

*ashraf* is an Arabic plural noun, those who are *sharif*, 'eminent or exalted'. In nineteenth century British India, this became a category of censuses and ethnographic descriptions referring to a fixed, 'caste'-like set meant to encompass higher status patrilineal groups of Muslims, comparable to Hindu twice-born *varna* and the emerging concept of 'Aryan', Indians whose higher status could be attributed to 'foreign' ancestry, often in the distant past. British social surveys purported to locate and count the '*ashraf*' and attribute to them a range of stereotypic characteristics. During the same period, however, the usage of the adjective *sharif* and the alternative plural noun *shurafa* took on an increasingly flexible usage of genteel respectability that referred at least as much to comportment and literary education as to descent and frequently applied to non-Muslims as well as Muslims. As an indication of status attributions, both words, *ashraf* and *sharif*, were matters of controversy and negotiation, as in marriage arrangements, legal jurisdiction, or access to government patronage.

More generally throughout the Muslim world, the term *sharif* is a term of respect that Muslims attach to the names of sacred places, texts or objects, such as Mecca and the Qur'an. In the Arabic Middle East, *sharif* is an honorific for descendants of the Prophet Muhammad or his family, though the criteria for this designation differ according to place and religious interpretation.<sup>1</sup> In India, Iran and Central Asia, however, the word *sharif* extended to wider categories of respectability; descendants of the Prophet were called *sayyid*.

It was probably not until the nineteenth century that the distinction between high status Muslims and those of lower status emerged into a formal system of classification supposedly based on whether a group could claim ancestry outside India. By this definition the *ashraf* consisted of four birth-defined strata, supposedly in descending order of status:

- 1) Sayyid, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, usually claiming patrilineal descent from his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali;
- 2) Shaikh, descendants of the companions of the prophet, that is, also of Arab origin, but also used as a term for sufi religious figures and extended more widely to people who have converted to Islam, perhaps in association with their sufi preceptors;
- 3) Mughal, which might refer to Chagatay Turks or more broadly to people of Central Asian and even Irani background who were associated with the Timurid dynasty; and
- 4) Pathan, people descended from Afghan migrants to India.

Other Muslims were classified on the basis of indigenous Indian origin, often sharing the caste designations of their Hindu ancestors. Starting in 1847, British census operations set about locating and counting the population according to these ranked divisions.<sup>2</sup>

The origins of this peculiarly South Asian construction of what it means to be among the *ashraf* are unclear. Before the nineteenth century there were various terms among Muslims in India to distinguish people with aristocratic, religious or literary claims to deference from the broader society of commoners. Al-Biruni, writing in the earliest phase of Muslim rule in India in the early eleventh century, noted the similarity between Indian concepts of *varna* and the stratified social theory of Sassanian Iran. 'We Muslims, of course, stand entirely on the other side of the question, considering all men as equal except in piety . . .'<sup>3</sup> Far more common, however, in the social theory associated with Muslim rule was the sharp distinction between the *ashraf*, 'respectable', and the *arazil*, 'vulgar'.<sup>4</sup> There were also numerous ethnic designations

that played a role in determining the composition of military units, the distribution of administrative offices, and the formation of factions. Muslims in the Mughal ruling class were often categorized broadly as Turani, Irani, Afghan and Hindustani; Hindus included Rajputs, Kayasths, Khatri, Marathas and others. Such designations had, in turn, subdivisions based on geographical origins, descent, religious affiliation and language.<sup>5</sup>

Early in the nineteenth century, probably about 1815, Mirza Muhammad Hassan Qatil wrote about the four *firqa* or classes of the *ashraf*, Sayyids, Shaikhs, Mughals and Pathans, by way of pointing out just how insecure such designations were. Those who pursued crafts or businesses in the bazaars, making and selling perfume or bread, caring for elephants, for example, could not be included among the *shurafa*; whatever their ancestry, they were considered *paji*, 'contemptible', not worthy of social intercourse with people of greater wealth and status.<sup>6</sup> Qatil was himself a convert to Islam, accepted at least by some as a Mughal, hence the title 'Mirza'. For the poet Mirza Ghalib, however, he was just Dilvali Singh, the *khatri* of Faridabad.<sup>7</sup>

