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Preface to Historicising Sayyid-ness: Social Status and Muslim Identity in South Asia

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Abstract

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Preface to Historicising Sayyid-ness: Social Status and Muslim Identity in South Asia

SARAH ANSARI

This Special Issue, entitled 'Historicising Sayyid-ness: Social Status and Muslim Identity in South Asia', and guest-edited by Drs Laurence Gautier and Julien Levesque, explores changing conceptions of 'Sayyid-ness' in various historical contexts in South Asia with the aim of challenging essentialised understandings of what a Sayyid identity has meant there. *JRAS* readers, therefore, may be interested to learn that one of the key individuals discussed in this Special Issue – Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98) – was himself a member of the Royal Asiatic Society for much of the second half of the nineteenth century. The 1866 issue of the *JRAS*, for instance, lists him as an Honorary Member, based in Ghazipur in the United Provinces (India). 'Sir Syed', as contemporaries often referred to him following his knighthood in 1888, had moved to Ghazipur from Moradabad in 1860: it was there that he set up a personal printing press, an English medium school and a 'Scientific Society', before launching his more famous educational initiatives centred on Aligarh, much closer to Delhi. His death was first reported in the July 1898 issue of the *JRAS*, and then formally recorded in the 'Report of the Council for the Year 1898' (July 1899), though the more detailed obituary that members had earlier been promised seems to have failed to materialise.

A second very prominent Indian Muslim actively associated with the Society (who is also referenced in this Special Issue) was Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928), who following a career as a judge in colonial service retired to England, where he had studied as a young man. According to his obituary (by A Yusuf Ali) published in the *JRAS* in October 1928, he had been elected a member of the Society in 1904, and then became a member of Council (1907-11; 1915-18) and Vice President (1911-15). As Yusuf Ali, put it, to "the courtly manners of a cultured Muslim gentleman", Syed Ameer Ali had added "a powerful intellect and absorbing love for Islam", his loss consequently resulting in "a big gap in Muslim learning and public life". But digging into earlier issues of the *JRAS* (now happily available via jstor.org as well as other online archival repositories) unearths a passing reference in 1877 to a non-residential member by the name of "Moulvi Syed Ameer Ali, MA, LLB". It would seem likely (considering that he had spent time in London between 1869-73, when he was called to the Bar at the Inner Temple) that Syed Ameer Ali's association with the Society goes back further

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