Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire

Nile Green
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 217 pages.

After what seems like a strange absence of academic interest, the study of Muslims in South Asia is catching up – and not all of that interest is motivated by the contemporary concerns of counter-terrorism and Af-Pak strategy. Part of this intellectual revival has been focused on the Deccan, and one of the best and brightest young historians working in the area is Nile Green, who now teaches at UCLA.

The author posits three primary contributions to wider historiographical debates. First, it engages the social history of how empire impinged upon communities and practices and often co-opted and promoted them, thereby allowing us greater insight into its workings to suggest that partnerships were essential to perpetuating power, especially in India, where the number of actual British soldiers and administrators on the ground was never sufficient for an absolutist colonial empire. As such, it allows us to peek into an alternative form of subaltern interaction and agency. This is significant, given the neglect to a large extent of the study of religion on the part of subalternists. Second, the book demonstrates how cultural practices and the invention of norms were central to fostering military culture and performance of the British Indian Army, which involves the selective promotion of certain forms of religiosity. It provides further evidence for

the centrality of the army as a key arena of cultural exchange and social interaction between Indians and Britons. In this area, Green draws upon the insights of Simon Digby, Jos Gommans, and Dirk Kolff on the nature of the military labor market and the role of cultural and communal affiliation. Third, it facilitates a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Islam and military violence and suggests that religiously motivated, reasoned, and practiced violence could be deployed in different contexts for different ends, in favor of resistance against empire but also significantly in favor of empire. Religion as an instrument of mobilizing for military effect was not just the external enemy, but was deployed within the cantonments.

The introduction explains the book's three central concerns: the nature of the military service that was controlled and mediated by *faqirs*, the nature of the relationship of these rather antinomian Sufis with the Indian soldiery, and how the colonial state promoted some forms of Islamic expression at the expense of others. It studies the Muslim soldiery of informal empire in Hyderabad through the troops of the Nizam's forces in the Hyderabad Contingent allied to and officered by the British.

Chapter 1 sets the scene by examining the history of the interaction of Islam and military life and the military labor market in pre-colonial India focusing on the traditions of the Deccan. Of particular importance are the accounts given of Naqshbandi warriors in the service of the polity such as Shah Palangposh (d. 1699). Sufis blessed conquest and warfare, participated in war, wrought miracles to subdue the enemy, and acted as rallies for other soldiers. Green does not fail to provide a wider comparative analysis: Sikh saints and *sadhus* played similar roles, and one wonders whether there is something peculiar about the nature of the social interaction of *faqirs* and soldiers. Sufi networks overlapped with networks of the labor market. Overall, this background chapter presents a useful and new way of approaching military history, especially as the adoption of *faqirs* and their networks and the tacit acceptance of their practices is contradicted by the slow tolerance of non-Anglican forces in the British Army and may show how the fulcrum of the colonial state yet again provided experiences that later affected the colonizer and institutions in the mother country.

Chapter 2 focuses upon the cult of two faqirs who had a prominent following among the *sepoys* in the Nizam's service: Afzal Shah Biyabani (d. 1856) and his disciple Muhammad A`zam, known as Bane Miyan (d. 1921), and demonstrates how the role of these Sufis was normalized through the existing example of the padre. The main texts used are their biographies

Afzal al-Karamat and *A`zam al-Karamat*, whose very titles stress the centrality of miracle-producing to the function of being a *faqir* saint. But one ought to step back and consider the tropic and formulaic nature of the hagiographies upon which Green draws and wonder what representations are being made in the text. It is perhaps an irony of the dichotomy between the popular sepoy Islam and scripturalism that not only were these *faqirs*, it seems, elite members of the ulema, but also their supernatural authority was somehow perpetuated through the medium of text. The Bolarum rebellion of 1855 is Green's attempt to demonstrate the agency of the *sepoys* and show that they were not necessarily manipulated by the officers, but rather that there was a negotiated exchange.

Chapter 3 is a more detailed study of Bane Miyan and his gradual marginalization as a madman that signals a decline in the *faqirs'* role and an institutionalization of military service. It shows the development of modernity, printing, and scripturalism marginalizing folk, barracks Islam in favor of a more scripturalist, literate faith promulgated by Hyderabad's Muslim authorities. The modern control over the public space and the body increasingly rendered the notion of the wise fool whose mind was "struck" by the divine to be meaningless, and thus for the *faqirs* to be seen as merely mad drug-takers. It would, in fact, be instructive to consider the *faqir's* madness as a form of social resistance not least to the encroachments of modernity.

The conclusions that Green draws from his study of two specific cases rooted in the close reading of two hagiographies relates to the changing nature of what he calls "barracks Islam." While in the earlier period barracks Islam was encouraged as an alternative to literate "high" Islam (which, especially due to the events of 1857, was considered with greater suspicion) in order to control and naturalize and even localize the influences upon *sepoys* through fostering their *faqir* networks and patronage hierarchies, the exigencies of modernity and the modern colonial state required new vertical forms of relationships and control of the Muslim public space through command over the tongue (the rise of Urdu literacy) and the mind (through the development of an asylum system). Modern warfare, in the form of the first and second world wars, probably was the key stimulus that killed off the old *sepoy* barracks Islam and its adherence to *faqirs*. If Green had continued his account up to partition, this might have become clearer; however, he ends his account around 1930.

While the book makes a useful contribution and a fascinating read, I have some reservations – or rather issues – that I think need further research

or clarification. In what sense can we consider *faqirs* with significant followings who probably had a complementary relationship with the officer class as "subaltern"? Can we really consider hagiographical sources such as *Afzal al-Karamat* to be "subaltern" histories? How should we read the sources to find the voices of their actual disciples? Were the networks within the labor market defined by adherence to a Sufi or to an individual who was seen as the network's patron? What do we know about rival claims to religiosity made upon the soldiery from the Nizamiyya and other "high" institutions of scripturalist Islam? What evidence do we have that the colonial authorities were actually disseminating religious cults?

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