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Anjuman, jami'at, and association: what Sayyid organizations tell us about associational forms among Muslim caste groups

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ABSTRACT

In the early decades of the twentieth century in colonial India, the development of education, the expansion of electoral politics, and the decennial censuses led many caste communities, or 'caste groups', to organize collectively in search of internal solidarity and public assertion. Informed by the notions of service and reform, Muslims participated in this new associationism. Among them, the Sayyids – a privileged status group that claims descent from Prophet Muhammad – also formed their organizations. This article compares three Sayyid organizations in India and Pakistan, with two principal aims. First, it brings out the implicit notions of inclusion and exclusion that inform the functioning of the organizations as they seek community preservation. Second, it draws broader conclusions about associational forms available to South Asian Muslims when they act collectively on the basis of a shared social status or caste. The article concludes by delineating three 'organizational models' that Muslim caste groups can draw upon – the *anjuman*, the *jami'at*, and the association. Overall, this article illustrates how Muslims frame practices of social distinction in an Islamic language of equality, piety, or service.

KEYWORDS

Organizational models; caste associations; status claims; community preservation; Sayyids

Introduction

In the late nineteenth century, South Asian Muslims began intervening in the public sphere with new forms of religious, social, and political activism. Dietrich Reetz (2006) suggested that Islamic activism – from proselytization to social relief to political assertion – shaped a 'specific sub-sector of the public sphere' or 'Islamic sphere'. These new forms of public participation relied on the setting up of new organizations that were informed by two key notions – reform and service. In the religious realm, reform (*islāh*) referred to the 'bringing into line of religious beliefs and practices with what are held to be the core foundations of Islam' (Osella and Osella 2013, xi). Social reform also informed projects that sought to 're-order Muslims' lifeworlds and institutional structures in dialogue with [...] colonial and post-colonial modernity' (Osella and Osella 2013, xi). Notably, the notion of *islāh* was at the centre of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's modernist enterprise for the access of Indian Muslims to a form of education that would allow them to work for the colonial state. Many Muslim organizations also invoked the notion of service (*khidmat*) to define their objectives. This involved service to society in a charitable or philanthropic approach as well as more political movements, such as the Anjuman-i Khuddam-i Ka'ba (movement of the servants of the Ka'ba), which sought to raise funds for the protection of Islam's holy places in the 1910s. More broadly in India, the 'culture of

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service' that guided new associations at the turn of the twentieth century could mix charitable enterprise with the political aim of 'serving the nation' (Watt 2005). Moreover, among Muslims, the notion of service overlapped with that of charity. Catherine Larouche (2017, 14) argues that 'Muslim NGOs' mainly emerged in the 1970s and provided an alternative to earlier forms of Muslim charity – *waqf* endowments, donations to madrassas, and donations to the poor. However, this article suggests that similar forms of charity informed the activities of Muslim organizations as early as the 1910s, particularly for organizations based on a shared social status.

Indeed, Muslims' engagement with new forms of public participation from the late nineteenth century also included community organizations formed on the basis of the common belonging to a *biradari* or to a lineage (Sajjad 2014, 274–301). In first half of the twentieth century, two prominent Muslim caste groups, the Ansaris (weavers) and the Quraishis (butchers), set up organizations. Their names – the All-India Jamiat-ul Ansar and the All-India Jamiat-ul Quraish – used the term *jami'at* that was not specific to caste-based movements. Some Muslim religio-political organizations established in the same period had names constructed in a similar way, like the association of Deobandi scholars Jamiat-ul Ulama-i Hind founded in 1919, or the Jamaat-i Islami created in 1941. The common Arabic root of *jami'at* and *jama'at* denotes the act of gathering or assembling and is widely used in Muslim religious activities, from the *jām'a masjid*, or assembly mosque, in every town, to, for instance, the *jama'atkhana* of the Ismailis. Although the term *jami'at* has been used by other Muslim caste groups for their organizations,¹ what stuck for the Ansari organization is not its Urdu but its English name, the Momin Conference. Many other groups beyond caste-based activism also called themselves 'conference', such as the Muhammadan Educational Conference launched in 1886 by the prominent reformer and educationist Sayyid Ahmad Khan, or the All-India Shia Conference.

A large number of Muslim organizations established in the second half of the nineteenth century were also called *anjuman* – a Persian word for assembly or society. Focusing on Punjab, Ikram Ali Malik suggests that these 'Muslim societies' aimed 'at social reform, economic cooperation and greater unity amongst different sections of the community. Some of these were established on the basis of caste or tribal affiliation, these units were considered effective for social reform' (Malik 1999, 114). Shia Muslims also took on the *anjuman* form for their organizations, often local bodies responsible for the management of ritual commemorations (*azādārī*) during the month of Muharram. Today, literally every town or village with a Shia presence has one or more *anjuman* that organizes Muharram rituals. *Anjumans* seemed primarily geared towards social reform or the perpetuation of religious rituals, although their often-exclusive composition arguably made them *de facto* caste associations.

Unlike the Ansaris and Quraishis, the Sayyids, who collectively claim descent from Prophet Muhammad, are a privileged social group, part of the broader Ashraf category of Muslims who believe their origins to be from outside India. In many parts of South Asia, and certainly in North India, Sayyids follow certain restrictions of social intercourse pertaining to endogamy, commensality, and occupational specialization (Gautier and Levesque 2020).² When it comes to endogamy, while intermarriages with other groups of the dominant Ashraf happen, Sayyids maintain their symbolic dominant position by following a hypergamous pattern in which Sayyid women are generally not married to non-Sayyid men, while Sayyid men can marry non-Sayyid women. Sayyids have traditionally specialized in non-manual occupations: religious scholars, writers, administrators, but also landowners (*zamīndār*). However, since the late nineteenth century, the overall social trajectory of Sayyids has undergone much transformation, well-described by the title of Margrit Pernau's book *Ashraf into middle classes* (Pernau 2013). Sayyids' dominant position was affected by the fall of Muslim states (the Mughal empire, the Awadh state, the Hyderabad state), the migration of many to Pakistan at the time of independence, and land reform that put an end to the *zamīndārī* system after independence. To mitigate the loss of their privileges, Sayyids largely invested in higher education, embraced intellectual, administrative, and educational professions, and settled in urban areas – in effect becoming 'middle classes'.

