

## Qawm

Faisal Devji

The “Muslim community” emerges during the colonial period as a new kind of sociological category. This emergence is linked to the designs and exigencies of British rule in India, including its deployment of new forms of classification like the census. More interesting, however, is the way in which colonial designs and exigencies provide Muslims the opportunity to re-define themselves. Perhaps the most important such definition of the “Muslim community” is that of the “modernist” or “reformist” gentlemen gathered in the Aligarh Movement. Called a *qawm* or nation, this new community was painted in the colors of colonial violation by the Aligarhists, who built their program of modernity and reform upon the ground of this seduction as a problem. More than simple conquest, the intellectual and political seduction of colonial rule posed for these men a problem of national authenticity. But like a woman the nation was not only someone seduced, she was also seductive, although her history of violation made this status, too, problematic. How was the nation to be valued? What was she or it worth? These questions, which locate the *qawm* within a veritable erotic of power, mark the directions in which this essay proceeds.

I want to begin with a definition of Muslim nationality by the founder of the Aligarh Movement, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and proceed to examine the landscape in which it was located:

But the word *qawm* (nation) is such that it is necessary to reflect on its meanings to a certain degree. For a length of time whose beginning is prior even to the historical period, nations were accounted for by descent from a certain ancestor or by residence in a certain country (*mulk*). Muhammad, the

undisputed Prophet of God (you are my father and mother, O Prophet of God!), demolished this national differentiation, which was only a worldly one, and founded a spiritual (*ruhani*) national relationship that was established on the firm foundation of (the credo): ‘There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Prophet of God’. All national genealogies (*silsile*), all national relationships (*rishte*), everything was annihilated before this spiritual relation, and a new spiritual, indeed divine, national relationship was raised up. Islam doesn’t ask anyone if he is Turk or Tajik, if he is an inhabitant of Africa or Arabia, if he is a resident of China or Tibet, if he was born in Punjab or (gangetic) India (*Hindustan*), if he is black or white. On the contrary, whoever grasped firmly this binding rope of monotheism became (a member of) one nation, indeed the son of a spiritual father. Because God has said, “The faithful are brothers, so close the gaps between brothers for God’s blessing”. Who is that person who does not know two brothers as the son(s) of a single father? So when God Himself has announced all Muslims to be brothers, then what doubt can there be that we are all the offspring of one spiritual father?<sup>1</sup>

This passage, from a speech made at Ludhiana on the twenty-third of January 1884, is remarkable in several respects. Apart from the interesting fact that Sir Sayyid felt it necessary to define a Muslim collectivity in the first place, we should note that he calls it a *qawm* rather than one of the terms, *ummat* or *millat*, used for specifically religious groupings that were localizable neither in time nor in space: groups that were not, in other words, communities in the modern sense. The word *qawm*, of course, had been used in reference to religious groups before, but not in any national sense, which is to say any sense in which a natural belonging together was implied. So in the introduction to his translation of the *Upanishads*, the seventeenth-century Mughal prince Dara Shukuh typically describes Hindus and Muslims both as *qawms*, referring thus to groups of adepts rather than to populations as such.<sup>2</sup> In other words the tribal or genealogical origins of the word are translated here into a notion of group specialization, which is why Dara uses *qawm* and *jamat*, congregation, interchangeably, describing in this way specialized associations of learning rather than simply groups of people identifiable by their descent or appearance, beliefs or practices.<sup>3</sup> And while our prince might have been exceptional in the width of his religious or intellectual sympathies, his language belonged entirely to the

Muslim scholarship of his time, in terms of which religion was not the given of a population, but a choice for which people could be held responsible individually and collectively.

