Islam in South Asia in Practice, Edited by Barbara D. Metcalf
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Reviewed by Tauseef Ahamd Parray

Islam in South Asia in Practice – the 15th Volume in the series of Princeton Readings in Religions – is edited, organized and introduced by Barbara D. Metcalf, an eminent historian of South Asia, that brings together the work of more than thirty scholars of Islam and Muslim societies in South Asia to create a rich anthology of primary texts that contributes to a new appreciation of the lived religious and cultural experiences of the world’s largest population of Muslims. Drawn from modern and pre-modern texts and pamphlets, government and organizational archives, new media and contemporary field work, the thirty-four selections-translated from Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali, Tamil and other languages-reflect the rich diversity of Islamic belief and practice in South Asia as well as highlight a wide variety of genres, from history and culture, to the socio-political and religious practice and institution in a word related to Islam “in practice” in South Asia.

Divided into five thematic parts viz, ‘Devotion and Praise to Allah, Muhammad, Imams and Elders’, ‘Holy and Exemplary Lives, “The Transmission of Learning, Guidance, Sharia, and Law, and Belonging” – all being “constant themes in Islamic practice, marking, in the present day, a “self-conscious and often contested ‘Muslim’ identities in social and political life” (p.37) – this anthology is preceded by 9-page “preface” and an extensive general Introduction (consisting of 39 pages) describing, “A Historical Overview of Islam in South Asia”.

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In addition, individual introductions for each of the five sections are also provided by the editor, ranging from 3-6 pages, describing the historical context as well as the main theme/focus of each selection that is followed subsequently. The voices of Muslims of South Asian region included in this volume are intended to “enrich the reader’s understanding of how Islamic religious thoughts, symbols, practices and institutions have provided meaning, ethical guidance, structures of belonging, and pleasure to millions of people over more than a millennium” (pp. xviii-xix). Here follows a brief over view of each section/part of this anthology.

Consisting of eight chapters, Part-I, “Devotion and Praise…, deals and discusses respectively with these theme chapter 1 examiner two literary genres, “Satpanthi Ismaili Songs” in the praise of Hazrat Ali and the Imam (translated by Ali S. Asani); Chapter 2 presents the “Hindavi Romance” – 16th Century Awadhi poem of Malik Muhammad Jayasi; chapter 3 presents texts relevant to the subcontinent’s most important Sufi shrine, that of Muiniddin Chisti (d. 1236) at Ajmer; chapter 4 focuses on “Women’s Grinding and Spinning Songs of Devotion in the Late Medieval Deccan” (p.87)-the very title of the chapter; chapter 5 provides a modern Qawwali songs; in chapter 6, translations of some na’ts (songs that praise Prophet) is provided; chapter 7 focuses on the “Shi’i Mourning in Muhurram”, and chapter 8 is devoted to “Islam and the Devotional Image in Pakistan” (p.121).

Part II, ‘Holy and Exemplary Lives’ consists of five chapters, 9-13, and are devoted to these themes. Chapter 9 is an excerpt from the travel account of Ibn Battuta about his meeting with a holy man Shah Jalal al-Din Tabrizi; chapter 10 presents “ Narratives of the Life of Haider Shyaykh in Punjab” (P.144); in chapter 11, Carl Ernst presents the translation of an excerpt from the biographical account of Ahmad Sirhindi, written by one of his disciples. The next two chapters focus on figures of colonial period, Chapter 12 presents the “Nuri Miyan’s Life and Urs” (p.166); while chapter 13 presents a series of anecdotes from the life of Banne Miyan a “Majzub in Colonial India” (p. 173)

This section thus focuses on specific holy men from the 14th the century to the 20th each chapter taking up a specific individual in order to show significant dimensions of his relationship with his followers and disciples. The authors contribute to our understanding of the differences between holy men in terms of their fidelity to formal practice, and they also suggest some of the many social roles these figures may play (see p. 135).

