DEVOational ISLAM AND POLITICS IN BRITISH INDIA
Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870 - 1920
NEW EDITION
USHa SANYAL

New Perspectives on Indian PastS
DEVOTIONAL
ISLAM
& POLITICS IN
BRITISH INDIA

Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi
and His Movement, 1870–1920

USHA SANYAL

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About Author

Usha Sanyal is a scholar and historian whose PhD dissertation analysed the Islamic legal scholar Ahmed Raza Khan Fazil-e-Barelvi. Usha Sanyal is Adjunct Lecturer at Queens University of Charlotte, North Carolina.

Sanyal has authored two books:

- *Ahmed Raza Khan: In the Path of the Prophet*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications. 2005

David Gilmartin

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Given the historical and contemporary importance of the Barelwi movement among the ulama of the Indian subcontinent, a scholarly study of Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his followers is long overdue. The importance of the Barelwis, who styled themselves “Ahl-e-Sunnat wa Jama‘at, or people of the [Prophet’s] way and the majority community” (p. 7), lay in their efforts to define, within the reforming discourse of the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century ulama, a position stressing both the veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and “the following of the Prophet’s path (sunna) with the help of saintly intermediaries” (p. 5). Though bitter antagonists of other Sunni ulama, including the Nadwat al-‘ulama, the Deobandis, and the Ahl-e Hadis, they were, as much as these other ulama, self-conscious reformers who used the printed word to show Muslims how to live properly in the modern world. Seeing himself as part of a larger Islamic world, Ahmad Riza Khan appealed repeatedly for support for his positions to the ulama of Mecca and Medina, and built his reputation in part on the support he received. At the same time, he defined a ritual style that was, in some respects, “distinctly subcontinental,” emphasizing intercession and reverential devotion (p. 267). Though Ahmad Riza Khan self-consciously rejected any commonalities with Hindus (and, in fact, showed relatively little interest in them), Sanyal’s account suggests the ways in which the Barelwi movement was a distinct product of the Indian social world in which the sharif Muslims of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British India lived.

The strength of Usha Sanyal’s book lies in her efforts to understand Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his followers in their own terms. The heart of the book lies in the chapters in which she explains the central concerns of Ahmad Riza Khan’s prolific writings. At the center of Ahmad Riza Khan’s worldview was devotion to the Prophet, a man, in his view, of “limitless virtues and abilities” and special knowledge of the unseen (p. 153). Devotion to the Prophet was the touchstone for a stress on the importance of mediation between man and God. The sainted dead, including sufi pirs, the descendants of the Prophet, and Shaikh ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, were all model intercessors, but none was more important as intercessor than the Prophet himself, not only on the Day of Judgment, but also in everyday human affairs. “Without it, the community would be thought to be bereft” (p. 265). Ahmad Riza Khan’s emphasis on the power of intercession and on the importance of love for the Prophet, by man and God alike, had “a distinctly sufi flavour.” But his views were argued with support from hadis and fiqh, and placed a strong emphasis on individual responsibility. Indeed, his greatest influence, in his own self-perception, was not as a sufi, but as the producer of a mass of legal rulings, or fatwas, which defined his widespread influence.

Sanyal’s book is important, not only for its sympathetic portrayal of Ahmad Riza Khan’s religious worldview, but also for its grounding of that worldview in the social context of colonial Muslim north India. Ahmad Riza Khan’s writings were infused with an emphasis on the importance of proper hierarchy and obedience to authority, as also with the importance of genealogy and descent, and of networks of personal connection, in defining both social and religious authority. Her discussion of the influence of Sayyid and Pathan families and their connections suggests the cultural milieu from which Ahmad Riza Khan’s ideas emerged. At the same time, it was the centrality of devotion to the Prophet that gave the perspective its larger framework.
For the Ahl-e Sunnat, she observes, “notions of hierarchy and love, seemingly contradictory, co-exist harmoniously” (p. 265).

In the concluding chapters of her book, Sanyal discusses some of the political implications of Ahmad Riza Khan’s positions. Ahmad Riza Khan was known for his opposition to the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation movements, an opposition which arose from his general lack of interest in political questions “as long as Muslims were free to practise their faith unhindered” (p. 297). Sanyal concludes with a discussion of the various trajectories taken by Ahmad Riza Khan’s followers after his death in 1921, particularly with respect to the movement for Pakistan. Here she sees no single position, except for a commitment to repudiation of political community based on alliance with Hindus. One might have wished for a little more discussion of the political implications of developing Barelwi notions of Muslim community—of the relationship between a community defined by hierarchies, descent, mediation and personal networks, and yet simultaneously united by the figure of the Prophet both as a model of individual responsibility and as the focus of personal devotion.

