Book Reviews

The Shi‘a in Modern South Asia: Religion, History, and Politics

Justin Jones and Ali Usman Qasmi, eds.
Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 212 pages.

The volume at hand brings together recent advances in and new avenues for the study of both Ithna ‘Ashari and Isma‘ili Shi‘ism in South Asia. As Francis Robinson notes in his introduction, the region’s roughly 60 million Shi‘as were grossly neglected in scholarship until the mid-1980s. Since then, and particularly from the turn of the twenty-first century onward, the situation has changed significantly. Indeed, some of the most interesting and promising recent studies of various historical and contemporary aspects of Shi‘ism in general have focused on those very communities. Justin Jones, one of the spearheads of this development, has acted as co-editor of this important collection of eight thematically highly diverse essays.

After Robinson’s overview of the field’s existing literature and the volume’s contents, Sajjad Rizvi tackles a major desideratum in the study of Indian Shi‘i scholarly history by closely examining the life and works of Sayyid Dildar Ali Nasirabadi (d. 1820). A major scholar of his day, as well as the founder of a scholarly dynasty and an instrumental figure in establishing the Usuli tradition in the Shi‘i state of Awadh, his figure and works have, surprisingly, only received attention in the context of Dildar Alis’s polemics against Shah Abd al-Aziz of Delhi (d. 1823) and his critique of Shi‘ism. Reviewing Ali’s severely contested but lastingly influential intellectual attack on Akhbarism, Sufism, Sunnism, and philosophy, all expressed in the context of rising Shi‘i power in late eighteenth-century Awadh, Rizvi aptly highlights the importance of seriously considering major developments in the late pre-colonial period in order to more fully understand the actual and supposed transformations that South Asian Shi‘ism underwent during and beyond colonial rule. Needless to say, this also holds true for the study of other Muslim communities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Michel Boivin, who continues to produce pathbreaking work on the Isma'ili Khojas, presents and analyzes hitherto neglected judicial sources on the emerging Isma'ili-Ithna 'Ashari divide within Karachi's Khoja community. This material allows him to argue convincingly that this split in many ways represents a conflict among spiritual leaders seeking control of the Khoja caste on the one hand, and the caste, as an independent social body striving to retain its independence, on the other. Muhammad Amir Ahmad Khan then focuses on the scholarly Mahmudabad family of the first half of the twentieth century in Awadh and its transnational Shi'i network. The latter rested primarily on the international preaching missions of graduates of the Madrasa't-ul Wa'izeen, founded in 1919, in close cooperation with the Mahmudabad family, and the Urdu and English Shi'i religious periodicals founded by them during the 1920s.

As these ostensibly religious press organs were also deeply concerned with national politics and the so-called Indian communal problem, Khan additionally provides interesting glimpses on the changing configurations that prompted wavering support for either the National Congress or the Muslim League. While strongly promoting the dissemination of a cultural pan-Islamism and rejecting political, militant pan-Islamism, besides sending Shi'i preachers to far away regions (e.g., East Africa), the concerned publications were remarkably devoid of any anti-Sunni element. Moreover, the contribution provides a window onto transnational Shi'i endeavors long before 1979.

In the next essay, Justin Jones analyzes the Husainology of the region's most influential Shi'i scholar, Sayyid Ali Naqi Naqvi (1905-88). In line with the major expansion of biographical writing in India from the late nineteenth century onward, as exemplified in Sunni circles *inter alia* by the respective works of Shibli Numani (1857-1914), Naqvi produced a heavily contested but highly influential account of the life of Imam Husain, one that is characterized by its remarkable secularization and de-mystification of Husain's figure. Framing him as a "martyr for all humanity" (*shahid-i insaniyat*, which also serves as the work's title), Naqvi presents Husain primarily as a moral exemplar and not as an intercessor or a divinely inspired character.

Of particular interest, however, are the author's observations on the practical political application of this Husainology through the inter-religious forum of the "Husain Day" organized in Lucknow in 1942 by a religious association closely linked to Naqvi. At this event, Hindus, Sunnis, and Shi'is who sympathized with the struggle of the Indian National Congress came together to link Gandhi's notions of self-sacrifice with the martyrdom and historical example of Husain. As Jones notes, a "distinctively Shi'i idiom of martyrdom,

thereby, was co-opted into a Congress-led nationalist language of self-sacrifice and civil disobedience" (p. 98). Additionally, the article draws attention to how the Husainology put forward by the ideologues of the Iranian revolution resembled that of Naqvi, including the ecumenical interpretation of Husain's figure, which would several decades later serve Khomeini in his quest to export the Islamic revolution.

Mukherjee's contribution, a study of building community through social service and activism among the Isma'ili Khojas of East Africa, fully brings the transnational and diasporic perspective into focus. By calling for a conjoined history, which simultaneously looks to developments on and interactions between both sides of the Indian Ocean littoral, the author highlights the strong impact of the secession of the Ithna 'Ashari Khojas on the East African diaspora. Two important strategies designed to confront this challenge were evidently the production of internal regulations and constitutions, and, externally, the strong engagement in community and social service. Hereby, universal aspirations and values, already present in East Africa before the establishment of the Aga Khan Development Network exemplified by Isma'ili investment in the welfare of the local Muslim community as a whole, as opposed to mere intra-community ventures, were closely tied to an emerging self-identity as Isma'ili Khojas and followers of the Aga Khan, whose leadership came to be perceived as extending beyond the Khoja community.

