



Indian History Congress

4/735, Taj Mansion, Friends Colony, Dohpur Area, Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh,
Pin Code: 202001

OBITUARY

Professor Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri

A Life Dedicated to History and the Indian History Congress

The Indian History Congress mourns the passing of Professor Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri, distinguished historian of medieval and early modern India, former Professor and Head of the Department of History at the University of Delhi, and one of the most devoted office-bearers of the Indian History Congress. He passed away on the evening of 13 July 2026. His death is a profound loss to the community of historians and to an institution to which he gave many years of selfless service.

Professor Jafri received his higher education at Aligarh Muslim University, where he trained in the rigorous traditions of historical scholarship associated with the Centre of Advanced Study in History. He pursued doctoral research under Professor Irfan Habib, an intellectual formation that left a lasting imprint on his work. His scholarship was marked by a firm grounding in primary sources, close engagement with Persian documents, and an abiding concern with the economic and social structures that shaped the lives of ordinary people as well as landed and religious elites.

After completing his education at Aligarh, he joined the University of Delhi, where he established himself as an accomplished teacher and scholar. He served as Head of the Department of History from July 2007 to June 2010. His teaching and research interests were remarkably wide, encompassing the history of Awadh, agrarian relations, zamindars and landed intermediaries, Indian Sufism, the relationship between rural society and urban gentry, the history of education and transmission of knowledge, the uprising of 1857, and the history of Central Asia under the Mongols.

His most substantial contribution lies in the study of Awadh and its transition from Mughal to colonial rule. His doctoral research, published in expanded form as *Agrarian Society in Awadh: Structure and Change under the Pre-Colonial Regimes, c. 1595–1856*, examined Awadh as a complex and evolving agrarian society, drawing attention to the changing composition of land-

Website: www.indianhistorycongress.com

Email: ihc.secretary23@gmail.com

Phone: (+91) 9758300289



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controlling groups, *taluqdari* tenures, rural administration, revenue assignments, and the position of zamindars. An earlier collection, *Studies in the Anatomy of a Transformation: Awadh from Mughal to Colonial Rule* (1998), had already established his reputation. Through these works, he demonstrated that the transition from Mughal to colonial rule involved far-reaching changes in landed power, revenue administration, and the relationship between the countryside and the state.

A second major field was the history of Sufism and religious institutions. His work on the khanqah of Salon in Awadh, based upon a rich collection of Persian, Urdu and English records, resulted in the edited volume *Masnad-e Faqr-o Irshad: Tarikh-e Khanwada-e Karimia Naimia Salon* (2003), a documentary history of this Sufi establishment from the seventeenth century onwards. His writings on Sufi institutions examined the landed properties of *khanqahs*, patterns of inheritance and succession within Sufi families, and the ways in which Chishti traditions interacted with local languages and popular practices. His essay on religious plurality in the Chishti tradition showed how spiritual institutions could become meeting grounds for different communities, challenging rigid representations of religious identities in pre-colonial India.

He also made important contributions to the history of education and the dissemination of knowledge. His widely cited essay, "Education and Transmission of Knowledge in Medieval India" (*Intellectual Discourse* 20, no. 1, 2012), explored education as a broad social process and was attentive to the movement of scholars, texts and intellectual traditions across regions. The uprising of 1857 was another subject close to him; his writings on Maulavi Ahmadullah Shah of Faizabad emphasised indigenous narratives, rebel proclamations, and Urdu and Persian accounts, recovering the voices of those who resisted colonial rule. He edited, jointly with Professor S. N. R. Rizvi, *The Great Uprising of 1857: Studies, Commentaries and Documents*, and later edited another collection centred upon Delhi, Lucknow and the experiences of the defeated.

His published writings ranged beyond Awadh to Mughal relations with the Portuguese at Goa, rural bureaucracy in Cooch Behar and Assam, *madad-i ma'ash* grants, Mughal jagir administration, calligraphic and commemorative styles in architecture, Persian literary traditions in Punjab, and Islam in India before the Delhi Sultanate. Among his major edited works were *The Islamic Path: Sufism, Politics and Society in India*, jointly edited with Helmut Reifeld, and *Recording the Progress of Indian History: Symposia Papers of the Indian History Congress*,

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1992–2010, a volume that preserved and made accessible significant papers from Congress symposia.

Professor Jafri's relationship with the Indian History Congress was exceptionally close and enduring. He served as Joint Secretary and In-charge of the Permanent Office from 1996 to 1998 and again from 2009 to 2012, maintaining records, dealing with correspondence, assisting in the preparation of the Proceedings, and ensuring the continuity of the institution's administrative work. He was subsequently elected Secretary of the Indian History Congress for the term April 2012 to March 2015. His tenure was marked by diligence, institutional loyalty and a deep respect for the democratic traditions of the Congress. He regarded the IHC as a national community of historians, sustained by adherence to secular, scientific and evidence-based history.

His contribution to organising annual sessions was equally notable. As Organising Secretary, he hosted the 68th Session at the University of Delhi in December 2007, the first session held there after a gap of forty-six years, attended by approximately 1,600 outstation delegates. Within three years, he again served as Organising Secretary for the 70th Session in May 2010. The successful organisation of two large sessions in such a brief period testified to his extraordinary capacity for institutional work, his personal accessibility, and his ability to bring together scholars from across the country.

Professor Jafri was elected President of the Medieval India Section and delivered his presidential address at the 77th Session at Thiruvananthapuram in December 2016, returning to his concern with the emergence of a composite society and culture in Awadh under Mughal rule. He was also deeply involved with the U.P. History Congress, serving as Executive Committee member, Joint Secretary, General Secretary and ultimately General President, organising six annual sessions and editing their Proceedings. He was associated with the U.P. Historical Review as Joint Editor.

As a teacher, he was generous with his time and knowledge, supervising numerous doctoral and M.Phil. dissertations and encouraging younger scholars to work with Persian documents and regional archives. His students remember him for the scholarly discipline he demanded, the sources he placed at their disposal, and the confidence he instilled in those entering the profession. He belonged to a generation that regarded teaching, research and institution-building as inseparable parts of a historian's vocation.

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Those who worked with him in the Indian History Congress will particularly remember his warmth, accessibility and capacity for friendship. The Permanent Office of the Congress requires patience, meticulous attention to detail and a willingness to undertake tasks for which there is seldom public recognition. Professor Jafri carried out these duties with quiet dedication, combining efficiency with courtesy. He remained intellectually active after his retirement, continuing to write on agrarian history, Sufi institutions, education, archival records, and the composite traditions of Indian society.

Professor Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri's life represented the finest traditions of the historical profession in India: a scholar rooted in archival research, a teacher committed to the training of students, and an institution-builder who gave unstintingly of himself to the Indian History Congress. His scholarship widened our understanding of Awadh, agrarian relations, Sufism, education and the uprising of 1857. His institutional service helped sustain the Congress through years of important transition and expansion.

The Indian History Congress records its profound grief at his passing and conveys its heartfelt condolences to the members of his family, his students, colleagues and friends. His absence will be deeply felt, but his scholarship and his contribution to the life of the Congress will continue to be remembered with respect and gratitude.

Professor S. Ali Nadeem Rezavi

Secretary

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