all Muslims it would have done so rather than mention only four groups. Second, he pointed out that all Muslims who were not Sayyids, Pathans or Mughals claimed to be Shaikhs when they rose in the world. Further, he noted that many Muslims in India did not call themselves Shaikh, Sayyid, Pathan or Mughal, but instead used other specific names such as Julaha, Nurbaf, Qasab, etc. Third, the judge maintained that the argument that low-class Muslims and converts to Islam were intentionally excluded was supported by the fact that only certain classes of Hindus were given a right of alienation in the *vajib al-arz*.[73] Accordingly, he dismissed the case and, in doing so, denied Qasabs the right of transfer and alienation of land: clearly, in his opinion, land rights remained dependent on community status tied to lineage and descent.

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[69][P 520 C2] *All India Reporter* (Allahabad, 1924), pp. 509–510.

[70]*Ibid.*, p. 509.

[71]The colonial government and courts considered the *vajib al-arz*, or record of rights, as an important document containing local information. It was partly a declaration of fact and partly a written agreement. The *vajib al-arz* was given a special value by statute, a presumption being attached to entries therein by section 46 of the Land Revenue Act, 1887. See Atul Kumar Singh, 'The Preparation and Maintenance of Village Land Records: A Case Study of the Office of the Patwari in the North Western Provinces, 1834–1900', *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 48 (1987), p. 497.

[72]*All India Reporter*, p. 509.

[73]The High Court Judge based his three arguments on further evidence, by quoting the views of Crooke's famous work on castes and tribes. Furthermore, the judge quoted the 1921 Census, albeit uncomplicatedly, arguing that the Qasabs had returned themselves in the census as a separate category and not under the broad category of 'Shaikh'. The judge also derived the same conclusion from the Moradabad District Gazetteer.

Questions over *vajib al-arz*, thus, reflected wider social transformations that were sweeping across the United Provinces during the period of British rule. These records featured lengthy genealogical tables to support claims to foreign origins and to establish common ancestors for the community. Establishing a shared lineage was not simply a matter of pride. It became a significant act to settle disputes and contestations over land and property. As a result, the practice of *'ilm al-nasab* was not merely a literary exercise. It also became closely associated with property rights and community status strengthening notions of communities based on common origin and descent.

Hence, it is within this context of social and material transformations, that Abbasi's scheme of stratification among Muslims needs to be read, and understood. The larger part of Abbasi's work on *nasab* is a sociological exercise of enumerating the various social segments of the population of Amroha. Abbasi begins by listing the Hindus and their various castes, namely Brahmins, Vaishyas, Kayasth and Shudras. This is followed up by a discussion focused on the Muslim population of Amroha, for whom Abbasi had formulated an elaborate scheme of stratification and categorisation based on an understanding of ethnic origins of various social groups. This scheme envisaged well-defined and distinct categories (see Table 1). Not only did he provide conceptual and historical analysis, he also substantiated his scheme empirically by identifying specific families in Amroha who belonged to each of the categories. These were neatly distributed in the various *muhallah*s of the *qasbah*. Such empirical precision was unprecedented, and a step ahead of colonial ethnographers, whose censuses and surveys had remained abstract and incoherent in spite of the attempt to anchor normative caste categories in empirical observation.[74]

Abbasi's neat and well-defined scheme of social stratification for the Muslims of Amroha includes several sets of distinctions. He first differentiates them according to their ethnic *nasal* (lineage) into three categories—*Arabi*, *Ajami* and *Hindi*—with the first being superior to the last. These categories emerged out of early narratives of Islamic history, according to which the *ahl-i bait* was revered and could make claims to rule the early Islamic dynasties on the basis of rightful lineage and descent. In Abbasi's scheme, in line with the interpretation found in the *AiA*, only the Banu Hashim clan could be considered the real *ahl-i bait* and rightful claimants to the title of Sayyid.[76] The Hashmis were further divided into five clans—Hasani, Husaini, Jafri, Aqili and Abbasi[77]—that considered each other *ham kufu*.[78] Abbasi condemns those who created hierarchies within the various families of the Banu Hashim, and directs this critique towards the Shi'as of Amroha who considered the offspring

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[74]On the census as a process of 'empiricalisation' of textual traditions, see P. Samarendra, 'Census in Colonial India and the Birth of Caste', *Economic and Political Weekly* 46, 33 (August, 2011), pp. 51–58. Colonial ethnographers such as Eliot, Beames, Nesfield and Crookes commented on caste distinctions among Muslims of India. Common to their writings was the division of Muslims into two broad categories. First, they introduced a distinction, based on descent, between those who were descendants of foreign invaders and those who were converts from Hinduism (these two broad categories were sometimes termed as the Ashraf and the Ajlaf respectively). Furthermore, among the Ashraf, a four-fold division was followed, namely Sayyid, Mughal, Pathan and Shaikh. Second, the remaining Muslims were categorised broadly as occupational classes with their names derived from specific occupations, such as Julahas or Qasabs.

[76]On the Talibid genealogy that traces such a lineage through Abu Mutalib, see Morimoto, 'The Formation and Development'.

