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Review

Modern Sufis and the State: The Politics of Islam in South Asia and Beyond, edited by Katherine Pratt Ewing and Rosemary R. Corbett. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. 360 pp., £108 (hb), £28 (pb). ISBN 9780231195744 (hb), 9780231195751 (pb).

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In the popular imagination, Sufism involves a series of binary distinctions between matter and spirit, living according to Islamic law, and a space that enables individual and emotive experiences of devotion and mysticism. Other commonly polarized distinctions relate to the split between fundamentalist, violent Islam and Sufism, which is seen as a form of apolitical or soft, peace-loving and syncretistic Islam.

In-depth analyses often challenge such binary constructions. Shail Mayaram and Christophe Jaffrelot have tackled the assumption that syncretism is necessarily peaceful and nonviolent. Furthermore, although Sufism is often perceived as apolitical, the political in its broadest sense may be manifested throughout the Sufi past and present, and may be traced to moments that seem far removed from the political, such as the emphasis on individual experiences that adheres to core liberal premises and thereby to modern democracy (pp. 9, 150). The notion of the political in the broadest sense, reflecting power structures and priorities in a simultaneously top-down and bottom-up perspective, suggests that no cultural-religious phenomenon can be seen as apolitical.

This book addresses Sufism in modern times, under the organizing notions of nationalism and the nation-state, while relocating itself with respect to the major transformations in the Islamic world at large, and especially the intensification of scriptural Islamic factions such as the Salafiyya, Wahabiyya and their South Asian counterparts. The South Asian regions, and especially the two nation-states of post-partition India and Pakistan, highlight issues regarding the nexus of religion and the modern nation-state in two different contexts: against the dominance of Hindu nationalism in India and, on the other hand, in the Islamic state of Pakistan.

Sufism, a major locus of popular religion in both historical and current terms, forms a fertile arena for questions regarding the relations between the state and its religious communities, and for interdenominational debates on religious and political issues. In the wider context, both nation-states are called upon to reconsider the aspiration to establish a modern state, to address the ways in which such states correspond to concepts rooted in liberalism, and to consider their position internationally between Europe and the US on the Western front, and the Muslim worlds in and outside Arabia on the other. What role can Sufism play, both concretely and symbolically, in these contexts?

To assess such issues, the context needs to be carefully defined. In their excellent introduction, Ewing and Corbett devote considerable attention to the way in which Sufism, as a term, was constructed as a product of Orientalist scholarship, and as part of the taxonomy and framing endeavours that distorted the polyphonic reality that crystallized around tenth-century Arabia. The editors highlight parallel transformations in the religious landscape that impacted both Hindu and Islamic reform movements; namely, the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj on the Hindu side, and Islamic reformist schools of thought such as the Deobandi and Barelwis on the Muslim side. The range of issues points to the political dimension associated with Sufism's affinity with Islam, the commitment to and tendency towards traditions that emphasize *shari'ah*, and local and global anxiety about radical Islam, which the South Asian context tends generally to associate with the Deoband, Ahl al-Hadith and the Taliban.

These political dimensions are not new to the context of Sufism. Since medieval times it has been preoccupied with aspects of space and geopolitical orientation (what Nile Green termed 'specializing religion'). Furthermore, land allocation turned Sufi strongholds into landed elites, as Richard Eaton noted. No less important was the explicit agenda of the pre-modern Naqshbandi-Mujadidi order to impact directly on imperial policy and guide the emperor towards the establishment of a *shari'ah*-oriented regime. In this book, Sarah Ansari elaborates on the economic and political nexus while describing Sufi *pīr*s in Sindh who acted as intermediaries for British colonials and were thereby accommodated into the system of imperial control (p. 130).

