



Margrit Pernau. *Ashraf into Middle Class: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 544 pp. \$69.75 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-809228-5.

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Middle-Class Muslims

This is an ambitious and sophisticated work of historical scholarship that engages with current debates on identity, community formation, religion, gender, communalism, and politics in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South Asia. Its canvas is vast: Muslims in Delhi during the nineteenth century, from the British takeover in 1803 until the Khilafat and noncooperation movements of the early 1920s. What did it mean to be a Muslim man or woman in Delhi at different periods during the nineteenth century? How did people of the nobility or the merchant or scholarly classes see themselves in relation to the British assumption of power which continually impinged on their lives at an individual, community, regional, and national level? When and how did a Muslim middle class emerge, how did this relate to the emergence of a new public sphere, and what role did religion play in the reconfiguration of community identities and evolving legal/power structures?

The author draws on an impressive range of original source material in Urdu and English, as well as the extant secondary literature on South Asian studies in several European languages. She delved into government records in Britain and India (mainly in Delhi), newspaper sources, Urdu journals, novels, personal memoirs, and family histories. Likewise, her knowledge of European languages, chiefly German, is also significant. She emphasizes the importance of cultural “translation” both within South Asia and across academic specialties in Europe and South Asia. Arguing that scholars on Europe and South Asia need to be in dialogue rather than for Europeanists to see South Asian history as the “Other” that has no relevance to their academic endeavors, she wants to “provincialize” Europe. Concretely, she raises

the question of comparing the German burgher class with the Muslim *ashraf* in nineteenth-century South Asia—while at the same time being mindful of the historical specificities of the two. Rather than assuming that Indian concepts and culture are too different from European ones to be comparable, Pernau argues, we have to unpack them.

Likewise, the concept of entanglement is important to the book: “entangled history is a useful concept, particularly where it goes beyond the traditional history of influences and examines the interconnectedness of a whole host of transfer processes in both directions” (p. 434). We cannot understand the histories of any one group without simultaneously understanding those of other groups around them, as they are related and connected. The histories of men/women, Muslims/Hindus, India/Great Britain—all are “entangled” and have to be understood in relation to one another. More importantly, Pernau proposes that we adopt a polycentric model of identity, one defined not by drawing boundaries between self and other, but one constructed in relationship with the other, including identification with the other. As she puts it, “Identity would then originate in ... relation to a centre, not to a boundary” (p. xix). Instead of sharply demarcated binaries, she favors fuzzy boundaries and overlapping identities.

Thematically, the book connects an evolving Muslim class structure with differences in religious observance and gender relations during the nineteenth century. Early in the century the Mughals and nobles tended to favor Sufi devotionism (in the Chishti order), whereas reformist Islam became “a key means to social

advancement for ... socially mobile merchant groups” (p. 430). Demonstrations of piety—the foundation of mosques and madrasas, philanthropy, and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca—were a means for the latter to lay a claim to *sharafat*, defined as nobility of behavior rather than nobility of birth. Furthermore, gender norms changed in the course of the nineteenth century. Women enjoyed more power and more opportunities for participation in the public arena before the 1830s (as illustrated, for example, by Begum Samru, and the wives of Akbar Shah and Bahadur Shah Zafar) than later. There was a convergence between British Victorian mores and reformist Islamic ones, the latter becoming stronger as the nineteenth century progressed. Pernau argues that the more women were talked about and made the subject of men’s reformist texts, the further they were driven from public view. A third argument is that communalism, usually interpreted as a “secularization deficit,” was actually “only possible once secularization ha[d] already taken place” (pp. 431–432). The key to Pernau’s argument here is that during the course of the nineteenth century a person’s religious identity became distinct from his or her personal faith. The individual’s personal faith (his transcendental relationship with God) became privatized, while the articulation of demands for community advancement were framed as legal and/or political goals. The prime examples of this phenomenon were Sayyid Ahmad Khan in the late nineteenth century and Muhammad Ali Jinnah in the early twentieth.

These arguments are made with great complexity from multiple perspectives, within a strictly historical framework. The nineteenth century political context falls into two roughly equal halves, pre-1857 and post-1857, as the political context is quite different in each. The nature of the historical sources for these two periods is also quite different, as Pernau explains. Looking at it from the British perspective, there was a break in the 1830s as a result of the debate between the Orientalists (Warren Hastings, William Jones) and the Utilitarians and Anglicists (Lord William Bentinck, Thomas Babington Macaulay) being resolved in favor of the latter. The era of the White Mughals ended in the 1830s. Pernau illustrates this with reference to the case of William Fraser’s murder. The purpose of Company rule shifted from purely commercial concerns toward its framing as a “civilizing mission.” This trend was accentuated in the post-1857 period. Basically the Indians were deemed culturally too different from the British to appreciate British culture. It was best to leave them alone and not to interfere in their religious customs, the argument went. However, because

the British needed low-level clerical workers, they promoted British-style education, which had begun during the 1840s, especially at the university level. (Elementary and high school education were initially not deemed important.)