Sanyal’s book, focusing on the origins and early development of one of the most influential modern religious movements among Muslims in the subcontinent, should prove critically important for historians of twentieth-century Muslim India. It is a model of scholarship—thoroughly researched and rooted in the enormous corpus of Ahmad Riza Khan’s Urdu writings. It should provide a critical foundation for historians seeking to come to terms with the connections between religious ideas, social organization, and politics in the South Asian Muslim community.

DAVID GILMARTIN
North Carolina State University

Indigenous Capital and Imperial Expansion: Bombay, Surat and the West Coast. By LAKSHMI SUBRAMANIAN. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996. ix, 368 pp. $29.95 (cloth).

Since the 1980s, the thesis that the emergence of British colonialism during the late eighteenth century was fostered by extensive support from Indian capitalists has become a well established though still controversial proposition. Among others, Karen Leonard, Chris Bayly, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, and David Washbrook have highlighted the contribution of great bankers and other “portfolio capitalists” to the early expansion of the East India Company in different regions of South Asia. In this study, Lakshmi Subramanian convincingly documents the importance of Hindu and Jain high-caste merchants, or Banias, in the development of imperial influence in Western India between the 1740s and 1810. Readers of Subramanian’s articles on this subject will be familiar with some of the contours of her argument. But it is only in this book that she brings together all the formidable evidence to back her case for the formation of an “Anglo-Bania” order.

Because of its heavy reliance on English records, this book tells us relatively little about the social organization of the business community of western India or about mercantile activities other than those that involved the Company. The strength of the work lies instead in its thorough account of the wide-ranging character of collaborative relationships between western Indian merchants and the English. Bankers and traders threw their weight behind the Company when it gained the governorship of the Surat Castle in 1759, largely because the English were willing to defend their interests
Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and His Movement, 1870-1920

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Considering how condensed Allinson’s account is, the narrative chapters are surprisingly nuanced and comprehensive. The treatment of economic issues is excellent throughout, and Allinson’s analyses of the bureaucracy, issues of war responsibility, and Japan’s uncertain future are also impressive. Allinson seems to slight electoral politics, especially in the prewar period, and gives little attention to the nature of Japanese colonialism or questions of Japan’s place in Asia. Some readers might misinterpret the complex analogy that Allinson employs to describe Japan’s descent into the Pacific war, in which he portrays the “irrational, deforming” Japanese military as a “sick, abusive father” and the Japanese people as brutalized wife and children, victimized by forces outside their control (70).

Allinson’s narrative is followed by a “topical compendium,” essentially a short historical dictionary of modern Japan with biographies (of political, military, and business leaders) and descriptions of major institutions and movements (political parties, government ministries, firms, opposition groups, etc.). Allinson also includes a “resource guide” with an annotated bibliography and a very useful appendix of crucial historical documents (from the Meiji Charter Oath to the 1960 “Income Doubling Plan”), quantitative data, and maps.

Overall, Allinson does an admirable job of making modern Japanese history accessible without “dumbing down” or distorting the historical record. As a reference tool and a basic introduction to Japan for a general reader, The Columbia Guide to Modern Japanese History is a welcome new resource.

WILLIAM M. TSUTSUI
University of Kansas

Ravina, Mark
Land and Lordship in Early Modern Japan
Stanford: Stanford University Press
278 pp., $45.00, ISBN 0-8047-2898-4
Publication Date: September 1999

Was Japan’s early modern regime feudal, absolutist, flamboyant, sui generis, or as this latest entrant to the debate would have it, “federal”? To a great extent, these differences in definition reflect which part of this unwieldy entity the researcher has chosen to study. As Mark Ravina, now an associate professor of history at Emory University, points out, the era was characterized by multiple sovereignties, tensions between center and periphery, competing and sometimes conflicting sources of legitimacy, overlapping types of authority, and widely disparate political units. Based on his dissertation completed at Stanford, he presents three large contiguous domains: Yonezawa, Tokushima, and Hiroasaki. Each domain had a different ratio of samurai to commoners, each had different prospects in the commercial realm, and each sought different solutions to common problems. Rather than concentrate on their origins and demise, Ravina prefers the long middle period from the late seventeenth century through the 1840s, when they tried with varying success to deal with demographic, economic, and political crises.

