

Popular Culture, Radical Egalitarianism, and Formations of Muslim Selfhood in South Asia

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Abstract

In early twentieth century leftist politics on the geographical fringes of South Asia, Islam played a major role. Were activists in these movements leftist despite their understandings of Islam, or because of them? This essay introduces the project represented in the essays of this special section of *South Asian History and Culture*, as well as the essays that will appear in a complementary section in a subsequent issue this year. The editors of this project reconstruct a conversation on surprising resonances in subaltern sources in Pashto and Bengali of early twentieth-century grassroots indigenous traditions of radical Muslim egalitarianism. What should we make of these resonances? Building on Latin American decolonisation theory in the wake of Subaltern Studies, we introduce a series of articles that together illustrate what Ramon Grosfoguel calls a ‘pluriverse’ of perspectives on the ethical self: some rooted in the local lifeworlds of Bengal and some in the Afghan borderland; all interlinked through a series of ‘middle actors’. In so doing, we excavate some dense but hidden two-way traffic between subaltern worlds of Muslim piety and devotion on two distant ends of South Asia, and all-India, international or cosmopolitan politics. These together helped constitute a surprising amount of what we know as the South Asian left, from what are usually seen as its geographical, social, and especially intellectual peripheries.

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Introduction

In early twentieth century leftist politics on the geographical fringes of South Asia, Islam played a major role. Were activists in these movements leftist despite their understandings of Islam, or because of them? This collection of articles has grown out of several years of conversation between the editors, over their dissatisfaction with the materials available for studying histories of Islam and social movements in modern South Asia. Both of us were frustrated that extremely important early twentieth-century movements in the regions we worked on—eastern Afghanistan and the North-West Frontier Province, and East Bengal, respectively—sat uneasily in mainstream theorisations and narratives of ‘Muslim’ politics in the subcontinent. The contributions of the left were frequently elided. More than that, both of us found histories of strong congruence between *‘ulama* and the anti-imperial left in the early twentieth century of our regions, rather than antipathy as was the case in many other parts of the world.

While there has been some research into formal leftist organisation among South Asian Muslims, rarely has ‘Islam’ been more than incidental to the narrative, apart from a brief study of *‘ulama* in M. Q. Zaman’s *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age*. This is even more the case once one moves beyond the realm of discourse. Ansari’s study of *The Emergence of Socialist Thought Among North Indian Muslims*, for instance, is overwhelmingly oriented toward a narrative of how Muslim intellectuals developed into secular socialists: its telos is located in individuals who may have drawn legitimacy from aspects of Islam’s textual tradition that supported liberty, equality and brotherhood, but who viewed most organised ‘religion’, whether reformist or traditionalist, as almost intrinsically reactionary. This was an emphasis that, despite prevailing critiques of positivism, we found resonating curiously within other historiographical work: as when

Ranajit Guha understood renunciatory traditions in devotion, for instance, as collusion with feudalism, possessing little scope for contestation.¹ Much like Malek Bennabi's critique of Fanon, that the latter's decolonial thinking in Algeria failed to seriously engage a long tradition of indigenous critical resources broadly coded under the rubric of 'Islam',² we wondered why histories of the modern left in South Asia have not inquired into, say, popular piety or cosmology in a sustained fashion. Even works that noted indigenous devotional traditions marked by radical egalitarianism, like Maia Ramnath's *Decolonizing Anarchism*, nodded at them largely in passing.

This was confusing because we noted strong interregional resonances across South Asia in links between popular practices of Islam and early twentieth century radical egalitarian movements that had something like a mass following. Even beyond the well-known socialist '*ulama*' who were among the most important socialist organisers in both Bengal and the NWFP, and beyond the civilisational-level concerns that drove Bennabi's formulation of a specifically 'Islamic' decolonisation theory, we initially found kinship in comparing the subaltern-oriented primary sources we were working with as doctoral students: popular poetry in Pashto and Bengali that fostered a view of radical egalitarianism as piety and a fulfilment of Islamic cosmology:

*Adam o Hawa thake duniya-e,
Karen chasher kaj
tar-i bangsha bhabe, achi mora shobe
kangal ki maharaj*

*Adam and Eve lived in the world
And tilled the earth
We who are alive,
Bear their ancestry,
Whether we are beggars or kings.*

(Abdul Hai, Adarsha Krishak, Mymensingh: Abdul Hai, 1921).

