Introduction

Writing on Indian Shi'ism

Whatever the differences between the manifold movements of Islamic renewal and reform that developed in north India during the second half of the nineteenth century, scholarship has been unanimous in identifying the cataclysmic events of 1856–8 as a defining moment. The annexation of new territory by the East India Company, the removal of the key figureheads of Muslim rule, the seizures of inherited landholdings and the imposition of 'Western' education all induced a sense of disenfranchisement and humiliation (*zillat*) among the Muslim elites of the region, and spurred them to devise new forms of Islam which could endure outside the framework of Muslim political control and state patronage.[1] Yet, while the Rebellion has long been proven collectively important for the Muslims of north India, the case could be made that it was of particular significance for the Shi'a minority. One of the most significant casualties of the events was Awadh, a Shi'a-governed princely state which incorporated a swath of north India from 1722 until 1856. As a rich literature on Awadh has shown, not least Juan Cole's masterful study, the ruling Nawabs, a dynasty of Nishapuri Persian origins, heavily co-opted Shi'ism as a 'dominant ideology' of governance, and an agent of state legitimization. Throughout the early nineteenth century, and in the 1840s–50s in particular, a 'formal religious establishment' of Shi'a

[1] Classic works in this regard include Aziz Ahmad, *Islamic modernism in India and Pakistan, 1857–1964* (London, 1967); Francis Robinson, 'The Muslims of Upper India and the shock of the Mutiny', in Francis Robinson, *Islam and Muslim history in South Asia* (Delhi, 2000), pp.138–55; Barbara Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982); Peter Hardy, *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge, 1972); David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Princeton, 1978).

clerics and courtiers was built up. Shi'a cultural, religious and welfare institutions were richly fostered by the state and used to extend its outreach, while a new and increasingly powerful circle of *'ulama* were recruited as jurisconsults and advisers to the Nawabi court.[2] Indelibly associated with Nawabi governance, in much of north India it was Shi'ism, and the relatively small population that formally identified themselves as adherents of the religion, that was most bound up with the established securities of state patronage and servitude.

The 1856 deposition of Wajid 'Ali Shah, the final King of Awadh, and the exile of much of his staff to Metiaburj in Bengal, brought to an end one of the world's most significant post-Safavid Shi'a kingdoms. Thereafter, with courtly patronage all but dead, the two decades after 1858 proved especially ruinous for Shi'ism in north India, especially in the city of Lucknow, the former Nawabi capital. The Awadh court was dismantled root and branch by the British, disenfranchizing many of its former advisers, while others were bought off with small pension agreements.[3] The chief *mufti* (jurist) of the city in the last years of the Nawab's reign, the exalted scholar Mirza Muhammad 'Abbas, had his personal library destroyed in the 1857 violence, and was forced into self-imposed exile.[4] The Urdu newspaper *Tilism* commented that the rites of Muharram, the annual commemorations for the martyred Shi'a Imam Husain and his family which dominated Lucknow's municipal calendar, experienced heavy depletion in tandem with the fortunes of the Nawabi elite and the realities of British policing: 'The doors of fortune are closed. The fire of suffering is at its height. The *imambara*s (mourning halls) look deserted.'[5] The city's largest Shi'a mosque, the Asafi *masjid*, and the adjoining Asaf-ud-daula *imambara*, Lucknow's most imposing religious building, were converted into British military garrisons, their religious functions shut down; over fifty other city mosques were appropriated to uses including offices, police depots, medical dispensaries and stables for livestock.[6] New land-settlement policies, rewritten in 1858 around principles of perceived

[2] Juan Cole, *Roots of north Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: religion and state in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley, 1988), pp. 126–7, 217–18.
[3] Ibid, pp. 271–2.
[4] Sayyid Murtaza Husain, *Matla'-i-Anwār: tazkira-i-Shī'a afāzil-va-'ulamā, kabār-i-bar-i-saghīr-i-Pāk-va-Hind* (Karachi, 1981), p. 77.
[5] Faruqui Anjum Taban, 'The coming of the revolt in Awadh: the evidence of Urdu newspapers', *Social Scientist* 26 (1998), pp. 19–20.
[6] Veena Oldenburg, *The making of colonial Lucknow, 1856–1877* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 35–7; Shakil Hasan Shamsi, *Shī'a–Sunnī qazīya: kitnā mazhabī kitnā sīyāsī?* (Lucknow, 2005), pp. 81–4.

