

Defending the “Community”: Sir Sayyid's Concept of *Qaum*

by Frances W. Pritchett, Feb. 2017

Sir Sayyid's long and adventurous life contained two or three ordinary lifetimes full of activity. In the larger societal arena, his beloved Aligarh Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (1878) was his supreme achievement, but in other domains as well he consistently saw himself, and was seen, as a mediator between British and “native” ideas and interests. Not surprisingly, his literary output was voluminous – he has left us records of his antiquarian interests (*āšār ul-ṣanādīd*, 1854 [1847]), his religious views (a commentary on the Qur'an), and his journalistic commitments (*tahzīb ul-aḵhlāq*), along with numerous letters, essays, reviews, and speeches on a wide variety of topics.

Undoubtedly the greatest watershed in Sir Sayyid's life was the rebellion of 1857. As an East India Company administrator posted in Bijnor, he was emphatically true to his salt, risking his life repeatedly in defense of British lives and interests. Then in 1858, almost before the rebellion was over, he recorded his personal experiences and local impressions in “History of the Bijnor Rebellion.” But the Bijnor account, fascinating though it is, has always been obscured by Sir Sayyid's greater achievement during this intensely turbulent year: his famous work, really a sort of long pamphlet, called “The Causes of the Indian Revolt” (*asbāb-e baḡhāvāt-e hind*).

In writing a work with such a title, at so fraught a time, Sir Sayyid knew that he was courting trouble. But he was determined. Once Sir Sayyid had gotten 500 copies of his Urdu pamphlet printed, the result was a dramatic scene:

When Sir Sayyid resolved to send them to Parliament and the Government of India, his friends forbade him. And Master Ramchandra's younger brother, Ra'e Shankar Das, who at that time was a clerk in Moradabad and was Sir Sayyid's extremely close friend, said to him, “Burn all these books, and don't by any means put your life in danger.” Sir Sayyid said, “To make clear all these matters to the Government, I consider to be for the welfare of the country and the community [*qaum*] and the Government itself; thus if it would be beneficial to the rulers and the people both, then even if some harm would come to me, that's acceptable.” When Ra'e Shankar Das saw Sir Sayyid's stubborn determination, and when no effect was achieved by his own persuasion, then tears came to his eyes and he fell silent. Sir Sayyid first performed a sup-

plementary prayer, then asked God's blessing, and at once sent off almost all the 500 copies in a single parcel to England. And he sent one copy to the Government of India, and kept some copies in his own possession.¹

Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), Sir Sayyid's younger contemporary and great admirer, goes on to tell in his biography *An Immortal Life* (1901) the full story of how this pamphlet caused some Englishmen to distrust Sir Sayyid as a malcontent or even a traitor, while others warmly defended him. Over time, Hali reports, his manifest sincerity won the hearts of even the most determined skeptics.

Hali claims that the pamphlet was translated a number of times during those first years after 1857, but these earlier translations were apparently made for internal governmental use, and were not widely disseminated. It was not until the 1873 translation by “his two European friends” (Major-General G. F. I. Graham and Sir Auckland Colvin) that Sir Sayyid's work became well known, and this translation is the only form in which the pamphlet is normally cited; it was, after all, issued with Sir Sayyid's personal approval.²

Sir Sayyid's pamphlet is full of free-flowing emotion and rife with self-contradiction. The most conspicuous, unignorable internal contradiction involves Sir Sayyid's shifting attitude(s) toward what he refers to, loyally and possessively, as “our” Government. He prefaces his work with a kind of credo: “An honest exposition of Native ideas is all that our Government requires to enable it to hold the country with the full concurrence of its inhabitants and not merely by the sword.” His official stance is thus sanguine and optimistic in the extreme. In his introduction, he declares that the recent “proclamation issued by Her Majesty contains such ample redress for every grievance” that his pamphlet can be of historical interest only; still, since no “native of the country” has yet publicly expressed his views about the “disturbances,” he will venture to do so.

After passing in review a number of commonly but erroneously ascribed causes of the rebellion, Sir Sayyid provides his own official diagnosis: “The non-admission of a native as a member into the Legislative Council was the original cause of the out-break.”

1 Altaf Husain Hali, *ḥayāt-e jāved* [An Immortal Life] (New Delhi: Taraqqi Urdu Bureau, 1982 [1901]), pp. 93-94. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted. See also *Hayat-i-Javed (A Biography of Sir Sayyid)*, trans. by David J. Matthews (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1994).