*Che Ādam khawro ke kīnī sa zarghūn kṛī
Manjīla che pa dawlat shī no xāmār shī*

*When Adam's progeny dig the soil, look what flourishes and blossoms.
[But] if your household implements get bound up with wealth, they will bite you.*

(Ghani Khan, untitled Pashto ghazal, 1940s)

Such resonances suggested strong and possibly interconnected indigenous histories of radical egalitarianism, rather than a view of such ideas as imports by a globally-aware critical-left intelligentsia. This collection of essays is an attempt to explore that suggestion—to excavate some moments in which earlier and more deep-rooted subaltern lineages of piety and devotion fused with those of a new activist world to help constitute the left as we know it. And so to summarise: while attending to historical formations of egalitarianism in the anticolonial movement, this collection when taken as a whole is also an exercise in methodology: what could a decentralised, more truly decolonised and more egalitarian history of leftist politics in South Asia look like?

Regarding the North-West, existing literatures had often mentioned, but far too infrequently interrogated, the strong undercurrent of social levelling that ran beneath the surface of much of the Frontier's history, even including contemporary Taliban movements. Not until 2012 and the publication of Magnus Marsden's and Ben Hopkins' volume *Beyond Swat* was there sustained historical attention to the utopian liberation politics pervading Pashtun Islamist movements, including the Taliban. One article, for instance, notes resonances between post-1971 'Islamic Socialism' as promoted by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, and later revivalist movements in Swat driven by piety while stoked by class conflict.³ However, even English-language *tazkiras*, or biographical dictionaries, organised by Peshawar University faculty, as well as a

burgeoning literature in Pashto, called attention to a reverse dynamic. In place of the influence of external ideologies like Bhutto's, these sources drew a picture of much longer genealogies of grassroots Islam in the NWFP, serving as vehicles for various ethics of social justice and egalitarian discourses of liberation. For instance, when arranged chronologically and cross-referenced with each other, the entries in *Celebrities of the NWFP*, compiled by Fazal-ur-Rahim Marwat and Pervez Khan Toru, build a narrative in which Deobandism and multiple strains of region-specific popular tradition alike were dominated by more or less libertarian-communist sensibilities from the early twentieth century; it was in the 1970s the party Jami'at-i 'Ulama-i Islam, in alliance with Bhutto's government, undermined this more radical trend through recourse to a regional, Deobandi iteration of Bhutto-era, state-centric populism.

The articles in the above *tazkira* are largely based on local, Pashto and Urdu, materials; this includes everything from folklore to memoir. Likewise the memoir of Ajmal Khattak, later a stalwart of the pro-regional and anti-military socialist movement in Pakistan, is particularly striking: he describes how he and a few of his comrades, in the early 1940s, helped co-found the Haqqaniyya *madrassa* in his native Akora Khattak, District Nowshera.⁴ Himself possibly an atheist by this point, Khattak recognised not only a thread of anti-imperialism in Deobandism but also a pro-egalitarian politics that was consistent with his own, expressed through locally-resonant critical resources. This is the same institution that later trained a fair number of the Afghan Taliban's cadres, albeit after Deobandism in Pakistan was thoroughly split from its earlier, more leftist politics.

