



INTRODUCTION

# Introduction to the Forum: Muslim modernity in South Asia

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## Abstract

This short article introduces the Forum on Muslim modernity in South Asia, placing its four articles—by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, SherAli Tareen, Julia Stephens, and Justin Jones—in the context of existing scholarship. I highlight the authors' contributions to the study of Islamic reform and of women's agency, in particular, in understandings of Muslim modernity in South Asia. Each of the contributions is on a discrete topic; this introduction therefore endeavours to pull at the threads within each that underscores their interventions in the study of Muslim modernity and that tie them together in this Forum.

**Keywords:** Modernity; Islam; Islamic reform; gender; colonial India

Muslim modernity in South Asia is well-studied, if by this one means the changes wrought in Muslim society from *circa* 1757, largely in response to colonialism, changes that accelerated from the late nineteenth century. Scholars have amply documented transformations in Muslim religious, political, social, and cultural life. Indeed, the scholarship has, in some cases, been so persuasive that aspects of our understanding of Muslim modernity seem to be settled, almost historical truisms. Among these aspects are the genesis and genealogy of Islamic reform, its centrality to Muslim religious life, and its particular impact on women;<sup>1</sup> the importance of the 'ulama, not only as teachers but as protectors of the faith;<sup>2</sup> the outsize influence of institutions—schools

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<sup>1</sup>The relevant scholarship is vast; these are the more important monographs, in chronological order: Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Usha Sanyal, *Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his movement, 1870–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996); Gail Minault, *Secluded scholars: Women's education and Muslim social reform in colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Ali Usman Qasmi, *Questioning the authority of the past: The Ahl al-Qur'an movements in the Punjab* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011); Brannon Ingram, *Revival from below: The Deoband movement and global Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018); and SherAli Tareen, *Defending Muhammad in modernity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

<sup>2</sup>Francis Robinson, *The 'ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic culture in South Asia* (London: C. Hurst and Co., 2001); Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The ulama in contemporary Islam: Custodians of change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

such as the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Aligarh, madrasas such as Deoband, and political parties such as the Muslim League—and of the men who spearheaded them;<sup>3</sup> and the importance of print culture for the dissemination of ideas to new and expanding Muslim publics, some even constituted as ‘Islami pabliks’.<sup>4</sup>

The richness of this field and the quality of its scholarship notwithstanding, the four articles in this Forum complicate in important ways accepted understandings of these themes. Individually, the articles reconsider the genealogy of Islamic reform, opening new perspectives on dominant reformist orientations; interrogate conceptualizations of modern Islam by leading intellectual and religious figures, allowing us to re-evaluate those figures and the institutions they represent; scrutinize an illiterate Muslim woman’s access to wealth and her command of resources, defying not only the centrality of the written record upon which most histories rely, but also narratives of Muslim women’s increasing containment to the domestic sphere; and examine the significant roles played by women in shaping Islam as practised in India today through Quranic exegesis, showing how some Muslim women appeal to the state to combat conservative ‘ulama who have been empowered in post-colonial India (as elsewhere in the Indian subcontinent) as the arbiters of Islam. Collectively, the Forum offers new perspectives on themes that have been central to an understanding of Muslim modernity in South Asia, particularly Islamic reform and women’s agency.

Muhammad Qasim Zaman’s ‘Law and Sufism in modern South Asia: A changing relationship’ analyses the mystical and legal thought of Shah Wali Allah (d. 1762). Wali Allah is considered foundational to modern transformations in South Asian Islam and is seen as the intellectual forebear of the dominant Deobandi paradigm of reformed Islam.<sup>5</sup> Wali Allah’s central role in the genealogy of Deoband’s reformed Islam is anchored in those aspects of his thought that came to define the Deobandi orientation—an emphasis on Quran and hadith, for example. Zaman’s article complicates this rather neat picture, however, by examining those aspects of Wali Allah’s thought that were sidelined, if not completely rejected, by Deobandi scholars. Focusing on the influential twentieth-century Deobandi scholar and Sufi Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), Zaman shows how Thanawi deliberately circumscribed the generative

<sup>3</sup>On Aligarh, David Lelyveld’s study remains seminal: David Lelyveld, *Aligarh’s first generation: Muslim solidarity in British India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). On Deoband, Metcalf, *Islamic revival*; and Ingram, *Revival from below*. On the Muslim League, Ayesha Jalal, *The sole spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>Francis Robinson, ‘Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 27, no. 1, 1993, pp. 229–251; Megan Eaton Robb, *Print and the Urdu public: Muslims, newspapers, and urban life in colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); S. Akbar Zaidi, *Making a Muslim: Reading publics and contesting identities in nineteenth-century North India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Nur Sobers-Khan, Layli Uddin and Priyanka Basu (eds), ‘Beyond colonial rupture: Print culture and the emergence of Muslim modernity in nineteenth-century South Asia’, Special issue, *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, vol. 3, no. 1–2, 2022. C. Ryan Perkins explores a late-colonial ‘Islami pablik’ in C. Ryan Perkins, ‘A new pablik: Abdul Halim Sharar, volunteerism, and the Anjuman-e Dar-us-Salam in late nineteenth-century India’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 2015, pp. 1049–1090.