2 In this paper all citations will be from this “official” 1873 English translation unless otherwise noted. The article numbers given in square brackets come from within this edition of the text. Its somewhat idiosyncratic and considerably varying spellings have been retained. For online access to this edition, and to much related material as well, see

<http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00Urdu/asbab/index.html>.

This he describes as the “one great cause,” while all others are but secondary [0.20]. He then goes on to enumerate five such subsidiary causes, each of which has many “branches” of its own. Any reader who considers their ramifications will find Sir Sayyid's official view simply bizarre. It's impossible to believe that the presence of a single native member in the Legislative Council could ever have prevented all those grievances from developing, or have rectified them when they did develop.

In fact Sir Sayyid himself can't sustain his own official view. As he enumerates the long lists of “Native” grievances, he presents them more and more forcefully and personally, until he actually says, with an engaging show of fairness, “The English Government had, however, many, very many, good points. I do not condemn it entirely.” He enumerates such benefits as security of travel, the postal system, and the protection of the poor. Then lest we overrate these, he concludes severely, “But it must be borne in mind that the benefits derived from the above do not efface the feeling that I have above portrayed” [3.8]. What a mental and emotional journey – from a small problem (no native in the Legislative Council) and a sense that “ample redress for every grievance” is already at hand, to that grudgingly concessive “I do not condemn it entirely”! But it is a back-and-forth journey, with many by-lanes and detours, that Sir Sayyid made again and again, throughout his long life.

Sir Sayyid's goals in writing the pamphlet, as reported by Hali, were basically threefold: to be of service to the country and people as a whole, and to the Government, and especially to the (Muslim) “community,” the *qaum*. The Government would benefit by understanding the rebellion more accurately; the people in general, and the Muslims in particular, would benefit by being freed from the (excessive) blame for the rebellion that the Government had wrongly ascribed to them. Throughout his pamphlet Sir Sayyid wrestles with the question of this blame; since the Government has laid the chief share of blame on the Muslims, he tries especially to defend his own religious community. His defense develops along several lines, some of them mutually contradictory.

What might be called his first line of defense is to show that Indians in general deserve much less blame for the rebellion than the Government has ascribed to them. Under the Company's government, he argues, Hindustanis in general have become progressively poorer: thus we learn in [3.5] and [3.8] that “poverty” induced the poor to work for the rebels, and to rejoice at the idea of a change in government. And there's an additional dimension to the situation as well, for the circumstances of the rebellion “appeared more serious to the authorities than they in reality were”:

It is well known in India that the taking of service is no offence. Whoever pays is served. It is thought wrong not to tender allegiance to a king who may have been proclaimed king in the place of another deposed. [4.10]

The Government's violent vengefulness and wholesale accusations of “treason” were thus an overreaction based on a misunderstanding of what was in fact more like a somewhat haphazard “mutiny” [5.7].

As compared to these general economic and political considerations, however, Sir Sayyid gives far more prominence to religious causes:

There is not the smallest doubt that all men whether ignorant or well-informed, whether high or low, felt a firm conviction that the English Government was bent on interfering with their religion and with their old established customs. They believed that Government intended to force the Christian Religion and foreign customs upon Hindu and Mussulman alike. This was the chief among the secondary causes of the rebellion. [1.2]

In the analysis of these causes Sir Sayyid's second line of defense appears: he tries to show that Hindus participated as fully in the rebellion as did Muslims, so that Muslims ought not to be singled out for special distrust – as, most conspicuously, they had been. He not only emphasizes the extensiveness and centrality of perceived religious grievances, but also argues that some of these were particularly significant to Hindus. (One such grievance is an arrangement for shared meals in jails that violates caste rules [1.12]; another is an act increasing the legal rights of widows, which is “opposed to practice of the Hindu religion” [2.2].) Near the end of the pamphlet he concludes, “If the whole facts regarding the rebellion be thoroughly sifted, I feel certain that we shall find that just as many Hindoos were concerned therein as Mahommadans.” [4.10]

But there's a third line of defense as well. Even if the Muslims did play a disproportionately large part in the rebellion, as Sir Sayyid himself sometimes explicitly states, he argues that this is understandable – because they in fact had a disproportionately large share of grievances. Many of these grievances were based on historical or cultural factors. For example, when it came to the resumption by the government of revenue-free lands, the Muslims had more such lands to lose, so that it was the Muslims “on whom this grievance fell far more heavily than on the Hindus” [2.6].

