

Book Reviews

Teena Purohit. *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2012. Pp. 198. ISBN 9780674066397. Hardbound. Price: \$45.00; £33.95.

Teena Purohit's *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India* is a study of the ways in which colonial power transformed religion and religious identity in modern South Asia. The specific focus of this book is on the transformation of Isma'ili [Ismā'īlī] religious identity in nineteenth-century South Asia from the fluid caste based identity of Khojas [Khōjahs] to a more defined sectarian identity of "Shi'i Isma'ili." *The Aga Khan Case* centers on a couple of court cases in Bombay that while seemingly occupied by disputes of inheritance and property, fundamentally altered the conceptual terrain in which the religious identity of the Khoja community was henceforth imagined. Both these cases revolved around complaints by some Khojas of Bombay about what they saw as the undue interference of the Aga Khan [Āghā Khān], a Persian nobleman who worked for the British army, in the affairs of their community. While many Khojas revered the Aga Khan as an Isma'ili holy figure, their precise relationship was unclear. These court cases, especially one of them in 1866 that had sought to adjudicate a dispute over property ownership, ended up focusing more on resolving the nature of that relationship. And in that attempted resolution, the question of the religious identity of Khojas was also resolved, in favour of a fixed modern identity that allowed no plurality or fuzziness.

Central to the legal operation of presenting the Khojas as Isma'ili was the manner in which the defendants interpreted a particular text, the *Dasavatar* (the ten avatars), a Hindi/Gujarati vernacular poem of the *ginan* genre transmitted and transcribed in the early eighteenth century. Premised on the classical Sanskrit story of the ten avatars of Vishnu, the tenth avatar presented in this text is 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 661 CE). The defense lawyers used this to argue that since the first nine avatars mentioned in this text were Hindu and the last one Muslim, the *Dasavatar*, which was prominent in Khoja devotional life, represented an Isma'ili conversion text employed to convert the Khojas from Hinduism to Islam. Through this line of argument, they sought to show

that the Aga Khan was the spiritual head of the Khojas and it was thus his right to collect tithes and to control their property. The presiding judge in this case Justice Arnould agreed with the defendants' argument and ruled in their favour. Therefore, as Purohit eloquently puts it, "at one stroke Justice Arnould redefined the Khojas as converts and the *ginan Dasavatar* as a conversion text" (p. 6).

Among the central arguments of Purohit's book is that this judgment in the case of 1866, from which we get the title of the book, represents a decisive hinge moment in the tradition of Indian Isma'ili thought and practice. From this moment onwards, the Khojas and their practices were increasingly redefined as "Isma'ili Muslim" and approached through a modern identitarian understanding of religion. Moreover, Purohit convincingly argues that there was nothing natural or inevitable about the construction of the Khoja community as Hindu converts to Isma'ili Islam. To the contrary, such a narrative of conversion was not only artificially crafted during the proceedings of the 1866 court case; it also distorted and opposed a long running tradition of piety in Gujarat known as the *Satpanth* (the true path) that was much more heterogeneous, fluid, and incongruent with modern religious and sectarian distinctions such as Hindu/Muslim, Sunni/Shi'i and so forth.

As this reviewer sees it, there are three major conceptual objectives that Purohit seeks to attain in this book: 1) demonstrate ways in which discursive knowledge and power, especially when catapulted by the force of law, transform religious landscapes and imaginaries, 2) show the long lasting effects and impact of such transformation on the practices and self-imagination of particular religious traditions, and 3) disrupt and bring into question dominant colonial narratives and translations of religious identities by mining and presenting alternative pre-colonial histories and contours of those identities.

Purohit achieves these objectives with dazzling success. The main strength of this book is the way it connects broader conceptual questions with meticulous micro readings of a variety of texts from different genres and languages. Purohit masterfully and seamlessly weaves together pressing theoretical discussions on the intersection of colonial power and religious identity with sophisticated and revealing analyses of critical textual archives. Therefore, the reader of this book is always kept attuned to the conceptual stakes of the project while being treated to nuanced and multilayered historical and textual explorations.

The Aga Khan Case consists of five chapters, an introduction, and a conclusion. The introduction succinctly describes the theoretical intervention and key arguments and themes of the book. The first chapter "Prehistories of

the Ismaʿili Sect in Nineteenth-Century Bombay” prepares the ground for a discussion of the 1866 court case in the next chapter by providing a historical account of the Aga Khan, his relations with the Khoja community, and by analysing the first legal dispute between the two in 1847, the proceedings of which held important implications for the 1866 case. Chapter two “Sectarian Showdown in the Aga Khan Case of 1866” presents a detailed analysis of the legal arguments, assumptions, and interpretive moves displayed during the 1866 case that pitted against one another the Aga Khan and the Khoja community over a property dispute. The third chapter “Reading Satpanth against the Judicial Archive” navigates the archive of the *ginan*, especially the *Dasavatar*, to present an alternative picture of Khoja devotional life and practices radically different from the one that emerged during the 1866 case. Most crucially, through rigorous and painstaking literary analysis, Purohit convincingly demonstrates that the colonial packaging of the *Dasavatar* as an Ismaʿili conversion text is not borne out by the text itself. She shows that dividing the text through the prism of modern identitarian politics, with the first nine chapters being Hindu and the tenth on ‘Alī being Muslim, represented an arbitrary imposed division that ran counter to the porous and heterogeneous internal logics of identity found within the *Dasavatar*.

