



## **The Politicisation of Muslim Delhi in the 1910s: Mohamed Ali, *Comrade* and the Public Sphere**

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KEYWORDS: DELHI, PAN-ISLAMISM, URBAN HISTORY, MUSLIM IDENTITY, PUBLIC  
SPHERE

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### **Introduction**

A favoured contemporary trope among the Indian Muslim public in the early twentieth century depicted Delhi as a city long past its prime—no longer the 'seat of Muslim power and glory' but the scene of its 'gradual decline and decay'.<sup>1</sup> While the city had outwardly recovered from its annihilation by the British in wake of the Sepoy Mutiny (First Indian War of Independence), benefitting from a commercial boom thanks to its position at the junction of six railway lines, the psychological scars ran deep. It remained a political backwater, with a notoriously parochially-minded public, at most 'lethargically interested in national politics' (Gupta 1981: 196).

Indeed, the British decision to relocate the Imperial capital to Delhi in December 1911 was, in part, motivated by the city's distance—physically and ideologically—from the machinations of Bengali nationalists in Calcutta (Frykenberg 1986: 369). Yet the consequences for Delhi were significant. By December 1918, it had become a centre for political activity and a 'stage to which all eyes were directed' (Pernau 2013: 369), hosting the joint Muslim League and Congress meetings that witnessed the launch of the *Khilafat* movement. The *Khilafat* movement itself attracted the participation of a 'large number of people' (Gupta 1981: 197) in Delhi, which was also



the first city to heed Gandhi's call for mass action in response to the Rowlatt Act in March 1919.

This paper posits that the groundwork for this transformation was laid by the nascent politicisation of Delhi's Muslim community in the early-to-mid 1910s. In fact, in May 1915, just a few months after Viceroy Hardinge rather patronisingly dubbed Muslims throughout India as 'sulky but quiescent'<sup>2</sup>, Delhi's Muslims came out in their thousands to protest against the internment under the Defence of India Act of the journalist, publisher, political activist and later leader of the Muslim League, Mohamed Ali (1878-1931). The British authorities reported that, following successive protest meetings on 19-20 May, the following day: 'A crowd numbering about 7,000 was present at midday prayers at the Jama Masjid' to mark Mohamed Ali's internment, 'and many Muhammadan shops were closed as a sign of mourning. Many of those present were said to be in tears.'<sup>3</sup> Mohamed Ali was then garlanded and mobbed as he departed by motor car.

This was no parochial or elite concern, but an action involving thousands across multiple days in support of a national-profile figure. The reported full participation of the city's fractious Muslim merchant community in such an overtly political strike was unprecedented (Ferrell 1969: 273f.). Margrit Pernau (2013: 403) notes that the events indicated that Mohamed Ali's influence extended 'beyond the circles of those who had previously been politically active'.

In fact, Mohamed Ali had moved his weekly newspaper *Comrade* to Delhi in October 1912 with the express intention of using the new capital as a springboard to extend his influence:

To reach the masses, we must use their own language, and if all India is to be our province, we must seek a more central place than Calcutta [...] we trust Delhi will once more influence the thoughts and actions of the people of our country. ("The Sadness of Farewell", 14 Sept. 1912)

In light of this stated intent, an exploration of Mohamed Ali's activities in Delhi between his arrival in 1912 and internment in 1915 allows for fascinating insight into the dynamism injected into the city's nascent public sphere in the years immediately following the transfer of the capital—a period when politicians and activists to flocked to Delhi, throwing it open to national and transnational currents that were to profoundly impact its political scene.



This paper will not argue that Delhi suddenly eclipsed Calcutta or Bombay as a centre for political activity during the period 1912-15 (it did not), nor that that loyalism—especially among the Muslim elite—was not still widespread in 1919. Rather, it is interested in the question of how, to borrow a phrase from Sandria Freitag (1989: 194), political activists like Mohamed Ali helped forge a connection between elite public opinion and mass political action during the 1910s. By examining this nascent politicisation and constituency-building in an urban setting, it sheds critical light on the beginnings of the process that paved the way for the growth of secular nationalism and communalism from the 1920s onward. Moreover, it helps explain how Muslim identity became a prime site of political activity in Delhi.

Historians of north India's Muslim community have pointed to the 1910s as a period of 'major reformulations' (Jalal 2000: 165), involving a distinct politicisation and radicalisation of Muslim public opinion (Reetz 2006: 186). Nonetheless, the period remains curiously underserved in the ample academic literature. The key contributions on Muslim politics during the 1910s have been made by historians of the Khilafat movement (Minault 1982; Qureshi 1999). In particular, Gail Minault's (1982) seminal work has shown how a series of disappointments during the early 1910s led a new generation of political leaders to turn away from the long-held policy of loyalism and to cultivate the use of religious symbols and agitational politics to unite the disparate Indian Muslim community. Fuelling these developments was Pan-Islamist sentiment, in which growing despair over the fate of the ailing Ottoman Empire became a potent symbol embodying the feelings of marginalisation and decline that typified the community during this period.

Yet few studies have examined this critical period of the 1910s in the development of Muslim political consciousness in a specific urban setting. Full-length studies of Delhi by Narayani Gupta (1981) and Margrit Pernau (2013) provide important context. Gupta demonstrates that there was a vocal public opinion in Delhi by the beginning of the twentieth century (1981: 148), though it was almost exclusively preoccupied with local issues. Indeed, neither the nationalist Swadeshi nor Muslim educational reform movement based at Aligarh had elicited much interest (Gupta 1981: 151, 198). She depicts a city where commercial interests routinely trumped community or religion, albeit noting that growing numbers of individuals or groups of all religions were more forcefully asserting their public rights regarding religious observance (ibid.: 130).

With regards to the Muslim community, Pernau has shown how societal changes over the nineteenth century brought some *Ashraf* professionals



together with wealthier merchants to form a quasi-middle class that became deeply involved in Delhi's public sphere—specifically in acts of collective piety and social work—as they strove to wrest community leadership from the loyalist 'natural leaders' promoted by the British (Pernau 2013: 242).

Both studies point to the explosion of community associations, the arrival of 'national' politicians and growth of the press in the new capital in the 1910s as a driver for increased political participation (Pernau 2013: 395-9; Gupta 1982: 195-200). Moreover, Gupta directly attributes the positive response to the Khilafat movement to the patronage of Mohamed Ali and his equally activist if less eloquent older brother Shaukat (*ibid.*: 197). However, neither study examines in depth how Mohamed Ali was able to awaken the apparently apathetic Delhi population's interest in national concerns. Aparna Basu's (1981) account of Mohamed Ali's Delhi years provides some useful clues, though its brevity and narrative approach also leaves this question largely unanswered. Mohamed Ali's biographers (Iqbal 1974; Hasan 1981) shed little light on his Delhi activities, while more recent examinations have tended to focus on attempts to reconcile his political outlook (Rahman 2012; Wasti 2002) or examined his activities through the lens of Muslim intellectual history (Zahman 2018).

These studies show that Mohamed Ali's passionate advocacy of Muslim causes made him a controversial figure—many of his contemporaries considered him an aggressive extremist, while some historians have painted him as a charming yet irresponsible demagogue, interested only in whipping up communal passions to sell newspapers (Robinson 1993: 178f.). Yet it is important to note that he was a nationalist and staunch advocate for Muslim-Hindu unity, who did not view the assertion of a Muslim political identity as antithetical to collaboration for the cause of Indian nationalism (Minault 1982: 32; Jalal 2000: 181). As such, this paper does not examine Mohamed Ali's activities through the lens of communalism, instead aligning with the view that this phrase can only be used for activities after the 1920s (Freitag 1989: 96). Similarly, it excludes Delhi's Hindu community from its purview only because Mohamed Ali's activities were focused on issues affecting the Muslim community, which was thus more politically active during this period (Gupta 1981: 199).

This paper does not seek to interrogate Mohamed Ali's motives or politics, but to investigate his methods and situate them in a specific urban space and time. It develops upon existing studies by drawing their various strands together and grounding them in available primary source material,



primarily Mohamed Ali's weekly newspaper *Comrade*. The paper was published from Delhi between 1912 and 1914 and served as the main conduit for Mohamed Ali's ideas and literal and figurative hub for his activities. In examining the tone and subtext of its articles and commentaries, and supplementing this with official accounts of Mohamed Ali's activities, this paper examines how the *Comrade* editor sought local influence by campaigning across the 'multiple differentiated sites of cultural and political interaction' that made up Delhi's public sphere in the 1910s (Bhasin 2010: 72). It shows how, by linking transnational and national events to contemporary local concerns—both religious and commercial—he was able to exploit existing networks of patronage and loyalties to gain a significant following and forge fresh alliances among the heterogeneous urban Muslim community. It was these connections that were to bear fruit when the time for mass action came in 1919.