Dara Shukuh's religious use of the word *qawm*, however, was derived metaphorically from its more standard genealogical usage, which also appears in his introduction to the *Upanishads*, when he both quotes and paraphrases quranic passages stating that there was neither an *ummat*, an ecumene, nor a *qawm*, a descent group, to which revelation had not been vouchsafed.<sup>4</sup> And it is this latter meaning of *qawm*, familiar from its Mughal usage in the description of groups like the Iranis, Afghans and Rajputs, that Sayyid Ahmad Khan simultaneously relies upon and questions when trying to think a Muslim collectivity in colonial India. In view of the fact that he is opposing narrow ties of blood and land in the quotation above, for instance, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's use of *qawm*, which suggests a kind of natural belonging together, is more than curious. It is as if he is trying to retain some empty notion of a genealogical or filiative identity in the affiliative polity he has created. Indeed this might also explain Sir Sayyid's odd, Christian invocation of God-the-Father as a focus for Muslim identity; replacing one form of genealogical filiation with another.

But the word *qawm* is not simply atavistic, it uses the language of filiation to suppress Muslim difference. So rank is the glaring omission in Sir Sayyid's list of social differences abolished by Islam. And this means not only that the north Indian *shurafa* or gentry attempted in this way to coerce lower-standing Muslims into a polity led by them, but also that they allowed the distinct status of the old landed aristocracy or *umara* to fall into abeyance. Indeed the nation was nothing more than an effort to universalize genteel or *sharif* values as Muslim ones, something that could only be done by extirpating the lure of the nobility from the hearts of the gentry itself. So the Aligarhist poet and biographer Altaf Husayn Hali, in his long narrative poem on the *Flow and Ebb of Islam*<sup>5</sup>,

something like an extended Muslim version of Arnold's *Dover Beach*, and perhaps the most popular Urdu poetic work of the nineteenth century, blames Muslim decadence on aristocratic values, and warns the younger generation against their seductive power.<sup>6</sup>

Rank is not the only division obscured by Sayyid Ahmad Khan's invention of a united *qawm*, so is region, for the only specifically Indian divide Islam is said to overcome is that between Punjab and Hindustan. Sir Sayyid, in other words, while he speaks in terms of "the Muslims," means only "the gentle-born north Indian Muslims," thus excluding all others from consideration. Indeed it is here that the restrictive word *qawm* assumes its full significance, as a finally ethnic polity of north Indian Muslims claiming foreign descent, which has arrogated the whole of Islam for itself. But it is important to remember again that this restriction was deliberately played down, something which ended up making the nation ambiguous. Thus Sir Sayyid, in a speech made in December of 1883 to the Islamic Association of Rae Bareilly, draws a comparison between the inclusive religious term *ummat* and the exclusive ethnic *qawm*; a comparison which suggests that the two are equivalent, but only by linking them, significantly, through filiation. In other words the term *qawm* is allowed to stand as distinct even when it is coupled with an *ummat* that it can in fact relate to only genealogically. It remains, therefore, uncertain:

My ancestor, the pride of the world's beings, Muhammad Mustafa (may God's peace be upon him), had in his last moments the utterance "my *ummat*, my *ummat*" on his blessed lips. Although I am among the descendants of that reverend sir, for which I am without doubt proud, I, too, am part of his community (*ummat*). My wish is this, that in my last moments the utterance should be on my lips: "my *qawm*, my *qawm*."<sup>7</sup>

In spite of his attempts to suppress Muslim difference within an ambiguously filiative terminology, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's use of the word *qawm* at last betrays its genealogical

associations by its genteel composition. But this exclusivity by the same token implies a parochialism as well, for the term *qawm* in the nineteenth century can obscure only local differences and is unable to extend *sharif* hegemony outside Upper India. This will be its undoing.