Part III, “The Transmission of Learning’, consisting of 6 chapters 14-19, looks at a variety of ways in which knowledge of Islamic doctrine, ritual practices, sacred texts, and spiritual disciplines have been communicated. It looks at the communication through the production of pedagogic texts and through three modern institutions – the formally organized
madrasa, a mass-based dawa or preaching movement, and a local cell loosely affiliated with the most important Islamist movement of the subcontinent, the Jamaal-i-Islami (see p.187)

The chapters of this part discuss the following themes respectively Chapter 14 is a translated excerpt from a 16th century Tamil work, Books of One thousand Questions, serving as an example of long tradition of Muslim Tamil literature that shares content and genre with Tamil literature as a whole; chapter 15 also contains an excerpt of Shah Isma’il Shahid’s Taqwiyyt-al-Iman; Chapter 16 is a translated selection from Hajji Imdadullah’s most famous book Zia-al-Qulub (The Brilliance of Hearts), which teaches methods of bodily control, concentration and visualization integral to the zikr/dhikr – “Meditation and Ritual”; in chapter17, translation of a first hand account of the experience of Manazir Ahsan Gilani studying hadith in a Madrasa in the early twentieth century (p.225) in Darul Ulum Deaoband is provided; chapter 18 is about “Jihad in the way of God : A Tablighi Jama’at Account of a Mission in India” by the editor, Barbara Metcalf, herself (p.240); while chapter 19 introduces a Qura’nic lesion given Bangladeshi college girl, inspired by Mawlana Mawdudi’s Jamaal-i-Islam. Thus, this section focuses on texts demonstrating the transmission of doctrine, hadith, spiritual disciplines, basic rituals, and Qura’nic lessons in manuals, popular texts, school teaching, preaching missions, and study circles.

Consisting of seven chapters, Part IV, ‘Guidance, Sharia and Law’ focuses on the institutions – such as pre-colonial qazi/qadi (judge), Official colonial and post-colonial secular courts, informal courts, fatwas, and a new style of popular leaders who establish through public appearances, publications, and other media – that seek to provide guidance, or to adjudicate correct Islamic behavior, in the light of the ethical parameters of the Shari’ah, that, ideally are informed by this transmitted knowledge. The themes of this section’s chapters are as : Chapter 20 discusses, again by Metcalf herself, “Ibn Battuta as a Qadi in the Maldives” (p – 271)] showing how he encountered cultural practices completely unlike his own; in chapter 21, Muzaffar Alam focuses on the “Guiding the Ruler and Prince” (p – 279), arguing that the Mughal rulers opted for pragmatism, justice, and their subject’s well-being over any religious code. Chapter 22 provides an example of a decision rendered under Anglo-Mohammandan law at the end of 19th Century in Allahabad; chapter 23 is a translation of a section of “Maulana Thanawi’s Fatwa on the Limits of Parental rights over Children” (p.304); in Chapter 24 Ebrahim Moosa presents a speech of Abul Mahasain Muhammad Sajad (d . 1940) from 1920s favouring the creation of separate Muslim courts outside the colonial state, entitled as “Shari’at Governance in Colonial and Postcolonial India” (p. 217). Chapter 25 presents the teachings of two sufi, Khwaja Hasan Nizami (d. 1955) and Hazrat Inayat Khan

(d. 1927) on “Moulding the new Muslim Women” (p. 326); in chapter 26, Khalid Masud presents, by way of translation of several fatwas. “Fatwa Advice on Proper Muslim Names” (p 339); and in chapter 27, Sylvia Vatuk presents texts from the debate on the “Shah Bano Case and Its Aftermath”, which became in the mid-1980s the “Rallying Cry for Muslim Personal Law” (p.352).

The Final part, Part V : “Belonging”, consisting of 7 Chapters (28-34), is intended to point to “belonging” in the sense of the authorities and arguments that define the basis of community. The themes covered in this section are as in ch. 28, Richard Eaton presents texts that show the pivotal place of Sufi figures in organizing social and economic foundations of local Muslim societies in Mughal India, ch. 29 is a translations of a text form 16th century courtier Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, “Challenging the Mughal Emperor” (p. 390); Ch. 30 is a translation of a 16th Century Arabic text on “Customs and Conversion” of Zayn al-Din al-Malibari’s “Gifts of the Mujahidin: Some Accounts of the Portuguese” (p. 403); Italics in original in the title) that makes clear what “separates Muslims from others, but also on what brings them together” (p 403) ch. 31 is a translation of wide-range of posters of Muslim League who, in 1940s made appeal to the ulama and Sufis (especially), “for support of Pakistan” revealing that” Islam in practice in the creation of a Muslim state” (p. 413); in ch.32, Asad Ahmed presents, “The Munir Report of 1954” as a proof for “Advocating a Secular Pakistan” – the very title of the chapter (p. 424); in chapter 33, Naveeda Khan introduces the writings of Maulana Yusuf Ludhianvi (d. 2000), a traditionalist scholar on the “Limits of Legitimate Religious Differences” (p. 438).