The 1990s saw a spate of local histories that both contribute to a better understanding of the period as a whole and emphasize the diversity of economic, social, and political practices. Although Ravina shares his focus on specific large domains with Philip C. Brown and Luke S. Roberts, he goes beyond them in his juxtaposition of three domains rather than concentrating on one. He is also more willing to link political philosophy with political practice, to discuss language as well as institutions, and to admit that the conclusions he derived from his research do not apply equally to all other regions in Japan. Drawing on the notion crafted by Mizuyabushi Takeshi, he sees Japan in this period as a “compound state,” with each of his domains reflecting the interplay among three types of authority: feudal (the personal bond between lord and retainer), suzerain (the autonomy of the most powerful daimyo in civil affairs), and patrimonial (the heritability of rights and privileges across generations within the context of the ie). What brought this complex system down was not the intrusion of the “West” per se. It was nationalism, which erupted first in the West, then spread like a contagion, replacing non-national cultures with the modern nation-state.

The book is exceptionally well written and attractively produced. Historians and teachers will appreciate Ravina’s keen eye for telling detail. Graduate students will learn a great deal about structure and organization from analyzing how his framework of multiple and overlapping authorities brings together disparate segments of domain histories, from commercial policy to peasant uprisings to factional disputes and diverse personalities. Written by a specialist for specialists, the book deserves to be widely read within that context.

ANNE WALTHALL
University of California at Irvine

Sanyal, Usha
Devotional Islam and Politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Bareli and His Movement, 1870–1920
New Delhi: Oxford University Press
Publication Date: August 1999

Usha Sanyal has adapted this book from her doctoral dissertation at Columbia University. It is a good complement to the work by Barbara Metcalf on the Deobandi school of Islamic revival in British India, and it was she who suggested this research to Sanyal. This book is about another important school of Islamic revival led by Ahmed Riza Khan that contended with the Deobandis and other Islamic revivalists as well as with Shia Muslims and Hindus.

The book starts with the historical and socioeconomic background in which Riza Khan appeared. It then describes his training as an Islamic jurist and as a Sufi initiate, which led to his being accepted as a highly learned Islamic scholar and a Sufi of great spiritual experience. Riza Khan and his school had doctrinal differences with the others chiefly concerning whether it was Islamic to pray to saints and the Prophet to intervene with Allah. Riza Khan believed that salvation was impossible without such intermediaries; his opponents believed that strict monotheism required that prayers be offered directly to Allah. He also believed, unlike some other Muslims, that British India was not inimical to Islam and that jihad against it was not justified. He opposed the Khilafat, movement which sought to ally Muslims with Hindus to oust the British from India as enemies of Islam, also because he did not wish to associate with the kafir (heathen) Hindus. Riza Khan’s movement as well as the other Islamic movements were responses to the British eclipse of Muslim rule in India. These movements made full use of the printing technology that became available to propagate their views. The debates among the different Islamic revivalists were often intense; however, in the end, the debates strengthened the connections between different Muslim groups and led to the formation of Pakistan.

It may appear that this is a monograph of interest only to scholars of Islamic movements in Britain India, but I feel that it has great relevance for the present time. The issues that Riza Khan and his contemporary Islamic scholars discussed are still very much alive. Muslims are still struggling to delineate the boundary between the territory where Islam prevails (dar al-Islam) and where non-believers predominate (dar al-harb), and about when and how to wage jihad. Riza Khan still has followers in India and Pakistan. The Deobandi school also continues, and the theology of the Taliban is derived from it. This book is quite accessible to the interested general reader and I recommend it.

PADMA MANIAN
San Jose City College

Foltz, Richard C.
Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century
Ed. Michael Flamini
New York: St. Martin’s Press
186 pp., $24.95, ISBN: 0-312-21408-1
Publication Date: October 1999

If anyone continues to subscribe to the prejudice that “East is East and West is West,” they need only peruse Richard C. Foltz’s informative work to realize that geography is not des-
oneself, never refusing anyone at one’s door. This is the dharma of the grihastha (householder), which
in the case of the ruler, extends to all his subjects. Indeed, ‘what is not given, cannot be enjoyed’.

Such an attitude is reflective of the deeper understanding of human life as a gift constituted of and
sustained by all aspects of creation. The mere act of living involves drawing upon the share of other
constituents of the universe. Being therefore in debt to all creation, we must endeavour to repay it
everyday. The classic statement is to be found in seven resplendent verses (10–16) in Chapter 3 of
the Bhagavadgita. This is one of the earliest enunciations of the interdependencies characterising
eco-systems and the imperative for humanity to play its role in preserving them.

