

Book Review: *Jeffrey and Sen (eds): Being Muslim in South Asia – Diversity and Daily Life*

Gry Hvass Pedersen

Jeffrey & Sen (eds.): *Being Muslim in South Asia – Diversity and Daily Life*

Contributors: Irfan Ahmad, Khaled Ahmed, Tanweer Fazal, Musbashar Hassan, Riaz Hassan, Samia Huq, Arif A. Jamal, Robin Jeffrey, Salim Lakha, Muhammad Khalid Masud, Dennis B. McGilvray, Barbara D. Metcalf, Matthew Nelson, Taberez Ahmed Neyazi, Ronojoy Sen and Torsten Tschacher

Oxford University Press, 2014

Pages: 368

Rationale:

Up to one-third of the world's Muslim population lives in the countries of South Asia, making it an important region when researching on Muslims and Muslim societies within a global perspective. The anthology under review provides both a good introduction for new scholars in the field and interesting new perspectives on the diversity of South Asian Muslims and the conditions they face for researchers already familiar with the region.

Key Words

South Asia, India, Pakistan, review

As part of the Modern Muslim Subjectivities Project at the Centre for Contemporary Middle East Studies, I travelled to New Delhi to conduct fieldwork on Islamic universities in an Indian context, their role as social sites for the formation of subjectivities, and their interrelation with global developments in higher education. My research project contributes to the ambition of the Centre to study the Middle East and Middle Eastern related issues within a global perspective. With up to one-third (more than 500 million) of the world's Muslim population living in South Asia, it becomes indispensable to include this region when studying Muslim societies and communities within a global context, a point further highlighted by the fact that Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh are the second-, third, and fourth-largest Muslim countries in the world respectively, only exceeded by Indonesia. Consisting of fifteen contributions addressing different issues relating to the lives and conditions of Muslims in South Asia, the anthology under review can contribute to the effort of understanding Muslim and Islamic issues within a broader, global perspective.

The overall purpose of the book is to highlight the diversity and pluralism of contemporary Muslims living in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka in order to counter the rather one-sided and often mistaken and misleading image of Islam which emerged following the events of September 11, 2001. Without ignoring the issues of violence and oppression, the main objective of the anthology is thus to give the reader an insight into the everyday practices of South Asian Muslims within areas such as education, marriage, identity, or leisure time. Moreover the volume informs the reader of the particular and diverse conditions and challenges Muslims face in the region.

In the first two chapters by Muhammad Khalid Masud and Barbara Metcalf, the reader is introduced to the issue of Islam and modernity in the South Asian context. Both authors address the challenges Western imperialism and modernity posed to South Asian Muslims from the 1850s onwards and the subsequent disputes within the community on how to respond. Khalid Masud portrays and discusses two contesting responses, one by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who called for reform, adaption and development, and the other by Jamaluddin Afghani, who advocated restoring the caliphate and rejecting Western imperialism, as well as the different narratives they produced, which Muslims continue to draw upon in their relation to modernity. It was, however, Afghani's political ideology that "dominated Muslim imaginations," rejecting religious reforms and leading

Muslim thought in South Asia “to its present intellectual impasse,” as Khalid Masud concludes.

Along similar lines, Metcalf looks more closely at the relationship between Islam and democracy in India in the twentieth century by analyzing the political visions of four Muslim leaders in relation to the model of ideal liberal democracy on the one hand and a communitarian-focused model on the other. She stresses the general diversity in views on issues such as government, nation state, world capitalism, etc., and how circumstances and contingency informs outcomes. As a main point of the chapter, Metcalf draws attention to the current trends in Indian Muslim political life, where the previous focus on cultural symbols, such as Muslim personal law, is increasingly being replaced by discussions of the economic and social conditions of Indian Muslims following the Sachar Committee Report in 2006. According to Metcalf, it is these daily social conditions which influence Muslim behavior in India and not any suspected militancy.

In the third chapter the scope changes to Pakistan. Riza Hassan investigates the crisis of conscience in Pakistan, focusing on religious consciousness. More specifically, he analyzes the importance of the “Islamization programme” of Zia ul-Haq and shows how it produced a narrow interpretation of Islam. Hassan labels this hybrid of Wahhabism and Salafism as “Salafabism” and argues that it is dominant in many parts of the country.

Shifting back to India, Torsten Tschacher challenges the scholarly tendency to place and understand South Indian Muslims within the models and theories derived from the conditions of Muslims in the northern parts of India. In challenging the master narrative of Tamil Muslim society as clearly identifiable “sub-communities,” he argues that the way in which scholars today cast communities and subsequently reduce diversity is based on a standard template produced by the British colonial census ethnography in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Furthermore, the chapter discusses how these common narratives have been adopted not only by academia but also by the post-colonial Indian state and local actors, resulting in a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy in which Tamil Muslims themselves produce self-identifying “sub-communities.”

In the fifth chapter, Dennis B. McGilvray lays out his comprehensive research on the long-term impacts of the Sri Lankan civil war and the tsunami of De-

ember 2004 on matrilineal marriage residency patterns and the property rights of women in Tamil and Muslim families, here with a particular focus on the Tamil-speaking Moorish community in Akkaraipattu. The findings of his case studies testify to the diversity of practices among Muslims, as well as showing the arrival of west-Asian/Middle Eastern models in the area, pressuring for homogenization. Still, McGilvray concludes that the Moorish matrilineal marriage system has proven very resilient, though affected and constrained by the consequences of the Eelam wars, the disaster of the tsunami, and local reformist efforts inspired by west-Asian models and interpretations of Islam.

In examining the role of trade, community, and British rule in connection with the migration of the Kassim Lakha family to East Africa, Salim Lakha's case study turns to the topic of Indian Muslims' place in the global Indian diaspora. The study illustrates the cultural adaptation of the Khoja Ismaili family, their embracement of modernization and Westernization, and the significance of the community and their Indian heritage in informing life in the diaspora.