### **The press: *Comrade* and pan-Islamism**

Print capitalism lies at the heart of Habermas' theories as to the development of the public sphere in which opinion is formed (Habermas 174: 49, 53). Despite restrictions and censorship imposed by the colonial authorities, the press was an important forum for the development of public discourse in India.<sup>4</sup> In Delhi, an active press had been involved in expressing and informing public opinion during several local agitations, including over the closure of Delhi College in the 1870s and House Tax in 1902-06 (Gupta 1981: 105-12, 140-5). It was also involved in increasingly assertive insistences on Muslim rights, including to publicly slaughter cows and display beef for sale within the city walls (ibid.: 129). By 1911, there were 19 Urdu and three English newspapers printed from Delhi, which together sold around 11,400 copies per week, though none had a reach beyond the immediate environs of Delhi (Pernau 2013: 397f.). The advent of *Comrade* was to change that.

When Mohamed Ali brought his weekly newspaper from Calcutta to Delhi, it was already a well-established mouthpiece for elite Muslim opinion (Iqbal 1974: 86f.). Overall *Comrade* set an aspirational tone; it sought the uplift of the Muslim community and a leading place for it in a future self-governing India. Despite Mohamed Ali's tendency to write lengthy, florid and repetitive articles, admirers praised the wit of his prose and fervour of his journalism (Hasan 1999: 18). The authorities also approved, in November 1911 referring to it as 'the most reputable and important among the Muhammadan papers'.<sup>5</sup>



The newspaper's popularity was helped by the fact that the first year and a half of its existence coincided with a series of setbacks to the aspirations of the Indian Muslim elite, including the annulment in December 1911 of the partition of Bengal and collapse in August 1912 of the scheme to establish a Muslim university. *Comrade* vocalised the community's crushing disappointment over these developments, and the creeping sense they engendered that the British were no longer the Muslim community's best allies.<sup>6</sup>

These cumulative disappointments influenced a turn by Mohamed Ali to more strident advocacy for Muslim causes, at home and overseas, chief among them pan-Islamism (Rahman 2012: 258). He was among a crop of young Muslim activists quick to recognise the nascent power in the religious loyalties aroused by the increasingly brazen encroachments into Ottoman territory by Western powers after 1911 (Minault 1982: 24). Indeed, despite occasional outpourings of public sympathy for the Ottomans in the later 19th century, pan-Islamism only became widespread or politicised in India from 1911 onward. Robinson (2012: 78f.) argues that this was in large part due to extensive coverage of the travails of the Ottoman Empire in the Muslim press.

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In fact, Mohammed Ali's turn to more strident Pan-Islamism is reflected in the notable increase in related content in *Comrade* around the time it followed the Government of India to Delhi in October 1912.<sup>7</sup> The first Balkan war began in the same month, and *Comrade's* coverage included exhaustive analysis of its causes, course and consequences. Beyond sober analysis, *Comrade* appealed to Pan-Islamist sympathies. Mohamed Ali—in his signature emotive style—suggested parallels between the fate of the Ottoman Empire and that of India's Muslims by drawing on motifs that echoed the melancholic narrative that had become central to the community's understanding of its own experience:

Perhaps the day has, at last, arrived when the Turkey, with their backs to the wall, should fight the last fight for their existence [...] If, however, his rule is destined to close, it is far better he, too, should perish with his rule than live to bear the bondage of his slavery. ("The Last Fight of the Turk", 12 Oct. 1912)

The newspaper also stirred humanitarian sympathies with reports of 'hospitals full to overflowing with hundreds and thousands of stricken soldiers, some of whom have lain for days on the field of battle, and whose state of suffering and sickness is beyond description,' and of the 'misery



and hopelessness' of destitute refugees families. ("The Position at Constantinople", 1 Mar. 1913)

Mohamed Ali's pan-Islamism was to find fertile ground in Delhi. Despite its parochial reputation, the city was home to a proud Ashraf elite that treasured its cosmopolitan heritage. Indeed, there is evidence of pan-Islamist sympathies in Delhi from the late nineteenth century, with Muslims involved in Delhi's leather trade—who were to become some of Mohamed Ali's first supporters—having a long history of support for the Ottomans (Gupta 1981: 140, 153). Even before Mohamed Ali arrived in Delhi, it was clear that press reports of Ottoman misfortunes were stirring latent Pan-Islamist sentiment. The authorities in November 1911 noted that:

At Delhi [...] the war is now the one topic of conversation among Muhammadans, who are daily growing more and more excited over the wrongs suffered by Turkey. [They are] eagerly reading and discussing the latest War Supplements.<sup>8</sup>

Donations flooded into the newspaper's "Turkish Relief Fund", with Delhiites taking up a prominent space in the weekly list of donors published in *Comrade*. Indeed, of the 118,762 rupees collected by the end of October 1912, some 32,000 rupees alone had been raised in Delhi – an impressive sum for what was yet to become a major metropolis ("Turkish Relief Fund", 16 Nov. 1912). Moreover, the Delhi authorities were starting to show signs of concern, with the Intelligence Department noting in November 1912 that Mohamed Ali's arrival had 'greatly stimulated the activity of pan-Islamism in what was formerly a very quiet place' (Iqbal 1974: 75).

Mohamed Ali was able to sustain and deepen Muslim Delhi's enthusiasm for pan-Islamism through its involvement in *Comrade's* Medical Mission to Turkey, which provided a local connection to the transnational conflict. The mission—which was announced in *Comrade* on 19 October 1912 and departed mid-December—was the brainchild of the Ali brothers and headed by Delhi-based doctor Mukhtar Ahmad Ansari. It was funded largely by the paper's Turkish Relief Fund and consisted of 80 doctors and nurses from across the subcontinent—including 20 from Delhi—who were to operate two field hospitals in Turkey (Gupta 1981: 197).

*Comrade* coverage of the mission was quick to position Dr. Ansari as a local hero, noting his 'extensive practical experience during the last outbreak of cholera in Delhi, having had to deal with about fifty cases daily and succeeding in curing 80 per cent, in spite of having been called in generally very late.' ("The Departure of the Mission", 21 Dec. 1912). A





pictorial supplement from 25 January 1913 celebrating the mission's departure featured a photograph of 'Organiser' Mohamed Ali and 'Director' Dr. Ansari posing together in the khaki uniforms of the Medical Mission, complete with *jodhpurs* and *fez* hats amid plush surroundings—the picture of resolute heroism.

Once the mission had departed, Delhi's residents continued to enjoy a direct link to events in distant Turkey. Dr. Ansari diligently supplied letters for weekly publication in *Comrade* throughout the first half of 1913. In the letters, he lionised the mission's efforts and frequently boasted that his field hospitals outperformed those of the British Red Crescent and French and German Red Cross ("The All-India Medical Mission", 8 Feb. & 26 Apr. 1913). *Comrade*, meanwhile, reminded Delhi of its special connection with the medical mission, lauding it as 'not only the place that claims Dr. Ansari as one of her eminent citizens, but the actual birthplace of the movement' ("Delhi's Welcome", 12 July 1913). Delhi's enthusiasm for its local hero Dr. Ansari and close identification with the Medical Mission was underlined by the large public celebrations that marked its departure and return from the city as discussed later.

Freitag (1989: 15) argues that newspapers may be problematic as a historical record of public opinion because the implicit agenda of the producers 'may differ radically' from the values held by the intended audience. Yet while portions of the press, including at times *Comrade*, were guilty of sensationalism, there was also evidence that the fortunes of the Ottoman Empire reflected the interests of its readership. Most convincingly, heavy coverage of the Balkan Wars coincided with a massive increase in the circulation of *Comrade*, which shot up from 2,500 in May 1912 to 8,500 by 1913, outstripping that of other Delhi newspapers (Hasan 1999: 18). Other pan-Islamist newspapers enjoyed a similar boom. Their increasingly emotive reporting throughout 1911-13 reflected the profound crisis of confidence afflicting the Indian Muslim elite, anxious over its place as a minority in a potential future self-governing India. The Ottoman Empire's existential struggle served as both a potent symbol and real-life example of declining Muslim power and influence.