And the case in the North-West was not only one of cosmopolitan or all-India politics in a local setting. We both felt a strong need to account for the role of local

cosmologies in the composition of ‘Muslim’, and other, politics. In the northwest, for instance, there has been a long tradition of regarding the 1930s and 1940s Pashtun-nationalist grassroots self-reliance and civil disobedience movement, the Khudai Khidmatgars led by Khan ‘Abd al-Ghaffar Khan, through a mostly secular or ecumenical lens. This may be because most of the work that has addressed the movement has approached it through its connections to the Indian National Congress. Other histories have treated the movement in largely secular terms as well, as the result of class conflict within a framework of imperial political economy, and identity politics that resulted from imperial bureaucratic and political categories. But while these are important features, their sterile focus on political economy and their adherence to modernist frames of analysis captured only a fraction of the movement’s affective life. Although this is acknowledged only in passing by most accounts, the Khudai Khidmatgar movement was also rooted in an understated, particularly Pashtun piety, fused not only with discourses of independence but also of socioeconomic reciprocity. This spread through a variety of pre-existing mediation techniques. All existing first-hand accounts by local Khudai Khidmatgar organisers, such as Waris Khan’s *Da Azadey Tahrik*, for example, are replete with descriptions of innovations of context and content within already-existing participative, performative Pashto poetic traditions, specifically singled out as one of the primary ways revolutionary affect among men and women alike was produced over the 1930s. Another theme that recurs were the written pledges that all members signed if only with a thumbprint, that treated the movement as a sort of proxy spiritual leader, or *pir*; and were directed at paying obeisance to the omnipresence of God in all of creation, including all fellow humans, regardless of caste or creed. Popular piety, adaptations of its

embodied life, and its role in the constitution of devotee selfhood, was an intrinsic and productive feature of social and political activism.

An interrogation of pathways for local bottom-up agency was so strong in the Pashto sources that we felt a focus on much deeper-rooted local cosmologies, mediation patterns, and the way they intersected with wider anti-imperial and socially-redistributive movements, was important. So was an accounting for the ways in which less often-studied subaltern ontologies, in areas that were marginal to most stories of either leftist or nationalist or pan-Islamic politics in the subcontinent, may in fact have been constitutive of much more than strictly local politics. Of course we should expect that Gandhianism influenced the Khudai Khidmatgar movement; but the view from Pashto makes us ask: might not Pashtun popular piety, either its practices or its reflexive critical resources, or both, have affected wider nationalist movements because of this same pathway of exchange? What about other, less notable cases? What would a history look like that actually began from ontologies radically different from those that have typically anchored narratives of decolonisation and contestations of inequality in South Asia?

Placing the NWFP's highly self-aware primary sources in conversation with critical historiography from Bengal was instructive. In some contrast to the literature on the NWFP, the dominance of Subaltern Studies in historiographies of Bengal over more than two decades now has meant that subaltern motives, mentalities, and "political" actions have been subjects of meticulous studies. A Gramscian attention to hegemony has ensured that the "mentality of subalternity" has not been seen in simple oppositional terms, but as a variable compound of accommodation and resistance, as processes of negotiations calibrated between the dominated and the elite via shared social, moral, and

cultural codes (and breaches therein).⁵ This is been superbly productive in examining the popular cultures and richly textured social worlds that interest contributors to this collection. In this tradition of scholarship, even though the focus of Muslim subalterns has been scant, there is some useful work that exists. For example, Sumit Sarkar has explored the life-worlds of the Muslim peasantry by examining two popular Muslim improvement tracts.⁶ Another example is Gautam Bhadra's brilliant delineation, in 'The Mentality of Subalternity', of the world of Manulla Mandal in which compliance and resistance vis-a-vis the oppressor were understood through moral codes of *insaf* or *iman*. But Subaltern Studies' somewhat ideological insistence on the "autonomy" of the subaltern domain, the drive to establish subaltern actors as legitimately political by making legible alternative registers of politics as counterpoints to organized labour movements, mainstream nationalist agitations, and activities of the organized left have been limiting in some important respects. Genealogical studies of the organized left, left political parties or communism in Bengal that may reveal unexpected, counter-intuitive beginnings — in subaltern ontologies and life-worlds — are roads not travelled often enough.