After providing a very useful compilation of classical sources, the authors make a disappointing
attempt, in two Epilogues, to establish that what the scriptures laid down was indeed the reality in
Indian history, till the British came and upset the apple-cart. While it is well-established that many
traditional institutions collapsed following the advent of the British, it is neither correct to romanticise
the pre-British situation nor useful to simplistically attribute all subsequent ills to British rule.

Samaj Pragati Sahayog
Bagli, Dewas, M.P.

MIHIR SHAH

GERARD HEUZE and MONIQUE SELIM, eds., Politique et religion dans l’Asie du Sud contemporaine
Politique et religion dans l’Asie du Sud contemporaine (Religion and Politics in Contemporary South
Asia), edited by Gerard Heuze and Monique Selim, is a timely collection of well-researched articles
on religio-political movements, actors, discourses, processes, issues and policies in India, Bangladesh
and Pakistan. The thematics of the individual chapters include: the Shiv Sena’s notion of action,
destiny and karma (Gerard Heuze); the RSS concept of race (Christophe Jaffrelot); fundamentalist
trajectory in Bangladesh (Bernard Hours); Islamicisation policies in Bangladesh (Monique Selim);
hawaabi and jamaati strategies of Islamicisation in Bangladesh (Samuel Landell Mills); and Islamiciza-
tion in Pakistan (Brigitte Piquard). The authors write from a perspective which is anti-essentialist,
and historically and contextually grounded. They tend to link the objects of their research to processes
of globalisation in dynamic ways. While the quality of chapters is extremely high (thorough docu-
mentation and astute analyses), one regrets that women and gender are so rarely analysed. Women are
mentioned in the introduction to the book as ‘excluded’ from public space in Bangladesh, and as mem-
bers of the separate women’s wings of ‘Hindu parties’, but disappear in most articles, with some notable
exceptions, especially Monique Selim’s insightful piece. The book will greatly interest sociologists,
historians, political scientists, and social theorists, for it makes contributions to these fields.

University of Kentucky
Lexington, USA

PAOLA BACCHETTA

USHA SANYAL, Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his
refs., epilogue, gloss., bibliogr., index. Rs 575.

This book traces the development of the Ahl-e-sunnat movement through a closely researched explo-
ration of the writings of Maulana Ahmad Riza Khan, a central figure in the formation of the movement.
A major concern of the book relates to identity formation of North Indian Muslims during the 19th
century. The author explores this in the light of the colonial situation, the role of print media and the
transport and communication infrastructure, but gives most detailed coverage to the religious writings
of the Maulana, which she sees as being at the core of a process that had wide ranging ramifications
for the movement’s relations with other Muslim groups as well as with the Colonial state. Extensively
covered also are the differences and debates between the Ahl-e-Sunnat and other Muslim groups on
religious issues, such as prophetology and the legitimacy of saint veneration. The concluding chapters
look at the Ahl-e-Sunnat standpoint on the khilafat and non co-operation movements. The focus on
the various religious issues that underlie the Ahl-e-Sunnat perspective on the above and other issues
such as the religious status of British India or the attitude to Hindus or to other Muslims is part of the
author's attempt to present the Ahl-e-Sunnat in their own terms. The book will interest Islamists as well as scholars interested in the history and sociology of Indian Islam.

University of Mumbai

NASREEN FAZALBHROY


As the title suggests, this is yet another work on dowry, this time in Maharashtra. Despite being recognised as a 'social evil' and abolished in theory, the practice continues even today. The author undertakes to view the practice in a different context—as a specific node within a dynamic system of exchanges between an urban (Pune) and a rural (a village in Shirur district) milieu. The work is called a social anthropology of marriage and traces the evolution of the practice of dowry in Maharashtra, the ethnographic composition of the district studied, the caste hierarchies, the rhythm of the seasons and the ‘time of marriage’, the rituals connected with the exchange of gifts and the marriage ceremony itself, ‘sanskritisation’ of the practices described, and the changing conceptions of dowry among classes and across the rural–urban divide. A sterling feature of the book is the analysis Bénéi has done of rituals connected with three types of marriages—Muslim, Marwari, and caste Hindu (Brahmin). (pp. 174–84).