The outcome was that by early 1913, *Comrade* and other pan-Islamist newspapers began to reflect deep disillusionment with the British over their failure to protect the last remaining independent Muslim power. They openly called for Muslim's to unite to safeguard their interests, ergo those of Islam itself, which could no longer be entrusted to the British. Growing support for this outlook was underlined when Mohamed Ali's clique of





Western-educated pan-Islamists (dubbed the 'Young Muhammedans' or 'Young Party' by the authorities) dislodged the loyalist leadership of the Muslim League, which in March 1913 ratified a resolution signalling support for the attainment of 'a suitable means of self-government for India' (Robinson 1993: 228f.).

This challenge to loyalism had destabilising implications for leadership on the municipal level. In Delhi, as elsewhere, the British had developed a system of patronage; by awarding titles and semi-official positions, they created a loyal elite (the 'natural leaders') that owed its wealth and position to the colonial power (Singh 1990: 45). As Mohamed Ali's brand of pan-Islamism captured the public mood, the loyalist Delhi elite displayed their nervousness by funding a separate medical mission to Turkey (Basu 1981: 117).

Several accounts of Delhi refer to a pre-existing rivalry between this traditional elite, who largely followed the Hanafi religious school and tended to be associated with the Jama Masjid, and the Punjabi merchant fraternity, who had been the main beneficiaries of the city's commercial boom and were by and large associated with the *Wahabi ahl-i-Hadith* based around the more 'unorthodox' Fatehpuri Masjid (Gupta 1981: 128). Although the reality will have been more complex than this simplistic binary—as reports of overlapping membership of mosque committees suggest—Mohamed Ali's natural alignment with the latter camp may have exacerbated existing tensions.

A section of Delhi's Muslim community—notably many students and lawyers—formed a clique around the editor in Delhi; *Comrade's* office in Kucha-i-Chela quickly became a 'political salon' (Hasan 1999: 18). Mohamed Ali's closest supporters included wealthy Punjabi merchants, especially those in the leather trade, who, in turn, carried significant influence among some working-class Muslim artisan groups and the butchers (Ferrell 1969: 246; Pernau 2013: 399). If these groups were attracted by Mohamed Ali's pan-Islamism, the editor also directly courted their support by increasing coverage of local issues close to the heart of those groups that were his natural supporters.

In June 1913, *Comrade* covered a month-long butcher's strike in Delhi over municipal regulations related to the sale of meat. The issue had been a controversial issue in Delhi since the 1870s and triggered the first Hindu-Muslim clashes in the city in 1873-74 amid increasing contestation over public space between the religious communities (Pernau 2013: 384f.). The debate had since simmered over several years. Now the council wanted to



force butchers into municipal markets. However, this time the butchers had powerful backing, including Muslim merchants and some Muslim members of the municipal council.

In two long editorials on 21 June and 28 June 1913, Mohamed Ali argued in favour of the striking butchers' right to trade without restrictions. Although he conceded that 'it may appear to be of little moment to the public outside Delhi' the issue is 'one which is sure to crop up in one form or another everywhere' ("The Butchers Strike at Delhi I", 21 June 1913). By infusing a local issue with rhetoric of community self-determination Mohamed Ali was seeking to elevate it to an issue of national importance. He was also currying favour with the wealthy Muslim merchants and butchers—who not only had a history of pan-Islamism but were also the most organised of the labouring classes in the city (Ferrell 1969: 139f.). Indeed, Abdul Rahim, a wealthy hide merchant who was considered the leader of the butchers was to become closely associated with the Ali brothers (ibid.: 246).

The launch in June 1913 of *Comrade's* Urdu sister paper *Hamdard*, which rapidly gained a circulation four- to five-times larger than its vernacular contemporaries, increased Mohamed Ali's reach (Rahman 2012: 259). The editor was to repeatedly use his newspapers during 1913-14 to link local concerns to national or supranational issues to increase their relevance. Reporting campaigns over the preservation of Delhi's Mughal-era mosques and tombs, and around the Kanpur Mosque agitation were to skilfully build upon local grievances and echo pan-Islamist rhetoric—specifically the sense that Islam itself was under threat—to call for more strident community action.

### **Collective activities: celebrations and protests**

When *Comrade* reported on collections for its Turkish Relief Fund, it lauded donations from the 'elite of Delhi society' and 'prosperous Punjabi community', but also a 'collection of about three hundred rupees from the Muhammadan washermen of Delhi' ("The Departure of the Mission", 21 Dec. 1912). The whole community was involved. Yet low literacy levels in colonial India meant that the press as a forum for public discourse remained outside the scope of the masses.<sup>9</sup> While word-of-mouth served to aid the spread of information, newspapers remained a medium largely consumed by, and reflecting the concerns of, the elite (Jalal 2000: 153f.). As such, Mohamed Ali's activities in the press fail to fully account for Muslim Delhi's political awakening.



Sandria Freitag (1989) has argued persuasively that the developing public sphere in colonial northern India is better understood as a differentiated 'public arena', in which public celebrations, rituals, enactments and protests played an equal, if not more important, role in the development of community identity than newspapers. Markus Daeschel (2006: 212) also emphasised the importance of public gatherings to community identity and nation-building when he described the experience of being in a crowd as 'perhaps the most powerful representational space of all'.

Mohamed Ali clearly recognised the power of public spectacle, oratory and symbolism, and was quick to utilise these in Delhi's 'public arena' to extend his influence beyond the educated elite. Mushirul Hasan—one of Mohamed Ali's more balanced biographers—notes that the *Comrade* editor was an excellent public speaker who 'possessed to the full the resources of traditional oratory—its repertoire of tricks' (Hasan 1981: 25). Indeed, immediately upon arriving in Delhi, Mohamed Ali addressed more than ten thousand Delhi Muslims at the Jama Masjid after Friday prayers, providing him with instant public exposure that cut across class lines ("A Successful Meeting", 26 Oct. 1912). He called on religious loyalties to canvas for donations, telling the crowd that the 'prestige of Islam and of the Mussalmans depended on the result of this war' (ibid.).

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The *Comrade* editor was to repeatedly address large crowds at Delhi's mosques until he was interred in May 1915. This included speeches at the Jama Masjid during elaborate public celebrations to mark the departure and return of the Medical Mission to Turkey. The mission's departure in December 1912 attracted a crowd of 15,000 people, but the celebrations marking its return in July 1913 were an even greater spectacle. *Comrade* was to mythologise the event in evocative language 'bookending the emotional drama' of the mission (Zaman 2017: 634).

In the wake of its destruction in 1858, a British observer dubbed Delhi a 'city of the dead' (Dalrymple 2007: 458) and the city remained littered with neglected Mughal-era tombs and monuments. These reminders of its tragic history meant Delhi had become poetic shorthand for the general decline in fortunes of the North Indian Muslim community (Zaman 2017: 627). The newspaper coverage of the mission's return centred this trope, presenting the celebration as emblematic of Delhi escaping from its past as the symbolic heart of Indian Muslim misfortune.

There was, noted *Comrade*, reason to doubt that Delhi could ensure 'an event as unique as her position', because the city 'in spite of her newly-conferred dignity, is still dominated by her past which broods over the lives



and activities of the living as well as the mouldering remains of the dead. An ever-present sense of her tragic history has created in her people a cynical disregard for the joys and the sorrows of the present.' ("Delhi's Welcome", 12 July 1913). Delhi was challenged to prove it was no longer an irrelevant backwater, no longer a 'city of the dead'.

The celebrations were reported in an almost ecstatic tenor as having exceeded all expectations. When Dr. Ansari arrives at Delhi, the train station is described as 'one moving mass of humanity [...] Thousands on the platform pressed forward to catch a glimpse of the man and his lieutenants [...] to kiss their hands and offer them flowers and garlands.' ("Delhi's Welcome", 12 July 1913). En route to the Jama Masjid, 'Moslem merchants had decorated their shops along the route and made arrangements for the distribution of iced sherbets and milk', while the crowd gathered to receive the mission at the mosque was estimated at 'not much below thirty thousand', an unprecedented size in Delhi's contemporary history (ibid.). Reporting the subsequent procession towards the Fatehpuri Masjid, the *Comrade* continued, 'The entire route was brilliantly illuminated, and the enthusiasm of the immense crowds that accompanied it is indescribable. The entire Moslem Delhi seemed to have turned out for the occasion.' (ibid.).

