Introduction

I

Maulvi Sayyid Imdadul ‘Ali Sahib, Deputy Collector Bahadur, Kanpur and later of Aligarh, was one of the earliest and most vociferous critics of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817–98), one of the most prominent Muslim reformists in colonial India. The noted essayist, writer and poet Altaf Husain Hali (1837–1914) had called Imdadul ‘Ali one of the two most important people who campaigned against Sayyid Ahmad. In AH 1289/AD 1872, Imdadul ‘Ali published his Imdād ul-Āfāq ba-Javāb-i Parcha-yi Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq as a forceful reply to the publication Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq, not long after Sayyid Ahmad Khan founded his journal in 1871. On the very last page of Imdadul ‘Ali’s 88-page diatribe against Sayyid Ahmad Khan, we learn why he wrote the tract. His spirit and core beliefs about Islam were provoked, he said, and he became angry and immediately wrote this tract in reply to Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq. This trend of ‘becoming angry’ after reading something and being compelled to write, often ‘immediately’, became quite commonplace, certainly amongst the ashrāf (well-born) of Hindustan, even at a time when ‘print capitalism’ was still in its early phases. Imdadul ‘Ali continued by saying that Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq was not only far removed from Islam but was blasphemous. In order to protect the beliefs of his Muslim brethren, he had his own text published and distributed for free.1 Sayyid Ahmad Khan had written to many individuals, including Imdadul ‘Ali, seeking their help when he began to plan the establishment of his college at Aligarh.

1 Sayyid Imdadul ‘Ali, Imdād ul-Āfāq ba-Javāb Parcha-yi Tahzīb ul-Akhlāq (Kanpur: Nizami Press, AH 1290/AD 1872), 85. This publication is particularly useful because it contains numerous interventions and fatwās made by the ‘ulamā, which gives a wide range of the types of opposition to Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s planned college for Muslim men.
After spending many pages on what constituted a proper ‘Muslim dress’, Imdadul ‘Ali moved on to Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s planned dress code for the Madrasat ul’ulum Musalmanān (Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College).² He quoted Sayyid Ahmad, who wrote that each student would have to come to the madrasa wearing socks and shoes.³ Imdadul ‘Ali felt that Muslims would object to this, saying that while this madrasa was supposed to be meant for Muslims, by imposing a condition of wearing ангrezī jūtā (British shoes) it would force people away from their Islamic dress and they would begin to find the British style more pleasing. He argued on the basis of a ḥadīs (prophetic tradition) that Muslims should dress in a manner that was distinct from non-believers, and that they were prohibited from copying them.⁴ Imdadul ‘Ali continued with a discussion on wearing a red hat and black alpaca overcoat as part of the dress code and explained why this was unacceptable (nā-jā’iz) and difficult for students, particularly poor students, to acquire.⁵ He was noticeably perturbed by the transformation undergoing Muslims in colonial India and saw these changes as a clear sign of the loss of cultural and social mores, their ākhlāq o ādāb, which had been so representative of the characteristics of the ʿashrāf. Imdadul ‘Ali wrote, he said, because there was a feeling ‘that our qaum is being ruined [kharāb hotī jātī hai] and that we should do something about it’.⁶ Citing some other ḥadīs, Imdadul ‘Ali also argued that according to the Hanafi tradition, ‘which is in the majority in Hindustan’, the wearing of red clothes was not permitted. He pointed out that at Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s madrasa, Muslims were to eat on a raised platform; Muslims would object to this ‘because that too is like a little table, [and] this would make them like the Christians who eat at tables. In our country only they eat at tables and in the Islamic religion, Muslims have been prohibited to copy/resemble Christians and they have been commanded to oppose them’.⁷ He argued that Sayyid Ahmad said that he would have photographs taken and put in the madrasa; but this too, according

³ The relevant reference can be found in Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Tahzib ul-Akhlāq 3 (AH 10 Safar 1290/AD 1873).
⁵ Ibid., 49.
⁶ Ibid., 9.
⁷ Ibid., 50.
to Imdadul 'Ali, was against Islam and would result in angels staying away from those houses where there were pictures. He quoted numerous hadīs stating that those who make pictures will burn in hell. The extent of ridicule and contempt for those who were imbibing 'British ways' was best illustrated by Imdadul 'Ali's statement: 'They urinate while standing so that they can become civilised.'