Yet such moves can be fruitful, opening up fascinating questions. Suchetana Chattopadhyay's monograph, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmed in Calcutta*, provides a rich account of Ahmed as a crucial actor on the Bengal scene who was connected to: local urban networks of labourers drawn from impoverished, mostly Muslim rural east Bengalis; the Muslim literati and Pan-Islamists of Calcutta; national communists networks; and trans-national networks of the Comintern and M.N Roy. In undertaking, say, a genealogy of the Communist Party of India or a short-lived socialist

formation operating within the nationalist Congress in the late 1920s such as the Peasants and Workers Party (PWP), both of which Muzaffar Ahmed was associated with, is it possible that significant gains would be made in attending to whether or not alternative radically egalitarian ontologies, far from being confined to spheres of subaltern autonomy, informed and shaped the politics of the organized left? Did enchanted worldviews steeped in everyday religiosity and notions of correct Islamic practice seep into avowedly a-religious formations of the Bengali left?

In this vein, Ananya Dasgupta's contribution to this collection of essays examines how ideas of correct Islamic practise and individual reform — as they circulated via rural Muslim tracts — mediated experiences of peasant indebtedness and seeped into articulations of the Peasant and Workers Party (PWP), Bengal's first socialist organization, as it addressed the problem of debt-induced hardship, in the context of professing communism as an antidote to such ills. Although some PWP members, such as Muzaffar Ahmed, were internationalists with links to the Comintern, their ideas were neither wholesale imports, nor nativistic, but drew on diverse critical sources.⁷

While it is true that redistributive justice became a major theme in late colonial Bengal, which coupled with the assertions of regional Muslim identity, found practitioners in major literary figures such as Nazrul and Abul Mansur, it was far from the exclusive preserve of the Bengali Muslim literati.⁸ Examining alternative articulations of redistributive justice to which the semi-literate or non-literate were exposed requires accessing archives that are not traditionally considered “literary.”

Scholars have paid some attention to the egalitarian tenor that inflected the cultural politics of Bengali Pakistanism as practised by the Bengali Muslim literati in

organizations such as the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (established in 1942) which had links with communists. Abdul Mansur Ahmed looms large in such accounts.⁹ His involvement with the *praja* (tenant-peasant) movement in the early twentieth century and his political career in the Krishak Praja Party are noted to have transfigured into his articulations of the demand for East Pakistan as an anti-imperial space of “*tamadduni azadi*”, where “*tamaddun*”—“Muslim culture” or “civilisation”—not Islam as religion *per se*, was imagined as synonymous with anti-imperialist “democracy” and “*samyavad*” (used loosely to designate egalitarianism, communism, and socialism).¹⁰

Yet, Mansur’s autobiography reveals aspects that may suggest the fluidity of movement between religious dispositions, older affective geographies of anti-territorial jihad, and, the *praja* movement, that have not been fully explored. Here the interregional linkages are fascinating. Mansur, born in 1898, belonged to a Faraidi family. His uncle Samiruddin Faraidi was highly respected in Dhanikhola, Mymensingh for his ability to recite Faraidi *punthis*. Maulavis from far-flung areas would come to the village to conduct *waz-mehfils* and stay at his ancestral home. Mansur’s grandfather’s older brother (*borodada*) was remembered locally as “Ghazi sahib” or “brave warrior” who fought in the army of Sayyid Ahmad Bareilwi and waged *jihad* against the Sikh “infidels” from their base in the Afghan borderland; when Mansur was growing up legends about his *borodada*’s fantastic exploits formed part of local lore.¹¹ In his autobiography, he speaks of a degree of social distinction enjoyed by his family among fellow co-religionists on account of being good Faraidis and, most importantly, being related to the Ghazi.¹² Possible links between a sense of social distinction accruing from associations with a

jihadi ghazi and Faraidi lineage, older affective geographies and early praja assertions' demand for respect might be worth probing.

Sayyid Ahmad and his successor *mujahid* colonies were based not just in a border region but within a certain affective geography. As Yasmin Saikia illustrates in her contribution to this collection, an emotional attachment of many non-local Indian Muslim activists to the northwestern mountains stemmed from the fictive notion that the region had never been fully subdued even by the Mughal empire, and was the preserve of true Islam due to its unwillingness to cede sovereignty to anyone but God. Was this a deep resonance of anti-territory, a distrust of sovereignty that in the Bengali peasant setting was translated into a more rooted scale—in effect, an affective breaking of peasant bondage, even when material bonds were not so easily broken? James Caron's essay in this collection, tracing how remnants of materially-rooted mountain egalitarianism seemingly resonated into subaltern life in other, more hierarchic settings in the colonial heartland of the Peshawar Valley, suggests this may be a fruitful line of inquiry.