Sir Sayyid's nation is also absolutist in that it recognizes no Muslim politics apart from or outside itself, and apparently maintains no formal relations with any other kind of *qawm* either. Whereas in the Mughal empire, then, different polities, including *qawms* like the Afghans, Iranis, Turanis and Rajputs, were said to interact with one another through the mediation of the emperor,<sup>8</sup> by the middle of the nineteenth century most of the Muslim ones had been collapsed into a single *qawm* (classically made up of Sayyids, Shaykhs, Mughals, and Pathans), and no Mughal empire existed in which it could interact with other such groups. Moreover, the very formation of this nation from two religious categories (Sayyids being descendants of the Prophet and Shaykhs descendants of his companions) and two ethnic ones (Mughals being Chagatay Turk by ancestry and Pathans Afghan), made it into a kind of hybrid that redefined the concept of nationhood altogether. The new *qawm*, then, was neither completely religious-affiliative nor entirely ethnic-filiative, but put together two formerly incommensurable categories to emerge as a nation in a peculiarly modern sense. Which is to say a group that could not belong in an old fashioned empire as a *qawm* like any other, but one that constituted itself as an entity both unique and absolute. And this was done precisely by abstracting the terms Sayyid and Shaykh from the ethnic *qawms* to which they had been predicated and setting them up as autonomous beings against two traditional nations, as if to subvert the old aristocratic and monarchical politics of these latter while retaining their genealogical principle in the name of an affiliative religion. Although this fragmentation of the old order was largely due to the establishment of the colonial state, the constitution of a Muslim nation itself had more to do with the will to power of the gentry, who in fact

came to exist as a unit along with and indeed as the *qawm*. So while the old *qawms* each had their *sharif* or genteel classes, the new Muslim nation is composed of their remnants and dominated by the *shurafa* as a unified, pan-ethnic entity for the first time. Unless they specifically mention the *umara* or nobility, for instance, the Aligarhists invariably address themselves to a united gentry as *qawm*, a habit which is soon taken up by non-Aligarhist groups like the *ulama* or clergy as well.

Now given the fact that this gentry is constantly bemoaning its fortune and attempting to rationalize its practices in order to regain a position in the world, we can guess that the *shurafa*, who work either for or with the colonial administration, are constituted as a polity precisely to recoup the losses incurred by colonial dispossession, particularly the elimination of a Muslim judiciary and the reservation of higher administrative posts for Europeans.<sup>9</sup> In this sense the puritanism of much of the clergy and the anglicism of the Aligarhists comes down to the same thing, a *sharif* effort to overcome the ravages of colonialism by exploiting that space opened up by the destruction of the Mughal empire to emerge as a separate nation; a group which could only have meaning in terms of Islam. Aligarh's poet laureate, Hali, for instance, is clear about the instrumental character of this nationhood, so much so that he quite ignores the paeans to belonging which tend to characterize another kind of nationalist movement:

Whoever wants to attain respect in this country

Whoever wants to remain close to the state

Whoever wants to retain his family's honour

Whoever does not agree to religion's disgrace

Whoever loves his ancestors and descendants

For him is the nation's consolation obligatory.<sup>10</sup>

More than this weakening of nativist sentiment, the poet recognizes and makes a virtue out of his political status by defining nationalism as a pedagogic project that is empowering only in a colonial situation, as a learning from or relating to it:

This is now time's speaking command  
That whatever is in the world is education  
This is now the foundation of governance  
It is here that is hidden the secret of empire.<sup>11</sup>

But this colonial model of Muslim nationhood does not simply arise out of a position of *sharif* weakness, for it also indicates a critical consciousness whose pragmatic participation in the pedagogy of colonization allows Hali to compose the following possibly ironic couplet:

It both constrains and liberates  
Creates freedom as well as loyalty.<sup>12</sup>

As a self-professed ideology, then, which is to say as *realpolitik* free of blood and soil bluster, Muslim nationalism depended upon the colonial state, even though it did so in a pragmatic rather than naturalized way. Indeed *sharif* institutions such as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, or the seminaries of Deoband and Nadwat ul-Ulama, were only possible in British India and could not exist in princely states such as Hyderabad or Bhopal, where the aristocracy was still powerful enough to keep its gentry in check. Indeed the many graduates of Aligarh hired by Muslim princely states had uncritically to fit themselves into these aristocratic cultures as the price of their employment. Similarly, Muslim majority areas like Sind, Punjab, Kashmir, Bengal and the North-West Frontier Province did not give rise to *sharif* institutions or even values,

probably because they were dominated by large rural interests to the detriment of an urban, wage-earning gentry. Yet this new nation, emerging as it did from a very particular group and in a very particular part of the country, came eventually to define being Muslim for millions of others. But this Muslimhood universalized itself only by destroying the Aligarhist gentry that had founded it.