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While the extent to which such public events would have politicised individuals is unclear, the *Comrade* editor and his supporters were certainly playing on the Delhi public's well-documented enthusiasm for festivities. Mughal Delhi had been famous for its elaborate celebrations and processions, notably the flower-seller's fair *Phulwalon ki Sai*, which the poet Ghalib labelled one of the four things that 'kept Delhi alive' (Dalrymple 2007: 6). As such, for Muslim Delhi, *Comrade's* suggestion that such celebrations were emblematic of the community's phoenix-like rise from the ashes of its past must have held special attraction. The size of the crowds, celebratory atmosphere, centrality of the mosques and impressive lamp-lit procession would have combined in an emotive shared experience, cementing a sense of community, while simultaneously elevating the local profile of the pan-Islamists. Indeed, Freitag's description of public events and rituals that 'simultaneously delineated common values and drew on shared historical moments and locally significant cultural referents' (Freitag 1989: 5) is a good fit here.

It is also important to note the role played by *Comrade's* reporting in mediating the collective experience—reflecting it back on the public. For *Comrade*, the event signified that Muslim Delhi could find redemption



through religion: 'The mass of the Moslem population in Delhi is ignorant and poor, but its religious spirit is yet alive and its Islamic sympathies have not been smothered under the ruthless mutations of time.' ("Delhi's Welcome", 12 July 1913). Such a message would have strongly appealed to Delhi's reformist religious leaders, with their focus on notions of personal piety, and the Punjabi merchant class that sponsored it.

Prayers and celebrations were not the only gatherings that could engender a shared sense of community and purpose. Indeed, the British revocation of the partition of Bengal had convinced a generation of political leaders of the power of public agitation (Pernau 2013: 396). A speech before a gathering of Muslims in Lahore in January 1913 highlighted that Mohamed Ali shared this attitude:

I do not fear the gallows of a dacoit or the chains of the thief, but I fear you (the audience) [...] Do not think that your cries have had no effect on British foreign policy. I assure you that I have read documents (to the contrary) [...] the voice of seven crores of Muhammadans will surely have its effect (cit. in Iqbal 1974: 74).

When a protest by Kanpur Muslims in August 1913 over the destruction by the authorities of a portion of a mosque descended into rioting and police violence, the authorities blamed 'outside agitators' and—almost certainly in reference to Mohamed Ali—specifically pointed to the influence of Delhi ("The Cawnpore Tragedy", 2 Aug. 1913).<sup>10</sup> It served the authorities' purpose to paint the outcry over the mosque as artificial and Mohamed Ali as an 'agitator' with nefarious anti-British purpose. In fact, Mohamed Ali had repeatedly written to United Province's governor James Meston to urge him to change his decision over the mosque.<sup>11</sup> He was also among prominent Muslim activists who delivered speeches at Kanpur that officials deemed inflammatory (Ferrell 1969: 242).

Yet the authorities also suspected Mohamed Ali of inciting the Kanpur unrest because of *Comrade's* coverage of similar issues in Delhi. A 24 May 1913 article had expressed fears that the plans for the new capital would involve the destruction of Mughal-era tombs and desecration of Muslim graveyards. In a fashion typical of *Comrade*, the article drew on motifs referencing Delhi's past:

We all desire to see Delhi freed from the gloom of past years; but no one could have desired that those responsible for the creation of the new Delhi should act as if this could be done by removing the mementoes of the "regal woe of many a vanquished race" and



destroying every trace of her "splendid tragedy of ancient things."  
("The City of Tombs", 24 May 1913).

The article also played on contemporary local concerns when it complained that plans to move Muslim graveyards further out of the city would disadvantage mourners. Even more pertinently, it referenced very current fears among Delhi's Muslim community—including Mohamed Ali's powerful merchant backers—over the 'remarkable diminution in the value of house property in Delhi', and the 'great commotion among her people as a result of fear that their house would be acquired without adequate compensation for the improvement of the town.' (ibid.).

The newspaper announced its intention to attend the Municipal Commission's weekly meetings to monitor developments. It also referenced Kanpur, warning that 'we are not sure that even mosques are quite safe in these days of City improvements, for in Cawnpore such a case is pending and Delhi has yet to see what is in store for her.' (ibid.). As such, the fate of the Kanpur Mosque was linked with that of Delhi from the outset.

*Comrade's* preservation campaign clearly appealed to some Delhiites. A group of Delhi ulama issued a fatwa in support of the campaign, and an association for the protection of mosques and monuments was later established (Ferrell 1969: 264; Gupta 1981: 197). *Comrade* readers' concerns were highlighted in letters to the editor calling for the community to protect Mughal sites ("Old Delhi – A Memorial Tablet Scheme", 5 July 1913).

The campaign was to publicly bear fruit by June. *Comrade* announced that Chief Commissioner Hailey had, after meeting with Mohamed Ali, ordered the reconstruction at government cost of a 16th century mosque, which had been 'mistakenly' demolished ("Distressing Sacrilege", 21 June 1913). *Comrade* welcomed the move as the only way 'the public can be convinced of the good intentions of Government' (ibid.). The authorities noted that the developments had indeed gained Mohamed Ali 'a great deal of popular support', including 'the grudging support of the more wealthy members of the community'.<sup>12</sup>

But concerns over Delhi's monuments were superseded by events in Kanpur, which were accompanied by exhaustive coverage in *Comrade*. In a series of lengthy editorials, Mohamed Ali set out the grievances of the Muslim community over the mosque and provided heart-rending details of the police violence ("The Cawnpore Tragedy", 9 Aug. 1913). He accused the district magistrate of inciting a riot to justify the tough crackdown so



as to 'teach the Mussalmans another lesson' ("The Cawnpore Tragedy", 9 Aug. 1913; Ferrell 1969: 243). and cited reports that victims had been shot in the back ("The Cawnpore Case", 16 Aug. 1913); the latter was particularly controversial because it cast aspersions on police claims that officers only fired to disperse the crowd.<sup>13</sup>

The authorities suspected that Delhi-based Muslim leaders were artificially stirring up Moslem feeling via the press. While sensationalist reporting may have stoked anger, the response suggested genuine grievance. The unprecedented countrywide agitation cut across class lines and united younger radicals with older, conservative Muslim leaders; even the staunch loyalist Nawab Ali Chaudhry led a protest at the Town Hall in Calcutta in August 1913 (Muhammad 1980: 26).

The fate of the Mosque in Kanpur was viewed as symptomatic of the decline in fortunes of the Muslim community and its 'martyrdom' in general (Freitag 1989: 214). This invocation of the idiom of martyrdom combined with accusations of police brutality was bound to find fertile ground in Delhi, a city notorious for its dislike of the police (Gupta 1981: 205; Ferrell 1969: 19). The message that the Kanpur incident underscored British neglect of Muslim interests was also likely to appeal, given fears over the desecration of Mughal-era tombs and monuments in Delhi and the antecedent anxiety over the changes wrought by work on the new capital.

Delhiites contributed liberally to *Comrade's* Cawnpore Mosque Defence Fund.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, Mohamed Ali helped organise public protests in Delhi. The first, on 10 August at the *Idgah*, was attended by at least 5,000 people, and spilled out onto the streets nearby ("The Protest of Delhi", 9 Aug. 1913; Ferrell 1969: 243). Notably, the event was used to link local grievances with the unpopular Delhi Deputy Chief Commissioner Major Beadon and his 'excessive reliance on the police' (Gupta 1981: 205). Mohamed Ali's close associate, the lawyer Abdul Aziz, addressed the meeting, informing the audience that Beadon had sent for him and two of the meeting conveners, 'and told them that he would himself attend the meeting bringing with him a cart-load of cartridges to shoot not the mob but the leaders.' ("The Protest of Delhi", 9 Aug. 1913). This was bound to rile up the crowd, which according to *Comrade* 'was very much moved at this show of great "Badahuri" (ibid.).

The newspaper account added fuel to the fire by noting that 'we are told a large force of armed police was held in readiness for emergency', and ending with a warning: 'We do not know what induced the Deputy Commissioner of Delhi to give such tremendous warning to the Delhi Mussalmans





[...]. "Cart-loads of cartridges" may succeed in repressing them for a while; but then, such repression is never without its consequences.' (ibid.). This turn of events worried Hailey enough that he felt required to inform the Secretary to the Government of India, Henry Wheeler.<sup>15</sup> It is conceivable that public indignation over this incident helped sustain support for the agitation in Delhi, where a second protest was organised on 19 September.

Eventually, Viceroy Hardinge stepped in, announcing that the demolished portion of the Kanpur Mosque would be restored. It appears likely the unprecedented protests played a part in forcing the government's hand. In Delhi, the public meetings showed that pan-Islamism and the Kanpur campaign had begun to politicise wider sections of the population. Basu (1981: 118) notes that they brought educated members of the Muslim community together publicly with merchants, artisans and *ulema* over a common cause for the first time.