In the resonances between Bengali peasant tracts and Pashto critical poetry we noted a focus on the material life of the everyday that nonetheless retained enchantment, and was often pervaded with a specific transcendental ethics of anticapitalism, as well as of anti-imperialism. We also noted that these interregional resonances did not appear to have remained incidental or unfulfilled: Ajmal Khattak, the aforementioned socialist organiser from the NWFP, was a key figure in the National Awami Party later organised in the 1950s by Maulana Abu'l-Hamid Bhashani, the famous Deobandi communist organiser of East Pakistan who is a focus of one of the papers in this collection. Both built very heavily on popular literary traditions and regional-language oratory to do this.

Interregional links between subaltern milieus, despite having diverse genealogies in local structures of mediation and despite contesting or contending with their own local or regional hierarchies, nonetheless created resonances across the geographical pan-peripheries of South Asia. When mediated through more elite movements like the Ghadar Party, linking Punjab to Afghanistan, Tokyo, San Francisco, and Mexico,¹³ they also sat in dialogue with other parts of the world. In short, this activity nourished a geographically vast space in its own right, and has never actually been as peripheral as it has been assumed to be. An inter-subaltern geography of South Asia, diverse and diffuse but interlinked counter-imperial spaces, suffused with revolutionary affect through a variety of informal media; alternative, enchanted genealogies of the left in South Asia, built in large measure on indigenous and extracolonial modes of thought and action and techniques of self-making: this all suggested a history that deserved some independent, sustained focus. That is the basis of this collection of essays.

Our Approach

To return to the conversation that sparked this collection: in noting these histories, in which subaltern resonances also became progressively interlinked, the editors began building an understanding that moved in the direction of post-Subaltern Studies Latin American decolonisation theory. In ‘Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy’, Ramon Grosfoguel argues that much of earlier projects to recover subaltern worlds in South Asian historiography were “studies about the subaltern rather than studies with and from a subaltern perspective. Like the imperial epistemology of area studies, theory was still located in the North while the subjects to be studied are

located in the South.”¹⁴ But at the same time, Grosfoguel does not trust fragmentation as either a political or a historiographical strategy. Instead he proposes to replace methodological provincialism with dialogue between ‘diverse critical epistemic/ethical/political projects’ in a ‘pluriversal’ rather than ‘universal’ world.’¹⁵ We realised that in our Pashto and Bengali dialogue, we were at times moving in the direction of doing this, as a way to write a history in which a variety of earlier actors themselves did exactly this.

In our desire to address these movements and the individuals who built them on such productively plural terms, our collection of essays reflects debates in a variety of disciplines and places a variety of approaches into dialogue. Our contributors bring concerns from social history; anthropology; religious studies; and cultural and literary studies, especially the sociology of publics. Each of the essays makes a contribution to its own milieu; but when taken as a whole, as a result of interconnected themes and actors, they contribute productively as a new theoretically-informed history of comparative political thought and action related to popular piety and ethics, sovereignty, and their role in individual and collective selfhood, ‘Muslim’ or otherwise. In the process they draw out new, and often unexpected, non-western genealogies of socialism, communism, anarchism, and other forms of radical egalitarianism in South Asia.

Yasmin Saikia’s contribution is anchored by a description of two intellectuals and activists who mediated between subaltern and transregional elite worlds, breaking the boundaries of their region and developing a conscious practice of pious life as uncolonised freedom. Leading the collection, her essay provides us with themes that resonate across others in this collection. One is that of the ‘middle-actor’: mobile