Chapter 34, “The Indian Jama’at-i Islami Reconsiders Secular Democracy” (pp.447-55), the final entry of this section (and the last chapter of the book as well) is a translation of two selections/texts of Jama’at-I Islami by Irfan Ahammad – an Australia-based Indian Anthropologist. Intended to demonstrate the “substantial ideological transformations the Jama’at has undergone since Partition on the issues of secular democracy” (p. 447), both these texts demonstrate the ability of an “Islamist” party to reinvent itself under appropriate conditions. For the editor, Barbara Metcalf, this chapter is

“an ideal conclusion to a volume [like this : Islam in South Asia in Practice] that argues the importance of studying Islam ‘in practice’ – in specific times and places and contexts – and from any hermetic notion that ‘Islam’ can be reduced to transparent and undeviating sacred texts or common mindsets.” (p. 374, Italics added)

It is necessary to quote this statement – as the words itself reveal their importance – because by saying all these words Metcalf has liberated and set free herself form writing a
conclusion to this rich and wide-ranging volume of 34 chapters. Had Metcalf written a conclusion to this anthology, the book could have done well, to match its string, extensive and informative introduction (which seems a book in itself). This considerable omission, for me, has deprived the editor-who has otherwise done a fabulous and wonderful job of editing and bringing out such a rich and highly diverse volume – of the opportunity to underline, emphasize, and reinforce the main points made in the chapters (although every chapter puts the main text within the context and although she has done the same thing by providing individual introductions in the beginning of every part/section). But, as majority of the selections in this anthology are social, cultural, institutional and non-political in nature, highlighting emphasizing and giving weight more to the religious practices, institutions, etc., so (in a way) this seems inequitable and unfair – and does not seem a genuine argument – to claim that this chapter (i.e. chapter 34, which is entirely political in nature, as the title as well as its content reveals) is “an ideal conclusion to a volume” (p. 374) like Islam in South Asia in Practice Giving due respect, both to this claim as well as to the efforts of Metcalf, one ought to say that not writing a conclusion has denied the book a correct ending and a proper climax.

Besides this limitation and weakness, on the whole, it is reasonable to say that the editor, Barbara D. Metcalf, has done a fabulous and extraordinary job in the capacity of being the editor and bringing out such a rich volume, as well as by providing a masterly extensive general Introduction to the whole volume and individual introductions (with deep insights and historical understanding of South Asian Islam, its history, culture, practices and institutions) to each part of the book as well – and this is the main feature which distinguishes this anthology from other anthologies in general. One more important feature of this anthology is that each author-translator, in the beginning of his/her chapter, provides a substantial introduction and contextual note as well as discusses the history and influence of the work as well.

Thus, giving access to a wide-range of texts, Islam in South Asia in Practice as an anthology is a rich source of the study of modern/pre-modern South Asian Islam-its religious practices, institutions, and worldview. Islam in South Asia in Practice can better serve as an introduction as well as guide and reference book, respectively, to a wide-ranging texts and practices and scholarly debates and discussions on South Asian Islam. In sum, given the extensive variety of topics and issues and broad selection of themes and concerns it covers is a must read for all those students and scholars who are interested in the history of Islam in South Asia in general and “in practice” in particular.
Muslim Societies: Rise and Fall by MIH Farooqi,
Reviewed by Saiyed Hamid

Dr. Mohammed Iqtedar Husain Farooqi, specialized as a plant scientist, zeroed in on
his discipline to conduct researches on plants figuring respectively in the Quran and Sunnah
(PLANTS OF THE QURAN & MEDICINAL PLANTS IN THE TRADITIONS OF
PROPHET by Dr. M.I.H. Farooqi). From there, Dr. Farooqi, moved into Islamic history and
produced a very informative and scholarly volume on ‘Muslim Societies: Rise and Fall’. It
constitutes a marvel of selective brevity and analytical subtlety. In a book dealing with society
based on religion there always lurks the risk of rhetoric overtaking scientific analysis. Dr.
Farooqi, with the rigorous training of a scientist, steered clear of this danger.

