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# Religious Piety in Islam and Contemporary India

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It should not be surprising that the rise of new forms of religious nationalism since the late 1970s and a renewed interest in revisiting the idea of secularism has been the central preoccupation of intellectuals interested in the study of religion. In continuity, religious nationalism of the Hindu Right has gained enough traction with the academic world. It has produced some of the most original insights to understand Hinduism, Hindu nationalism, and the everyday aspect of being a Hindu. On the other hand, while much has been written on Islamic revivalism and fundamentalism, the religious aspects of the everyday life of Muslims have yet to receive adequate attention. In a broader context, Peter van der Veer (1994) argues that to study the religious aspects of movements, everyday practices, and discourses one needs to shift the focus from the political scientist's viewpoint to the anthropologist's study of rituals and traditions.

## Understanding Islam

As a timely intervention, in India and elsewhere in the world, there is growing interest in the anthropology of Islam. The book examines the problematic aspects of the studies on the everyday life of Muslims in India. The book attempts to fill the gap in the lack of ethnographic work on Islam in India. It critically examines the existing works in the anthropology of religion and puts concepts and categories, such as syncretism, communalism, and fundamentalism under the scanner. The introductory chapter lays out “four key areas in the anthropology of Islam,” namely the debates on “Indian Islam,” the critical examination of syncretic tradition within Islam, “an ethnography of the secular in contemporary India” (p 3), and debates on boundaries between religion and secular in the public sphere of

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Religion and Secularities: Reconfiguring Islam in Contemporary India** edited by Sudha Sitharaman and Anindita Chakrabarti, *Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2020; pp 240, ₹795 (hardback).*

India. The successive chapters in the book follow the above-mentioned key areas and try to address the pertinent challenge, that is, the “impossibility of understanding contemporary Islam outside the logic of modern, secular, liberal governance” (p 3).

## Muslim in a Secular World

Aditya Kapoor's “Muslim Subjectivities, Embedded Identities” focuses on religious ideas and practices, which influence the complex interaction between the sacred and secular spheres. The essay also traces the fluidity of social boundaries and identities in the everyday life of Muslims (p 32). Central to this chapter is a quest, how does one be a Muslim in a secular world? The author further interrogates, “how are traditions interpreted and meanings constituted which inform everyday life” (p 32)? The following two sections of the chapter try to answer the questions, though not satisfactorily. While emphasising the polymorphic processes between the religious and secular domains of everyday life of Muslims, the essay ignores the pertinent question, why is the shrine one of the most important sacred sites for Muslims in eastern India? The answer to this question will possibly cast more light on the key findings of this chapter. Unfortunately, the introduction to the chapter fails to mention that it is a study of a shrine, and thus it is almost a revelation when one comes across it in the ensuing pages.

Aleena Sebastian's essay “State and Legal Reform” foregrounds the courtroom as the site of discursive practice to explore “the legal shifts that have taken

place over the years in colonial and postcolonial Malabar concerning the matrilineal practices of the Mappilas.” The essay underlines the complex relation between codified laws of the state and sociocultural pluralities and the limitation of a modern legal framework to ascertain the “strategic roles people enter into to sustain the coexistence of the ‘supposedly antithetical’ religious and cultural elements in their social organisation and inheritance pattern” (p 54). Through this exercise, Sebastian interrogates the dominant understanding of religion and law as universal conceptions. The essay successfully demonstrates the centrality of dialogue in negotiations of Islamic principles of family law in a matrilineal society. It further adds to our understanding of the “ways to accommodate matrilineal and religious elements within the purview of the Malabar law” (p 76). The dichotomous knowledge of social reality, a hallmark of modernity, has shaped the understanding of religion, gender, language, and culture in the post-colonial world. The author believes that the limitation of such accounts has created a void between the judiciary and the everyday practices of the local communities. The essay succinctly illustrates this fact by highlighting the absence of “an in-depth engagement with the customs and usages as practised by the Mappilas in their everyday life in colonial Malabar” (p 76). It would have been interesting to know in more detail how the Islamic reformist trend has brought changes in the attitude of young women of this region towards matrilineal practices.

Chapter 3 in the book, “Religion, Secularity, and Law,” initiates a provocative debate around the idea of political secularism. The essay contradicts the view of both liberals and right-wingers that political secularism is a project of the modern state “to ward off the dangers of religious strife” (p 84). Sudha Sitharaman suggests that

the modern state and political secularism, particularly the modern state's production and regulation of religious differences, have played a far more decisive role in transforming pre-existing religious differences, thereby producing new forms of communal polarisation

and making religion more rather than less salient to Hindus and Muslims, alike. (p 84)

While the essay illustrates the point through the case of Baba Budhan dargah in South India, it misses the point that the Hindu Right in India has registered their discomfort with the project of political secularism as a project of the state. A more critical reflection on this aspect of the debate on political secularism in India would have strengthened the overall argument.

