

### **Islam in South Asia in Practice**, Edited by **Barbara D. Metcalf**

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Reviewed by **Tauseef Ahmad Parray**

Islam in South Asia in Practice – the 15<sup>th</sup> 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 overview of each section/part of this anthology.

Consisting of eight chapters, Part-I, “Devotion and Praise...”, deals and discusses respectively with these themes: chapter 1 examines 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” – 16<sup>th</sup> 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 song; in chapter 6, translations of some *na’ats* (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 14<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 16<sup>th</sup> 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 *Taqwiyytl-al-lman*; 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 *zikh/dhikr* – "Meditation and Ritual"; in chapter 17, 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 Deoband 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 lesson 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-Mohammadan law at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> 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 sufis, 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 16<sup>th</sup> century courtier Abd al-Qadir Badayuni, “Challenging the Mughal Emperor” (p. 390); Ch. 30 is a translation of a 16<sup>th</sup> 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 Ahamad – 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.