'loyalty' to the British Raj, shut off the stipends of inherited land revenue on which many noble Shi'a families and religious scholars had depended. Meanwhile, with the kings of Awadh no longer representing a solid source of patronage for Shi'a scholars and preachers, the transnational clerical traffic between Iraq, Persia and India largely evaporated. Visits to India by Arab and Persian scholars, artists and physicians, commonplace under the nawabs, became less so, while the profile of Indian *'ulama* in Shi'a clerical centres such as Najaf reciprocally dried up.

Given the infliction of these numerous catastrophes upon Shi'ism, there followed perhaps unsurprisingly a diminishment of the funding, visibility and popular support that the religion had previously enjoyed in north India. The two or three decades after 1857 were, as remarked in 1871–2 by Ahmad 'Ali, one of the city's leading scholars, an era of religious 'weakness' and 'disorder' (*mazhabi kamzori*, *fitna-parwazi*) for Indian Shi'ism. He lamented widespread 'misgivings' (*shubhat*) among the population, their disregard for the *'ulama* (Muslim clergy), and the 'self-interest' (*khud-ra'i*) which meant that Shi'as had no sense of common brotherhood with one another.[7] No meaningful organization, he complained, existed to serve or represent the Indian Shi'a.

Now let us jump forward a few decades, to around the 1910s, and one can see that a new Shi'a organizational apparatus has come to exist in the city's public life. The great *mujtahid*s (religious scholars) of Lucknow are once again vocal public figures, using a series of new podiums and organizations to reclaim their public profile and social relevance in a way unseen in decades. A series of *madrasa*s (religious schools) have recently been established, creating a refreshed, functional body of *'ulama*. Specialist preachers vie for invitations to offer sermons and dirges for the Imams in private and public, while a number of Shi'a publishing-houses offer a new, Urdu-literate audience unprecedented access to religious knowledge. A new Shi'a conference organization invites dignitaries to Lucknow from across India and beyond, and offers a wider matrix for bringing a diffuse array of Shi'a organizations into contact. Shi'a orphanages, charities and welfare institutions exist in numbers, while several campaigns for new religious colleges are making headway. Simultaneously, relations between the city's Shi'a and Sunni Muslim communities have deteriorated rapidly, with the occasional theological arguments of earlier decades having given way to orchestrated seasonal clashes, and taken on newly political intimations.

[7] Habib Husain ibn Ahmad Husain, *Sawānih-i-'umrī-i-Ghulām Hasnēn Kintōrī* (Lahore, 1904), pp. 185–8.

This apparent expansion of what one *maulvi* described in 1910 as a 'fresh religious life' (*na'i mazhabi zindagi*) among north India's Shi'a Muslims,[8] one which apparently took root in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, forms the foreground of this book. This study has two central objectives. First, it presents an examination of religious and social change among the Shi'a of colonial north India. Examining new forms of religious learning, participation and practice, this book discusses how Shi'ism was dissociated from its background of state power, and reconstructed anew as a systematic religion, entailing new forms of engagement both with its adherents and with the historical setting in which it functioned. The second objective, heavily intertwined with the first, is to interrogate the growth during this period of Islamic 'sectarianism', a term that I use broadly to refer to an enhanced discourse of religious and communal difference between the members of Islamic groups or schools.