[77]Hasani and Hussaini refer to the offspring of Ali. Jafar was the brother of Ali and the descendants of Abbasi are related to al-Abbas, the brother of Abu Talib.

[78]Those who could marry according to the directive of *kafa'ah*. (On *kafa'ah* see Fn. 66.)

Table 1. The stratification of the Muslims of Amroha according to M. A. Abbasi [75]

Muslims of Amroha	Arabi	Hashmi (Sayyid)	Husaini
			Hasani
			Aqeeli
			Jafri
			Abbasi
		Ansari (Shaikh)	
		Qureshi (Shaikh)	Siddiqui
			Usmani
			Faruqui
	Ajami	Mughal	
		Pathan	
		Qizlibas (Turk)	
	Hindi	Peshevar	Julaha
			Qasab
			Mirasi
		Shurfa	Kambo
			Kalal

of Fatima as the only authentic lineage emerging out of the Banu Hashim. Such a consideration allowed Abbasi to challenge the Shi'as of Amroha who did not consider the Abbasis as part of the *ahl-i bait*.[79]

Although not claimants to the title of 'Sayyid', Qureshis and Ansaris in Abbasi's scheme are also categorised as *Arabi nasal* and so are deemed superior to families of *Ajami* or *Hindi* lineages. In the four-fold hierarchical order often used by colonial ethnographers to categorise Muslims with foreign descent, they were only second to the Sayyids and fell under the broad category of the Shaikh. Among the Qureshis, three clans could claim the purest lineage, the Siddiquis, Faruqis and Usmanis. Abbasi identifies specific families (with the *muhallah*s in which they resided) of Amroha for all these sets of categories.

The most provocative aspect of Abbasi's scheme was his categorisation of the *peshevar aqvam*[80] (occupational classes), such as those of *Hindi nasal*. Within this category were to be found the working classes, who were identified through their occupations, such as Julahas, Qasabs and Mirasis. As already pointed out, these communities in the 1920s had begun forming associations that were attempting to challenge Sayyid and Ashraf hegemony. It was the category of the Shaikh, however, that was most ambiguous and fluid, and so it was thoroughly contested when many among the *peshevar aqvam* began to claim this status. These working-class groups sought the title of Shaikh, which implied a claim of being of *Arabi*

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[79]*Tarikh-i vastiya*, a Shia tract, considers only the descendants of Fatima as the authentic *ahl-i bait*, and disregards the Abbasi family as a rightful claimant to the title of Sayyid. See Abbasi's critique of the work, in *TiA*, pp. 179–180.

[80]*Peshevar aqvam* is translated here as 'occupational classes'. It broadly denotes the working classes and could also be translated as occupational 'communities' (as *aqvam* [pl. *qaum*] may be translated as communities) or, in a stricter sense, as occupational 'castes'.

nasal, and began to call themselves Ansaris and Qureshis, thereby claiming a higher social status in the scheme of stratification than was being advocated by either colonial ethnographers or by Abbasi.

For Abbasi, such claims were inaccurate and he went to painstaking lengths in his first and the third volumes to prove that Muslim *peshevar aqvam* were of *Hindi nasal* rather than of *Arabi nasal*. He deliberated on this point extensively, and his arguments became the basis of polemical debates and discussions that took place in Amroha. In his attempt to deny the *peshevar aqvam* the status of *Arabi nasal*, Abbasi put forward several arguments. First, he claimed that these communities were of *Hindi nasal,* having been converted from the Hindu lower and untouchable castes. This understanding overlapped with much of the understanding of colonial scholars who made similar claims. Abbasi, in fact, quoted passages from T. W. Arnold's *The Preaching of Islam*, wherein Arnold divides Muslims into two groups: those who migrated to India from foreign lands and those converted from local inhabitants.[81] This theory, however, was rejected by the *peshevar aqvam*, especially by the Qasabs of Amroha who published a series of pamphlets under the aegis of the All India Jamiatul Quresh, succinctly refuting each claim put forward by Abbasi in his writings.

More often than not, Abbasi invokes the observations made by colonial ethnographers on the subject. He quotes Beames who acknowledged this phenomenon in the North-Western Provinces; the number of Muslims who were claiming to be Shaikhs had increased and this general tendency was reflected by the commonly-quoted adage "Last year I was a weaver, this year I am a Shaikh, next year if grain is dear, I shall be a Sayyid".[82] Hence, Abbasi's well-defined scheme of social stratification represented an attempt to impose normative and textual understandings of Muslim society onto distinct observable social groups. The social categories that he put forward indicated the social hierarchy as it was conceived by dominant groups at the local level of the *qasbah* of Amroha at his time.

Conclusion: implications for Sayyid-ness

This article has sought to historicise the terms of references of debates on hierarchy among Muslims in India by reading vernacular Urdu *tarikh* texts that were produced in Amroha in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Colonial ethnographers in the nineteenth century and social scientists in the twentieth century considered notions of caste and hierarchy within the practice of Islam in India to be a result of its fusion with Hinduism. Their writings argued that there was no evidence of caste or justification of social hierarchy in classical Islamic scriptures, although notions of social stratification existed in practice among Muslims.