For many like Imdadul 'Ali, who observed and wrote about changing cultural and social norms, such forms of deportment and such practices were an embodiment of utter and extreme humiliation, zillat.

This cultural notion of zillat was emphasised further and repeatedly by Imdadul 'Ali in the bimonthly newspaper from Kanpur, Nūr ul-Āfāq. In the 6 June 1874 issue, when Imdadul 'Ali was Deputy Collector in Agra, he wrote a reply to articles by Mazhar ul-Haq and Maulvi Mahdi ‘Ali Sahib, Deputy Collector, Mirzapur. Addressing these heretics/infidels (mulhid), he said that they had destroyed their faith for jobs worth a mere 10 or 20 rupees. They had abandoned their Islamic dress, code and conduct, and wore jackets, pants, socks, shoes and red caps. They stood and urinated, ate un-koshered chicken cooked in impure water and ate off impure plates with a knife and fork while sitting at tables. They tried to emulate the Europeans to become more like them, he argued. In this article as well as in earlier ones, Imdadul 'Ali supported his assertion that Muslims were not supposed to urinate while standing with references, noting that urinating while sitting was the correct Islāmī tariqa (Islamic manner).

Clearly, Imdadul 'Ali, himself in the employ of the British, represented this idea of debasement in cultural terms. Muslims in Hindustan had given up their more traditional cultural mores—their akhlāq—by acquiring British (or European) ways, which according to some was the manifestation, if not the cause, of zillat.

The Urdu journal Oudh Punch, published from Lucknow in the middle of the nineteenth century and edited by Muhammad Sajjad Hussain (1856–1915), was one of the iconoclastic periodicals of its era, widely read and never ignored. It was a witty paper (zarīf), often very sarcastic, though serious in intent and subject
matter. It was read by Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and the British alike, and had nawabs, munshis, divans, pandits, maulvis and various categories of government officials subscribing to it across north India. While it was a ‘Muslim’ newspaper, it was syncretic, in that one did not see either pro-Muslim, pro-Islamic or anti-Hindu sentiments expressed. It included stories about 'Id and Divali, both equally celebrated, and in this manner stood out amongst the many newspapers of north India.

The Punch even wrote articles against its competitor, the Oudh Ukhbar, for writing anti-Muslim articles. Akhtar Shahanshahi in his biography of newspapers written in 1888 listed 1,512 newspapers between 1840 and 1880 and said that there was no better humorous newspaper than the Oudh Punch in the whole of Hindustan. It had amongst its readers Maulana Shibli Nu'mani (b. 1857) who was said to have read the paper with great enjoyment.

The Punch spoke of a very different culture in a very different language, humorous and caustic. In 1878, in the midst of a debate around how the term tahzīb (culture/civilisation) should be defined and used by Muslim writers, with major implications for how groups of Muslims reacted to colonial rule and how they imagined themselves, the newspaper carried an article which defined tahzīb in a way very similar to Imdadul ‘Ali’s, which is as follows:

To call one’s countrymen semi-barbaric; to call one’s elders ‘old goose’; to wear a jacket and pants; to whistle while walking; to swirl one’s umbrella and hit one’s shoe [on the ground]; to urinate taking aim on the walls of one’s neighbours; to wear a cap with a tail; to enjoy eating potatoes; to drink wine; to eat a non-koshered chicken; to give up using oil and use the fat of a bear in one’s hair; to get a foreign wife; reading a newspaper [in English] whether they know English or not …

