

Book Review

Saikia, Yasmin and Rahman, M. Raisur. *The Cambridge Companion of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*. 292pp. Cambridge University Press 2019.

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Every day as I travel to my university in Karachi, I first pass a building with the name, ‘Aligarh Institute of Technology’, a private polytechnic established in 1989 by the Aligarh Muslim University Old Boys’ Association of Pakistan, followed by, at a short distance and separately, the Sir Syed University of Engineering and Technology. The websites of both institutions, not surprisingly, clearly show their inspiration and allegiance to the ideas and initiatives of Sayyid Ahmad Khan.

I often wonder what Karachi, or Pakistan, or South Asia would have been like had Sayyid Ahmad Khan not been responsible for the very many ideas, thoughts, and initiatives which the editors and contributors to this book allude to and which Sir Sayyid initiated. After all, they argue, Sayyid Ahmad Khan was the ‘most brilliant and unusual reformer of India’ (p. xiii), and ‘made efforts to promote Western education, scientific knowledge, rational thinking, religious pluralism, political accommodation, and participatory community associations founded on ethics and justice’ (p. 2). Few individuals would, even today, be able to undertake even a single one of these pathbreaking initiatives in many lifetimes. Moreover, as I begin any new semester when I teach a course that is compulsory for all undergraduates at every university in Pakistan, variously called ‘Pakistan’s History’ or some version of this, one of the questions I ask in the early part of the course is, ‘who was the founding father of Pakistan?’. Expectedly, the names of Sir Sayyid, Muhammad Iqbal and Jinnah are mentioned – occasionally interspersed with that of Muhammad Bin Qasim, as well – but the consensus amongst my undergraduate students is that Sir Sayyid was the first and foremost amongst these three and should be claimed as the *real* father of Pakistan, starting

with some notion of the ‘two-nation’ theory, which allegedly started it all. Sir Sayyid, in many crucial ways, is synonymous with Pakistan.

The book under review is neither about contemporary Pakistan nor about the making of Pakistan; rightly so, it situates Sayyid Ahmad Khan in his specific milieu and context, as any book of history ought to. Nevertheless, it does expand these Sir-Sayyidan locational aspects well beyond the latter half of the nineteenth century, and does examine the nature of his legacy – see below. Starting from Yasmin Saikia’s opening essay which lays out a particularly useful introduction locating Sir Sayyid on and in history, using the notion and episode of Rebellion in the mid-nineteenth century to examine his role and contribution that paved ‘a path for a new Muslim future in India’ (p. 18). Saikia uses Sayyid Ahmad’s 1857 writings ‘which inspired Muslims to participate in their own development, reconstruct a positive community image, and assume agency in transformation’ (p. 20). Moreover, she argues, he ‘opened a space for a future possibility for all Indians, particularly Muslims, to regain their civilisational dignity – which was his lasting and continuous legacy’ (p. 23), a point I take up below. Contributions by Carimo Mohamed looking at Sayyid Ahmad on the Caliphate unfortunately refer far too much to ‘recent events’ and draw too many ‘parallel[s] with the current events’ of the early twenty-first century (p. 39), while Gail Minault builds on her excellent oeuvre on Muslim women writers in colonial Hindustan, examining Sayyid Ahmad’s often misconstrued views about education for women and girls and locating them in their particular social and historical context. M. Raisur Rahman and Mohammad Sajjad both use Sayyid Ahmad’s pivotal educational endeavours to create college and community interacting with many of the

(largely Muslim) men who constituted his social and intellectual milieu. Charles M. Ramsey examines the relationship of the staunch believer, Sayyid Ahmad, and how Science, Religion and Revelation were understood and accommodated by him, while Frances Pritchett works on the complicated notion of *qaum* in the context of nineteenth century north India and how Sayyid Ahmad negotiated this very fluid concept.