individuals who, “[t]hrough rhetoric and revolutionary work, ... connected ordinary people with tribal chiefs, national leaders, and political parties; traders and merchants with religious leaders, as well with ideologues of the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League; political elites of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Bihar with Bolsheviks, Turkish nationalists, and anti-imperial internationalists.” And, Saikia’s essay also provides a vocabulary of anti-territory that resonates throughout the rest of the collection. Drawing on the work of Malek Bennabi, she highlights an antiteleological cosmology rooted in the thought of Ibn Arabi that contributed to widespread imagination of a space of freedom beyond coloniality, an imagination of a domain of ‘the uncolonisable’ that multiple activists located in the material space of the Afghan borderland, and in global anticolonial networks that stretched as far as Germany, Italy and beyond. Connected to this, as James Caron’s contribution to this collection underscores, Ibn Arabi’s cosmology in fact featured prominently in local activists’ self-narration, while subaltern activists themselves, in dialog with transregional textual traditions, produced their own parallel understandings of sufism as antiterritory that provided fertile ground for intersection with actors from more elite regional and global worlds.

If Saikia’s contribution addresses earlier spatial, temporal, and social imaginations that took on new salience in the era of British empire, Jan-Peter Hartung’s essay, in the forthcoming volume of this journal, addresses the newer transregional Deoband tradition to which many of this essay’s middle actors were attached. Through an appraisal of the personality of Mahmud al-Hasan ‘Shaykh al-Hind’, as extended by his rural audiences, and those of his webs of deputies and students, Hartung complicates our picture of the Deoband phenomenon in the early twentieth century. By focusing on this

organiser of militant clandestine action in the early 1900s, and by focusing on him as part of an actor-network rather than purely as a biographical individual, Hartung rethinks the idea that Deoband socio-religious reform always reflected aspirations toward a new kind of *sharafat*. He also reorients our picture of Deoband as a mostly politics-neutral phenomenon in his suggestion that anti-hierarchic tendencies in the early demographic genesis of Deoband intersected with local ontologies of anti-hierarchy and social levelling in Deoband's urban and rural margins.

Other essays in this collection pick up this suggestion from the other side: one of Mahmud al-Hasan's students was Fazal-i Mahmud Makhfi, a central protagonist in Caron's essay; while another was Maulana Bhashani, the focus of Layli Uddin's. Both these essays and the contributions by Suchetana Chattopadhyay and Ananya Dasgupta are informed by, explicit or implicit, transregional scales at stake in Saikia's and Hartung's contributions, but instead of focusing on middle actors, they seek to focus on dynamics closer to the ground that connect middle actors to the lifeworlds of regions. In the process they uncover hidden lineages of the global in the local, and hidden histories of local radicalism in transregional histories.

Chattopadhyay focuses on conjunctions and disjunctures of pan-Islamic movements, previously well-discussed, with urban working-class politics. Popular oratory of pan-Islamic community that referenced the loss of global Muslim prestige, in the era of the Balkan Wars, lent a transcendental ethics to resistance against dispossession amid colonialism—and not just on the global scale. On the local scale this translated into resistance against specific conditions of scarcity and dispossession in Calcutta. As Chattopadhyay argues, “The inability of the anti-colonial populist-extremists and pan-

Islamists to build a mass movement against dispossession and scarcity, to lead the indigent towards a popular-democratic future meant their efforts could be suppressed from above. Out of their milieu, however, will emerge an immense post-war labour upsurge, aligned with the popular upheavals accompanying the movements of Khilafat and Non-Cooperation. While Calcutta of the early 1910s witnessed the growth of the pan-Islamic current, its full-blown populist culmination was reached during 1920-21.”

From the opposite direction, from the bottom up, James Caron’s essay draws upon subaltern sociopolitical theory that was emergent in upland Afghan poetic traditions to trace how antiauthoritarian and anti-state modes of life resisted the twin expansions of the Afghan monarchy and the British empire. More than that, however, Caron’s essay adopts frames of analysis developed in subaltern oral poetry to argue that upland sufi poetics, and the political subjectivities and social domains that poetic performance constituted, influenced the much better-studied transregional trends that appear in Saikia’s and Hartung’s paper. That is, local subaltern poetic forums, and non-elite devotional subjectivities that were premised on an anarchistic politics of mutuality, textured the political practice of the transregional ‘middle-actors’. This linked into regional histories of anticolonial Pashtun nationalism in the North-West Frontier; and it also linked into pan-Islamic movements on the all-India and global scales, providing vital sustenance to those better-studied movements and suffusing them with devotional subjectivities.