Comrade lauded the disruption of a meeting of loyalists in Delhi in September 1913 by nationalists as proof that the 'awakening amongst the common people had reached an advanced stage' ("A Rally of the Moderates", 4 Oct. 1913). While this was an exaggeration, the British certainly believed that the Ali brothers were gaining influence, with the director of criminal intelligence noting in January 1915 that 'although distrusted and disliked by many educated Indian Muhammadans, these people are popular heroes with many of the lower classes.'<sup>16</sup>

### **Mosques and *madrasas*: Mixing politics and religion**

The separation of religion from politics in Muslim Delhi's public sphere was difficult, if not impossible, given that the mosque, especially after midday Friday prayers, was the main location for meetings on matters of concern to the community. After the Balkan Wars and the Kanpur Mosque agitation concluded, Mohamed Ali pursued his quest for influence by campaigning on issues directly relevant to the religious life of the Muslim community. During this time, he freely used the space of Delhi's Mosque, backed up with Comrade, to attack the imam and mosque committee of the Jama Masjid, which was known to be dominated by moderates and loyalists. Although he cloaked his activities in the guise of guardianship of proper religious practice, a closer examination makes clear that he was simultaneously seeking to undermine Muslim Delhi's traditional community leaders, thereby politicising religious space.



For example, as part of a campaign for improved conditions for Indian pilgrims undertaking the *Haj*, Mohamed Ali organised a meeting at the Jama Masjid in Delhi on 24 July 1914. During the meeting, he attacked the Delhi Haj Committee, led by the loyalist Abdul Ahad and other local moderates, of failing to challenge the government on the Haj issue—lambasting it as of 'no more utility than a newborn child of unknown parentage'.<sup>17</sup>

The official account vividly depicts the subsequent humiliation of the imam at the same meeting. The imam was asked to lead prayers for the 'Cawnpore Martyrs', which he reportedly did:

with tears in his eyes, amidst cries of "hypocrite" and "sycophant". The Imam was then asked to sign the telegram [denouncing the government's proposed Haj rules] but refused to do so and was thereupon denounced as a government informer.<sup>18</sup>

The official account speculates that a belief that the imam sided with the government during the Kanpur Mosque incident had caused his unpopularity. If accurate, this points to the growing unpopularity of British-appointed community leaders in Muslim Delhi at this time. It also suggests that Mohamed Ali and his followers were actively challenging these leaders' authority in public spaces.

The campaign against the Jama Masjid Mosque authorities was to continue with a hatchet job on the imam in *Comrade* in August 1914. The paper describes a clash between the imam and Mohamed Ali over successive Fridays, ostensibly over the 'scorching' and 'unbearable' conditions for those forced to pray in the mosque's courtyard ("The Rival Cliques of the Delhi Moslems", 14 Aug. 1914). After refusing Mohamed Ali's initial request to discuss the issue, the imam is alleged to have complained to Commissioner Hailey about the editor's visit, claiming that he brought 'a large crowd' with him ("The Imam of the Jami Mosque", 14 Aug. 1914). The following week, in response to Mohamed Ali's attempts to raise the issue again, the imam is reported to have been 'loud and insulting', behaving 'in a manner that no Mussalman, with the great presumption to model his like on the example of the great founder of Islam, would imitate' (ibid.). Mohamed Ali, meanwhile, is reported to have acted 'with extraordinary self-restraint', moving to restrain 'great outbursts of resentment' from the crowd that heard the imam's comments (ibid.).

The incident made the authorities nervous. Hailey noted: 'There is an organised clique, which follows him [Mohamed Ali] to the mosque where he insults the older Muslims.' (cit. in Gupta 1981: 198). But what is



especially interesting about this encounter, is *Comrade's* description of the 'disgraceful incident' as 'a vile and clumsy attempt [by the imam and mosque committee] to give a political complexion to a matter entirely innocent of politics.' ("The Imam of the Jami Mosque", 14 Aug. 1914). Yet it appears that Mohamed Ali is stoking suspicion over the imam and committee. Most damagingly, the imam is painted by *Comrade* as an informer: 'The imam has been talking of riots and disturbances and of crowds led by Mr. Mohamed Ali. Has he hit upon this clever device of "catching" a "dangerous" person, perhaps to crown a life-long loyalty?' (ibid.). The public response—or at least of Mohamed Ali's by this time fairly large and vocal group of supporters—points to the decline in credibility of the politics of collaboration and increase in the reputation of the politics of protest (Robinson 1993: 205).

In its biting conclusion, the article 'reminded' the imam 'that when priests stray into politics, they often lose their heads and always the esteem of the public.' ("The Imam of the Jami Mosque", 14 Aug. 1914). Yet, while publicly denouncing the imam of the Jama Masjid for politicking, Mohamed Ali was cultivating ties with those ulema in Delhi that were more inclined to support his criticisms of British policy. His efforts reflected recognition of the powerful influence of the ulema over Muslim public opinion, especially the artisans and other uneducated classes—such as women—who together accounted for 90 per cent of Delhi's Muslim population (Basu 1981: 11).

Although the ulema had been among the first to respond to the challenges of colonial rule through religious reform movements, they remained generally aloof from politics until the 1910s. The activities of Mohamed Ali and his followers in Delhi were not the cause of their subsequent politicisation. This process occurred in parallel to, rather than because of, the activities of the Western-educated 'Young Mohammedans'. Nevertheless, Mohamed Ali and his followers evidently recognised that they could only reach the Muslim masses through the ulema. By establishing contacts with leading ulema from 1912 onward, they widened their spheres of influence and drew on traditional religious networks to gain access to new supporters. Delhi served as a physical nexus for the overlapping networks of ulema and Western-educated Muslim leaders from 1912 onward.

Reformist madrasas were in the early 1910s multiplying in number in Delhi while simultaneously increasing their involvement in political activity (Pernau 2013: 402f.). Mohamed Ali was known to have cultivated links to the leaders of several Delhi madrasas reported by the authorities to have been active in pan-Islamist campaigning, namely Madrasa Nomania,



Madrasa Aminia, Madrasa Mohomedia and Madrasa Wahab (Pernau 2013: 403; Ferrell 1969: 264).

Most such madrasas were linked to the ahl-i-Hadith and funded by the Punjabi merchant community, who also provided financial backing for the Ali brothers' activities; several Punjabi merchants were also known by the authorities to have links to Wahabi *Mujahideen* networks on the border with Afghanistan and in Baluchistan (Basu 1981: 112; Ferrell 1969: 264). Mohamed Ali's campaigns in Delhi—especially around the preservation of mosques and tombs—gained the public support of some ulema linked to these institutions. Several signed a fatwa in August 1913 condemning the destruction of the *baoli* of two Delhi mosques as part of work on the new capital (ibid.: 264).

Mohamed Ali's madrasa contacts worked both ways. The students of these madrasas were among the *Comrade* editor's core supporters in Delhi. In 1914, officials noted that 'no individual has the authority over them (students), which is exercised by Mohamed Ali.' (Hasan 1999: 18f.). They helped organise demonstrations, distribute pamphlets and collect funds for pan-Islamist causes. For example, in 1914, when the securities for *Comrade* and *Hamdard* were confiscated after the authorities objected to Mohamed Ali's controversial "Choice of the Turks" editorial, it was students that went door-to-door to raise a new security deposit (Ferrell 1969: 264).

In addition, Mohamed Ali could also rely on the traditional networks of reformist ulema in Delhi and its hinterlands to preach support for pan-Islamism and related pan-Indian Muslim causes. Meanwhile, the ulema were able to begin to access the 'national' level networks of the 'Young Mohammedans' to increase their political influence. This process culminated in their attendance at the Muslim League and Congress meetings in Delhi that launched the Khilafat movement in December 1918.

One key madrasa with which the Ali brothers were reported to have developed ties was the Nazarat al Ma'arif al Quraniya, the Quranic school established at Delhi's Fatehpuri Masjid by the *Deoband* in 1913, under the direction of its activist *sarparast* Mahmud al-Hasan (Pernau 2013: 403). The Deoband had historic links to Delhi, having been established by graduates of the destroyed madrasa of Shah Walliallah. The school was set-up under the leadership of Hasan's disciple Maulana Ubaidullah Sindhi, who was himself to become the centre of a web of political activity in Delhi.