In 1832, the *Qanoon-i Islam or the Customs of the Mussalmans of India*, written by Jaffur Shurreef in Dakhani Urdu at the behest of a British physician, G.A. Hercklots, but only published in English, presented all Muslims within the framework of this four-fold division, indicated in honorifics attached to their names, while noting that there were marriages that crossed such boundaries.<sup>8</sup> In *Rasum-i Hind*, a popular text book compiled by Master Pyare Lal for the Punjab Department of Public Instruction and published in 1862, there is an elaborate explication of the four fold division and further subdivisions, referred to as *nasl*, 'lineage or pedigree': Mughals are said to be descendants of the Biblical Noah; ancestors of the Pathans were Israelites from the time of Solomon. Frequently reprinted for use in the schools, this text was also part of the

vernacular training in Urdu for British military and administrators.<sup>9</sup>

Left out of this categorization were patrilineal descendants of converts to Islam, even prominent Rajput families who otherwise commanded high social status. More clearly excluded were the large majority of Muslim peasants and artisans that British social analysis lumped into the pejorative category, *ajlaf*, from *jalaf* or *jilf*, meaning 'base or vile': 'the low Muhammadan rabble', and 'the bigoted *julaha*', 'weaver', who the British associated with rebellion and disorder.<sup>10</sup> It was noted in *Rasum-i Hind* and the census reports that the term *shaikh* was commonly extended to male converts and their descendants who could claim no Arab ancestry. British accounts frequently quoted a Persian saying that may in fact have arisen in response to their inquiries: 'The first year I was a butcher, the next a Shaikh; this year, if the prices fall, I shall become a Sayyid'.<sup>11</sup> Among Muslims, descent was only one criterion among others in claims and attributions of social status. Nor did the concept of *sharafat*, respectability, create a single unit of social solidarity that could override other sorts of social division based on kinship, locality, religious affiliation, ideology or economic interest.

Distinctions between high and low status Muslims were too variable to fit these census demarcations. Sayyid and Shaikh, as well as Mirza for Mughal, and Khan for Pathan, could be attached to a person's name as a title of address, but these were imperfect indications of social status. Although social status and previous kinship ties were serious considerations, among others, in matrimonial alliances, Muslim social groups were not sufficiently endogamous or socially exclusive for most British definitions of caste, particularly within the framework of a four-fold concept of *ashraf* and its differentiation from *ajlaf*.<sup>12</sup>

Writing about pre-colonial Bengal, Richard Eaton claims that *ashraf* status based on 'Arab, Central Asian or Afghan origin' is not merely a colonial construction but has deeper historical roots. He cites a late fifteenth century Bengali text by Vipra Das that mentions the

Sayyids, Mughals and Pathans of Satgaon.<sup>13</sup> The secondary source from which Eaton derives this information, however, casts doubt on the authenticity of the text, specifically whether terms like Mughal (actually Mongol in the Bengali quotation) or Pathan could have been used in 1495, the date of the poem, and notes that the other categories in the same verse, *makhдум*, *Sayyid*, *mulla* and *qazi* refer to piety and learning, not descent.<sup>14</sup> Another source that Eaton uses is the late sixteenth century Bengali poet Mukundarm who lists fifteen Muslim occupational groups using the term *jati*, which Eaton characterizes as endogamous and 'socially distinct from the *ashraf*.'<sup>15</sup> But again, the secondary source from which Eaton derives this information does not warrant such explicit characterizations of these social categories with respect to social status or marriage practices.<sup>16</sup> Eaton furthermore offers evidence that 'the *ashraf* perspective on Bengali culture' was as condescending as the colonial British, but he probably overemphasizes the significance of descent as opposed to language and cultural style. Derogatory and satirical remarks about other places and categories of people, not least Turanis and Afghans, were certainly widespread in Mughal society, but it would be an unwarranted leap to pick out a few nasty quotations as evidence of deep structural principles.<sup>17</sup>

More important than descent was the quality of *sharafat*, respectability, which was a matter of cultural style associated with the heritage of the Mughal court, in dress, manners, aesthetics, and above all, language and literature. Elaborate politeness formulas, familiarity with Persian and Urdu literary conventions, the art of elegant conversation, all of these marked a person as *sharif*.<sup>18</sup> Though rooted in Islamic ethical traditions, *akhlaq*, the quality of *sharafat* included many Hindus, Sikhs and even Europeans who were in a position to partake of courtly society or to emulate it and excluded the overwhelming majority of Muslims. In the course of the eighteenth century it came to characterize a particular linguistic register of Urdu, which took on the literary heritage of Mughal Persian as the mark of cosmopolitan cultivation.<sup>19</sup> But *sharafat*

could continue into later times and carry over into other languages, including Bengali, as depicted, for example, in Satyajit Ray's 1958 film *Jalsaghar* (The Music Room).

