

# BEYOND REVIVAL AND REFORM: REORIENTING THE STUDY OF SOUTH ASIAN ISLAM<sup>1</sup>

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This special volume presents and explores new problem-spaces, archives, and approaches in the study of South Asian Islam that venture significantly beyond and substantively reorient the framings of revival and reform that have typically dominated discussions on this topic. The subject of Islam in South Asia has recently begun to develop into an independent field of study. In the past two to three decades, the study of Islam in South Asia has played an ancillary role to the two main disciplines in which it emerged: history and religious studies. Within the discipline of history, the tradition of Islam has been engaged primarily at the level of politics. In the field of premodern South Asian history, this has entailed the study of Muslim political thought as it took shape in the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal empires. In the field of modern history, the study of Islam has been folded into the study of political ideas as tied to Partition, communalism, and nationalism.

From the perspective of Religious Studies, Islam in South Asia is a new field. Islamic studies, the subfield of enquiry for Islam in the field of Religion, has typically taken a philological and Arab-centric approach to the study of Islam that has given primacy to the Middle East and the Arabic language. Only recently have scholars begun to take seriously the texts, histories and practices of Islam in vernacular Indian languages and literatures. In many ways, this shift can be marked by a growing (though still fewer) number of jobs that describe positions as the “Study of Islam” open to time periods, languages, geographic contexts that are beyond Arabic and the Arab world—which are normally associated with the more traditional field of “Islamic Studies.”

In the backdrop of this broader historiographic context, the goal of this special volume is to bring together experts in the field of South Asian history with scholars of Religious Studies to revisit some key yet hitherto less examined components of South Asian Islam. The premise of this volume is to argue that historians need to engage more closely with the categories and ideas of “tradition” while Religious Studies scholars must work with the forms of critique and questions of historiography that are at the center of the historian’s practice. To this end, this special

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volume speaks to the specific intersection and interface between the two disciplines in both pre-modern and modern South Asia.

Other than generating a conversation between scholars of South Asian Islam from different disciplinary backgrounds, this volume also brings together scholars who focus on both pre-modern and modern intellectual traditions. A question that has dominated South Asian studies for a while now has been that of whether the colonial moment in the late 18th to 19th centuries represented a massive rupture or more of a continuity with the pre-colonial past. This volume attempts to find new ways of addressing this question with reference to the career of Islam in South Asia that might move beyond the rupture/continuity binary. Instead it tries to identify and highlight the precise intellectual shifts and continuities that mark the transition to the colonial period with respect to questions of religion, language, and politics.

Another hallmark and distinguishing feature of this volume is its emphasis on engaging the study of South Asian Islam through conceptual themes and vocabularies that move beyond or reorient the problem-space of Muslim reform and revival. All articles in this volume not only bring into view critical new sets of actors, texts, and contexts that have received little and in some cases no prior attention. But more importantly-individually and collectively-they also push for and invite the consideration of less traversed locations of South Asian Islam that in turn reorient the theoretical lens and terrain through which one might view this ongoing discursive tradition.

For instance, the sites of inquiry that occupy the essays in this volume include pre-modern Mughal imaginaries of religious difference and inter-religious hospitality (Rajeev Kinra), women in the evangelical *Tablighi Jama'at* and their strivings of piety in the domestic sphere (Darakhshan Khan), authorial memory, history, and reception in early modern Bengali Sufi song literature (Ayesha Irani), pre-modern and modern South Asian Qur'an commentaries and translations in Arabic, Persian and Urdu (SherAli Tareen), the interaction of architecture, ritual, and "Shi'i dharmic kingship" in the early modern Deccan (Karen Ruffle), and the politics of sexual difference in the theologically inflected work "Heavenly Ornaments" of London based contemporary Pakistani artist Naiza Khan (Ali Mian). Together, these articles demonstrate the elasticity as well as the expansive analytical frontiers of South Asian Islam as an intellectual, lived, and academic category. By examining South Asian Islam through varied disciplinary perspectives, conceptual questions, and discursive and material objects of study, this volume aspires to showcase the breadth and dynamism of this tradition, while also suggesting novel avenues and possibilities for its interrogation. In addition to sparking productive conversations among specialist and non-specialist scholars, we hope these essays will also work profitably in various undergraduate and graduate seminars connected to South Asian Islam or to the thematic registers engaged in these essays.

## Note

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