Patrons included local notables Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. Ansari, who acted as important intermediaries between the Western educated leaders



and the ulama during this period (Minault 1982: 30). While it publicly disavowed political intent, the school quickly became a forum for informal political discussion (Basu 1981: 119; Minault 1982: 30). Sindhi was also introduced to the Ali brothers—whose brother Ahmad had married Sindhi's daughter—by Dr. Ansari and reportedly 'befriended' the *Comrade* editor (Kelly 2013: 164). As well as the Western-educated leaders, Sindhi cultivated links with some ahl-i-Hadith madrasas, claiming a common thread via the teachings of Shah Waliullah (Pernau 2013: 403).

The status of Delhi as a centre of a network of radical reformist activity—with Sindhi at the centre—was apparently proven by the uncovering of the so-called Silk Letters Conspiracy in August 1916. The conspiracy, believed by the British to have been masterminded by Hasan or Sindhi, involved a scheme to overthrow British rule with the help of frontier tribes, Afghans, Turks and possibly Germans. To further the conspiracy, several Delhi madrasa students and eventually Sindhi himself travelled to Kabul, while Hasan left India for the Hejaz. The British intercepted communications between the conspirators written on silk handkerchiefs sown into a courier's coat. Although the conspiracy appeared—even at the time—far-fetched at best, it revealed a network of radicalised, pan-Islamist ulema stretching from Deoband, through Delhi to Afghanistan, Turkey and the Hejaz. Moreover, the British pinpointed Delhi as the centre of funding for the conspiracy and Dr. Ansari as its financier (Kelly 2013: 167).

British suspicions were clearly not borne out by enough evidence to prosecute the Delhi pan-Islamists. Similarly, claims by Chaudhry Khaliquzzaman, a later leader of the Muslim League, that Dr. Ansari and Shaukat Ali were directly involved have a clear retrospective political motive in painting the Muslim leaders as active rather than quiescent during the war (Khaliquzzaman 1961: 32). Nevertheless, that the Delhi pan-Islamists were aware of or extended tacit support for the plot cannot be ruled out given their links to the key conspirators.

The Silk Letters Conspiracy lends credence to Minault's (1982: 37) assertion that the politicisation of the ulema was 'unmistakable' by the outbreak of the First World War. However, those ulema involved in the conspiracy represented a small number of radicalised individuals. Other leading reformist ulema, notably Abdul Bari of the Lucknow-based Firangi Mahal, sought to become involved in mainstream political activity. This was made possible via an alliance with Mohamed and Shaukat Ali, to whom he later became religious guide and spiritual mentor.



Abdul Bari wielded significant influence through a network of shrines across northern India and drew on this to collect donations for the Turkish Relief Fund and Red Crescent Medical Mission (Pernau 2013: 402; Qureshi 1999: 57). Bari came into contact with the Ali brothers in December 1912, reportedly suggesting the idea of a pan-Islamist association at their very first meeting (Minault 1982: 35). The Delhi-based association in modern style was to radically impact Muslim politics, pulling together the threads of the Indian pan-Islamist movement and paving the way for a potent partnership between religious and secular leaders during the Khilafat movement.

**Associational activity: *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba***

The end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century saw an 'extraordinary efflorescence' of new associations that energised north Indian public life, helping to forge notions of civility, civil engagement and political participation (Metcalf & Metcalf 2012: 137; Watt 2005: 5; Stark 2011: 2). In the absence of opportunities for genuine participation in politics, emerging self-styled community leaders found in these voluntary organisations a means of expressing their identity and projecting their interests, while also demonstrating their modernity through a cultural link to state power (Gilmartin 1988: 77).

Criticising the traditional neglect of the 1910s in histories of India, Carey Watt (2005: 5-7) argues that the decade was important because of the explosion of associations and social service initiatives in this period helped shape its public sphere and civil society; these activities, he states, prepared the way for the politicisation of wider sections of the public by encouraging 'a patriotic sense of civic engagement that was latently political'. By involving new social groups in public life—including petty bourgeoisie, women and young people—associations facilitated 'the creation of cross-caste, cross class, transregional and urban to rural solidarities.' (ibid.: 7). While Watt's research is focused on Hindu associations, an examination of *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba* (Association of the Servants of the Kaaba)—the pan-Islamist association established by the Ali brothers and their associates from Delhi in 1913—illustrates that his argument is equally applicable to the Muslim community.

The *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba* was part of a 'veritable boom' in new Muslim associations in Delhi—both local and supranational in focus—in the period from 1910 to the outbreak of World War One (Pernau 2013: 398). Its aims and objectives were publicised in *Hamdard* on 16 May 1913 and in



*Comrade* in the following weeks. They indicated that the organisation had been formed out of concern for the security of the Holy Places in the Hejaz, in light of the pressures on the Ottoman Empire. Its main objective was 'the preservation of the sanctity of the Sacred Places from violation [...] and safeguarding it from non-Muslim violation.' ("Servants of the Ka'ba", 31 May & 7 June 1913).

Yet despite stated pan-Islamist aims, only one-third of the association's subscription fee was to be used to support Muslim causes abroad. Another third was for 'management of the Society, propagation of Islam, Moslem primary schools and orphanages, and such other beneficial works', with the remaining third held in a reserve fund ("Servants of the Ka'ba", 31 May 1913). So, it was made clear from the outset that the society was at least partially aimed at social service benefiting Muslims at home—underscoring its potential appeal to a locally-minded public and the symbolic use of pan-Islamism for constituency-building within India.

There were to be two tiers of membership; higher tier *Shaidaian-i-Kaaba* (votaries of the Kaaba) were identified by an impressive green robe uniform, decorated with a yellow crescent, symbolising their devotion to the cause (Robinson 1993: 208f.). In the modern organisational style, the society was to have a Central Committee at Delhi, provisional branches and two general secretaries (one of whom was Shaukat Ali). Abdul Bari was to relocate to the capital to oversee the society, as its 'Servant of Servants'. Although based at Delhi, the founders had national ambitions; the society was to build a 'huge network of local societies' in every province and every town in India ("Servants of the Ka'ba", 31 May 1913). With typical bombast, *Comrade* claimed that membership would run into the millions (ibid.).

The use of *Hamdard*, *Comrade* and other publications to promote the association underscores the intimate connection between the new associational activity and print media (Stark 2011: 4; Minault 1982: 36). Yet Mohamed Ali also turned to mosques to publicise his new association, addressing an audience of 5,000 at the Jama Masjid on 23 May 1913 to explain the purpose of the society and call on the audience to 'fulfil their duty under Islamic law to protect the sacred shrine of the Prophet' (Ferrell 1969: 232).

This was the first of several public meetings by the anjuman in Delhi, which as well as the Central Committee had a separate local branch. British officials noted the importance of two public meetings in Delhi held on 26-27 October 1913 as catalyst for increased support for the movement.<sup>19</sup> Activity picked up during 1914, with officials recording further meetings on





19 April, 4 May, 21 May and 1 June, some of which were 'well-attended' and counted the Ali brothers among the main speakers.<sup>20</sup> The result was that Delhi's membership rose from 900 in the society's initial months, to 2,000 by June 1914 (Basu 1981: 118). Overall membership never reached the millions projected by *Comrade*. Nevertheless, it grew from 3,431 by October 1913 to an impressive 17,000 by 1915 (Landau 1994: 200).<sup>21</sup>

Branches sprung up countrywide, making it one of the first truly pan-Indian Muslim associations (Minault 1982: 36).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, membership cut across class lines, attracting Muslim of all walks of life, both literate and illiterate (Ozcan 1997: 162; Minault 1982: 37). Strikingly, membership was open to both genders, providing one of the first opportunities for Delhi's Muslim women to engage in public life.<sup>23</sup> Several women-only meetings were organised in the capital, at which Mohamed Ali's mother and wife, and the wife of Dr. Ansari, appealed for moral and financial support for the association's activities (Basu 1981: 118; Minault 1982: 36).

The butchers and hide merchants were also attracted to the society. The 'leader' of Delhi's butchers Hazif Abdul Rahim became secretary of the local branch (Ferrell 1969: 249, 252). Both Ferrell and Pernau note the support extended to Mohamed Ali by this key demographic, and suggest that its politicisation had an economic cause, especially after the outbreak of the First World War led to a collapse in hide prices (Ferrell 1969: 259-61; Pernau 2013: 401). Regardless of the cause, Mohamed Ali was able to draw on this group for help when *Comrade* fell foul of the authorities and its security deposit was forfeited due to the 'The Choice of the Turks' editorial in September 1914. The authorities reported that he had been able to collect 4,000 rupees to cover the newspaper's new security through a house-to-house canvas of 'butchers and low-class Muslims' in Delhi (Ferrell 1969: 256). The *Comrade* editor was drawing on cross-class loyalties in Delhi via networks that existed because of commercial realities.