By the late nineteenth century, British census and ethnographic surveys turned the concept of *ashraf* status into a matter of public controversy and stimulated new forms of social identity. Particularly in Bengal, there emerged among Muslims a demand to be counted as Sayyid, Shaikh, Mughal or Pathan, the numbers increasing dramatically from census to census. The 1872 Bengal Census counted about a quarter of a million Muslims who claimed *ashraf* status out of a total Muslim population of over 17 and a half million. By 1901, 19 and a half million Muslims were counted as Shaikhs, out of a total Bengali Muslim population of twenty-one and a half million.<sup>20</sup> Claiming high status for virtually all Muslims served as a means to assert full recognition and enfranchisement as Muslims in the face of the challenges of colonial rule and the rise of nationalist movements. Addressing the Muslim world at large, the poet Shaikh Muhammad Iqbal, descendant of Kashmiri pandits, declared in 1913, 'You may be a Sayyid, you may be a Mirza, you may be an Afghan, whatever you may be, speak out: are you also a Muslim?'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. van Arendonk, revised by W.A. Graham, 'Sharif', *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. IX, fasc.

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153-54 (Leiden, 1996), pp. 329-337.

2. For example, A.A. Roberts, 'Population of Delhie and its suburbs', July 18, 1847, in *Selections from the Records of Government, North-Western Provinces*, No. XIII, pp. 152-57

<sup>3</sup> *Alberuni's India*, tr. Edward C. Sachau (London, 1910), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Baqir Najm-i Sani, *Advice on the Art of Governance*, ed. and tr. Sajida Sultana Alvi (Albany, 1989), pp. 20-21, 170.

5. M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966), pp. 14-33.

6. Mirza Muhammad Hassan Qatil, *Haft Tamasha* (Lucknow, 1875), p. 117 [Persian]; discussed in Sudipto Sen, *Empire of Free Trade* (Philadelphia, 1998), p. 29.

7. Altaf Hussain Hali, *Yadgar-e Ghalib*, reprint ed. (Lahore, 1963), p. 29 [Urdu].

8. (London, 1831), pp. 5-10.

9. Reprint ed. Lahore, 1961.

10. Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990), pp. 66-108.

11. E.A.H. Blunt, *The Caste System of Northern India*, reprint ed. (Delhi, 1969), p. 184.

<sup>12</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, 'The Ashraf-Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social Structure in India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 3 (1966), pp. 268-78; idem, ed. *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (Delhi, 1973).

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13. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley, 1993), pp. 97-103. A more explicit example of reading colonial ethnography back into the past is in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983), p. 59. See also J.R.I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 69-91.

14. Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chittagong, 1985), pp. 193-94.

15. Eaton, p. 101.

16. Edward C. Dimock, Jr. and Ronald B. Inden, 'The City in Pre-British Bengal' in Dimock, *The Sound of Silent Guns and Other Essays* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 121-25.

17. Eaton, pp. 167-71; cf. Athar Ali, pp. 18, 20-21; for a compendium of ethnic slurs and stereotypes, see Muhammad Umar, *Muslim Society in Northern India During the Eighteenth Century* (Aligarh, 1998), pp. 1-37.

<sup>18</sup> David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, 1978), pp. 29-30, 35-56. See also, J.F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers', in Barbara Daly Metcalf, ed. *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: 1984), pp. 221-240.

<sup>19</sup> Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam, c. 1200-1800* (Delhi, 2004), pp. 115-140, 180-185.

20. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: A Quest for Identity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Delhi, 1988), p. 115. 29-30,

<sup>21</sup> 'Jawab-e Shikwa', *Kulliyat-e Iqbal* [Urdu] (Lahore, 1973), p. 203.