Even when Sir Sayyid speaks of the difficulties faced by “the Hindustanees” in general, “who are becoming more and more impoverished every day” [2.10], he maintains that

this “overwhelming poverty of the Indians” too is “particularly of the Mohammadans” – for it is they who suffer most from the lack, under British rule, of aristocratic employment opportunities:

A native's best profession is service. Now although everyone felt the difficulty of getting service, this difficulty pressed most heavily on the Mahommadans. It must be borne in mind that the Hindoos, the original inhabitants of the country, were never in former days in the habit of taking service, but on the contrary they were each engaged in such work as their forefathers had been engaged in before them. The Brahmins never took service, the Vaishyas were always traders and bankers; the Kshatriyas, once lords of the land, never took service, but each kept his own small portion of land [3.3].

Because the Muslims “came in the train of former conquerors and gradually domesticated themselves in India,” they were “all dependent on service,” and because of the scarcity under British rule of suitably “honourable” opportunities for “the higher class of Mahommadans,” over time “they, far more than the Hindoos, were put to much inconvenience and misery” [3.4]. Because of this aristocratic history, the Muslims have more pride than the Hindus:

For centuries the Mahommadan's position in India has been an honourable one. There is an element of shame in his disposition. He has no grasping desire for money; he esteems honour above all other things; and there are many proofs on record, which shew that the Muhammadan is not easily brought to do that which, under the influence of temptation, other races [*qaum*] in India will do without compunction [4.6].

But ultimately more central than such economic and social grievances are religious ones – and in these cases too, Muslims have had more to lose. The last item in section 1, “The interference in religious matters more repugnant to the Muhammadans, and its causes” [1.14], provides an intriguing comparative analysis of Islam and Hinduism, in which Sir Sayyid attempts to distinguish orthodoxy from orthopraxy:

All these causes rendered the Muhammadans more uneasy than the Hindus. The reason of this, I take to be that Hindu faith consists rather in the practice of long-established rites and forms, than in the study of doctrine. The Hindus recognise no canons and laws, or appeals to the heart and conscience. Their creed does not admit of such things. Hence it is that they are exceedingly in-

different about speculative doctrine. They insist upon nothing excepting the strict observance of their old rites, and of their modes of eating and drinking. It does not annoy or grieve them to see such rites and observances as they consider necessary, disregarded by other men.

Muhammadans, on the contrary, looking upon the tenets of their creed as necessary to Salvation and upon the neglect of them as damnation, are thoroughly well-grounded in them. They regard their religious precepts as the ordinances of God. Hence it was that the Muhammadans were more uneasy than the Hindus, and that, as might have been expected, they formed the majority of the rebels. [1.14].

However we may feel about the accuracy of these accounts, the Urdu style is flowing and powerful, even if at times the exact grammar is hard to pin down. Sir Sayyid's rhetoric not only has Biblical resonances, but contains numerous cited Biblical passages ([4.2] ff.). It is bracing to hear him speak truth to power. He works hard to defend Indians in general, and his own Muslim "community" in particular, from British reproach.

Thus it is all the more dismaying to find that almost at the end of his pamphlet, Sir Sayyid offers to the Government some very explicitly Machiavellian "divide and rule" advice. One of the pre-1857 errors the Government had made, he says, was to include Hindus and Muslims in the same military regiments:

[5.2] If these two castes formed distinct Regiments perhaps the Mahommadans would not have objected to the use of the new cartridges.

Government certainly did put the two antagonistic races [*hindū aur musalmān donoñ qaumoñ ko jo āpas meñ muḵhālif haiñ*] into the same regiment, but constant intercourse had done its work and the two races in regiment had almost become one. It is but natural and to be expected, that a feeling of friendship and brotherhood must spring up between the men of a regiment, constantly brought together as they are. They consider themselves as one body, and thus it was that the difference which exists between Hindus and Mahommadans had, in these regiments, been almost entirely smoothed away.

[5.3] The employment of Hindus and Mahommadans in the same regiment.