11 See Oudh Punch on 5 February, 26 March, 23 April, 11 June, 30 July of 1878 for numerous lists.
12 See Chapter 3 for further discussion.
13 Oudh Punch, 10 August 1880.
16 Oudh Punch, Lucknow, 22 January 1878. Jennifer Dubrow in Cosmopolitan Dreams points to similar examples where she writes that Rathan Nath Sarshar, who was the editor of the Oudh Akhbar and author of the Urdu novel Fasāna-yi Āzād, paints the
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The Oudh Punch was also a major vehicle for attack on the so-called Naturies (nechrīs) and on Sayyid Ahmad Khan. There were numerous articles and letters to the editor printed in it which criticised the nechrī school of thought. For instance, a reader going by the initials FH sent a letter to the Oudh Punch with the published title ’New Religion’, mocking the nechrī. The letter, which took the form of a dialogue, asked what this nechrī fiend was. The reply came that it was a new religion which had been invented by a ‘Sayyid Sahib’. The letter then stated that these days there was a lot of hue and cry about it. When the letter writer asked what its principles were, the answer given was that it really had no principles, and because of this façade, religious benefits accrued to those who subscribed to this ‘new religion’. The writer then wrote that ‘for fame and progress, this is a good scheme [that is, not to reveal its principles]’.17 Dozens of articles and poems (for example, one entitled ‘Natural Poetry’) and even cartoons against the nechrīs appeared in the Oudh Punch in 1880. It was identified specifically as an ‘Aligarh-based ailment’, where the disease could be found in its most articulate form. The newspaper gave a description of its adherents as follows: ‘[They wear] a red cap with a tail; a cigarette holder in the mouth; … with a dog alongside; wearing a jacket … hating the natives, friendship with the British … saying “good morning” rather than “salām”…’.18

This attack on the nechrīs and on their cultural values, blaming them for the decline and humiliation of Muslims, continued in the Punch well into the 1880s. Blaming the nechrīs for bringing about a condition of slavery to the British, the Oudh Punch argued that the Muslims were the most useless (nikamme) community because they had recently lost their kingdom (saltanāt), and that they were still living in an older world.19 In another attack on the Aligarh college, in an article entitled ‘Tahzib kī Taraqqī’ (‘The Progress of Culture’), the Punch made an astonishing link between the Muslim community’s zillat and the students’ obsession with playing cricket! In a sarcastic piece, it asked, ‘Is it going to be this cricket that is going to correct the present and future condition of Islam?’20 Writers in the Oudh Punch also acknowledged a larger concern with respect to the condition of decline and humiliation of Muslims—namely, main character Azad ‘as an example of the Anglicized babu’, carrying numerous ‘Western objects’ (p. 47).

17 Oudh Punch, Lucknow, 17 February 1880.
18 Oudh Punch, Lucknow, 10 August 1880.
19 Oudh Punch, Lucknow, 29 January 1885, 2.
20 Oudh Punch, Lucknow, 7 May 1885.
Zillat was perceived by different categories and groups of Muslims in different terms and emanating from different sources or elements in their lives. For some, it was religious decline, for others, it was social and cultural decline, and for yet others, it was a loss of social position related to their job and economic status. For certain sections of the ashrāf, questions of comportment, dress, ‘everyday living’, as well as morals and mores, were tied in to their notions of zillat, and to their akhlāq (ethics). This was a class perception of zillat, which resulted in a loss of face. On the other hand, for some Muslims, imagined or real restrictions on religious practices and rituals, as well as pollution of Islamic practices from Hinduism (bid’at), or the absorption of ‘Western’ social values and practices, implied that they had fallen to a zillat kā maqām (a state/place of humiliation). For still others, it was some combination of religious, social, economic, cultural and moral decline, leading towards zillat.

Notions of zillat were not exclusive to the Muslim ashrāf or ‘ulamā in nineteenth-century Hindustan. Other religious communities experienced similar sentiments. However, because many Muslims believed that their community had experienced political loss with the end of Mughal sovereignty in 1857, they were more greatly affected than were other communities who suffered other forms of loss. Such zavāl (decline) was not limited to Hindustan; as Mana Kia writes, ‘In the mid-nineteenth century, under the pressures of looming European imperialism, Persians saw Iran’s declining economic, social, and political position as the results of collective moral degradation.’ Yet the loss of political power after 1857 marks a radical departure compared with similar experiences elsewhere. Importantly, most Urdu writers in the nineteenth century agreed that they had brought zillat by themselves upon themselves: apne hāthon se (by their own hands).

Despite numerous monographs on South Asian Islam and Muslims over the last 50 years, the question Barbara Metcalf asks at the beginning of her foundational

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21 **Oudh Punch**, Lucknow, 5 November 1885.
22 See Seema Alavi, *Islam and Healing: Loss and Recovery of an Indo-Muslim Tradition, 1600–1900* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007) for how the akhlāq of the ashrāf were affected as they negotiated colonialism and the changes underway in the nineteenth century.
study on Deoband, ‘Why has modern South Asia produced such a diversity of Islamic movements?’, has not satisfactorily been answered. She answers her own question as follows: ‘One reason may well be the extreme form in which political loss here took place.’  