Jadavpur University

RILA MUKHERJEE


The book under review belongs to the group of cross-cultural studies seeking to understand the factors shaping the psychological behaviour of the individual, particularly cognitive style development. The study attempts to account for psychological outcomes by examining the manner in which communities have dealt with their long-standing ecological setting and more recent cultural contacts. Focusing on three tribal communities of Bihar (Birhor, Asur and Oraon), the authors trace psychological outcomes in the individual at two levels—that of ecological adaptation and acculturation. Acculturation here refers to the change in the original cultural pattern on account of cultural contact. The empirical material of the study is analysed within this broad research agenda. The introductory chapter elucidates the theoretical underpinnings of the study. The descriptive account of the tribes (Chapter 2) brings out the impact of environmental degradation on the lives of forest-dwelling communities. Chapters 4 to 7 analytically trace the influences shaping socialisation, acculturation and cognitive style development. Chapters 8 and 9 present an overview of cognitive changes and acculturative stress in these communities while the final chapter discusses the potential applications of the findings in planning for social transformation. The overall objective of the authors is to suggest strategies to make the journey through acculturation less conflictual and stressful. However, the principal weakness of the study lies in its rather mindless use of statistical techniques, often resulting in spurious correlations. The real issue is whether the complexities of human behaviour in objective situations can be meaningfully inferred at all through tests for task performance rated according to points scored. The absence of such candid introspection makes this research an example of how not to apply statistics in the social sciences.

Samaj Pragati Sahayog

Bagli, Dist. Dewas, M.P.

P.S. VUAY SHANKAR


It is refreshing to read a village monograph at a time when they are going out of fashion in the anthropology of India/South Asia. Simultaneously, Struggling with destiny in Karimpur, 1925–1984,
Chinese Short Story: Studies in Dating, Authorship, and Composition [Harvard University Press, 1973] and The Chinese Vernacular Story [Harvard University Press, 1981]) or that the textual criticism should be appended to the thematic analysis (as Andrew H. Plaks appends “The ‘Li Cho-wu’ Commentary Editions” to The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel: Ssu ta ch’i-shu). This latter approach would provide interest for nonspecialist readers and help them to understand Chinese popular religion and vernacular fiction. At the same time, the specialist would find the textual issues in the appendix useful.

In sum, Meir Shahar has presented a valuable endeavor in the study of Chinese popular religion and vernacular fiction. It is also a fine combination of historical examination and anthropological investigation on a specific topic of Chinese popular culture and literature centering on it. It will undoubtedly stimulate more research on Chinese fiction from a religious perspective. Thus, this book should be recommended, despite some existing problems.

Richard Wang

Chinese University of Hong Kong


This is the first comprehensive study in any language of an important religious movement within Sunni Islam in South Asia whose followers call themselves Ahl-al-Sunnat wa-al-Jama’at, or the “People of the Sunnah and the community.” More commonly, though sometimes derisively, it is referred to as “the Barelwi Movement,” after the place of residence of its founder, Ahmad Riza Khan (1856–1921) of Bareilly, in North India.

Consequent to the establishment of the British colonial state after the rebellion of 1857, there was a marked reduction in the privilege and prosperity of the Muslim elite of North India. This brought forth several different responses from among them, all couched in some language of Muslim exclusivism. Ahmad Rizaq Khan, too, like his elders, sought to guide his coreligionists out of that perceived state of decline. The upward path, according to him, lay in the Muslims’ strict adherence to the way of the Prophet, which, he further argued, was readily available to them if only they maintained an absolute faith in all the recorded words and acts of the Prophet and the received interpretations of the same.

Ahmad Riza Khan combined in himself the textual learning of an ‘alim, the juristic activism of a mufti, and the ecstatic pietism of a Sufi. But his emphasis on a kind of literalism concerning the Qur’an and the hadith, and his rejection of any nonconventional interpretative strategy, placed him in direct opposition to the other three important movements that predated him: the secular reformism of Syed Ahmad Khan, the millenarian sectarianism of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, and the scholastic revivalism of the seminarians of Deoband and Lucknow. Ahmad Riza Khan strove to counter them in all arenas then available for nonviolent public contestation, even by issuing fatwas of heresy against some proponent or other...
of each of them—often with additional endorsements from like-minded Arab scholars of Mecca and Madinah that he had met during his sojourn there or with whom he was in regular correspondence. Arguably, his most pervasive contribution to the Muslim politico-religious discourse of the time was made through copious fatwas that he issued in response to his followers’ queries or as he saw fit. These were published in newspapers and journals and also as separate books and pamphlets. Sanyal’s study underscores how certain new technologies radically altered the parameters of religious discourse for Indian Muslims. Issues that were more or less local could now—thanks to printing presses, newspapers, and regular mail—quickly become national and even international.

The movement Ahmad Riza Khan started did not end with him. It continued to grow strong, and even now it plays a major role in assorted Muslim sectarian tussles for sociopolitical control in South Asia. Sanyal’s scholarship is exhaustive and impeccable. This is an indispensable book for anyone interested in Islam in South Asia.

C. M. NAIM

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