If a portion of the regiment engaged in anything, all the rest joined. If separate regiments of Hindoos and separate regiments of Mahommadans had been

raised, this feeling of brotherhood could not have arisen, and, in my opinion, the Muhammadan regiments would not have refused to receive the new cartridges.

Sir Sayyid thus loyally offers to the colonial government his best political advice. Nothing in the pamphlet suggests that he finds this advice at all repugnant, or even problematical. It reflects a basically tripartite scheme of analysis: there are Hindus, there are Muslims, and there is “our Government.” In the original Urdu text, each of the first two groups is unproblematically referred to as a *qaum*, for which the only “least marked” translation is “community.”

After the hardships of 1857, the following three decades were easier for Sir Sayyid. He campaigned tirelessly for his Aligarh Muslim Anglo-Oriental College (1878), raising money for it among people of every community, and admitting boys from other communities as well as Muslims (provided that they came from good families). He traveled to England and admired much of what he saw; he made warm friendships with many Englishmen; he became so theologically liberal that conservative parents stipulated that their sons could attend the College only if Sir Sayyid himself had no hand in their religious education. As always, he had patrons and friends from different religious communities. Hali has told us the story of those years in *An Immortal Life*, and David Lelyveld has given us *Aligarh: The First Generation*, to which we all owe so much.

In 1885, however, an event occurred that horrified him – an event that might have seemed at the time to be a tempest in a teapot, but that has loomed much larger over the years. This was the founding of the Indian National Congress. Despite Sir Sayyid's own personally liberal, trans-communalist tendencies, this event seemed to rouse him to extreme anger. Rejecting the urgent appeals and remonstrances of Badruddin Tyabji and other friends, he showed a furious hostility to this small nascent organization. He didn't merely decline to join it himself; he didn't merely advise his own friends not to join it. He pulled out all possible stops, and opposed it as publicly as possible, with his whole heart and soul.

In Lucknow, on Dec. 18, 1887, Sir Sayyid devoted a major speech to an urgent, even desperate-sounding, appeal to Muslims not to join the Congress; a few months later (March 14, 1888) he reiterated his arguments in a second major speech at Meerut. If these speeches did not mark the introduction of the “two-nation theory” into Indian political discourse, they certainly gave it all the impetus of Sir Sayyid's personal prestige

and powerful rhetoric. They laid down the track, and greased the rails, that led straight to the logic of Partition.

The 1887 talk was presented before the Mahomedan Educational Congress, and according to the "Pioneer" (Allahabad), upper-class Muslims had come from all over North India to hear it:

There were present the taluqdars of Oudh, members of the Government Services, the Army, the Professions of Law, the Press and the Priesthood; Syeds, Shaikhs, Moghals and Pathans belonging to some of the noblest families in India; and representatives of every school of thought, from orthodox Sunni and Shiah Maulvis to the young men trained in Indian colleges or in England.³

Sir Sayyid spoke for an hour and a half, interrupted often by cheers. This speech was a carefully prepared major address. Yet it is truly surprising and disappointing to read. From our perspective, Sir Sayyid is making arguments of social-class snobbishness, ethnic chauvinism, and unabashed religious communalism. His reasoning is slipshod and unconvincing. He is supposed to be, by his own lights, a rational thinker and a liberal reformer, an educator rather than a demagogue. Why does he so passionately reject the possibility that Indians might fruitfully come together as individuals? It will be helpful to consider the nature of his arguments, and see how they can best be explained.

I have translated the 1887 talk from the Urdu as literally as I could manage, and have made it available on my website.⁴ For convenient reference, I have divided the talk into numbered sections. For reasons of space the whole speech cannot be reproduced here, but it is well worth reading in full (as indeed is the Meerut 1888 speech that forms a kind of sequel to it, and that is also available on my website). For our present purposes, I offer an outline of the main points, based on my own translation (since the "Pioneer" translation had not been officially endorsed by Sir Sayyid):

(1) There is a kind of political tumult today in Hindustan, and I must tell you my views about it.

3. *Sir Syed Ahmed on the Present State of Indian Politics, Consisting of Speeches and Letters Reprinted from the "Pioneer"* (Allahabad: The Pioneer Press, 1888), pp. 1-24. A modern facsimile version (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1982).