To delineate the history of this Muslimhood more is required than a discussion of the nation as such; for the location that this nation occupies, or does not occupy, is as important a subject. The absolutism of Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *qawm*, for instance, is only possible in a certain kind of space, the homogenous, neutral, depoliticized geography of India as a foundational category. Only during the second half of the nineteenth century did politics give way to such geographies as the foundations for administrative discourse, with words like Hind and Hindustan gradually losing their regional reference and coming to represent the country as that area encompassed by the colonial state. And yet the old meanings did not lose entirely to the new geography. Instead, such words as *mulk* or country took on a duality that rendered both the entities it signified ambiguous. This is not to say that the gentry somehow resisted this new idea of India; rather, both old and new political concepts were conceived as inherently troubling.

It was the destruction of the Mughal Empire, with its emphasis on politics rather than geographies, that resulted in the establishment of an Indian landscape as the foundation for something like a Muslim *qawm*. In the old order, on the contrary, there was no neutral, objective word for country or state. *Kishwar* could mean anything from region to continent, as could *mehan* and *watan*, the words for homeland, while *dawlat*, *saltanat*, *hukumat*, *nizam* and *mulk* referred to royal power or possession. Furthermore, there was no way of conceptualizing the country as a stable unit, for not only did rulers lay claim to territories beyond their reach, not only did the capital move with the monarch and indeed

as the monarch, but the empire itself was spoken of as a plurality, the terms Hind and Hindustan referring to regions which were united only as the *mumalik-e mahfuza*, protected realms. In fact we shall see that traditional cartography could not even represent the kingdom as a unit or indeed as such.

The colonial state, therefore, was radical because premised upon the cartographic idea of India as place, which was a novel conception even among Europeans, since it is only in the nineteenth century that India replaces “the empire of the great Mogul,” “the kingdom of Oudh,” etc. And this substitution, let me add, is not due to the fact of increasing British power so much as it is tied to a larger European shift from person-oriented dynastic to space-oriented national states. The fact that India had become a place and not a polity or set of polities was convenient enough for colonialism, because it allowed the British to dismiss the old order as superficial to India. But it trapped the new nation in a bounded space with which it could only have a relationship as epiphenomenon, and within which it could only be juxtaposed with other polities, given its absolutism and the decline of the old empire.

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<sup>1</sup>Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Taqrir mutalluq qawmi ta‘alim, qawmi hamdardi, awr bahami itifaq,” in *Khutbat-e Sir Sayyid*, vol. 1., ed. Shaykh Muhammad Ismail Panipati (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1972), p. 403.

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Dara Shikoh, *Sirr-i Akbar*, ed. Tara Chand and S.M. Reza Jalali Naini (Tehran: Kitabkhaneh-e Tahuri, 1957), pp. 3-6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Altaf Husayn Hali, “Musaddas dar Madd-o Jazr-e Islam,” in *Kulliyat-e Nazm-e Hali*, vol. 2 (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1970), p. 5–45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100–104 and 126–135.

<sup>7</sup> Sayyid Ahmad Khan, “Taqrir bajawab address-e anjuman-e Islamiyya Rae Bareilly,” in *Khutbat-e Sir Sayyid*, vol., 1, ed. Shaykh Muhammad Ismail Panipati (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1972), p. 365.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Abu'l-fazl Allami, *The A'in-i Akbari*, trans. H. Blochmann (Delhi: Andiesh Book Depot, 1965), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> See, for this, W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Mussulmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (Delhi: Indological Book House, 1969).

<sup>10</sup> Altaf Husayn Hali, *Musaddas-e Hali* (Lahore: Taj Press, n.d.), p. 122.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.