One sees in this book a scientific temperament coming to terms with faith. ‘Coming to
terms’ perhaps are words not appropriately used as the author’s thesis is that Islam is
compatible with Science. Author’s icon Sir Syed believes in the aphorism that Nature is the
Work and Quran the Word of God. There could, therefore, be no discord between them.

‘Muslim Societies - Rise & Fall’, consisting of 28 chapters and spread over 208 pages,
has not only delineated the Rise and Fall of Muslims ever since Islam’s emergence but it has
collected, tabulated and analyzed a wealth of relevant information. This information is placed
alongside counterpart statistics for other societies. This is evidently intended to spark
dissatisfaction at their plight among members of Muslim Societies. The bare figures given in
this volume about various aspects, moral, material and intellectual, are bound to create an
urge for getting rid of the present predicament. The author religiously eschews the temptation
to sermonize or over argue but lets circumstances and figures speak for themselves. At the
centre of the book is the exhortation.

Khuda ne aaj tak us qaum kee halat naheen badli
Na ho jisko khyal aap apni halat kai badalne ka.

(God has not changed the condition of a nation, which does not wish to change itself)

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In a little over 200 pages, the author has condensed the highlights of Islam ever since its beginnings. One can imagine admiringly the vast canvas that has been covered and the exacting selection to which the copious material has been subjected. What impresses the reader even more, although very expectedly, is the scrupulously scientific approach. One realizes all the time that the book is from a scientist’s pen. Although dealing with religion, history, society, it steers clear of sentiment and rhetoric. The author has kept a low profile and a silent visage. He has remained in the background and summoned thinkers of other times and climes to his assistance. This falls in line with the pattern of documentation which he has adopted in the interest of authenticity and sobriety.

It is not collection and tabulation alone that the book provides us with. Islam is juxtaposed meaningfully with other religions and societies. This technique brings out dramatically the status of Muslim Society viz-a-viz the other societies and the vagaries of their relationship. It is this analysis that highlights the main causes of the fall of Muslims. Turning the pages of a book packed with erudition, the reader is driven to the conclusion that a faith endowed so liberally with vitality and based on reason could not but come to grief when it forsook its moorings. Somewhere in its eventful journey it renounced the curiosity which has set it off on its ever-ascending adventure into the unknown. Inexorably and unwittingly it fell a victim to lethargy, superstition, tradition and convention.

The author has sedulously studied the history of Islam and picked up for adoption the factors that led to its rise. The factors that had an adverse effect were similarly identified so as to be avoided.

The book has two foci: its main focus is on the meteoric rise of Islam and its steep fall. The bane of Islam in the global context has been its refusal to take stock of the never ceasing changes and make provision for meeting them.

The centre-piece is Chapter 6 captioned as ‘Ijtihad-Need of the Hour’. The author proceeds to explain Ijtihad as ‘the modern interpretation of Shariah in the light of Quran and Sunnah’ and describes it as ‘the necessary tool for the Muslim religion to face the changed condition of societies’. The decline and lack of progress and of resilience in Islam is attributed to the giving up of Ijtihad. Dr. Farooqi has cited the views of great Islamic Scholars like Shah Waliullah. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Allama Iqbal, Hasan Al Turabi, etc.

The chapter, “Growth of Muslim Population-No case of Rejoicing” is thought provoking. Dr. Farooqi is absolutely right in pointing out that the increase in our (Muslim)
global population could add to our misery unless drastic remedial measures are made and all-round improvement are undertaken. We have to set our priorities right.

The change of attitude which the Ummah needs desperately, as pointed out in the book, does require the unambiguous and almost undivided attention of the Ulema who wield immense influence among the masses.

Dr. Farooqi has been putting in very valuable work quietly and effectively. He is right that the distance from Science and Technology is a devastating deprivation for Muslims. The warning sounded by Dr. Farooqi has not come a day too soon. His book brings out in bold relief the alternatives that Muslims are facing today: ‘learn or perish’. The lesson has to be driven home from the platform and the pulpit and to be echoed in the media.

Dr. Farooqi is a scientist of repute; his approach is, therefore, analytical. We need analysis much more than rhetoric.

Dr. Farooqi has made extremely valuable information available to the reader and introduced him to an in-depth assessment of what Islam has gone through over centuries and how it has to prepare for a second renaissance.

( Courtesy : Countercurrents )