4. The whole speech in my translation, along with the "Pioneer" reporter's translation, the Urdu text, and other relevant material as well, including the Meerut 1888 speech, will be found at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00islamlinks/txt_sir_sayyid_lucknow_1887.html.

(2) The Government has created a Council that makes laws, and has invited knowledgeable administrators and nobles (“Ra’is”) to sit on it.

(3) It must invite the Ra’is, rather than inviting people on the basis of personal worth, because only the Ra’is can mix socially with the Viceroy and his circle, and only they can be accepted by the upper classes as suitable to rule over the country:

Will the Ra’ises of our land like it if a man of low [*adnā*] community [*qaum*] or low rank [*darjah*], even if he has taken a B.A. degree or an M.A., and even if he is also worthy, would sit and rule over them, would be master of their wealth, property, and honor? Never – nobody at all will like it. (Cheers.)

It is our misfortune that our Ra’ises are a worthless lot and can do nothing in Council for the benefit of Hindustan.

(4) The Council carefully considers public opinion before promulgating laws.

(5) The Government must also fulfill its duty to keep the Queen's rule in Hindustan firm and secure.

(6) At present we have full access to our Government – we can express our ideas, and obtain a fair hearing for our claims.

(7) Chief among the many demands of the Congress is that all Government posts should be allotted by competitive examination, and that these examinations should all be held in India rather than England.

(8) When examinations held in England result in the appointment of people of low birth, such people are of “no benefit,” while “those of high family honor the Ra’ises and treat them well, and impress upon people's hearts an image of the honor of the English people [*inglish qaum*] and the justice of the British Government, and are of benefit to the country and the Government.” But at least England is so far from us that we don't know the family backgrounds of the officers who come here. Whereas the “noble communities [*sharīf qaum*] of Hindustan will not like it for a Hindustani of low rank, with whose roots and background they are acquainted, to be the master of their lives and property. (Cheers.)”

(9) Competitive examinations are suited to countries in which a single community [*qaum*] lives, or in which various well-integrated communities can compete on a footing of equality.

But this is not the state of our country, in which different communities [*qaum*] dwell. On one side there are the Hindus, on another side Musalmans, and on a third side the Parsis. Even among the Hindus, the Hindus of our region [*mulk*] and the Bengalis of the eastern region and the Marathas of the Dakani region are not one.

These communities are not on an equal footing with regard to competitive examinations:

Now this is the question: has the Musalmans' education and training, and their knowledge of literature, which for the Government's high posts is necessary, reached such a level that it would be equal to that of the Hindus? No, absolutely not. Now, taking the Musalmans and Hindus of our region [*mulk*] together, I ask whether they both can equal the Bengalis. Absolutely not. When this is the situation, then in this country how can competitive examinations be instituted? (*Cheers.*)

(10) Competitive examinations would result in government by Bengalis. "All the communities [*qaum*], not just Musalmans but all the Hindus of this region [*mulk*], the honored Rajahs and brave Rajputs too who remember their ancestors' swords, will see as their ruler one Bengali, who upon seeing a knife would drop down beneath a chair." To endure the rule of Bengalis would be "to suffer shoe-beatings."

(11) The Congress's second request is that members of the Viceroy's Council should be elected. Even assuming this could happen, the Hindus would vote for a Hindu, and the Muslims for a Muslim. Thus there would be four votes for a Hindu, for every vote for a Muslim. "And it will be like a game of dice in which the Hindus have four dice and we have one."

(12) If electors were chosen through a property qualification, the Bengalis would entirely dominate the Council, and other, more martial communities would become restive.

(13) If a system of proportional representation were adopted, there would still be four Hindu members for every Muslim member.

(14) Even if Muslims were given half the seats in the Council, not one of them would be able and willing to do the work.

(15) Even if a Muslim were somehow made Viceroy, he could never grant such a request.

(16) Even if the whole of Hindustan joined the agitation of the Bengalis, “then is the Government so weak that it cannot suppress it?” We must remember how quickly the rebellion of 1857 was put down.

(17) The Government is wrong to distrust us Muslims, but such distrust is understandable, for we are a martial community. “We are those who for six or seven hundred years ruled over Hindustan. (*Cheers.*) We are those from whose hands the Government snatched [*chhīnnā*] the country.... We neither eat fish, nor fear that if we eat with knife and fork we might cut our fingers. (*Cheers.*)”

(18) A commotion confined to Bengal is not a danger. “But if you create the same commotion in these regions [*mulk*], and among the Rajputs, or among the Pathans of Peshawar – will you content yourself with the scratching of the pen, or the babbling of voices? At that time, then, the Government will have to send the army, and explain with bayonets what their cure is for this turmoil.”