While offering reflections relevant from 1857 until the present, the book's main empirical focus is a rough six decades from the 1880s to the 1930s, a period which saw the formation of many significant Shi'a institutions, and the most consequential attempts at religious transformation. It is comfortably bookended by, in the earlier dates, the formation of several significant *madrasa*s, the emergence of a new generation of activist '*ulama*, and the institutionalization of manifold variations in religious practices; and in the later years, the extreme violence of the 1939 *tabarra* agitation, India's most significant instance of Shi'a–Sunni political conflict to date. So, the first task of this introduction is to offer at the outset an overview of the Shi'a societies and the region at the heart of this study as they stood on the point of British annexation. It then offers a survey of the key themes and arguments at issue, contextualizing the study and its lines of enquiry in the existing historiography on Shi'ism, and Muslim sectarianism, in modern South Asia.

*SAYYID*S, NOBLES AND COSMOPOLITANS: SHI'ISM IN NORTH INDIA

Shi'a Islam has had a long history in the Indian subcontinent. Of earliest influence and importance were the Shi'a-informed dynasties in the

[8] *Luckna'u kē masībat-zada Sunnīōṅ kī faryād aūr vāqa'ī asbāb-i-masībat* (Lucknow, *c.* 1910), a pamphlet contained in GAD No. 366/1911, Uttar Pradesh State Archives, Lucknow (UPSA), p. 2; Shamra'l ud-din Ahmad, *Shikast-i-'azīm bā'i-ādā-i-Qur'ān-i-karīm* (Lucknow, 1920), p. 3.

Deccani south, such as the sultanates of Bijapur (*c.* 1489–1686), Golconda (1518–1617) and Ahmadnagar (1496–1636); indeed, it was here, rather than in north India, that many established Shi'a cultural forms, such as the *majlis* sermon and *marsiya* poetry, first developed.[9] Over time the religion also came to be associated with segments of the Muslim urban and landed elites in Bombay, Sindh, Punjab, Bengal and elsewhere.

Indeed, many studies of South Asian Islam in its broadest senses, from the medieval period onwards, have demonstrated how these many historic associations with ruling Muslim dynasties have given Shi'a cultural and religious traditions a permeating influence on religious practice and custom, even at those levels of society where they were not formally acknowledged as being exclusivist Shi'a identifiers as such. For instance, study after study has documented participation by diverse religious communities – Sunnis, Hindus and others – in the nominally Shi'a Muharram festival, held in commemoration of the martyred Imams. The veneration of the third Imam, Husain, and the manifold explorations and reworkings of the martyrdom motifs embedded in the Karbala story in South Asia, is testament to this long-standing Shi'a influence in a diverse range of cultural settings.[10] Equally, many studies of those Sufi orders (*tariqa*s) most influential in South Asia, such as the Chishtiya and Qadiriya, have demonstrated how normative Sufi practice has shared certain synergies with Shi'ism. Such orders, most of which trace the lineage of their saints back to the Imams, have historically sanctioned devotion to the family of the Prophet as an act of piety, and at local levels Sufi cults of devotion to 'Ali and his descendants have often overlapped with 'popular' Shi'a practice in a way that entirely belies the construction of difference between traditions at the level of some formal clergy.[11] Hence, scholarship has largely been in agreement that Shi'a-derived cultural norms and practices have had a historical and social impact on South Asian Muslim culture and societies more broadly, out of all proportion to the sum of formally declared Shi'a adherents.

[9] Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian subcontinent* (Leiden, 1980), pp. 51–62; Omar Khalidi, 'The Shi'ites of the Deccan: an introduction', *Rivista Degli Studi Orientali* 64, 1–2 (1991); Franco Coslovi, 'Shiism's political valence in medieval Deccani kingdoms', in Anna Libera Dallapiccola and Stephanie Zingel-Avé Lallemant, *Islam and Indian religions* (Stuttgart, 1993).

[10] E.g. David Pinault, *Horse of Karbala: Muslim devotional life in India* (New York, 2001); Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: martyrdom in South Asian memory* (New York, 2006).