Ananya Dasgupta takes up similar issues from the other side of the subcontinent, focusing on selfhood and subjectivation. She examines how popular Muslim improvement tracts in eastern Bengal fostered a self-image among peasants in which the metrics of individual and collective piety were tied to a positive valuation of labour; her essay ex-

plores relationships between piety and peasant radicalism. Unlike historians who have examined similar tracts to trace the gradual communalization of rural Bengali Islam, Dasgupta shows that such clear cut degenerative telos is thwarted by the ways in which inter-meshed rural ideas about labor and Islamic practice made their way into the discourse of early communism in Bengal. Conflicting notions of improvement of self and community that underscored discussions about circumventing large-scale indebtedness in inter-war Bengal, anchored in the thorny issue of Islamic permissibility of interest on loans, reveal rural ontologies and their divergences with strands of elite ontologies as well as affinities with left-leaning city elites.

Meanwhile Layli Uddin's essay brings a narrative of peasant radicalism in East Bengal forward in time to the creation of Pakistan. She continues a focus on piety and techniques of individual and collective self-formation, through a study of the relationships of peasants with the charismatic leader Maulana Abu'l-Hamid Bhashani, and his techniques of mass mobilization. Bhashani was a Deobandi scholar attached to many of the same networks as those that appear in Caron's, Hartung's, and Chattopadhyay's essay. In contrast to the participative texts that fostered a collective reformist subjectivation in Dasgupta's account, however, crucial in this account was a reconfiguration of the practice of *bay'ah*, or sufi allegiance passed on through face-to-face relationships. Much as in the case of the Khudai Khidmatgar movement in the North-West Frontier, a crucial part of revolutionary social change was self-formation through written pledges to the movement, a case in which slippages between individual and collective selfhood built on slippages between new modes of revolutionary selfhood, and earlier modes of devotional selfhood.

Our Primary Contributions

In building an interdisciplinary history of freedom, anti-imperialism, and revolution that is centred both on spatiality and on self-formation, we intervene in a variety of fields.

One contribution is to the literature on the formation of Muslim ethical selfhood, by recognising a distinct category of collective revolutionary subjects with significant roots in non-elite material worlds rather than exclusively in discourse and conceptual worlds. Here we may build upon the work Martin Holbraad, among others working on ontologies of revolution, alongside work such as Naveeda Khan's in *Muslim Becoming* that attempt to address the relationship of political theology to the texture of local lives. Holbraad sees 'revolution' in Cuba not in terms of political commitments that preexisting liberal subjects can "acquire in an Exchange" of possible ideas, or even as a habitus they adopt, but as a "distinct political form" that "dictates its own terms of engagement", and one within which subjects are formed.¹⁶ In Holbraad's Cuban case, this is a selfhood premised on self-abnegation through sacrifice for a goal that is permanently deferred: 'revolution' not as a concept but as a mode of life, which he places in contrast to the actually-existing revolutionary state.

Many of our cases parallel such subjectivities, but tracing pathways of movement is important. In Holbraad's article, implicitly at least, revolutionary subjectivity radiates outward from cadres; while Khan's narrative begins with Iqbal's political theology of constant aspiration and its resonances in new public arenas shaped by a nation-state. In our cases, taken as a whole, we see revolutionary ontology emergent in the intersubjectivity between middle-actors and the local populations to which they were responsive, and this built on earlier existing forms of collective subjecthood. Chief

among these were devotional subjects, which were themselves formed in interregional, and extra-sovereign, premodern worlds too. And vitally, in our devotional settings, individuals were frequently self-actualised through the liberation that comes with lived processes of communitarian freedom, whether in the collective harvest of a saint's *awqaf* land, or in the *hujra*, or men's lodge, as a communal antihierarchic space, as in Caron's account; or in the more hierarchic relationships that patterned both peasant reformism and sufi revolution in Dasgupta's and Uddin's accounts of Bengal.