The associational engagement of Sayyids' – informed by notions of reform and service – thus takes place against this backdrop of 'déclassement', or loss of social position. In order to understand Sayyids' use of associations for community preservation, this article compares the foundation and evolution of three Sayyid organizations, the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Momineen (AWSM) in North India, the Sindh Sayed Association (SSA) in Pakistan's Sindh province, and the All-Kerala Sadath Association (AKSA) in South India. The comparison relies on interviews and informal discussions with members of the three organizations, observation of an annual meeting of the Sindh Sayed Association in August 2019, and documents collected in Pakistan (Sindh) and India (Delhi, Aligarh, Amroha, Kozhikode) between 2019 and 2021.

The comparison has two principal aims. First, comparing Sayyid organizations seeks to bring out implicit notions of social and religious boundaries among Sayyids. The activities of Sayyid organizations point to a change in the modes of community preservation, from a primarily discursive approach rooted in genealogical claims to associationism. Soheb Niazi suggested that the tradition of genealogy (*ilm al-nasab*) has long been a way to 'develop a historical consciousness for communities based on a sense of common descent' (Niazi 2020, 472). This form of history-writing foregrounded lineage and descent, thus legitimizing claims of superior social status. Yet, even as it justified social hierarchies, this literature also overtly emphasized adherence to the egalitarian principle of Islam. Hence, the large literature produced by Sayyids on lineage (*nasab*) does not offer an explicit discourse on their social position. Instead, these writings tend to emphasize Islamic principles of equality, while paradoxically providing substance for social distinction (Gautier and Levesque 2020).

Organizations provide a complementary source to understand how genealogical claims shape community boundaries. While the creation of associations did not put an end to genealogical narratives, it formalized these claims into rules of membership. Although participation in these organizations was voluntary, genealogical pedigree became the condition of eligibility as active member or as beneficiary. In the activities of Sayyid organizations, at least two aspects – directories and financial support – distinguish this mode of community preservation from genealogical claims. First, while genealogical trees (*shajrah-i nasab*) were a common feature of genealogical writings, several organizations now compiled and distributed directories of their members. Through such directories, community connections, which had earlier relied on interpersonal connections, could now extend to previously unknown community members. Second, extending financial support to organization members was also a new way of ensuring the reproduction of social preeminence: in particular, sponsoring the young generation with scholarships helped ensure income, status, and presence in public life for the future. Overall, focusing on organizations helps us apprehend how conceptions of social hierarchy became the basis of new forms of group solidarity and distinction among Sayyids.

The second aim of the comparison is to draw broader conclusions about associational forms among Muslims. Apprehending the multiplicity of associational forms adopted by various Muslim caste groups in India constitutes a first step towards defining what a Muslim caste association may be. Comparing Sayyid organizations shows that the boundaries of the 'community' they claim to work for may be fuzzy and contested. I suggest that this fuzziness in the community boundaries has to be understood in relation to the associational form adopted. The article thus seeks to throw light on what Sayyid organizations tell us about the associational life of Muslim caste.

The first section explores how the context of the foundation of two organizations shaped their objectives and actions. The second section delves more closely into the contradictions of the organizations when it comes to the community they claim to work for, and introduces a third organization in the comparison. The conclusion proposes to distinguish different organizational models of Muslim community engagement based on social status.

Sayyid *anjumans* in the late colonial period: Community promotion amid Muslim political assertion

The aims and development of two Sayyid organizations founded in the early twentieth century show that as their founders and members sought to consolidate their own status-based community, they also took part in broader processes of Muslim political assertion in the public sphere.

Another North Indian Anjuman under the auspices of the Shia Conference

The Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Mominin was founded by two wealthy Shia men in Dehra Dun on 31 March 1912, Syed Jalaluddin Haider (1872–1948) and Nawab Syed Mohsin Mirza (1883–1929). According to the organization's website, the purpose of the organization 'was to award loan scholarship (Qarz-e-Hasna) to the needy, deserving and meritorious students of the community for pursuing their lower or higher studies both religious and temporal, to be returned without interest in easy instalments after the students get settled'.³ Online documents available on social media depict the organization as the oldest institution that provides educational support for the community ('*T'alimī imdād dene wālā qaum kā sab se qadīm idārah*'), an idea that was also conveyed to me during interviews. Other internal documents, like the AWSM's magazine (*Monthly Wazifa*) or the organization's constitution (*das̄tūr-i 'amal*) and the introduction that precedes it, eulogize the founders and their visionary initiative in favour of knowledge and education.

Contextualizing the foundation of the AWSM helps understand its purpose.⁴ The AWSM came about at a time of consolidation of Muslim political mobilization: the Muslim League was founded in 1906 (with a Shia support out of proportion with the number of their members) and the All-India Shia Conference the following year (Fuchs 2019, 16). Yet this political mobilization did not express a strong anti-colonial critique. Instead, it professed loyalty to the British colonial state, in part in response to the realization permitted by the recent introduction of the decennial census that Muslims were a minority in the overall Indian population. Similarly, the AWSM did not adopt an anti-colonial stance but focused on training young Shia Muslim Sayyid men to avail employment within the fold of the colonial system.

Yet more important than the overall Muslim political assertion is perhaps the fact that the AWSM was founded when a distinctive community consolidation process was taking place among Shias. This Shia assertion involved the creation of numerous *anjumans*. According to Justin Jones, the creation of the AISC initiated a form of 'new associational Shi'ism' (Jones 2011, 120–123). This involved the creation of religious, cultural, and social institutions 'that emphasized [Shias'] own autonomy as a free-standing religious community, and frequently spilled over into political affairs' (Jones 2017, 352). Moreover, this 'new associational Shi'ism' gave central importance to charity (*wazā'if*). Jones suggests that while the creation of numerous *anjumans* affiliated with the AISC in a way followed the steps of the Nawabi institution-building of the former Awadh state, these new organizations also departed from some of the Nawabi traditions. In particular, they participated in a 'redefinition of Muslim respectability (*adab* or '*izzat*'), defining it less in terms of ancestral pedigree and specific high birth, and more in the sense of good character and personal conduct' (Jones 2011, 123).⁵ The AWSM should thus be understood as an organization that accompanied Shia Sayyid families in their transition from a patronized noble status to being educated and salaried professionals.