[11] E.g. Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: social roles of Sufis in medieval India* (Princeton, 1978); S. M. Azizuddin Husain, 'Sufi cults and the Shias', in Anup Taneja, ed., *Sufi cults and the evolution of medieval Indian culture* (Delhi, 2003).

In view of this pervasive cultural influence across the subcontinent, it is important to impose some initial limits on this study. This book is solely concerned with the Isna'Ashari branch of Shi'ism (also known as Twelvers or Imamis, for their belief in the Twelve Imams as successors to the Prophet). It bypasses entirely communities such as the Isma'ili and Dau'di Bohra often categorized under the Shi'a umbrella, with whom the Isna 'Ashari shared few associations of family, region, religious belief or political action – at least during the period under discussion here.[12]

This book will also confine itself tightly to the swath of north India encompassing Awadh, Rohilkhand and Doab, latterly known from 1901 as the United Provinces. By the eighteenth century Nawabi rule had given Shi'ism an entrenched presence in this region, and from the peak of Nawabi power and patronage in the late eighteenth century onwards, Awadh has often been perceived as the intellectual, financial and psychological heartland of Shi'ism in India. This book is located entirely in the Shi'a societies of this region, examining the communities of the larger towns and rural townships (*qasbas*) dotted across the Gangetic plains. The reason for the largely local setting of this study is that, rather than resorting to the grandiose generalizations and tendencies to essentialization common to many studies of Shi'ism, it seeks to assess evolving constructs of Shi'a identity through an analysis of those environments in which it was most immediately lived and experienced. However, in no way is this regional focus intended to limit the scope of the study. Instead, the book's description of how Shi'ism was recrafted following the deprivation of its political power, the construction of new notions of religion and religious community, and the growth of a systematized Shi'a sectarianism, are all stories with powerful resonances in other settings and in the modern world.

For many observers, the elite social milieu and historical proximity to governance meant that it was still honour and respectability (*adab* or '*izzat*) which were identified as most characteristic of Shi'ism in this region.

[12] On these communities see Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: their history and doctrines* (Cambridge, 1990); Jonah Blank, *Mullahs on the mainframe: Islam and modernity among the Daudi Bohras* (Chicago, 2001). Most studies have agreed that religious boundaries between Imami and Isma'ili Shi'as were more firmly consolidated in India during the 1840s–1850s, on account of Usuli Shi'a consolidation in Nawabi Lucknow, and the simultaneous resettlement of the Isma'ili leader Hasan 'Ali Shah, Aga Khan I, in India from 1843. Judging from the sources consulted throughout this book, most north Indian Imami Shi'a saw themselves as having little in common with the Isma'ilis during the period under discussion.

Most north Indian Shi'a communities conceived themselves as being of *sayyid* genealogy, one of several *sharif* ('noble') castes in Indian Islam and one linking them directly to the Prophet via the family of 'Ali.[13] In Shi'ism especially, the conviction that religious authority was vested in the family of the Prophet has meant that the status of *sayyid* has long carried connotations of religious and cultural authority even in contemporary manifestations; the most senior '*ulama* are by necessity identified with it, as are most of the *umara'*, lay nobles and dignitaries. For all that has been said about the breakdown of traditional *ashraf–ajlaf* caste structures in Islam, in practice most Shi'a in colonial India were members of particular *sayyid* clans or kinship groups (*biradari*), whose distinguished ancestral status was jealously guarded through endogamic marriage, social segregation and purity of religious practice. Many of the Shi'a writings consulted for this study, right into the twentieth century, include *shajra-i-nasb*, genealogical trees which charted the lineage of their authors, tracing them back through the generations to the Imams and hence drawing sustained legitimacy from their own perceived ancestral authority. The association of Shi'ism with forms of nobility, both in terms of *sayyid* descent and Nawabi cultural pedigree, was equally obvious to outsiders, and became the definitional feature of Shi'ism to colonial observers. The first Census of India, as well known for informing the self-image of segments of the Indian population as much as it catalogued them, declared 'the Shi'a religion' to be 'the more fashionable and the more richly endowed . . . the greater part of the higher classes among the Muhammadan community belong to it'.[14]