Most strikingly, the anjuman apparently briefly united Muslim Delhi's warring loyalist and reformist factions on a joint platform, demonstrating the symbolic power of pan-Islamism to supersede (albeit temporarily) local rivalries. Indeed, meetings of the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba in Delhi represented a merging of various networks. As well as local medical notables such as Hakim Ajmal Khan and Dr. Ansari, membership reportedly included religious men such as the imam of the Idgah, who was president of the local branch, local businessmen such as Abdul Rahim and hotel proprietor Haji Muhammad Saddiq, and members of eminent Ashraf families (ibid.: 252).



The tenuousness of this unity was exposed when a financial scandal engulfed the anjuman and led to a rift between the Delhi-based Central Committee and the Delhi branch. The scandal culminated in the dissolution of the local branch in February 1915 by some of its officers (Minault 1982: 37). Yet while it exposed enduring factional rivalries, the incident did little to dent Mohamed Ali and pan-Islamism's overall appeal. The Delhi branch eventually continued with different officers and retained significant membership, despite the lull in activity after the outbreak of war, with a rival local pan-Islamist organisation attracting little interest (Minault 1982: 37; Basu 1981: 121).

Although it ultimately achieved very little beyond some limited assistance to Haj pilgrims before its activities petered out due to the war (Robinson 1993: 208f.), the anjuman proved significant for a number of reasons. Most importantly, it provided a common platform for collaboration between religious leaders and the Western-educated Muslims for the first time. Its Central Committee consisted of both 'Young Mohammedan' leaders and ulema such as Abdul Bari, setting the pattern for the post-war Khilafat movement.

The influence of ulema paved the way for the inclusion of women and less educated elements of society in public life. Moreover, the pan-Islamist symbolism that went hand-in-hand with membership was new; the pageantry of uniforms and badges, alongside the emotional appeal of universal religious symbols such as the Kaaba and the caliph, was vital to its appeal (Minault 1982: 36f.). It helped paper over the community's heterogeneity and attract broader participation than any Muslim organisation up to that point. The association's uniforms and organisational structure provided an organisational template, directly foreshadowing the Khilafat Committees of the coming years.

## Conclusion

Despite Mohamed Ali's expressions of loyalty at the outbreak of war, the authorities' paranoia over his pan-Islamism proved too much to bear.<sup>24</sup> *Comrade's* forcible closure in October 1914 was closely followed by his detention. If political activity was muted in Delhi from May 1915 until the Khilafat movement, this was hardly surprising; the imprisonment of prominent leaders, wartime censorship and economic distress left the city subdued. Nevertheless, low-level political activity did continue. Some 500 Muslims gathered in July 1916 to condemn the Arab Revolt (Gupta 1981: 199), and in early 1917, a Delhi branch of the Home Rule League was



established. Muslims and Muslim issues were at the forefront of the agenda; the largest Home Rule League meeting in Delhi on 26 September 1917 was convened by Dr. Ansari, chaired by Hakim Ajmal Khan and a key resolution called for the release of Muslim internees (Ferrell 1969: 305). The authorities reported large numbers of students and members of the 'New Muslim Party' among the 4,000 attendees (ibid.).

Mohamed Ali had set out to 'reach the masses' on his arrival in Delhi in 1912. Wielding powerful pan-Islamist symbols via his newspapers, on the streets and in mosques and madrasas, he succeeded in gaining a personal following, and interesting fresh groups within the population in national and transnational issues. Gupta (1981: 198) argues that 'this made it inevitable that the Khilafat question, when it was to become a political issue in 1919, had its supporters in Delhi already organised.'

But why did Mohamed Ali's activism resonate so strongly with Delhi's Muslim community in the 1910s? A key element was his mix of rhetoric and religious symbolism that spoke to its specific collective identity. Mohamed Ali evoked the tragedy of the decline of Indian Muslim fortunes to bemoan the fate of the community; if Islam itself was endangered, then how would India's fractured Muslims fare? This emotive tenor reached its peak during the Kanpur Mosque agitation, which cemented this new rhetoric invoking 'symbols and vocabulary capable of transcending local boundaries' (Freitag 1989: 343) in political discourse. Potently for Delhi, the *Comrade* editor placed the new capital's tragic history and its position as a symbol of the Muslim community's decline at the centre of this rhetoric. Whether decrying the 'ever present sense of her tragic history' ("Delhi's Welcome", 12 July 1913) or quoting Sarojini Naidu's poem lamenting 'the regal woe of many a vanquished race' ("Imperial Delhi", 12 Oct. 1912) that suffused the city, Mohamed Ali peppered his reporting on Delhi with melancholic references to its past.

Yet as Faridah Zaman (2017) has suggested, while utilising nostalgia to elicit an emotional response, Mohamed Ali appears primarily to have been concerned with the community's future. He rejected the suggestion that Muslims should be grateful to see the British restore Delhi as a seat of empire; instead, he stated, 'it is not to the past that Mussalmans should be invited to look back but to contemplate a future, different no doubt but possibly not less glorious.' ("The Announcement", 16 Dec. 1911). In fact, Delhi as a scene of Muslim redemption was a thread running through Mohamed Ali's rhetoric. Delhi was repeatedly called upon to step-up to its position as the new capital by supporting his various pan-Islamism-inspired



campaigns. He painted a future in which Delhi acted as 'the centre and beating heart of Islam' (Zaman 2017: 643). That this positive vision resonated with the city's young, aspirational Muslims is evident in the high youth participation in the Khilafat movement in Delhi (Gupta 1981: 206).

Mohamed Ali also applied more practical methods to interest Delhi's Muslims in national politics. He used varied public platforms to tie issues of local concern to national and international developments. Events in faraway Ottoman Turkey were given a local connection through the involvement of Delhiites in the Medical Mission and fundraising drives. Matters previously viewed as parochial were elevated to national importance in *Comrade* to attract the support of specific interest groups. Mohamed Ali also exploited pre-existing rifts within the local Muslim community to gain the support of ambitious reformist merchants. He reflected anxieties linked to construction work on the new capital and played on the deep-seated local dislike of the police, and couched these issues in terms of a wider neglect on the part of the British authorities towards Indian Muslims.

Mohamed Ali gained followers by demonstrating the wider resonance of national and international events to Muslim Delhi. However, it was his ability to tie together different networks of supporters that laid the foundation for future activism. The editor's connections with reformist mosques and madrasas gained him the support of influential local ulema and their students. The ulema, in turn, wielded significant influence among the illiterate and women, and were linked by traditional networks of patronage that stretched from Delhi across India to the Holy Places. Some of these activist madrasas were funded by Punjabi leather and shoe merchants, through whom Mohamed Ali was also able to access commercial networks and associations, even drawing on them for financial support in times of need. These merchants exercised influence over artisans and butchers under their patronage, who, along with students, were to be mobilised for events and fundraising. Varied networks were ultimately joined under the single umbrella of the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba. These 'networks of civic engagement' (Watt 2005: 7) would be drawn on to support future national political campaigns such as the Khilafat movement—a movement which would also be marked by a mix of local with global issues, and modern with traditional methods.

While acknowledging Mohamed Ali's influence, his activities symbolise broader changes affecting Delhi after the transfer of the capital. Not only aspirant politicians, but also waves of migrants of all social classes from across the subcontinent were arriving in Delhi, adding dynamism to its



public sphere. The influx of migrants, not tied through networks of neighbourhood patronage to Delhi's designated 'natural leaders', were bound to destabilise urban politics (Gilmartin 1988: 75). Compounding this, the spread of the population beyond the old city walls diluted the cultural unity and strong sense of community they had engendered (Gupta 1981: 232), broadening urban perspectives.

If Mohamed Ali was quick to recognise and exploit the anxieties stirred by these changes, local agency was also critical. Some merchants' support for his brand of pan-Islamism was pragmatic. The transfer of the capital brought economic strain, especially alarming increases in property prices, while the First World War severed many of the commercial city's trade links. Meanwhile, promises of increased self-government and the loosening influence of traditional community leaders changed the political dynamic. In Mohamed Ali, canny Delhiites recognised a leader willing to lobby for their interests on the national stage and to assist in their attempts to wrest community leadership from the local Ashraf, something that was eventually achieved during the Khilafat movement (Pernau 2013: 402; Hasan & Pernau 2005: xiii). Similarly, local ulema were primarily concerned with guarding their position of moral influence over the community and teamed up with national political leaders to 'reaffirm their role as the authoritative representatives of a Muslim consensus' (Shaikh 1991: 174).