Finally, the AWSM was quite strongly present in the small town of Amroha, which (along with the neighbouring town of Naugawan Sadat) has to this day a significant and active population of Shia Sayyids. At the beginning of the twentieth century, competition between dominant groups in the town took place in the form of writings on history and genealogy (Niazi 2020). In particular, the Sunni author Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi argued that the Sayyid title should not be reserved to the descendants of the Prophet through Ali and Fatima exclusively, as claimed by the Shia Sayyids, but used more broadly for the descendants of the Prophet's clan, the Banu Hashim as a whole. Although Mahmud Ahmad Abbasi left India for Pakistan, Hashimis maintained their claim to Sayyid status

and an Anjuman-i Sadat-i Abbasiyya was created in the 1970s in Amroha. By including a reference to *sādāt* (the plural of Sayyid) in its very name, the AWSM thus worked to publicly define who falls under that category, against other claims to equal status. Moreover, the attachment to social distinction of at least one of the AWSM's founders appears in the fact that he subsequently established other *anjumans* for Sayyids, such as the Anjuman-i Husaini Campbellpur Sayyidain in Campbellpur (now Attock) or the Mohsiniyya Sadat Association in Delhi.

Thus, examining the context of the foundation of the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Mominin helps us understand the organization beyond its official claims. In other words, the AWSM presents itself as an educational charity, but its foundation participated in broader dynamics. This involved Muslim reformism in general and, more specifically, Shia assertion through the establishment of associations. The creation of the AWSM also took part in the social transformation of the Ashraf – with their noble patronized status – into middle classes – whose main revenue stems from salaried employment. This transformation involved dispute about social claims in which the AWSM was also a participant, most visibly through the choice of its name.

Moreover, we may note important features of the organization that affected the AWSM's subsequent evolution. First, its sectarian character as a Shia organization allowed for its future geographical expansion beyond the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh and North India. However, it prevented the inclusion of non-Shia Sayyids, while de facto countering various claims to equal social status. Second, the AWSM seems to have always preserved its non-political outlook, a stance that we could perhaps link with the loyalist attitude adopted by the Muslim League in relation to the colonial state – but that we should perhaps more appropriately see as part of a broader negative understanding of politics, or politics as a source of discord, conflict, and corruption. This negative view of politics evokes the tendency in many Islamic societies to emphasize unity over differences (a possible source of schism or *fitna*) or the historically prevalent Shia aversion towards politics as a result of persecution and its collective memory. It also joins, more generally, a widespread opinion across South Asia that portrays democratic politics as a source of corruption rather than a tool for achieving social cohesion.⁶

A first Sayyid Anjuman in Sindh after the Khilafat movement

While the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Mominin seems best understood as part of a general trend of 'new associational Shi'ism', the ancestor of the Sindh Sayyid Association, the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat, came about right after the Khilafat movement and amid growing Muslim political assertion in Sindh. However, its emphasis on lineage over religious orientation brings it closer to caste associations.

The Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat was founded in 1924 by Ghulam Murtaza Shah, better known as G. M. Sayed (1904–1995). G. M. Sayed was then only 20 years old, but went on to become the leader and ideologue of the Sindhi nationalist movement, after having been one of the main proponents of the Muslim League in Sindh (Levesque 2021; Verkaaik 2004; 2010). The custodian of a local Sufi shrine and a landowner (*zamīndār*), the young G. M. Sayed already had political ambitions: several years earlier, in 1920 and 1921, he had been attended meetings of the Khilafat movement and met Gandhi on that occasion. He would soon join the Congress Party and be elected in local body elections. His public engagement took multiple forms. For instance, he was involved in organizations of the landed gentry (the Sindh Zamindar Association launched in 1921), but would also take part in the foundation of a movement for landless peasants, the Sindh Hari Committee, in 1930.⁷

The foundation of the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat partakes of G. M. Sayed's efforts to bring Sindhi Muslim elites into the political fold. According to G. M. Sayed, the rationale for the foundation of the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat was to start working for social reform and upliftment from within one's community (Qazi 2017). G. M. Sayed convened a meeting in his village of Sann on 17 and 18 March 1924, calling on the members of the Sadat-i Mutalvi branch to bring their genealogical records, or *shajrah*, to the meeting (see Figure 1). The Sadat-i Mutalvi, also called Matiari *sādāt* in

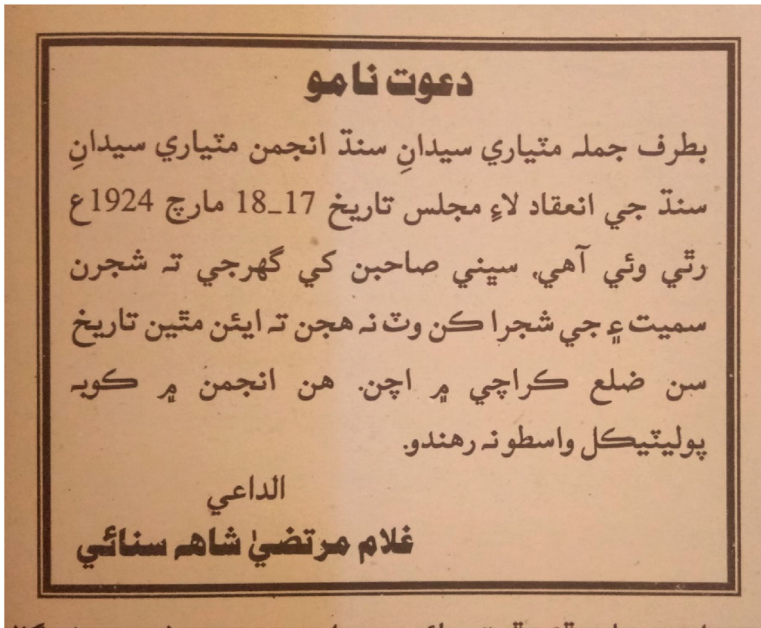


Figure 1. Invitation sent out to members of the Sadat-i Mutalvi, ahead of the first meeting of the Anjuman on 17–18 March 1924, requesting the guests to bring their genealogical records. Source: Qazi (2017).

reference to their association with the town of Matiari, north of Hyderabad, are one of the two main branches of Sayyids in Sindh.⁸ It is noteworthy that G. M. Sayed's initiative took place barely two weeks after the official abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate on 3 March 1924, and that he called on the network of custodians of shrines (*sajjada nashin*) and Sufi guides (*pīrs*) that he had been introduced to in the meetings of the Khilafat movement. After the establishment of the *anjuman*, G. M. Sayed wrote to the custodian of the shrine of Sehwan Sharif and suggested him to create a similar organization among Lakyari *sādāt* – the other main lineage of Sayyids in Sindh. His efforts, however, went wasted, and G. M. Sayed could only deplore that practices he judged deviant and morally improper still took place at the annual fair of Sehwan Sharif (Qazi 2017, 60–65). Although G. M. Sayed's moral stance exhibits his reformist attitude, the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat's creation cannot be detached, both symbolically and practically, from the Khilafat movement, which brought many scholars and *pīrs* together in a movement that had not only expressed attachment to Muslim traditions, but also voiced anti-colonial positions.

The Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat only lasted a few meetings. Yet although Sindhi Sayyids did not seem to show much interest in the Anjuman, they remained quite a solid political base for G. M. Sayed in the years and decades to come. For instance, at the Sindh assembly, in the late 1930s and 1940s, most of his supporters were Sayyids (see Figure 2). When there was a conflict over the nomination of Muslim League candidates ahead of the 1946 elections, Sayed's opponents accused him of wanting to impose a 'Sayyid Raj' (Ansari 1992, 122–124). G. M. Sayed kept relying on the network of Sayyid custodians of Sufi shrines when his political career took on a more explicitly nationalist turn. During Ayub Khan's military dictatorship in the late 1960s, he organized numerous cultural meetings at Sufi shrines that were the occasion of much political discussions on Sindhi identity (Levesque 2020). Conversely, in the 1950s, G. M. Sayed also used a government-funded cultural institution that he had helped create, the Sindhi Adabi Board (Sindhi Literary Board), to support research on the Sadat-i Mutalvi.

However, returning to the 1930s, the foundation of the Anjuman takes part in the growing public assertion of Sindhi Muslims, who demanded that Sindh be separated from the Bombay Presidency

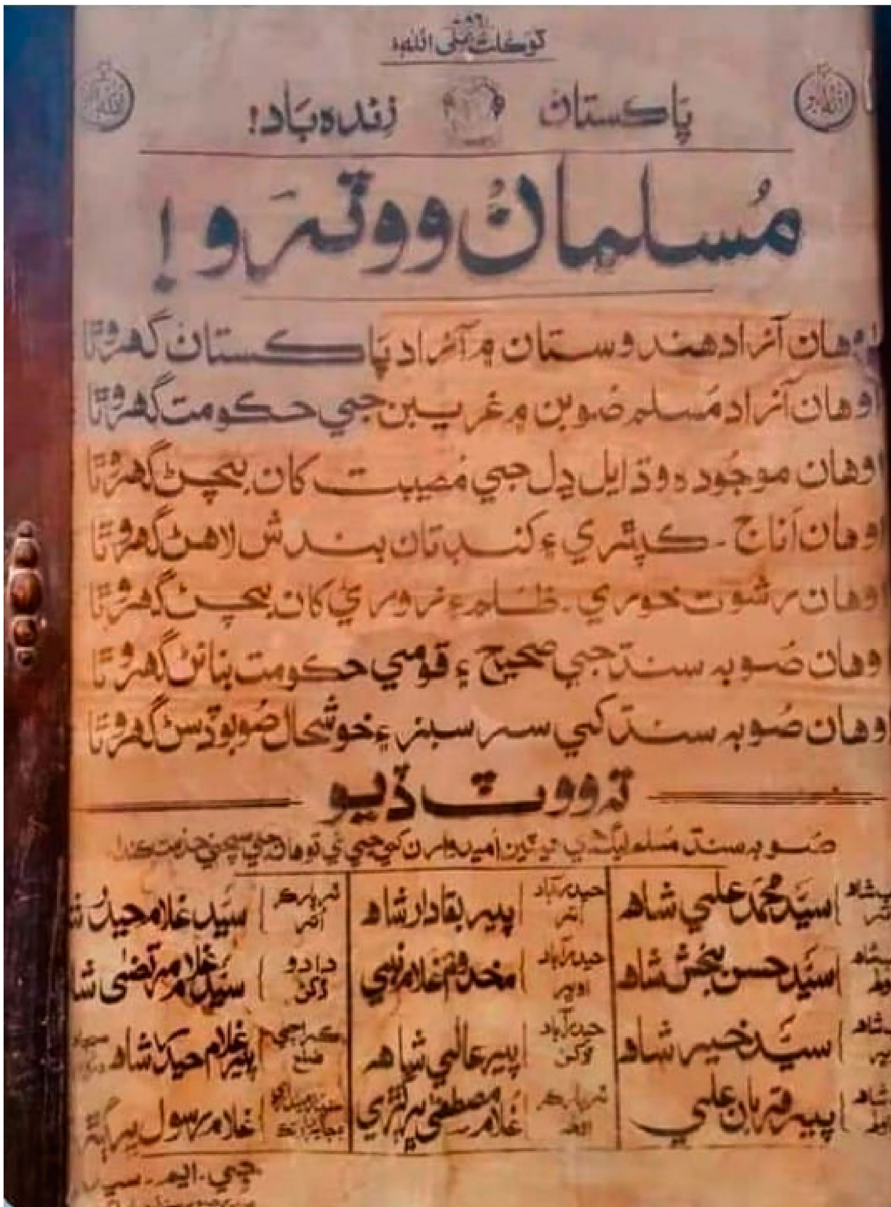


Figure 2. Appeal to Muslim voters by G. M. Sayed ahead of the 1946 elections. The names of the candidates indicate that Sayed’s political group at that time was almost exclusively made up of Sayyids and custodians of Sufi shrines (pirs, makhdum). Source: unknown, circulated on social media.

and made a province. Since 1847, the British colonial state had administered Sindh as part of the Bombay Presidency. In 1913, two members of the Congress sought to change the situation and demanded a separate province for Sindh. The question became gradually communalized: a new Sindhi Muslim elite entered the political domain in the 1920s and massively supported the creation of a Sindh province. The All-India Muslim League endorsed the demand in 1925 and the Government of India Act of 1935 made it a reality. Although the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat had no direct link with the demand for a separate province, its main initiator was involved in the separation movement.

The Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat, the ancestor of the current Sindh Sayed Association, was different from the AWSM in at least two regards. First, the organization did not adopt a sectarian orientation. It was neither Shia nor Sunni but followed the pattern of caste associations in that it sought to include only Sayyids, and all the Sayyid families of Sindh, with an implicit ethnic bend for Sindhi speakers that became more explicit after independence. Second, although the Anjuman did present itself as non-political, its creation, at least for its main organizer, sought to respond to the political needs of Sindhi Muslims, in contrast to the AWSM's loyalist stance. Getting Sayyids involved was part of a strategy towards broader Muslim political mobilization. Thus, while the AWSM was first and foremost a Shia *anjuman*, the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat was marked by the context of anti-colonial Muslim assertion in India, and in Sindh in particular.

What made both of these groups, despite their differences, name themselves *anjumans* rather than *jami'ats*? A tentative answer could be that the term *anjuman* not only echoed the names of numerous Muslim reformist organizations of the period but more importantly implied a non-confrontational political stance. A reason for the failure of the Anjuman-i Sadat-i Mutalvi in Sindh was perhaps the disconnect between G. M. Sayed's political ambitions and the political quietism of many of the *pīrs* of Sindh. A *jami'at* might have better suited G. M. Sayed's ambitions than an *anjuman*.

Fuzzy community boundaries, clear gatekeeping: maintaining Sayyid distinctiveness in changing environments

In their documents, both the AWSM and the SSA claim to work for 'the community', which clearly defines the scope of their activities to a bounded collective. This collective can be understood, in the first case, as Shia Muslims, and in the second, as Sindhi Sayyids. The explicit statement of their target group reveals the exclusive character of these organizations. However, the claim of representing a certain group often appears inconsistent with the constituency to which the organization, in practice, caters. The tension around community boundaries brings to the fore divisions among Muslims and reveals the implicit notions of social and religious boundaries – sectarian or ethnic – based on which these organizations act. This section also introduces a third Sayyid organization, the All-Kerala Sadath Association.

Caste or religious community? The AWSM's fidelity to the Anjuman model

As mentioned in its very name, the community that the AWSM works for is dual. The organization's name includes an ambiguous tension between a status group, the *sādāt* (or Sayyids), and a religious or sectarian group, the *mominīn*, which in this case means Shia believers. According to Justin Jones, 'the organization's parochial dichotomy of 'sayyids' and 'mominīn' ('followers') distinguished it from the collective 'Muslim' community addressed by Aligarh and served to restrict the organization's membership to Shia sayyid families' (Jones 2009, 893). Moreover, the slogans of the organization use the term '*qaum*', well-noted for its polysemic character, as it may both designate a status or a religious group.⁹

The apparent tension between '*sādāt*' and '*mominīn*', however, does not seem to be a contradiction for the organization. This is what the cover of the commemorative document published by the AWSM on its sixty years suggests.¹⁰ It displays prominently a Quranic verse (17:26), taken from Surah al-Isra, that reads as follows: 'Give unto the kinsman his right, and unto the indigent and the traveller, but do not squander wastefully' (Nasr et al. 2017). The verse invites the believer to engage in charity instead of lavish spending. However, the first part is subject to interpretation. In particular, Shia interpretations tend to read the word 'kinsman' (or, in other translations, 'relative') as synonymous with 'relative of the Prophet'. The kinsman's 'right' (or 'due' in other translations) can be understood as *khums*, a tax dedicated to the descendants of the Prophet, who are not otherwise entitled to other

forms of charity (*zakāt*). The choice of this verse is thus consistent with the AWSM's actual charitable actions. In spite of its professed work for 'the community' of Shias, the AWSM seems in fact to be an organization for Sayyid mutual help, which, optionally, can benefit others. This can also be gathered from the names of the office holders of the organization, whether at the time of its Silver Jubilee in 1937, Diamond Jubilee in 1982, or on its current website.

The AWSM did not see itself as limited in space. Its documents, such as the 1937 Silver Jubilee publication, boast contributions from members across the world, from London to Bombay. If Justin Jones noted the importance of Amroha in the organization's formative years, it seems that its links with Lucknow deepened as it expanded. Indeed, this appears from the list of scholarship recipients since the inception, available on the organization's website. Out of a total 5457 beneficiaries between 1912 and 2020, 1877 were from Lucknow, 314 from Aligarh, and 271 from Amroha (which can be combined with 84 from Naugawan Sadat). The organization remained largely UP-centric: out of 3806 people who became life members, 2148 were from U.P., 470 from New Delhi and 323 from Bihar. However, it also expanded beyond U.P. where there is a notable Urdu-speaking Shia population: several hundred students received scholarships from Hyderabad (365) and Srinagar (168), but very few from West Bengal, Punjab, or South Indian states apart from Andhra Pradesh (the list does not take into account the separation of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana in 2014).

As it expanded, and with the Partition of the subcontinent in 1947, the AWSM split in different autonomous branches. The Pakistan branch retained the full name of the organization. However, the tension between 'sādāt' and 'mominīn' was partially dispensed with by the North American branch of the organization. Although the Anjuman is registered under its full name as a non-profit in the United States, its website has over the years gradually displayed 'Sadat o Momineen' in much smaller font than 'Anjuman Wazifa', to such an extent that its logo sometimes entirely excludes it.¹¹ The North American Anjuman was initiated in 1990 by Shia Sayyids of Pakistani and North Indian origin, but the organization now provides scholarships to Shia students from a variety of countries coming to the United States for higher education. The Anjuman states on its website that it has received the permission (*ijāzah*) from Ayatollah Sistani, a prominent Shia scholar, to collect religious donations meant for Sayyids (*khums*). It indicates that one eligibility criteria for the scholarships is to be a 'practicing Muslim of Jafari faith'. The Anjuman also maintains links with other Shia organizations based in Western countries, such as the Ahl-ul Bait Islamic Mission in the United Kingdom. By moulding itself into a broader internationalized Shia identity, this branch of the Anjuman partially abandoned its South Asian specificities, among which the importance given to descent-based distinctions: almost none of the recipients of the scholarships bear a Sayyid title in their name.