The book is divided into four sections that aim to contextualize or answer questions about South Asian Sufism and the state from several analytical perspectives. To lay a broad foundation for this analysis, the first part presents a study of Sufism and its engagement with the global order. The chapter by Rosemary R. Corvette discusses the key conceptions that guided US policy and the way Sufism was deciphered through American scholarship. Corvette discusses the division of global Islam into Arab Islam, which was perceived as prone to violence, and South Asian Islam which was perceived as promoting peace and harmony. The spatial division, significant as it may be in the formal arena, ignores, for example, the figure of Syed Abul Ala Al-Mawdudi

and his ideological imprint on the Jamaat-e-Islami as it has developed differently in both India and Pakistan, as well as his impact on political Islam in the Middle East.

Another issue is how South Asian Sufi *ṭarīqah*s (Sufi Orders/spiritual pathways) situate themselves with respect to hubs of global power. Verena Meyer's chapter is important for understanding how modernist agendas can percolate into Sufism at large. The article traces the development of the concept of neo-Sufism, which seeks to reconcile *shari'ah* and *ṭarīqah.* The coupling of the two crystallized into 'neo-sufism' which enables Sufi orders and leaders to emphasize their commitment to *shari'ah* and orthodox Islamic education. The concept is repeated throughout the book (e.g., in Marcia Hermensen's chapter), and points to the extensive Islamist/modernist impact on the South Asian Sufi world. This concept (along with others, such as post-*ṭarīqah* Sufism) extends political aspirations beyond the realms of the Naqshbandiyya and also constitutes an obstacle to the imposition of binary constructions onto South Asian Islams.

This challenge constitutes another analytical orientation of the book; namely, the inter-denominational debate that is often defined as the tension between the Deobandi and Barelwi schools. It should be noted that the assumption that Sufis tend to associate themselves with the Barelwi tradition is not necessarily correct, even though it corresponds to 'soft and inclusive' Islam. Either way, the in-depth readings presented in this volume show that any binary interpretation is either impossible or porous. In his excellent chapter, Brannon D. Ingram examines the Pakistani madrasa Dar al-Ulum Haqqaniyya which has Deobandi roots and is affiliated with the Taliban, evoking the traumatic attacks perpetrated on Sufi shrines by the Tehreek-e-Taliban and its affiliated movements in 2009. Ingram frames the attacks as revenge against the government's attempt to quash the movement (p. 106) rather than in the context of the inter-denominational debate. He argues that despite the theological differences, the 'Taliban' madrasa sees the practice of Sufism as an integral part of Muslim piety (p. 83).

Other in-depth readings challenging these binary distinctions appear in Usha Sanyal's chapter on a Barelwi madrasa for girls in Uttar Pradesh, India. From the perspective of state politics, Alex Philippon examines the channelling of Sufism as a weapon against radical Islam, citing the steps taken by President Pervez Musharraf to depict Sufism as a vehicle for peace and love in the aftermath of 9/11.

The volume also addresses identity politics as mediated by Sufism. Sarah Ansari discuses the distinction between old and new Sindhis in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition (p. 131), and the identification of Sindh with Sufism as a way to differentiate Sindh from Pakistan as a whole. In the Indian context, Carla Bellamy presents a case study of an *Imāmbāṛā* run by a Shiite family which attracts a heterogeneous audience. Conflicts and practices of ritual exclusion show how state-prompted identities indirectly play a role within

a space that is perceived to allow the dissolution of such identities. Similar dynamics are also discussed by Nur Zaidi, who re-examines the division between Sunnah and Shia. The book concludes with references to symbolic dimensions in the arts and media. Rachana Rao Umashankar's chapter on *qawwālī* in Hindi cinema as a space of unity in an imagined diversity is reminiscent of the early work of Mukul Kesavan on the symbolic use of Urdu in Hindi films as an imagined means of re-accessing a lost space of harmony.

This book is an ambitious project that clearly makes a significant contribution to the field. In my view, it is unfortunate that the book does not include more references to the politically oriented Naqshbandi-Mujadidi order and its contemporary narrative of withdrawal, at least temporarily, from political aspirations. Similarly, the New Age as a global phenomenon and a 'soft' political power underlies some of the contemporary framings of Sufism and should have been addressed more extensively.