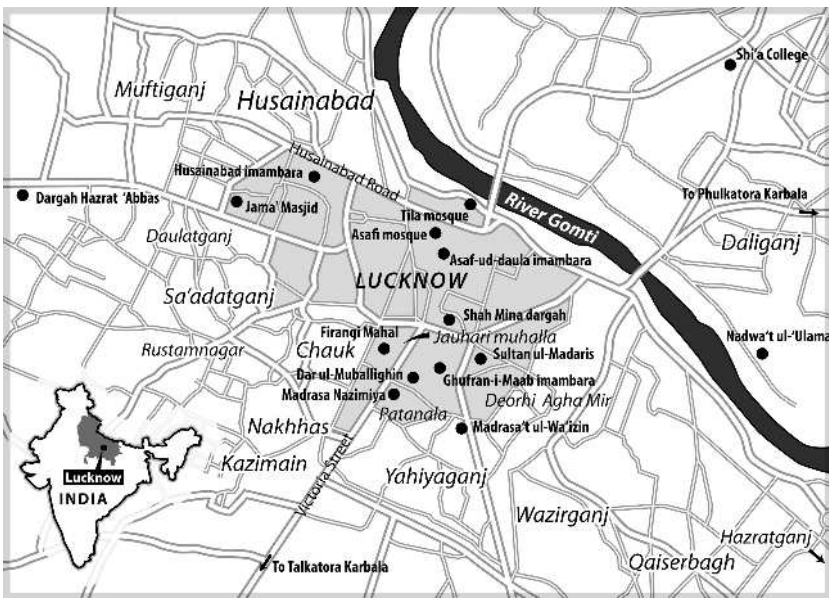
The single setting closest to the heart of this study is the city of Lucknow, the former capital of the Shi'a nawabs, and until today the South Asian city most intractably associated with Shi'ism. Even after the destruction of the Nawabi state, Lucknow would remain by far the most important Shi'a spiritual centre in north India. The city was home to a significant Shi'a population at all social levels. Many of north India's most senior Shi'a scholars, known as *mujtahid*s, originated in Lucknow or surrounding districts, and were largely resident in the city. There were also those Shi'a who were left behind as part of the old Nawabi courtly nobility. Of these, around 1,700 or so belonged to a group known as *wasiqadar*s. These, the pensioners and dependants formerly attached to

[13] On the definition and significance of *sayyid*s see esp. Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Moral conduct and authority: the place of* adab *in South Asian Islam* (London, 1984); Cole, *Roots of north Indian Shi'ism*, pp. 72–84.
[14] J.Charles William, *The report on the Census of Oudh, Volume I* (Lucknow, 1869), p. 76.

the Awadh court, continued in British India to draw tokenistic alms from the huge Nawabi religious endowments (*waqf*s) established to provide for them in perpetuity. The pensions they received were often very small, and increasingly so with the subdivision of this revenue among their descendants over successive generations. As such, they were often described by government as a 'backward' community, clinging to an outdated lifestyle in their ancestral homes in Lucknow. This 'impoverished and declining class of persons', crowding Lucknow's old *muhalla*s to the city's west such as Kazimain, Daulatganj and Sa'adatganj, became interpreted by the British administration as symptomatic of all that was wrong with the old regime, and rarely did colonial administrators miss an opportunity to castigate them for their assumed 'backwardness', their inability to modernize and their attachment to a life of leisure. Lucknow's *District Gazetteer* evoked these pensioners and dependants as a people 'mostly in debt, and lead[ing] a wretched hand-to-mouth existence, which also seems to have a demoralising effect on their fellow citizens',[15] while one Commissioner of Lucknow described them with disdain as 'a feckless lot, who are degenerating'.[16] They were stereotyped as shunning educational and commercial enterprise, and instead spending their time engaged in court cases and fratricidal feuds as they fought claims over inherited titles and access to rapidly sub-dividing pensions.