<sup>5</sup>As a seminal figure in South Asian Islam, there is much scholarship on Shah Wali Allah. For an overview, see Marcia Hermansen, ‘The current state of Shah Wali Allah Studies’, in *Shah Waliullah (1703–1762): His religious and political thought*, (ed.) M. Ikram Chaghatai (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2005), pp. 683–693. Barbara Metcalf underscores Wali Allah’s foundational role in Deobandi Islam in Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India*, pp. 16–45.

relationship between Sufism and the law in Wali Allah's thought. The article unsettles the genealogy of modern reform further by suggesting that Wali Allah's understanding of the relationship between Sufism and the law may be a more appropriate foundation for the Barelawi orientation, which is often thought to be irreconcilably at odds with Deobandi Islam, not least because of the polemics the Barelawis and the Deobandis have directed at each other. Understanding how Wali Allah is a forebear for both Deobandi and Barelawi orientations complicates our view of reform and of the various orientations of modern Islam that are too often placed in discrete silos. Zaman's article offers one additional contribution in highlighting that an understanding of Sufism that was central to Wali Allah's thought in the eighteenth century was, by the twentieth century, unmistakably delimited and refashioned. The broader implication of the argument is that in delimiting Sufism, Deobandi scholars such as Thanawi were delimiting an earlier conceptualization of Islam itself.

The modern conceptualization of Islam is more overtly the foundation of a debate examined by SherAli Tareen in his article, 'The theological foundations of Muslim modernism and traditionalism in South Asia'. Here, Tareen focuses on an exchange between Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi (d. 1877), one of the Deoband Madrasa's founders, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), who established the MAO College (later to be known as Aligarh Muslim University).<sup>6</sup> Rejecting easy labels of the former as a traditionalist *alim* (cleric) and the latter as an Islamic modernist (as Khan is often characterized in scholarly literature), Tareen's article examines their exchanges on theology, hermeneutics, and normative Islam, and illuminates new aspects of the interaction between these 'two most influential rationalities of Islam in modern South Asia'. Beyond providing a close reading of a set of letters the two exchanged, Tareen illustrates that while Khan drew on the same sources of authority as the 'ulama, his modernism fundamentally diminished their role, deprivileging juridical reasoning and the scholarly interpretive apparatus that was Deoband's conduit to refashioning Muslim practice. The pivot that Tareen highlights, Khan's use of 'traditional sources and arguments of authority', while circumscribing a role for the 'ulama—men who saw themselves as the upholders of how those sources were to be interpreted—illuminates Khan's efforts to delimit the sphere of religion in conditions of colonial modernity.

At the same time, the dispute at the heart of Tareen's article is related to a meta-discourse about what Islam should look like and what role it ought to play in the modern world. We should recall that while scholars today recognize Khan as a theologian (among other designations), he was not educated in a madrasa, and was never a member of the 'ulama.<sup>7</sup> Tareen's article brings to the fore Khan's ability, nonetheless, to challenge the most renowned theologians of his age, and to lay claim to the mantle of

<sup>6</sup>On Nanautvi, see Metcalf, *Islamic revival in British India*, pp. 75–80. Studies of Sayyid Ahmad Khan abound. In addition to Lelyveld, *Aligarh's first generation*, an important recent contribution is Khurram Hussain, *Islam as critique: Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the challenge of modernity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

<sup>7</sup>See Christian Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A reinterpretation of Muslim theology* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1978). More recently, see David Lelyveld, 'Naicari nature: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the reconciliation of science, technology, and religion', and Charles M. Ramsey, 'Religion, science, and the coherence of prophetic and natural revelation: Sayyid Ahmad Khan's religious writings', both in *The Cambridge companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, (eds) Yasmin Saikia and M. Raisur Rahman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 69–85 and 138–158, respectively.

protector of the faith in colonial India. Historiography today has largely ceded this role to reformist 'ulama and revivalists, seeing Sayyid Ahmad's Khan historical significance in his advocacy of Muslim loyalty to the British after the Rebellion of 1857–1858, his role in Muslim education, and as an intellectual forebear of the 'two-nation theory'.<sup>8</sup> Tareen's article reminds us that the conceptualization of modern Islam in colonial India was a contested space with a multiplicity of voices, while showing the texture of the arguments and claims made.