There are two particularly excellent essays in this collection which need to be highlighted. No contemporary scholar can better David Lelyveld on Sayyid Ahmad Khan – one perpetually awaits his never-written manuscript or collected essays on Aligarh or Sayyid Ahmad – and this collection shows the unparalleled heights Lelyveld has achieved in mastering his subject and the themes surrounding Sayyid Ahmad in his essay on nature, *nechari*, and the numerous relationships and ideas which emerge from his ideas and initiatives in the field of science and technology. Importantly, using these themes, Lelyveld's is one of the few pieces in this collection which negotiate broader themes such as modernity, colonialism, knowledge, and notions of colonial superiority and dominance which, Lelyveld argues, troubled Sayyid Ahmad. Equally brilliant is the evocative and beautifully crafted essay by a younger scholar, Mrinalini Rajagopalan, an historian working on the impact of British colonialism on the built environment, who examines Sayyid Ahmad's earliest work, entitled *Āṣār-us-Ṣanādīd*; engaging with Sayyid Ahmad's work, she uses architecture and building as a motive of Mughal decline – '*a ruin haunted by the spectre of a fallen empire*' – something already anticipated in his early writings. She writes that the '*history of the Red Fort betrays Sayyid Ahmad's affective mourning for a glorious but lost empire coupled with his hope that the demise of the older order must surely also lead to a new modernity*' (p. 242). There are numerous parallels in the Lelyveld and Rajagopalan essays which set both apart.

The final section of the book comprises four chapters which constitute 'Part III: Sir Sayyid today: Enduring legacies', which raises some particular problems. Perhaps because one of the co-editors of the collection is an AMU graduate, one gets the sense that much of this book has too much of an Indian Muslim and Aligarhist focus, especially when it comes to legacy and in the books overall contemporary focus. Even Amber Abbas's 'A Living Legacy: Sir Sayyid Today', focuses excessively on the AMU network rather than on the broader legacy of Sayyid Ahmad. Both the co-editors share this AMU focus when they conclude in their

chapter 'at one place, Sayyid Ahmad lives and is fresh in everyone's memory – in AMU. Here, he is the indisputable hero' (p. 279). Not only at AMU, though.

The chapters in this collection remind us repeatedly how complex, contradictory, and critical Sayyid Ahmad Khan was, not just to the Muslims in colonial India of the nineteenth century, but to all the Indians of Hindustan, to science and rationality, education and to the notions of identity and nation. However, what dominates in these chapters is a 'Muslim reading' of Sayyid Ahmad, rather than an Indian one, i.e., the focus of these chapters is on Sayyid Ahmad as a 'Muslim' thinker, activist and intellectual, and his Indian-ness is insufficiently emphasised. Perhaps it is difficult to imagine him otherwise, outside of his particular cultural, religious, and social milieu, but such a reading would have added a more critical and interesting exploration of Sir Sayyid and might have located him more concretely in colonial India interacting with the British and with their Hindu subjects. What is missing in this collection, and in much work on Sayyid Ahmad, is the impact he had on Hindustan other than on the Muslim *qaum*, an absence which reaffirms, for many, his supposedly communalistic presence, diminishing his contribution to science, rationality, and education, outside of a specific Muslim domain.

This is largely an unapologetically hagiographic evaluation of Sayyid Ahmad Khan, which could have done with much substantive critique and the unsettling of an older form of doing history. For example, many scholars in their contributions either praise or, without qualification accept the notion that Sayyid Ahmad accepted 'a tone and style of compromise' (p. 21), and that he 'estimated that educated Muslims would be allies of the British administration. This approach was not an admission of subservience, but it was a claim to partnership' (p. 33). Was this partnership or subservience, compromise, or surrender? And did this strategy really bring about 'civilisational dignity' to Muslims? In this era of decolonialising history, perhaps a more radical and critical interpretation of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan would be of greater use.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan is greatly revered in Pakistan — primarily in Urdu-speaking Karachi, where the Aligarhists migrated to; Lahore has its Muhammad Iqbal. There has, however, been very little objective analysis, reflection, or criticism on his role in creating a modern Muslim colonial subject of a particular type, with all its contradictions and consequences, both good and bad, as any seminar and publication around his

biennial birth celebrations in Pakistan would reveal. Sadly, for this reason, the narrative in Pakistan has become one unilinear trajectory, from Sir Sayyid, to separatism, to Partition and the making of Pakistan.

Given the numerous attributes of Sir Sayyid mentioned in this book, in equally important ways many of his traits, intellectual pursuits and thought processes are completely missing from contemporary Pakistan. From being the ‘most important Indian Muslim’ for the colonial British, his presence and shadow is foundational for Pakistan. In many important ways, one can claim that Pakistan is both the success as well as the failure of Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s project.