The presence of the Shi'a clergy, landed elite and old aristocracy in Lucknow, combined with a residual nostalgia and memory of the city's historical significance, thus gave the city a particular significance as a convening point, publishing hub and religious and cultural centre for the Shi'a more widely in early colonial India. Indeed, the fact that Lucknow itself dominates much of the narrative of this book is representative of its importance in north Indian Shi'ism in general. In view of the great diversity of Shi'a culture and leadership, both beyond and even within the region of north India under discussion, it would be entirely facile to suggest that the Lucknawi Shi'a were representative of the Hindustani Shi'a *in totem* and the guardians of the religion as a whole. Nevertheless, in many of the Shi'a-authored tracts and speeches consulted for this volume, they certainly wrote and spoke as if they were.

[15] H. R. Nevill, *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, volume XXXVII: Lucknow* (Allahabad, 1904), p. 65.
[16] R. Burn to His Honour, 27 September 1912, Political File No. 42/1913, UPSA; cf. Lovett to Chief Secretary, 31 January 1913, ibid.



MAP 1.1. Major Muslim sites and institutions of colonial Lucknow.

FIGURE 1.1. Monuments of Nawabi Lucknow: the Asafi mosque and Asaf-ud-daula *imambara*, photographed *c.* 1895 (MacPherson Collection, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge).

Leaving Lucknow aside, Shi'ism was also prominent in many of the rural Muslim townships, or *qasba*s, in surrounding Awadhi districts such as Barabanki, Rae Bareili, Bahraich and Fyzabad. Many of these townships had been established by *sayyid* lineages from the Arab or Persian world who traced their arrival in India back as far as the tenth or twelfth centuries, but often became Shi'a somewhat later. With the Nawabi court from the eighteenth century onwards enhancing its reach outside Lucknow itself through the cultivation of ties with the landed Muslim gentries of these towns, many *sharif* families accentuated their visible commitment to the Shi'a religion, or even converted to Shi'ism anew, for the advantages of land grants or courtly patronage, giving Shi'ism a widespread and well-documented influence in the Awadhi countryside. Some *qasba*s were associated with powerful Shi'a magnates, of which the Rajas of Mahmudabad in Sitapur district, a family who converted to Shi'ism in the 1820s–30s, were perhaps the most famous and influential Shi'a landlords (and, later, political figures) of north India. Other *qasba*s became known as seats of learning, producing well-known religious authorities who drew their sustenance from land and professional ties to the court at Lucknow. As can be seen from the Appendix to this volume, a few key townships such as Kintor (Barabanki district) and Nasirabad (Rae Bareili district) became the seats of esteemed clerical families. Under the Nawabs of Awadh, these lineages of scholars had received preferential land settlements (*nazrana*), and had been heavily co-opted by the state as court advisers, educators and the testators of endowments. As we shall see, with these functions abolished in 1856, they were soon to have to seek new moulds of public relevance and legitimacy.

Other significant Shi'a populations existed in those parts of the United Provinces further afield from Lucknow, in districts which had been ceded to the British in 1775. Among these were the cities of Allahabad and Jaunpur, which had some of the largest and most influential Shi'a populations in the province, often local landholding gentries resident in neighbourhoods on the peripheries of these towns or rural outposts in their hinterland, such as Kajgaon, Baragaon and Machhlishehr (outside Jaunpur), or Dariyabad and Phulpur (outside Allahabad).[17]

Another cluster of Shi'a populations was consolidated within the divisions of Rohilkhand and the Doab to the west, a region that had been

[17] E.g. John Hollister, *The Shi'a of India* (London, 1953); Nevill, *District Gazetteers, volume XXVIII: Jaunpur* (Allahabad, 1908), pp. 84–5, 257; C. A. Bayly, *The local roots of Indian politics: Allahabad 1880–1920* (Oxford, 1975), p. 41.