Such an answer is at best partial. What was it then, that agentive force amongst Sunni Muslims in the late nineteenth-century colonial India, which led them to a revival, renewal and reform of their practices and belief systems resulting in an efflorescence of identities and denominations emerging within Islam?\(^\text{25}\) 

I propose that what acted as an agentive force was the realisation of \textit{zillat}, the utter humiliation that Muslims faced after the ‘extreme form in which political loss here took place’. From Urdu texts including those by less-known publicists, one gets the sense that the Muslim \textit{ashrāf} were confronted by a condition of \textit{zillat} that began to define their collective sentiment. As I explain in Chapter 2, \textit{zillat} was not merely a cry of lamentation; it was instrumental in encouraging Muslims to redefine who they were. I see \textit{zillat} as the \textit{motor} which caused a revival, renewal and reform amongst Muslims, giving rise to them emerging and coming into being in diverse manifestations and multiple forms.

This was also the period when the British started defining and categorising Muslims based on their own understanding, needs and criteria, through instruments such as the census. Muslims, on the other hand, were imagining themselves quite differently. While the motif of change, decline, destruction and loss was central to their lives, I argue that one of the consequences of the experience of \textit{zillat} was a momentum that led Muslims to \textit{remake themselves}, resulting in different ways of being. The medium for this transformation was most often print, which, rather than unifying, resulted in fragmentation and fracture. It produced not one, but many types of Muslim communities. This technique, instrument and technology of capitalist and colonial modernity—mass printing—becomes the vehicle through which numerous conflicting Muslim identities


\textit{In chronological order, these would be as follows: the Deobandis, the Ahl-i Hadis (although they had some strong continuities with the past), the Ahmadis, the Barelvis or Ahl-i Sunnat wa’l Jama'at, and the Tablighi Jama'at, part of and an offshoot of the Deobandi tradition. Interestingly, all except the Ahmadis emerge from within a geographical radius of a few kilometres of each other, and the Ahmadis are also not that much further afield.}
took institutionalised, organised and corporatised forms as *maslaks*.\textsuperscript{26} It is the realisation and agentive force of *zillat*, interacting with modern techniques and technology, which results in new categories of Muslims ‘being made’, providing some understanding of why modern South Asia produced such a diversity of Islamic movements.

For Muslims, notions of who a Muslim was emerged through a discursive space and process—in this case, the Urdu print medium—based on conditions of materiality, and resulted in the construction of identities that constituted who could be called a Muslim. By all accounts, such constructions resulted in fluid notions of who Muslims were, and in the case of the census, this fluidity became particularly apparent in the context of whom the British designated and counted as Muslim. What also emerges is that in matters of self-confession and self-description, the boundaries Muslims created were *far more rigid* than those demarcated by the British. Those who claimed Muslimhood or Muslimness often did so by arguing that they were the only authentic Muslims, establishing hard, bifurcating lines that ensured others were kept beyond the pale of their Islam.

II

One would have thought that it might have been easier to answer the question ‘Who is a Muslim?’, rather than ‘What is Islam?’, especially in the context of the early colonial modernity of nineteenth-century north India. Muslims, quite simply, ought to be those who professed that they were themselves ‘Muslim’, a self-confession being sufficient to designate belonging to the religion and varied practices of (an) Islam. This is what Shahab Ahmed argues in his magisterial *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, a study of the ‘histories of the societies