As it maintained itself over the years, the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Momineen has thus remained faithful to the '*anjuman* model': that of a charity for a 'community' understood in religious terms and oriented towards social reform. It expanded much beyond its initial geographical scope and split in different branches but remained politically non-confrontational. In defining the community that it works for, the Anjuman, on the one hand, conflates the religious community and the status group: the implication is that real Shia Muslims are Sayyids and vice-versa. Yet at the same time, the name maintains a distinction between the Sayyids and the followers: the latter can be accepted as faithful devotees but remain apart from the descendants of the Prophet. This tension between the status group 'Sadat' and the religious or sectarian group 'Mominīn' does not seem to pose a problem in the South Asian milieu. This may be due to the context of origin of the Anjuman, Uttar Pradesh, where a large proportion of Shia devotees claim Sayyid status.¹² We may also attribute the non-problematic character of the organization's name to the widespread acceptance of descent-based status distinctions in South Asia. However, in the North American context, which condemns descent-based inequalities, the Anjuman chose to adopt a broader Shia Muslim identity and follow the model of a religious charity.

Ethnicity over Lineage: the SSA from Anjuman to association

In contrast, the Sindh Sayed Association emphasized ethnicity over lineage as it shed the *anjuman* model in favour of becoming an ‘association’. The original organization did not experience much growth. In fact, G. M. Sayed’s *anjuman* barely lasted a few sessions, and was in any case limited to one particular lineage in the region of Sindh. More than fifty years later, when a group of Sayyids decided to establish the Sindh Sayed Association in 1981, they saw themselves as the continuators of G. M. Sayed and sought his permission for the ‘revival’ of the organization. Despite the SSA’s claim to be the heir of the original *anjuman*, there is in fact little connection, and few commonalities, between the two (Qazi 2017, 8).

Indeed, there was no attempt to adopt the original *anjuman*’s model. The SSA explicitly depicts itself as an organization that aims to bring Sayyids on one platform for the purpose of mutual solidarity: it provides scholarships, organizes medical camps, and facilitates marriages among Sindhi Sayyids – the latter being a major issue, as many Sindhi Sayyid families now struggle to find suitable marriage partners for their daughters.¹³ By clearly stating its openness to all Sindhi Sayyids, and working actively to register at least one member in each Sayyid family, the SSA apparently brought the Mutalvi and Lakyari lineages equally on board. However, its current leader is from the Mutalvi *sādāt* and hosts the annual convention in his farmhouse near Matiari. Moreover, one important branch of the Lakyari, the Rashdi *sādāt*, seems less represented in the organization – perhaps because the Rashdis count among themselves the most powerful spiritual figure of Sindh, Pir Pagaro, whose religious network hardly needs an organization like the SSA.¹⁴ I received contradictory statements on the Lakyari *sādāt*: while some thought that they had their own community organization and merged it with the SSA, others claim that it still exists separately.

The Sindh Sayed Association, however, makes it clear that it does not cater to all the Sayyids of Sindh, but rather, to Sindhi-speaking Sayyids. The organization entertains no contacts with Urdu-speaking (commonly called Muhajir) Sayyids who migrated into the province after 1947, some of whom, like the Sadat-i Amroha, have their own *anjuman* in Karachi. The SSA has no official links with the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Momineen of Pakistan. In this sense, the SSA is ethnically exclusive – a characteristic we might see as consistent with G. M. Sayed’s nationalist politics.

In spite of its official apolitical stance, the SSA seems to aspire to do what many caste associations do: act as a political lobby. The SSA thus keeps track of the elected representatives who are Sayyid and to whom members of the community could appeal to. For instance, after the 2013 general elections, the Karachi division of the SSA congratulated in its newsletter the Sayyid politicians of Sindh elected to the National Assembly.¹⁵ In my discussions with one of the grandsons of G. M. Sayed, he recalled how he used to be regularly invited to the annual meeting of the SSA and asked to deliver a speech on stage. According to him, he once openly condemned the ‘*sayyid-parastī*’ that the organization sought to promote in politics, by inciting its members to vote for a Sayyid candidate when possible. Instead, while he did not necessarily disagree with the need to maintain a community organization for collective welfare (*falāh-o-bahbūd*), he made a case for principled politics, in which caste, lineage, community, or religion should not interfere. He told me not to have ever spoken again in the meetings of the SSA after this event.

Other kinds of disagreements exist within the organization. In recent years, in particular, several members have started questioning the use of funds by the leader, who was at some point made ‘life president’ (*tā-hayāt sadar*). At the 2019 annual convention, these members spectacularly interrupted the president’s final speech, accusing him of lying and embezzling funds. They also managed to amend the statutes of the organization to ensure that there would never be another life-long president after the current person passes away.

The Sindh Sayed Association thus clearly moved away from the *anjuman* model of quiet, non-confrontational, non-political community charity. Although it does engage in welfare activities, its ambitions more explicitly include building a network of political influence that can be mobilized in case of need. Its model thus better corresponds to that of caste associations. Its ethnic bias that excludes

Urdu-speaking (Muhajir) Sayyids, however, shows that caste primarily operates within a regionally specific cultural system. This also points to the fact that building caste-clusters beyond regional and linguistic boundaries requires significant political work, which, in this case, the Sindhi Sayyids are not willing to engage into. Instead, the organization prefers to stress ethnicity over lineage – and in this it is indeed faithful to G. M. Sayed's politics.

Keeping the usurpers out: the Sayyid association of Kerala

The cases of the AWSM and the SSA can be contrasted with that of a recent Sayyid organization in northern Kerala, the All-Kerala Sadath Association (AKSA). AKSA chose to name itself as an association. It was founded in 2006 at a time when the term *anjuman* had long lost currency for new organizations, except perhaps for the management of Shia rituals. Moreover, the *anjuman* model has not been as important in the social environment of Kerala as for socio-religious reform in late nineteenth-century North India. As this section further shows, this confirms the regional and cultural limitation of status and caste networks.

The organization's office holders state that the primary goal behind its creation was to network all the Sayyids of Kerala.¹⁶ Apart from their geographical spread across the state, the Sayyids of Kerala are divided according to their origins, which either run through Central Asia (Bukhari) or directly hail from the Arabian Peninsula (the Hadramawt region of Yemen in particular). The latter group is further subdivided in numerous *qabilas*, an Arabic word generally translated as tribe but here better understood as lineage.¹⁷ Belonging to a *qabila* designated by an Arabic name indicating origins in Hadramawt clearly set the Sayyids apart from the other Muslims of Kerala deemed to descend from mixed marriages and local conversions – the Mappilas, Ossans, and Pusalans (Saidalavi 2017). AKSA places great importance on maintaining an active connection to the Arabian Peninsula – it has a branch in the UAE – something facilitated by the large diaspora from Kerala in the Gulf countries. AKSA claims to bring all the *qabilas* together. Thus, after the setting up of a committee and a first meeting with various Sayyid personalities of Kerala, AKSA actually came about at a large convention in Calicut (Kozhikode), the main city of Kerala's Malabar region, in which all the *qabilas* were represented. However, the 2006 convention was the only general meeting across *qabilas* and the organization has since then preferred to work at the level of each lineage.