Modern transnational dynamics are also the focus of Mirza's comparative chapter on diverging conceptions of Twelver Shi'i reform, represented by the Khoja-led World Islamic Network and the Tanzeem group of Hyderabad. Whereas the former has grown out of the transnational networks of the Khoja diaspora and its links to centers of Shi'i authority in Iraq, the latter draws considerably on the religious discourses and images generated by Iran. Both of them, however, have been relying extensively on various modern media, such as books, printed pamphlets, television channels, and videos to spread their messages further afield. As far as intra-Khoja dynamics are concerned, it is of particular interest to read how tales of sacrifice and Aga Khani persecution are figuring prominently in the collective memory of the Twelver Shi'i Khojas.

Just as this represents an inversion of sorts, due to the fact that the Isma'ili Shi'is are commonly rather regarded as subjects of persecution rather than the other way around, the following contribution by Kamran and Shahid serves to complicate our perspective on a major South Asian Islamic tradition: the Chishtiyyah Sufi *ṭarīqah*. Commonly heralded as the historical embodiment of an inclusive and pluralistic South Asian Islam, the article traces the devel-

opment of a markedly exclusionary streak within the Chishtiyyah of the Punjab from the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century onward. During a major revival beginning in Delhi, the Chishtiyyah, led by the *pir*s of Sial Sharif, eclipsed both the Qadiriyyah and the Suhrawardiyyah in the Punjab. Part of the new discourse of these Sialvi saints was the exclusion of Shi'is from what they viewed as the true Islamic tradition. As these ideas found striking parallels in contemporary Shi'i reformist thought in the area, the outcome was a considerable sharpening of identities, which the authors perceive as a precondition for Pakistan's bloody sectarian conflict of the last decades.

The latter has, conversely, occupied much of the existing scholarship on Pakistan's Shi'i community, which accounts for the comparative dearth of studies on change and continuity in Shi'i thought there both before and after 1979. Thus it is particularly valuable that Simon Wolfgang Fuchs focuses on Sayyid Arif Husain al-Husaini, a major Pakistani Shi'i scholar and activist of the period who is often regarded as the prime mediator of Khomeini's influence in Pakistan. He convincingly shows that post-1979 confrontational Shi'i activism was hardly a new development, but rather a continuation of patterns established in the preceding decades, something of which al-Husaini was fully aware. Accordingly, al-Husaini's interests and political activism proved to be, at times, seriously at odds with those of official Iran, whose universalist message underwent several transformations at his hands. This was most explicit in his refusal to welcome Ali Khamenei, then Iranian president, at the airport during a state visit, in order to avoid lending any seeming political legitimacy to Zia ul-Haq's regime.

All in all, this volume represents major advances in the study of Shi'ism in South Asia and its links to the Middle East, East Africa and, to a lesser degree, the Americas. Unfortunately, however, it suffers from partly insufficient editing, which is all the more surprising because all of its articles had been published in a 2014 special issue of the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*. Apart from the comparably high number of errors encountered, the somewhat disorganized historical introduction to Kamran and Shahid's study (pp. 163ff.), could have been easily improved by more rigorous editing and peer review processes. Either the editors or the reviewers should have recognized that, in Mirza's paper, there is a confusion of dates and chronology, as we hear of the arrival of an Iraqi Shi'i leader in India during the early 1990s and upon whose departure in 1981 a trust was founded (p. 145).

The same goes (i.e., that editorial work could have been more thorough) for a number of minor flaws in the same two articles. Thus, Mirza not only seems to imply that the Twelver Khojas are cremating their dead (p. 143),

something that, if factually true, would require at least some comment to non-specialist readers, but also paints an unduly unidirectional picture of a print-based Shi'i public sphere that links communities in various parts of South Asia and Africa "via funds from the Middle East." This naturally obscures the substantial amount of funds annually sent *to* the Middle East (i.e., the shrine cities in Iraq) from Khoja Twelver communities in both South Asia and, especially, the diaspora (p. 145f.).

Kamran and Shahid's presentation of the development of exclusiveness and shari'atization during the Chishtiyyah revival is not entirely convincing, as it partly operates on the basis of such questionable dichotomies as shari'a/Sufism and, particularly, ulama/Sufis (p. 168ff.). The apparent representation of the Barelvi leader Ahmad Reza Khan as source of the *nur-i Muhammadi* (light of Muhammad) idea, is – given the concept's centuries-long history and pervasiveness – of course misleading. Despite such individual minor flaws and the not completely satisfactory editorial work, the volume will hopefully be widely appreciated not only by the small circle of specialists of South Asian Shi'ism, but more widely by scholars and students of Shi'ism and Islam in South Asia in general.

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