\textsuperscript{26} See SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in Modernity* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 2020), who has a few pages entitled ‘What Is a Maslak?’, noting that a *maslak* in late nineteenth-century British India becomes ‘the most visible referent to a distinct Muslim reformist program in colonial South Asia’, which ‘is intimately entwined with, and perhaps overshadowed by, its implicit signalling of competition over normativity. From the late nineteenth century onwards, *maslak* has become a resounding competitive concept’ (p. 173). Brannon D. Ingram has argued that the term *maslak* in South Asia ‘has come to denote the features that define a given school, sect, or movement’ in Brannon Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 141.
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of Muslims’, 27 where he sees Islam as a ‘human and historical phenomenon’. 28
Taking the shahāda, bearing witness to Allah and his Prophet, as such a
confession, this ought to be enough in making any claims to ‘being’ Muslim.
At an individual and household level, this self-confession works adequately,
but when notions of a larger collective being or entity, such as a ‘community’
or a ‘religion’ or maslak, emerge, things become more complicated. How does a
family unit or an individual who has taken the shahāda decide (if they actually
make such a clear and conscious choice) to belong to a particular representation
of Islam, or of the numerous ways of being Muslim? What is that mechanism
which results in such choices about belonging to different manifestations of Islam?
Who decides where someone belongs within the larger notion of ‘Muslim’? Which
Muslim does one become, and how? One could even claim to ‘be a Muslim’
without subscribing to any doctrinal faith and by following rituals and practices
selectively and creatively. 29

Muslims have, in the words of Shahab Ahmed,

been dealing with difference, diversity and disagreement for fourteen centuries … [and] have long been aware that they are not all the same; they have long
been aware that their identity as components of universal Islam includes diverse
experiences, agreement, disagreement, problems, dilemmas, and predicaments;
that they mostly agree to disagree and to be different. One might say that the
community of Islam is a community of disagreement. 30

Approvingly quoting Ebrahim Moosa, Ahmed in a footnote continues, ‘There are
multiple and diverse forms and articulations of “Muslimness” or “Being Muslim”.
In other words what we really have are multiple representations of being Muslim
embodied by concrete individuals and communities.’ 31 For Shahab Ahmed, the

general arguments in this Introduction rather than draw upon a wider scholarly
field. His book brings in ideas from diverse fields and presents a good summary
of many of them. Importantly, and most refreshinglly, his is one of the few books
on Islam that squarely addresses South Asia and other Muslim societies beyond
the Middle East.

28 Ibid., 106–7.

29 The well-known case, one of many, is that of the poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib
calling himself an ādhā musalmān (half Muslim).

30 Ahmed, What Is Islam?, 147, emphasis in original.

31 Ebrahim Moosa, ‘The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam’, in Progressive Muslims:
great challenge has been to conceptualise Islam ‘posed by the sheer diversity of—that is, range of differences between—those societies, persons, ideas and practices that identify themselves with “Islam”’.\(^{32}\)

It might be convenient to make the argument, no doubt correct, that ‘Islam is a community of disagreement’, yet when we turn to examine the numerous and diverse groups which constitute that ‘community of disagreement’, complications arise as to who is entitled to, and/or has the power to, decide who belongs within a particular community which constitutes a part of the larger ‘community of disagreement’. Those excluded might not even be permitted to make the claim that they also belong to the larger ‘community of disagreement’. Self-confession allows one to make the claim of belonging, yet it seems that such a right could as easily be denied by and to others. Clearly, a question of legitimacy arises, but more importantly, the question of who decides this question of legitimacy needs to be addressed. First order and second order distinctions clearly matter—in order to make the claim that they belong to the community of disagreement, they have to be allowed to first make the claim that they actually belong (are allowed to belong) to the community of Islam before they are allowed to agree (or not). If they are not even allowed to make the claim that they are Muslims, they will certainly not be allowed to make the claim that they are Muslims ‘differently’.

This book examines precisely this vein of concern regarding who is allowed to make such a claim of being Muslim, who is excluded and on what grounds. Multiple claimants to the supposedly ‘legitimate’ claim of being Muslim exclude all others making the same claim. Are those who are denied this right allowed to be part of this ‘community of disagreement’?

Not only do one’s own choices matter but in the context of colonial modernity and colonial governmentality, government holds the power to identify individuals, households and communities as ‘Muslim’—leaving aside internal distinctions within the broader notion of ‘Muslimhood’ or ‘Muslimness’—defining and constituting Muslim subjectivities. Subject populations whose own understanding and practices of faith may vary from the categories and characteristics recognised by the colonial state are nevertheless classified on the basis of having, or being perceived as having, certain types of characteristics with which the colonial power was somewhat familiar. Importantly, this subject population is even denied the notion of a conscious self-confession of who they are, who they think they