Aspects of Delhi's experience during these years make it unique, such as the rapidity of the changes wrought by the transfer of the capital. Nevertheless, many of the broader trends applied to other urban centres in northern India. This includes the impact of migration and increasing urbanisation on entrenched localism and the concomitant emergence of new leaders seeking legitimacy from the public via modern means of communication and emerging discursive spaces. With regard to Lahore, Gilmartin (1988: 76) writes that the influx of a new class of educated migrant 'began new interest-oriented associations and pioneered new forms of communication that transcended local patronage networks'. In fact, Lahore had its own influential pan-Islamist newspaper editor-cum-community leader, Zafar Ali Khan, whose activities could be interestingly compared with those of Mohamed Ali in Delhi. Mohamed Ali, then, was just one among a generation of political leaders attuned to the changing urban dynamics of the 1910s.

This paper has largely avoided an analysis of the national political context or close investigation of British surveillance and censorship of Mohamed Ali's activities in favour of a focus on his dialogue with the Delhi public.



Nevertheless, it serves to highlight that changing social dynamics accompanied a loosening of British control over public discourse, as their system relying on 'natural' community leaders crumbled. Indeed, if Mohamed Ali's jailing in 1915 supports Gurpreet Bhasin's (2010: 71) assertion that his activities had become 'the prime locus of the Delhi government's efforts to survey, vilify, manipulate and, indeed, prevent the construction of public opinion in Delhi', then the response highlighted this attenuation of British influence in the public sphere.

More generally, while the relative success of the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba highlighted the nascent politicisation of Muslim Delhi, its experience of infighting underscored the fragility of the tentative unity of purpose. This was to be brutally exposed with the collapse of the Khilafat movement, after which some Muslims turned to the secular nationalism of Congress and others to communalism and eventually the idea of a separate Muslim nation. Mohamed Ali and his contemporaries had undertaken a herculean task in attempting to create a unified constituency out of the heterogeneous Indian Muslim community. Indeed, his evocation of religious symbolism and equation of local with transnational sympathies—while successful for a short time—also held in it the seeds of problems that continue to complicate, and are weaponised against, Indian Muslim identity to this day.

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The incorporation of emotive rhetoric with religious symbolism into political agitation was ultimately Mohamed Ali's most enduring contribution to India's independence struggle, rather than—as he would surely have preferred—his vision of Hindu-Muslim cooperation as part of a 'federation of faiths' (Ashraf 1981: 77). Mohamed Ali viewed his Indian and Muslim identities as separate but concentric circles that could exist in equal importance side-by-side (Wasti 2002: 51). But many were to struggle to square these apparently competing claims on Muslim loyalty as the boundaries between communities hardened through increasing use of exclusionary symbolism in public discourse, especially at the local, urban level. Mohamed Ali's vision of a composite nationalism embracing multiple identities was ultimately to prove too complex and full of inherent tension in the struggle ahead.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Speech delivered by Dr. MA Ansari, Chairman, Reception Committee, All-India Muslim League 11th Sessions, Delhi, 30th December 1918 (cit. in Ferrell 1969).



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- <sup>2</sup> Letter from Hardinge to Butler, 31 Jan. 1915 (cit. in Muhammad, *The Indian Muslims*, vol. 5: 41).
- <sup>3</sup> "Report for the Week Ending 25 May 1915", May 1915, NAI; Home Pol B; 855-858, PR\_000003001901.
- <sup>4</sup> The advent of militant nationalism in the first decade of the 20th century caused the colonial authorities to tighten their hold on the press through the *Newspaper (Incitement to Offences) Act* of 1908 and *Press Act* of 1910. In theory, expressions of nationalist sentiment were tolerated, though support or calls for violence were not; in practice, the laws gave the colonial authorities significant leeway to decide what was deemed to be dangerous or seditious (Reetz 2006: 40).
- <sup>5</sup> 'Issue of Invitation of Representatives of the Indian Press for the Delhi Durbar', Home Pol 21-52 part B, Nov 1911, NAI. PR\_000003001325.
- <sup>6</sup> Reflecting on the government's effective torpedoing of the university scheme, *Comrade* quoted a Persian poet: 'Every hostility that thou has shown, O friend of mine, towards me, thou hast shown it only now, but I knew of it before.' ("The Moslem University", 17 August 1912).
- <sup>7</sup> Survey of *Comrade* issues 1911-13; by March 1913, *Comrade's* 'War Supplement'—complete with photos and lengthy descriptions of the minutiae of battles—made up exactly half of the paper's 20 pages.
- <sup>8</sup> "Weekly Reports of the Director, of Criminal Intelligence on the Political Situation, during November 1911", January 1912, NAI, Home Pol B, 121-123, PR\_000003001691.
- <sup>9</sup> Literacy among Muslims in Delhi was 8 per cent in 1911, rising to 12 per cent in 1912, while among Hindus it was 12 per cent in 1911 and unchanged ten years later. Statistics from Census of India 1911, 192 (cit. in Ferrell 1969: 37).
- <sup>10</sup> "Riot at Cawnpore in Connection with the Demolition of a Mosque in Machli Bazar. State of Muhammadan Feeling in India", Home Pol A, Oct 1913 100-18, PR\_000003003462.
- <sup>11</sup> See letters from Mohammed Ali to Meston, reprinted in *Comrade* throughout July 1913.
- <sup>12</sup> "Demolition and Restoration of Maulana Abdul Haq's Mosque Near Okla", RDDA, Revenue File 39 Part B 1915 (cit. in Ferrell 1969: 235).
- <sup>13</sup> "Question Regarding the Cawnpore Mosque Circulated to Muham-Madan Additional Members of the Imperial Legislative Council by Mohamed Ali", Nov 1913, NAI, Home Pol B 149, PR\_000003001775.
- <sup>14</sup> "Cawnpore Mosque Defence Fund", *Comrade*, 13 Sept 1913: Of the 85 contributors listed in this week, 40 are Delhi residents.
- <sup>15</sup> "Riot at Cawnpore in Connection with the Demolition of a Mosque in Machli Bazar. State of Muhammadan Feeling in India", Oct 1913, NAI, Home Pol A, 100-118, PR\_000003003462.
- <sup>16</sup> "Weekly Reports of the Director, Criminal Intelligence, dated the 1. January 1915", NAI, Home Pol B 278-82, Jan 1915, PR\_000003001919.
- <sup>17</sup> "Weekly Reports of the Director, Criminal Intelligence, on the Political Situation for the Month of July 1914", Aug 1914, NAI, Home Pol B 259-262, PR\_000003001850.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> "Reports Regarding the Society Started in the United Province called the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, or Society of the Servants of the Kaaba"; NAI, Home Pol A, May 1914; PR\_000003003494.
- <sup>20</sup> "Reports of the Director, Criminal Intelligence, on the Political Situation for the Month of June 1914", NAI, Home Pol B, July 1914, 124-8, PR\_000003001864; "Reports of the Director, Criminal Intelligence,





on the Political Situation for the Month of May 1914", NAI, Home Pol B, June 1914, 142-5, PR\_000003001869.

<sup>21</sup> Membership eventually grew to 20,000 by 1918, before it was superseded by the Khilafat committees (Landau 1994: 200).

<sup>22</sup> "Reports Regarding the Society Started in the United Province called the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, or Society of the Servants of the Kaaba"; NAI, Home Pol A, May 1914, PR\_000003003494.

<sup>23</sup> "Reports Regarding the Society Started in the United Province called the Anjuman-i-Khuddam-i-Kaaba, or Society of the Servants of the Kaaba", NAI, Home Pol A, May 1914, PR\_000003003494.

<sup>24</sup> Delhi Chief Commissioner Hailey commented to Secretary H Wheeler, that 'though he [Mohamed Ali] does little here [in Delhi] of an overt nature, he remains the centre and inspiration of the pan-Islamic movement, and I cannot help feeling [...] that he is only waiting for a favourable opportunity to attempt a Muhammadan combination of an active kind against the government.' ("Internment of Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali at Mehrauli in the Province in Delhi and Proposal to prohibit Abul Kalam from visiting Delhi"; May 1915, NAI; Home Pol; Deposit 36, PR\_000002999743).

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