T Hasim's essay "Islamic Traditions in Malabar" is fourth in order and offers an analytical inquiry "that moves beyond the limits of the dichotomies of the secular liberal discourse" (p 117). Hasim examines the public debates among Mappila Muslim groups in Kerala on the practice of Islam, "which aims at deducing a set of practical rules of conduct to guide their members in revolving the mundane issues of daily life" (p 117). The essay draws upon Hirschkind's conception of the counter-public to argue that the public sphere and religious deliberation and discipline are not necessarily opposed. One of the significant contributions of this essay is to open up the debate on the everyday life of Muslims in South India, which is otherwise at the margins in the existing academic writings on Islam in India. "Piety and the Civic" engage with the shift in Islamic "reformism" through critical engagement with the ideology and activism of the Solidarity Youth Movement of Kerala chapter of Jamaat-e-Islami Hind. In line with the theme of the previous essay, this one argues that discursive meaning-making processes lead to a re-imagination of the civil-religious binary on the one hand and transformation of the Jamaat-e-Islami on the other. Thus, the essay does not offer us any significant findings except that it brings in the vital point and highlights of the book succinctly in a different setting.

Suchandra Ghosh and Anindita Chakrabarti's essay draws attention to the complexities involved in the conception of justice in the context of personal law. The thin line of demarcation between rights and trust in personal laws is the crucial predicament on secularity. The extension of this demarcation translates into a "mutually exclusive choice between

personal law and demands for a uniform civil code" (p 162). The essay argues that "it is only by drawing our attention to how the adjudication of personal law takes place in contemporary India that we can begin to think beyond this sharp binary" (p 162). R Santhosh's Chapter 7 in the essay "Religious Activism and Secular Ethos" revisits the secular-religious binary from the viewpoint of Islam's engagement with modernity. Through the Mujahid movement—a popular initiative for palliative care of all sections of people in Kerala—the essay showcases the debate on Islam and secularism and "explore(s) the processes through which Muslim communities in the different sociopolitical contexts negotiate with secularism and secularisation" (p 192). By bringing in health issues, the essay reflects upon the complex relation Islam negotiates with modernity in the realm of knowledge creation and dissemination. In short, it "opens up ways of thinking the fraught relationship between Islam and secularisation" (p 211).

Talal Asad in "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam" writes that

Islam as the object of anthropological understanding should be approached as a discursive tradition that connects variously with the formation of moral selves, the manipulation of populations (or resistance to it), and the production of appropriate knowledge. (Asad 2009: 10)

Religion and Secularities is an attempt in this direction. The book goes beyond the interpretation of behaviour and inquiry into the relation of practices and invites the readers towards what Asad calls "discursive tradition." The book reflects upon the everyday life of Muslims in India from the micro-sites of religious-secular interface vantage point. It makes a significant contribution to the more extensive debate on the complex relationship between religion and modernity.

### Impact of Hindu Right

A glaring gap in the study is the absence of any reflection upon the rise of Hindu Right in India and its impact on the everyday life of Muslims. An understanding of how Islam and the everyday life of Muslims in India have responded to the ascendance of religious fundamentalism,

of all hues and colours, would have presented a more comprehensive picture of the religious-secular divide in India. In addition, the questions raised by the editors of the volume in the introductory chapter, and taken up further by Kapoor's essay has not been answered satisfactorily. In other words, the book could have gone beyond the existing framework of anthropological understanding of Islam, evident in the scholarship of Talal Asad and Peter van der Veer. A more critical reflection on the theoretical problems that accentuate while studying Islam in contemporary times, must have been examined for those who wish to understand the anthropology of syncretic strands of Islam. In addition, the book could have taken up more case studies from North Indian states to provide a more comprehensive picture of the dilemma of being a Muslim in contemporary India.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this volume successfully conveys the argument that Islam in India, as elsewhere in the world, needs to be understood beyond the dominant religious-secular binary. For this exercise, insights from the everyday life and discursive practices are of immense value. The intrinsic significance of the book lies in bringing the anthropological viewpoint of Islam in India. The volume will be helpful to students interested in Islam in India, gender studies, history, politics, and culture studies and offer insights to grassroot level workers and legal practitioners engaged with issues concerning religion and Muslims in India.

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