Pernau also explores the Muslim sources in great depth to give us a picture of changes at the local level. Most important, at the center of Muslim intellectual life in the first half of the nineteenth century was the Madrasa Rahimiya, where Shah Abd ul-Aziz, the eldest son of Shah Wali Allah, steered a middle course between acquiescence in the British assumption of political control in Delhi after 1803 and a call to armed resistance, most strikingly in his fatwa deeming it permissible for Delhi Muslims to take and receive interest on loans in view of their straitened economic circumstances but not to rebel, given that they were able to freely observe their ritual obligations. Economic considerations figured prominently at this time in the fatwa literature, Pernau notes (p. 53), a fact that presaged the growing importance of traders in the Muslim social structure. While the early nineteenth-century class structure was divided between the nobles and the landed elite (*ashraf*) and the low-born (*ajlaf*), including traders—a division that coincided with those deemed to have foreign origins and local converts to Islam—this twofold division would change in the 1830s and beyond. Traders then became a key group in a newly emerging middle class.

In the Madrasa Rahimiya, by the early 1830s nuanced argument gave way to hardened boundaries and an emphasis on religious texts rather than personal devotion to a master. Under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d. 1831) and others, opposition to growing British control of northern India, now under direct rather than indirect rule, led to periodic outbreaks of fighting in northwestern India and the “Wahhabi trials” of the 1860s in Patna. Another trend at the Madrasa Rahimiya, paradoxically, was what Pernau refers to as “desacralization,” which had its roots in “reformist Islam” (pp. 158–159).

Pernau’s research into the politics of the Mughal dynasty and certain key families, including the Loharu family and the family of Hakim Sharif Khan, was for me one of the highlights of the book. Accounts of the intrafamily politics of Akbar Shah II, who ruled from 1806 to 1837 and was followed by Bahadur Shah Zafar (Mirza Abu Zafar), favored by the British but not by his father in part because his mother was of humble origin (p. 31), are interwoven with descriptions of the religious loyalties of different family members, the layout of the city, and the

politics of key players/intermediaries between the British and the Mughals. The role of the latter after the 1857 uprising, including their varied economic fortunes and political roles, lends thematic continuity to the book's many foci and keeps it grounded in the unfolding history of nineteenth-century Delhi.

To return to one of the key themes of the book, namely, the gradual emergence of a Muslim middle class in the post-1857 period, Pernau argues that what was key was not the economic basis of the new middle class, as there was no industrial output in Delhi and hence nothing like an industrial elite, as in England, but the participation by a mix of educated professional groups, poets, religious elites, and some traders in the emerging institutions of the mid- to late nineteenth century and the concomitant growth of a new public sphere. Differentiation into separate spheres increased, which led to greater secularization. Pernau argues that secularization does not imply the reduction of importance in religion, so much as its compartmentalization.

Among the most important constituents of the new institutions were the print media and educational institutions. Delhi College in particular is discussed at great length. Under British patronage in the 1820s and 1830s, the college had an "Oriental" department, where Arabic and Persian—with an emphasis on "languages, law, a little philosophy and logic, mathematics, and some geography" rather than theology, were taught (p. 112), and an English department which focused on Western learning, the latter taught in Urdu translation. The graduates of this college become a learned elite who exercised great

influence on the Muslim intellectual scene prior to 1857. They included the novelist Nazir Ahmad, the reformer Zaka Ullah, Sayyid Ahmad Khan, and others. When the British began to include Indians in municipal government in the 1860s and thereafter, many of the former graduates of Delhi College were included in the British designation of "natural leaders" of the Muslims, together with Punjabi traders.

The values of this nascent Muslim middle class, as reflected in novels such as Nazir Ahmad's, centered around piety, frugality, education, and hard work. These were the achievement-oriented values of the "new" ashraf. Urdu magazines such as *Ismat* (Woman) articulated new gender roles, reconceived around the notions of female domesticity, piety, and Islamic education, which drew upon both Victorian and reformist Islamic sources of inspiration.

Pernau's book, in my view, makes a significant contribution to South Asian studies in terms of its breadth and depth of scholarship, its use of source material, most well known but some less so, and by engaging with the current literature in the field in both English and other Western languages. This book does not uncover new ground so much as it revisits a history already well known and thoroughly researched, by raising new questions. That Pernau has gone on since publishing this book (first in German, and subsequently in English translation) to work on the history of emotions in South Asia attests to the fact that she continues to look at South Asian history in new and interesting ways.

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