Staying within the scope of the Indian Ismaili community, Arif A. Jamal analyses the Shia Imami Ismaili Conciliation and Arbitration Boards (CABs) and their role in providing a variety of justice within the community. In particular, the chapter addresses and discusses how the CABs negotiate concepts such as law, community, plurality and authority, tradition, and tradition in relation to modernity.

In chapter eight we return to Pakistan, where Matthew J. Nelson in a rather substantial way examines the issue of differences within Islam and how institutions of religious education have dealt with these sectarian and doctrinal differences. More specifically, he investigates and challenges the common perception of how certain educational institutions produce certain ideas concerning differences (either they are ignored, reluctantly acknowledged or embraced) and how these ideas inform the formation of religious-cum-political subjectivities. In pointing to the hybridity of enrolment for many Pakistani children in both state and religious schools, he shows how students, depending on the circumstances, apply their own independent interpretation of the ideas passed on to them by the various institutions. Thus, Nelson challenges Talal Asad's focus on the domination of institutions in the discursive tradition of Islam and "brings individuals back in." For anyone dealing with the formation of subjectivities and religious ideas and influence, Nelson's piece is a worthwhile and inspiring read.

In Taberez Ahmed Neyazi's contribution, the topic of Islamic education and its alleged resistance to change is challenged by an analysis of the religious Darul Uloom of Deoband. Through analyzing Deoband's approaches to social issues Neyazi argues that the Deoband institution of Islamic learning has actually transformed. Yet, while Deoband has changed and adapted to certain circumstances in recent times, it has also been unable or unwilling to accommodate to others, leading Neyazi to the rather disillusioned conclusion: "While Deoband still commands great respect among Sunni Muslim communities in India and South Asia, it has failed to adapt to the changing times."

Changing the scope to contemporary Muslim identity consciousness in North India, Tanweer Fazal aims to capture the heterogeneity of ideologies and viewpoints shaping community formation and the minority discourse of Indian Muslims. Based on narratives given by a diverse group of Muslim interviewees with regard to gender, age, occupation, education, caste, and religiosity, he more specifically investigates how the conditions of stigmatization and discrimination (largely following 9/11), the notion of Ummah and nationalism, and the constitutional minority status of Indian Muslims affect identity construction. His findings are an illustration of the main theme of the book: the huge plurality of Muslim subjectivities and identities.

In the first of the two contributions focusing on the case of Bangladesh, Musbashar Hasan examines the question of whether Islam and the notion of Ummah is incompatible with nationalism, touched upon by Fazal in the previous chapter, within a Bangladeshi context. Investigating political Islam in Bangladesh by examining the influence of the transnational paradigm of Ummah in the country, Hasan concludes that the various networks of political Islam using modern technologies of communication played a significant and instrumental role in making the notion of Ummah a highly politically relevant issue in Bangladesh. Samia Huq builds further on the same question of how to be a Bengali Muslim, but shifts the gaze from the Islamist position to a different Muslim group constituted of females in Bangladesh seeking a different way to be Muslim, rejecting both the Islamist and the secular platforms. He analyses the women's hermeneutical approach, shows how their longing for a new version of Bengali Muslim identity is an evolving one, among other things indebted to modern education and technologies, and suggests ways to deal with the problems they face in their endeavor.

The two following chapters analyze the media discourses in Pakistan and India. In his contribution, former journalist Khalid Ahmed shows how the anti-Americanism of the Pakistani army, spread to the press due to the army's political power and thus into the political order of the country, informing public opinion. He concludes that, as a consequence of the Pakistani military's supremacy in the Pakistani political order, "al-Qaeda and its affiliates enjoyed powers of coercion that civil society and the media were less and less able to resist."

Based on his fieldwork research, Irfan Ahmad delivers a comprehensive and passionate analysis of the Indian media context and its representation of Indian Muslims. Referring to Kafka's illustration of how the pursuit of delivery of justice leads to its abolition, Ahmad argues that the Indian state's increased securitization and terrorism rhetoric has created a hegemonic myth on terrorism and Muslims which the mainstream media accommodates by fitting facts to it. Indian Muslims are constituted as the "other" of the Indian state, and in the media's deeply flawed representation of Muslims, this myth is being reproduced and fortified.

In the last chapter of the book, co-editor Ronojoy Sen returns to the topic of Indian Muslims' daily life and traces the history and importance of the Mohammedan Sporting Club of Kolkata prior to 1947. His analysis aims to place the Muslim football club in the context of communal politics in Bengal in the 1930s and 1940s and Muslim identity of the time. Furthermore, in his contribution, Sen illustrates the intersection between sport, religion, and politics.

As this review hopefully has illustrated, this book on the diversity and pluralism of Muslim life in South Asia is in itself a bundle of diverse scholarly work constituting of various focus areas, theoretical approaches, and methods. This diversity is both the strength and the weakness of the book. Covering a wide range of topics based on new research material and case studies, as well as applying various academic disciplines and scopes, it surely has its merits. Almost any scholar, no matter their academic background, will be able to find contributions relevant to their respective field. In particular, scholars working on Islam and its commonalities and diversities across regions will without any doubt benefit from its selections and findings. However, the diversity of the book is also its problem, as it can appear scattered, with the chapters varying in academic quality and depth.

Because of its combination of merits and drawbacks, the various chapters of the volume can be used as case material for lectures on the diversity of Muslim culture and religion, both as a source of knowledge and information and as cases for critical assessment and discussion of academic methods and positions.

About the author: Gry Hvass Pedersen is a PhD candidate at the Center for Contemporary Middle East Studies at the University of Southern Denmark.