(19) Another foolish Congress request is to have approval of the budget for the Army. “He who has never seen a battlefield, or seen the mouth of a cannon – he says, 'we will prepare the budget for the army!'”

(20) Another Congress request is to be able to have representatives sit in the Council and speak, even if they are not allowed to vote. What is the benefit of such “babble,” and what is to be gained from it?

(21) Another Congress request is that army schools for officer training should be established in Hindustan, and Hindustani volunteers should be appointed as officers. Indeed, the Government ought to do this, and it is wrong of them to distrust the Hindustanis.

Oh brothers! I have blamed the Government in such harsh words – but that time is coming when our brother Pathans, Sadats, Hashimis, and Quraishis, from whose blood comes the scent of the blood of Abraham, will at that time wear glittering uniforms and become Colonels and Majors in the army. But we ought to wait for that time. The Government will certainly attend to this, on condition that you do not permit it to become suspicious.

We should continue to show our strict loyalty; only then can we make a claim for appointment as officers.

(22) We ought to have patience, and let such military reforms unfold gradually:

[For] when you conquered Hindustan, what did you yourselves do? For how many centuries was there the name of not even one Hindu on the list of soldiers? But when the time of the Mughal dynasty came and there was mutual trust between them, it was these very Hindus who were appointed to high posts in the army. Be just – how many days has the Government been in power? How many days has it been since the Rebellion? And that shock that affected the Government, although it was from the ignorant/barbarous [*jāhil*] and not from the Ra'is – please tell me how many days ago it took place!

(23) We should remember that election to local offices and councils will always present a numerical problem for Muslims.

Just now in Calcutta a bearded Musalman of very venerable family met me and said this: 'A disaster has taken place! In our city eighteen members were to be elected. Not one Musalman was elected; they were all Hindus. Now I want from the Government, the appointment of some Musalman. I hope that the Government would appoint me.' This is the state of all the cities.... Then how can we walk along that road, on which we are neither capable, nor in control?

(24) And in conclusion:

Friends! Don't say that I'm like that dyer who because he only knew how to dye things mango-colored, said that only mango color pleased him. But I say truthfully that the thing that will raise you to a high level, is only high education. As long as in our community such people will not be produced, we will remain low [*zalīl*], we will remain below others, and we will not attain such honor as our heart wishes to attain.

Perhaps the largest internal contradiction in this remarkable speech, and one that leaps to the attention of the Urdu reader, is the quite tricky use of the word, and concept, of *qaum*. In Platts's dictionary, *qaum* is defined as “A people, nation; a tribe, race, family; sect, caste,” which pretty well covers all the bases. But the problem is that Sir Sayyid's usage shifts from one sense to another in a very slippery way.

For one of his basic assumptions in the Lucknow 1887 speech is that the Hindu and Muslim “communities” would always feel and act as massive religious blocs. (This is the primary assumption of “Causes of the Indian Revolt” as well – though there Sir Sayyid also shows how easy it is to change the behavior of “these two antagonistic

racess” by, for example, putting Hindu and Muslim soldiers together in the same platoon.)

In Sir Sayyid's rhetoric a polarized “two-community” view of Hindus and Muslims is so fundamental that he depicts the situation even more ominously in his Meerut 1888 speech only a few months later. Suppose, he says in that speech, that the British should leave.

Then, in Hindustan, who will be the ruler? In such a situation will the Hindus and Muslims, both communities [*qaum*], be able to sit together, with equal rank, on a single throne? Absolutely not. It will certainly happen that one of them would conquer and suppress the other.⁵

He goes on to envision scenarios of escalating military intervention from various Asian and European powers.

Yet just as in “Causes of the Indian Revolt,” in his Lucknow 1887 speech too he himself also offers arguments that contradict this monolithic-bloc view. For example, there are clearly regional differences within the “communities.” In section (9) he observes, “Even among the Hindus, the Hindus of our region [*mulk*] and the Bengalis of the eastern region and the Marathas of the Dakani region are not one [*ek*].”