With Julia Stephens' contribution, 'Material modernities: Tracing Janbai's gendered mobilities across the Indian Ocean', the Forum turns attention to questions of gender and Islam. Stephens' article examines the life and activities of Janbai Topan (d. 1934), the wife of successful trader Tharia Topan (d. 1891), who worked between Gujarat and East Africa. By using a micro-historical approach and, given Janbai's illiteracy, drawing together a history that relies on material objects as much as written records, Stephens makes important contributions to understandings of gender and Muslim modernity by showing how an illiterate woman used her marriage to enjoy social mobility, influenced her husband's business fortunes from the domestic sphere, and used colonial law to insist on her right to dispose of property. The Janbai that emerges in this article sits uncomfortably with scholarly emphases on reform's impact in the late-colonial period as increasingly circumscribing women to the domestic sphere.<sup>9</sup> Stephens also makes important methodological contributions by pushing scholars of Muslim modernity to think beyond print, unearthing a remarkable archive of sources that helps us see that Janbai was not a historical anomaly.

In the final article, 'Muslim feminism as Islamic modernism: Women's activism in India between the Quran and the Constitution', Justin Jones shifts our focus from the colonial to the post-colonial period with his analysis of Muslim women's organizations. The article tells an important story about the trajectories of Muslim feminism in contemporary India, tracing activism from the 2000s by the All India Muslim Women's Personal Law Board and the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, activism that addresses a purported failure of Islamic modernism to provide gender justice and social progress. Jones focuses in particular on these organizations' investments in the interpretation of religious texts. With this article, Jones expands the range of institutions that have been the grounds for telling the story of Muslim modernity and offers important insights into when these organizations choose to direct themselves to the 'ulama and when they choose to direct themselves to the state. As Jones suggests, the 'harnessing of the Indian Constitution is perhaps the most striking element within this form of Muslim feminism', where Muslim feminists draw an equivalence between the values of the Quran and those of the Indian Constitution.

Jones illuminates important episodes in the history of Indian feminism and Muslim modernity. He also points to a possible broader legacy of Muslim feminist activism in

<sup>8</sup>A key revivalist voice was that of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. See Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi religious thought and its medieval background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989). On the significance of Sayyid Ahmad Khan in broader narratives of modern South Asian history, see, for example, Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A concise history of modern India*, 3rd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 100–106, 137 and 160.

<sup>9</sup>Gail Minault, for example, shows how reform erased many women's cultural practices in her landmark study, *Minault, Secluded scholars*. She does not, however, explore the implications of this point.

the parallels between the practices employed by these women's organizations over the past few decades and the more recent forms of Muslim civil activism, such as that in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. His article also intersects in important ways with Stephens' in that both show women creating space for themselves with new instruments and resources. Stephens emphasizes Janbai's use of colonial mechanisms of the law such as powers of attorney and colonial courts to actualize her aims; Jones highlights the importance of informal shari'a courts, led exclusively by female *qazis* (religious judges), in promoting feminist interpretations of the Quran and Islamic law in contemporary India.

Each of the articles in this Forum presents a dense web of arguments. Here, I have endeavoured to pull at the threads that underscore their interventions in the study of Muslim modernity, threads that tie them together despite their discrete topics. Given the breadth of a subject such as Muslim modernity in South Asia, refining our understanding of it—and reflecting rather than flattening its complexity—can only be a collective enterprise. The workshop where the articles in this Forum were initially shared was just such a collective endeavour.<sup>10</sup> The workshop included not only the participants represented in this Forum, but also an interdisciplinary group of interlocutors: Kathryn Babayan (History), Juan Cole (History), Gaurav Desai (English), Humeira Iqtidar (Political Theory), Webb Keane (Anthropology), Alexander Knysh (Islamic Studies), Farina Mir (History), and Mrinalini Sinha (History). The engagement of these colleagues was generous and generative, and their contributions enrich each of the articles here. One hopes that the publication of this Forum will continue a constructive conversation and inspire additional research on the many aspects of Muslim modernity in South Asia. As these articles suggest, despite the remarkable quality of existing scholarship, this is a field that can be made richer still, and one to which we can still bring new perspectives.

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