The three texts examined here intervened in debates and practices on hierarchy and social stratification among Muslims at the local level of the *qasbah*. They deployed the tradition of genealogical history writing—*ʿilm al-nasab*—to narrate the *qasbah*'s past, its important families

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[81]Abbasi quotes from T.W Arnold's *Preaching of Islam*, see *TiA*, pp. 214–215. Another term that Abbasi used to describe the occupational communities who converted from the Hindu lower castes was *nau musalman* (new Muslims), the idea being that these groups were Hindus and only later converted to Islam. The implicit assumption in this understanding was that Hindu upper castes exploited the lower ones and the latter's conversion to Islam was step towards greater freedom.

[82]*TiA*, p. 218, and Beames, *Memoirs on the History*, p. 185.

and their ancestors. The textual practice of *'ilm al-nasab*, however, evolved from being a form of family history towards becoming a kind of social history. Moreover, the three texts under scrutiny emerged in a social and material context that was rapidly changing, with the *peshevar aqwam* such as *Julaha*s (weavers) and *Qasab*s (butchers) forming associations and challenging the social hierarchy as it was conceived by Sayyid and *Ashraf* Muslims.

Accordingly, several conceptions of hierarchy among Muslims can be mapped from these Urdu *tarikh* texts. Ethnic categorisations according to geographic origin were one way of conceiving of it, and so they divided Amroha's Muslims into *Arabi, Ajami*, and *Hindi* groups on the one hand, and into Ashraf and Ajlaf on the other. A second type of classification found in them was based on narratives of early Islamic history, particularly those concerned with the relationship with the family of the Prophet, known as the *ahl-i bait*. By using the term 'Sayyid', which referred specifically to Muslims who could claim an authentic lineage to the family of the Prophet, the texts' authors aimed to distinguish *sadat* from other Muslims, including other Ashraf elites. In addition, these texts established a hierarchy based on notions of respectability by distinguishing *sharif* from *razil* Muslims. Finally, they evoked a fourth type of hierarchical distinction, linked to the occupational background of these different groups—labouring *peshevar qaum* versus *sharif qaum* who were involved in respectable professions. In practice, therefore, these texts did not rely on a single type of social hierarchy but on multiple forms of categorisation.

And yet Sayyid Muslim narratives consistently denied the normative basis of hierarchy within Islam, and instead projected inequality as practised among Muslims as the result of Islam's assimilation with Hinduism in India. Such an understanding of caste hierarchies among Muslims in India can be traced to nineteenth-century reformers in Aligarh and Deoband, who regarded caste hierarchies as *bid'at*, associated with lower-class Muslim practices. To resolve the tension between the practice of caste hierarchies in Muslim society and Islam's normative egalitarian ideals, Sayyid authors drew a temporal distinction between the early period of Islam and contemporary times, and deployed the notion of *nasab* accordingly. They declared that, in theory, piety and its practice were the criteria for virtue and excellence in the afterworld. At the same time, they cited 'authentic' Islamic sources to show the importance of genealogy. This allowed them to justify the existence of hierarchies in practice among Muslims, and particularly the position of Sayyids at the apex of social stratification among Muslims.

But from the historian's perspective, these texts not only reflect Sayyid conceptions of social stratification among Muslims. They also provide valuable indications regarding who was a Sayyid and how a person could claim to be an authentic one. The autobiographical notes of the three Sayyid authors discussed here offer us a general picture of what Sayyid life could be like. These men often occupied important positions in the administration, whether this was in the service of the Nawab of Rampur or the AIMEC. In their writings, it appears that Sayyids considered themselves to be migrants in Hindustan. Claiming to be part of the *ahl-i bait* meant that they regarded themselves to be of *Arabi nasal* and this resulted in them having a sense of superiority vis-à-vis indigenous converts of *Hindi nasal*. The Sayyids of nineteenth-century Hindustan were often recipients of patronage and revenue-free land. Land in itself was a marker of being noble. It was reflected in local records such as the *vajib al-arz,* which legitimised their ownership of land and even restricted its

transfer to non-Ashraf people. Besides, Sayyids often inhabited important *muhallah*s of the town, where they were engaged in constructing, maintaining and managing key religious and educational sites. Their economic prosperity, combined with the symbolic legitimacy of noble lineage and descent, allowed Sayyids to enjoy a prominent place in the Muslim social stratification as practised across north India during the colonial period. In the early decades of the twentieth century, however, various associations like the All India Jamiatul Quresh challenged this dominance, and can be seen not just in the literary sphere—in publications and pamphlets—but also in local politics at the municipal level in the *qasbah*.

Repeated emphasis on Islam's egalitarian ethos notwithstanding, social hierarchy among Muslims remains a fraught issue today. As the recent re-publication of the three texts explored here suggests, Sayyids continue to engage actively with history-writing and to place importance upon *nasab*. At the same time, in the last two decades the growth of organisations such as the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz ('Marginalised Muslim Front'), highlights caste discrimination among Muslims and the ongoing relevance of debates on caste and descent-based hierarchies among Muslims in India.

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