Related to this, and to underscore a point made in the first section of this introduction, this attention to middle actors mediating between multiple universes of selfhood is another thing that distinguishes this collection from, for instance, classic work on peasant resistance in subaltern studies. In short, rather than fragments we are dealing with what Ramon Grosfoguel, as discussed above, calls a 'pluriverse': a series of points where regional subaltern worlds and their sedimented pasts patterned an *alternate interregional transmodernity*, a space of uncolonizability and anti-sovereignty, from below. This took root in geographic and social margins, and in the rhizomic space that non-elite culture is so good at preserving and creating. Even as it interlinked itself through middle-actors who often were attached to elite organisations and even state machinery, these geographies were politicised in a way that sought escape from, rather than hybridity with, both the nation-state and liberal subjectivation.

This methodological move helps us both highlight and understand histories of the South Asian left that have not been well-articulated so far. Accounts of local-language activists who helped build Pakistan's National Awami Party, like Bhashani in East Bengal and like Afzal Bangash and Ajmal Khattak in the NWFP, show how, starting the late

1950s, the NAP's popular and populist poet Habib Jalib was only the tip of a much larger iceberg of socialist *bay'ah*, fiery sermons, and *musha'iras* (poetry festivals). We could tell the story of this politics through the lens of party organisation; but our excavations in this collection suggest a parallel one: a gradual interlinking of rhizomic space in a 'pan-periphery', in which ad hoc activism in languages ranging from Pashto and Punjabi to Sindhi and Balochi and Bengali, and in local forums that varied according to a history of local power relations, was translated by mobile middle actors and was facilitated by religious educational and devotional networks. It was strongest when antiteleological and process-focused, in distinction to other, more organised modes of revolutionary life, and most fragile when brought into the fold of organised political parties.

Finally, might this eclectic yet encompassing approach be applicable to other settings? What of the Ghadar movement, for example, which included devout Muslims among members of other confessional communities, in addition to avowed atheists? What was the role of lived cosmologies in the political action of such movements? After all, 'religious' institutions and lived practices of self-making affect even those who consciously repudiate them. And, apart from in Caron's essay which addresses animist worlds, this in turn opens up questions about the artificiality in our case studies of boundaries between the Muslim and the non-Muslim. Finally, the global scope of the Ghadar movement, and of Indian revolutionaries generally, opens up a set of highly intriguing questions if our method is applied. When avowed atheists like the Maharashtra communist Pandurang Khankhoje, for example, worked with Mexican agriculturalists, might we have to account for sedimentations of Amerindian cosmologies, underlying lived Latin American experiences of the Catholic church, that affected even

those who consciously repudiated it—a set of factors that would then interact with early communist internationalism in addition to whatever life experiences Khankhoje brought to the encounter? With such connections, we must end by noting the messy and arbitrary borders of this collection. This is not simply limited to the permeable boundaries of ‘Muslim’ South Asia and other practices of devotion and piety, but extend beyond the permeable boundaries of South Asia too. These are projects for future inquiry.

Notes

1 For a contesting viewpoint that reviews this debate in the work of Edward Said as well as in Subaltern Studies, see Bhatnagar et al., 'Meera's Medieval Lyric'.

2 On which see Niviges, 'The Formative Influence...'

3 Lindholm, 'Swat in Retrospect...'

4 Khattak, *Qisa Zma da Adabi Zhwand*.

5 For example see Bhadra, 'The Mentality of Subalternity'

6 Sarkar, "Two Muslim Tracts for Peasants: Bengal, 1909-1910."

7 Ibid, 141-170.

8 For a discussion of Muslim identity formation and regionalism in the literary sphere see Bose, *Recasting the Region*.

9 See discussions of Abul Mansur in Sartori, 'Abul Mansur Ahmad and the Cultural Politics of Bengali Pakistanism.'

10 Ibid.

11 Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajniti'r Panchash*, 7-11.

12 Ibid.

13 On which, see Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

14 Grosfoguel, 'Decolonizing...', 3.

15 Ibid.

16 Holbraad, 'Revolución O Muerte,' 372.

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