Moreover, as he repeatedly emphasizes, there are cross-cutting social class differences, and each social class too becomes a *qaum*. In section (3) he invites his upper-class listeners to consider how distasteful it would be if “a man of low community [*adnā qaum*]” were chosen by competitive examination to preside over their affairs. His listeners respond with cheers. In section (i) he returns to this point, emphasizing the displeasure that the “noble communities [*sharīf qaum*] of Hindustan” would feel at such degradation. The whole speech assumes this elite perspective, and has nothing whatsoever to say to lower-class Muslims.

But most crucially, Sir Sayyid grapples with the problem of the Bengalis; often he differentiates them clearly from “Hindus” in general. In section (9) he laments that not only do the Muslims not equal the Hindus in educational attainment, but also the “Hindus of our region” do not equal the Bengalis. In his lexicon, all “Bengalis” are Hindus. He clarifies the point in his Meerut speech: “If we take the whole of Bengal together, then al-

5 Shaikh Isma'il Panipati, *khuṭbāt-e sar sayyid, jild-e duvvum* [Speeches of Sir Sayyid, vol. 2], p. 97. Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab, 1973, p. 97; my translation.

most half will be Muslims and a bit over half will be Bengalis.”⁶ The fact that there are very large numbers of “Bengali Muslims” is one that he cannot or will not see.

It is these (Hindu) Bengalis, always, who are the chief objects of his envy and anxiety. They are cowardly: they “eat fish,” they fear that if they would eat with a knife they might cut their fingers [(17)]. Heightening the contrast, he praises his listeners for their own martial heritage and qualities “All the communities [*qaum*], not just Musalmans but all the Hindus of this region [*mulk*], the honored Rajahs and brave Rajputs too who remember their ancestors' swords” would feel that to be governed by Bengalis would be “to suffer shoe-beatings” [(10)]. (Here again he depicts conspicuous regional differences among Hindus, so that his fear of their always voting as a monolithic bloc looks increasingly implausible.)

His listeners are to think of themselves as martial – but not too martial. Sir Sayyid here treads a remarkably narrow rhetorical path. The Muslims are the community from whom the British seized Hindustan; they still retain the martial prowess of their ancestors. But they must also be careful, in the aftermath of their major role in the rebellion of 1857, not to show even the appearance of disloyalty to the Government, because they would then be vigorously, and understandably, slapped down. Because they are so full of martial prowess, they must be extra-careful to show themselves as peaceful and loyal.

All this convoluted and internally contradictory rhetoric, with all its uncharacteristically mean-spirited ethnic sneers and boasts, can only be explained by the urgent need to appeal most viscerally to his audience. For the situation as he sees it is dire indeed. Sir Sayyid speaks of situations in which competitive examinations are possible: first, those in which the whole country consists of a single community [*qaum*]; second, those in which “various communities would live, but those communities would have come together and become almost one community, like England and Scotland.”

The third situation for competitive examinations is this: that although in one country different communities may live, still with regard to worthiness, education, and wealth they would all be equal, and to every community the opportunity can be available that through this examination it can obtain equal advantage – even if it might never do so, but the opportunity would be there [(9)].

Everything Sir Sayyid wishes for his community is here summed up. Yet he is all too aware how far his community is from a state of “worthiness, education, and wealth” that

6 Shaikh Isma'il Panipati 1973, p. 36; my translation.

would enable its elite young men to compete on equal terms with those of other communities. He knows against what obstacles, chronicled in detail by Hali, he struggled to establish his college at Aligarh. Muslims should not join the Congress and share in its demands for competitive examinations, because they are not yet prepared to compete as individuals; supporting voting rights too would be like playing “a game of dice in which the Hindus have four dice and we have one.” Only through the most cohesive group solidarity can Muslims achieve political potency – and thus sustain themselves until some happy, fulfilling day when they will no longer need this kind of crutch.

At the risk, Sir Sayyid says, of sounding like a dyer who has only one shade of dye, he concludes his speech by insisting once again, as he has in dozens of speeches before, that “the thing that will raise you to a high level, is only 'high education'.” He is so determined to emphasize the phrase that he gives the English phrase in transliteration, followed by an Urdu translation. He then predicts solemnly, “As long as in our community such people will not be produced, we will remain low [*zalīl*], we will remain below others, and we will not attain such honor as our heart wishes to attain.”