

**Islam in History and Politics:  
Perspectives from South Asia**

*Asim Roy, ed.*

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This collection of essays consists primarily of the output of Australia's first major conference on South Asian Islam, held in 1996. Most of the contributions to this somewhat delayed volume, then, were written by scholars work-

ing in the Australian and New Zealand academe. Editor Asim Roy has tried to close the intervening decade with an at times polemical introduction focusing on the Islamophobia that has been rising steadily since the conference was held.

The book opens with Francis Robinson's conference keynote address. A professor at Royal Holloway in London and former president of the Royal Asiatic Society, Robinson is one of the most prominent scholars on (early) modern Islam in South Asia. His presentation discusses the shift from an "other-worldly" to a "this-world Islam" and the consequences that this inward turn had for the individual Muslim's sense of responsibility. As the ulama lost their monopoly on the interpretation of Islam in this process, reformists and modernists – and Muslim women in particular – were all thrown back on their own devices for re-evaluating the role of religion in what had become, to a large extent, a disenchanting world.

In his meditation on self-instrumentality and self-affirmation, Robinson enters into a conversation with the writings of the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, a leading thinker on what he himself termed "one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization": the centrality of "ordinary life" to self-fulfillment (p. 29). This open-ended new trajectory raises an array of previously unasked questions, such as what will be the outcome of "the sense of empowerment that comes with the knowledge that it is humanity that fashions the world" and whether it will lead the Muslim world toward a secularizing path (pp. 32-33).

The next two essays are dedicated to the historiography of South Asian Islam. Javeed Alam's brief presentation revolves around the notion of the Subcontinent's alleged "composite culture," which is often attributed to a supposedly inherent Indian genius for synthesis. Central to his analysis is that "co-mingling" and "fusion" on folk levels were very much a feature of communal development in the pre-reflective stage, which only started to unravel as elites, states, and "spokesmen of dominant versions of orthodoxy" intervened (pp. 38-39). Discussing both the impact of Hindu and Muslim intrusions, Alam discerns a growing politicization of societal life that resulted in a "bifurcation of common concerns and interests" (p. 43).

Roy's second contribution, a lengthy essay on the Islamic revival in Bengal, elaborates this further. Taking issue with Rafiuddin Ahmed, a leading historian on Bengali Islam, that Islamic revivalism's primary impact was on the sociopolitical situation of Bengali Muslims, Roy argues that the "Islamic salience" of Islamic revivalism should not be underestimated. Introducing an alternative methodology for historiography, he reassesses Ahmed's standard account, contending that the reinvigoration of Islamic values

became an inherent part of the Bengali Muslims' sense of community. At the same time, he adopts a revisionist perspective in order to avoid simplistic dichotomous representations of orthodoxy and heterodoxy, thereby restoring a more complex and subtle interplay of values and practices.

Following some briefer presentations on Tipu Sultan (Kate Brittlebank) and the plague in turn-of-the-century South Asia (I. J. Cathanach), Ian Copland's contribution on the 1932 Alwar Revolt takes us to the Rajasthan region of northwestern India. Building on the writings of such "moral economists" as E. P. Thompson, George Rude, and James C. Scott, who challenged overly materialistic analyses of peasant revolts, Copland applies a comparable approach to the religious values underlying the Meo Muslim community's 1932 revolt against its Hindu neighbors. Toward the end of his study, he adds the important observation that

writing on the "rise" of communalism in colonial India has tended, as I have here, to emphasize change over continuity, to highlight irruptions of communal violence at the expense of situations of peaceful co-existence, even though there is much statistical and anecdotal evidence to suggest that, even in the twentieth century, the latter was the prevailing norm in most places at most times. (p. 138)

Dominique-Sila Khan and Zawahir Moir have contributed a fascinating impression of the microcosm of the Imam Shah shrine in Pirana (Gujarat). Their account shows an intricate game of the appropriation of a Nizari Ismaili saint by Hindu and Sunni Sufi devotees, with the saint's descendent, practicing a twentieth-century form of *taqiyah*, deftly operating in the background as an "invisible pir" to maintain his forefather's "true" legacy. The next rather bland presentation by W. H. McLeod on the relations between Punjab's Sikhs and Muslims does not add anything new to the extant accounts.

The remaining three essays deal with the two Muslim-majority countries of South Asia: Pakistan and Bangladesh. In "Ethnicity, Islam, and National Identity in Pakistan," Adeel Khan sketches how Muslim migrants (Muhajireen) from northern India's United Provinces and the Punjabis succeeded in dominating multi-ethnic Pakistan at the expense of such other regional groups as the Bengalis, Sindhis, Baluchis, and Pashtuns. Building on Jinnah's post-independence centralizing efforts, a very resilient military-bureaucratic alliance evolved and used Islam in a variety of tactical ways to repress all challenges to its hegemony. This political Islam bore little resemblance to the cultural "Islams" of the various ethnic groups and resulted in a kind of intellectual identity crisis as to what constitutes Pakistani culture. The consequences of the state's ideological manipulation of religion is fur-

ther explored by Samina Yasmeen, whose essay focuses on the implications for women and religious minorities. The volume ends with a third, maybe somewhat redundant, contribution by the editor, in which he returns to the “salience” of Islam in South Asian politics.

Although a thematic red thread may be lacking, apart from the geographical focus, the very absence of such a focus in this collection of essays actually underscores what anthropologist Stanley Tambiah has called the “true ‘moral’ economy” of South Asia: its pluralism and multiculturalism (p. 137).

Carool Kersten  
Lecturer, Islamic Studies  
King’s College, London, United Kingdom