The next chapter “Comparative Formations of the Hindu Swami Narayan ‘Sect’” engages another movement centered on a charismatic figure that flourished in the Satpanth milieu, the Swami Narayan movement, for comparative reflections on the development of “sectarian” formations in colonial India. The last chapter “Sect and Secularism in the Early Nationalist Period” shows what one might call the afterlives of the 1866 case by unpacking some of the ways in which the Ismaʿili tradition in South Asia, especially under the leadership of Sultan Muḥammad Shāh (1877–1957), was increasingly Islamised and systematically purged of textual and ritual traces deemed external to Islam. This chapter also makes the fascinating argument that Sultan Muḥammad Shāh’s religious and political personas were held together by a curious paradox. While his public discourses on Islam and contributions to Muslim nationalist politics were informed by a rationalist secular colonial public sphere, in the religious realm he elevated himself as a messianic leader with supernatural capacities. The conclusion distills and outlines the key conceptual contributions of the book to Islamic Studies and to Religious Studies.

Among the most profitable aspects of this book is the way it constantly strives to question binaries such as inclusive/exclusive, orthodox/sectarian,

insider/outsider and so on. Purohit very astutely makes explicit early in her book that her argument is not that

people were more tolerant or open about religion in the premodern period . . . [but rather] that the turn to identitarian religion has taken place, and it is necessary that we contend with this shift *rather than take the new form of religion as a given on the one hand, or wax nostalgic about the worlds we have lost, on the other.*" (p. 3; emphasis added)

Another feature of this book that stands out is the attention it pays to the contingent nature of discourses on religious identity formation, perhaps seen most vividly in Purohit's remarkably nuanced discussion of the 1866 court case. For instance, in a particularly instructive moment, she shows that the very amplification of the *Dasavatar* as a definitive Khoja religious text owed to the plaintiffs confusing the *Dasavatar* with another older Persian text called "Dasatir." Mr. Anstey, one of the main lawyers of the plaintiffs, strived to show that the Aga Khan was a Persian heretic who had no connection to the Khojas or to "Orthodox Islam." In assembling this argument, he cited that the Aga Khan held in high esteem non-Muslim Persian texts such as "Dasatir," a seventeenth century Zoroastrian text about Persian prophets. But when the presiding judge asked a clarifying question about the relationship between the Dasatir and the Khojas, Anstey confused the Dasatir with the *Dasavatar* (two completely unrelated texts) and admitted that the Khojas recite this text over the dead, thus inadvertently admitting that a religious connection between the Khojas and the Aga Khan did in fact exist.

It was from this moment onwards that the *Dasavatar* and the question of whether it represented a "Hindu" or a "Muslim" text assumed center stage in the trial, eventually and ironically boosting the case of the defendants that this was indeed an Isma'ili conversion text and that therefore, Khojas represented Hindu converts to Isma'ili Islam. This is just one example of several instances in which Purohit demonstrates at once the powerful effects of colonial discourses on religion while also showing the highly contingent and at times theatrical circumstances in which those discourses emerge, cohere, and impress their authority.

Given the plethora of foreign/technical terms and categories in the book, a glossary would have been useful to the reader. Also, while chapter four on the Swami Narayan sect presented an interesting comparative dimension to the study of charismatic religious movements in colonial India, this reviewer found it slightly interruptive to the narrative of the Isma'ili tradition in South Asia that had preceded that chapter and that continued in the next chapter.

But these very minor points in no way diminish the significance of this book to the study of Islam and South Asia. Indeed, *The Aga Khan Case* represents Religious Studies at its best for the way it substantively engages big and important theoretical questions while not letting the theory colonise the specificities and complexities of the texts and contexts that animate the project. This is arguably the most analytically sophisticated book on South Asian Islam to have been published in the field of Religious Studies in the last several years. What makes this book a particularly formidable piece of scholarship is that it is equally attentive to both genealogy and tradition. While providing a nimble account of the colonial translation/mistranslation of religion, Purohit disrupts and uninherits the colonial politics of “religion making”¹ precisely through showcasing the depth and nuances of alternative logics of religion and life within particular discursive traditions (in this case the Satpanth tradition). Thus genealogical investigation is leavened through careful attention to the complexities of tradition. Apart from its theoretical merits, *The Aga Khan Case* is also written in a wonderfully lyrical and lucid fashion making it accessible to both specialists and non-specialists. It will be most suitable as an assigned reading for upper level undergraduate and graduate seminars on modern Islam, South Asian Islam, religion and colonialism, and religion and law.

SherAli Tareen

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¹ Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).