By setting up a state-level Sayyid network, the organization acts as gatekeeper, both in religious (or sectarian) orientation and in social status. When I probed the general secretary about the need for such a network of Sayyids, I received a rather elusive response that highlighted the importance of knowing one another in order to extend help to each other. Another reason invoked was the need to prevent the decay in morality and spirituality that Sayyids, being part of society, were deemed to be experiencing. The association thus seeks to remedy this problem by raising awareness in the networks of the respective *qabilas* about the need to preserve morality and spirituality. The subtext of this statement is the will to preserve the traditional Islamic religious practices centred on the devotion to saints, in the face of reformist movements in Kerala – the Salafi Nadwatul Mujahidin Kerala (NMK) and the Jamaat-i Islami.¹⁸ AKSA is very careful to include members of both factions of the 'traditionalist' Samastha (EK and AP) and its members insist that it makes no difference in the organization. The organization's pro-Samastha stance appears not only in its insistence on the celebration of Prophet Muhammad's birthday, but more broadly in 'sectarian gatekeeping': members of the organization must be followers of one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence (*mazhab*). This excludes not only Shia Muslims but also NMK followers, who do not follow any of the four schools. Unlike followers of the Samastha, Sayyids who adhere to the NMK do not add the title 'Thangal' to their name to mark their refusal to perpetuate descent-based status distinctions.

The gatekeeping role of AKSA is thus not only sectarian but also pertains to social hierarchy. Indeed, the 'decay in morality' that AKSA deplors may well also include a diminished reverence for Sayyids. When I asked the general secretary whether AKSA had a formal membership system,

the justification for not having one came in strangely diplomatic terms: 'We have thought of putting in place a formal membership, but we fear it may bring controversy.'¹⁹ A formal membership system would force the organization to explicitly exclude people who claim to be Sayyids and are popularly recognized as 'Thangal' in Kerala, but whom the AKSA organizers, in their opinion, know to be usurpers. In other words, certain people are widely reputed to be Thangal but not recognized as real descendants of the Prophet by the AKSA members. However, because some of these individuals are influential, gatekeeping must remain diplomatic: AKSA does not invite them to its events, but neither does it formally declare their exclusion.

Despite its ambition to unite all pro-Samastha Sunni Sayyids of Kerala, AKSA is not immune to internal dissension. In fact, if one were to look online for the association, one would be more likely to find information about a splinter group, the All-Qabeela Sadath Association (AQSA).²⁰ Not much seems to distinguish AQSA from AKSA. The associational model appears similar: the organization explicitly works for Sayyid families, as it seeks the 'spiritual uplift and materialistic progress of SAYYIDS and their respective families', as well as to 'secure all the rights and benefits that are due to the individuals who belong to the SAYYID FAMILIES from around the state of Kerala'. Apart from supporting Sayyids, the organization's activities include the preservation of religious traditions (with an insistence on the celebration of Milad un-Nabi), educational support, dispute resolution, and a matrimonial bureau to 'maintain healthy marital relations'. AQSA also describes its charitable activities as extending to the 'citizens of the state of Kerala (irrespective of their genealogical origin)', through orphan protection and medical provisions. The symbolic and moral engagement also goes beyond Sayyids, as the organizations proclaims to work towards the unity and integrity of the country, for inter-religious harmony, and against 'immoral traffic and social injustice'. However, unlike AKSA, the splinter group AQSA displays its connection with the most powerful Sayyid family of Kerala, the Shihabuddin family of Panakkad. The website indeed shows AQSA's leader, a member of the Shihabuddin lineage from Thirurkad, standing next to Munavvar Ali Shihab Thangal, the rising figure of the family that controls the Indian Union Muslim League.²¹

Interestingly, AQSA displays its name in Arabic: *Jami'ah al-Sadat wa al-Ashraf*, or gathering of the Sayyids and Ashraf. Moreover, AQSA's website includes a slogan that expresses emphatically the attachment to Sayyids: 'MAS: Muhibul Ashraf wal Sadath' (the lovers of Ashraf and Sadat). In this context, the term *ashraf* is a synonym for Sayyids, as in the Arabian Peninsula. Its meaning is different from what it denotes in North India – the socially privileged Muslims who claim foreign ancestry.

Although AQSA equates the English term 'association' with the Arabic *jami'ah*, its meaning differs from the North Indian *jami'at* through which various marginalized Muslim caste groups asserted themselves from the 1920s onwards. While the latter find in the *jami'at* an associational form that serves their political assertion, AQSA and AKSA take greater inspiration from Arab traditions of tribal relations – an imaginary that Kerala Sayyids cultivate, but that is also an actual and active relation.²² Because they keep those deemed usurpers of the Sayyid status out and emphasize both Arab origins and the active maintenance of links with Hadramawt, the associations of the Kerala Sayyids mainly act as gatekeeping networks rather than as vehicles for political assertion or as community charities.

Concluding remarks

Claiming descent from Prophet Muhammad had long been the sole purview of genealogical narratives (*ilm al-nasab*), until Sayyids began creating organizations based on common social status in the early twentieth century. Informed by new forms of public engagement driven by the notions of service and reform, Sayyid organizations had to define the population they catered to in practice. The activities of Sayyid organizations thus work towards community preservation. By defining the population they cater to, they reveal, sometimes explicitly, often tacitly, conceptions of

distinctiveness and exclusionary fault lines among Sayyids – descendants vs believers, lineage vs ethnicity, real claimants vs usurpers. Thus, the charity activities of the Anjuman Wazifa-i Sadat o Mominin define a religious community – the Shia – in tension with the status community of the Sayyid. The Anjuman does not engage in politics or community representation, yet is a form of a de facto caste association because of its almost exclusively Sayyid composition. By stressing the sectarian dimension, it implicitly refuses to acknowledge the claims to Sayyid-ness of Sunni Muslims. On the other hand, the Anjuman-i Mutalvi Sadat and the Sindh Sayed Association never pretended to be anything other than organizations of and for the Sayyids. As a result of this emphasis on social status or caste, they were exclusive not from the sectarian, but from the ethnic point of view. In Kerala, the All-Kerala Sadath Association and its rival All-Qabeela Sadath Association act as status and sectarian gatekeepers that exclude those deemed false claimants to the Sayyid status while maintaining an active link with Arabian tribal traditions as a source of distinction. This comparison suggests that these three organizations formalize social boundaries to preserve the preeminence of the Sayyid status in ways that are different according to social and historical conditions. Moreover, these organizations also illustrate the way Muslims may frame practices of social distinction in an Islamic language centred on piety (*taqwā*) or service (*khidmat*).

The comparison also helps us tentatively delineate three organizational ideal types for South Asian Muslims when they rely on caste or social status for public engagement. First, the *anjuman* can be defined as a non-confrontational and reform-oriented religious community organization. The fact that the AWSM and the ASM were not called *jami'at* is not a coincidence: the *anjuman* in North India may be understood as the preferred associational model of the Ashraf, particularly of the Shia Sayyids, who assume for themselves a leadership role in religious and collective affairs. By contrast, the *jami'at* works mainly as a vehicle for collective political assertion and is therefore preferred by marginalized Muslim caste groups. The ambition to represent a caste group in the public sphere, however, does not prevent *jami'ats* from also engaging in charity activities similar to that of *anjuman*. Finally, the association sheds the 'traditional' heritage that both the *anjuman* and *jami'at* convey and can therefore act as a gatekeeping network – either along ethnic lines like the SSA, or social and sectarian like AKSA. These organizational models may overlap in practice and do not exhaust the range of associational forms that Muslim caste groups draw upon – the *sabhā* and *panchāyat* could be added to the list, although they are not rooted in the Islamic tradition. This author hopes that subsequent research may further document the diversity of Muslim associational life that allows Muslims to reproduce social hierarchies even as they invoke Islam's egalitarian ideal.

Notes

1. See for instance Ahmed (2023) in this special section on the Jamiat-ur Rayeen.
2. About the social position of Sayyids beyond South Asia, see notably Morimoto (2012) and Amoretti (1999).
3. See the online presentation of the two founders: https://www.wazifaesadat.in/uploads/1514194500_9.jpg. The organizations' website is accessible at the following URL: <https://wazifaesadat.in/> (accessed on 28 June 2023).
4. Some of the early documents of the organization may have been lost because it did not have permanent headquarters until the mid-1980s. According to an online document, Bashir Hussain Zaidi, then president of the AWSM, proposed at the annual convention held in Amroha in 1985 to establish a permanent office for the organization. Until then, the association's office was located at the president's house, so that no particular group would be able to dominate the organization.
5. Others have argued that the moral norms, or *adab*, guiding relations between masters and servants in Sayyid households gradually took on the form of hierarchical caste relations in the late nineteenth century. See Paiker (2022).
6. In South Asia, written works and popular knowledge often associate representative democracy with morally condemnable acts, from the self-serving attitude of politicians to the colonial 'divide and rule' policy. Among Muslim thinkers, critiques of democracy include poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal's or Maulana Maududi's writings. In a different context, the anthropologist Jon Spencer noted how people in Sri Lanka dissociated the 'national question' from 'the messy amorality of politics' (Spencer 2008).

7. The Sindh Zamindar Association aimed to voice the interests of the landholders to the government on legislation related to agriculture. It was part of a growing number of political organizations founded and led by Muslims in Sindh. For more on the emergence of Muslim political organizations in Sindh, see for instance Khuhro (1982).
8. Both Mutalvi and Lakyari Sayyids are Kazmi (or Musavi) *sādāt* who claim descent from the seventh Shia imam Musa Kazim. Although other lineages exist in Sindh, the overwhelming majority of the Sindhi Sayyids belong to these two lineages.
9. *Qaum* may also mean national or ethnic community, but this usage is not directly relevant to our case.
10. The cover is available on the website of the AWSM: https://www.wazifaesadat.in/uploads/1514198158_9.jpg (last accessed on 20 July 2023).
11. The North American Anjuman's website can be consulted at: <https://www.anjumanwazifa.org/> (last accessed on 20 July 2023).
12. Justin Jones (2011, 7) thus states that 'most north Indian Shia communities conceived themselves as being of *sayyid* genealogy'.
13. I was told that because Sayyid men now increasingly marry outside the community, many women stay unmarried, since they are not allowed to marry 'below their rank'. To respond to this problem, the Karachi branch of the SSA created a special website for Sindhi Sayyid families to advertise their need for a suitable groom for their daughters.
14. On Pir Pagaro and his followers called the Hurs, see Ansari (1992).
15. See the June newsletter of Karachi division of the SSA: <http://ssakd.blogspot.com/2013/07/news-letter-june-2013.html> (last accessed 20 July 2023).
16. Personal interview with Saboor Thangal, AKSA general secretary, Karanthur, Kerala, India, 28 October 2021.
17. Most of the Sayyids from Kerala trace their origins to the Hadramawt region of the Arabian peninsula (Dale 1997). Some of the most prominent *qabilas* are the Bafaky, Shihabuddin, Ba-Hassan, Aidrusi, Jifri, Jamiluledi.
18. The 'traditional' Islam of Kerala is represented by the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama (more commonly known as Samastha), subdivided in two factions (EK and AP) because of political, not theological, differences. The term 'traditional' is misleading in the sense that the Samastha is also engaged in social and religious reform. The term mainly designates the will to preserve the reverence for saints, the centrality of saints' mausoleums in religious practices, and the celebration of the Prophet's birthday. For more on religious reform in Kerala, see Osella and Osella (2008; 2013).
19. Personal interview with Saboor Thangal, AKSA general secretary, Karanthur, Kerala, India, 28 October 2021.
20. According to AKSA general secretary Saboor Thangal, a person expelled from AKSA set up AQSA. AQSA's website was active between 2012 and 2020 but has been taken down. It remains consultable on the internet archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200204060855/http://www.aqsa.org.in/> (last accessed on 20 July 2023).
21. The Shihabuddin family of Panakkad has been leading the Indian Union Muslim League since 1973.
22. This link is well-described in Ho (2006). During my visit to Panakkad, Munavvar Ali Shihab Thangal showed me a large photograph of the 2018 Shihabuddin reunion.

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