

**Justin Jones and Ali Usman Qasmi**, *The Shi'a in Modern South Asia: Religion, History and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 218 pp., ISBN: 9781107108905, £67.00.

A valuable addition to the steadily growing corpus of literature on the ‘minority’ Islamic sects of South Asia, *The Shi'a in Modern South Asia* is part of a recent trend to move away from the *atabat-i-aliyat* (the Shi'ite shrine cities of Iraq), the traditional lens employed in much existing scholarship on Shi'i Islam. One effect of this realignment led scholars to focus more closely on the sizeable Shi'i communities of South Asia, resulting in a spurt of literature from the mid-1980s.<sup>1</sup> Employing a similar approach, the eight chapters that make up this text contribute to this widening scholarship. Of special mention are two important correctives the volume makes to existing literature: it vests equal space and import to a study of the less numerous Shi'a subdivisions of Isma'ilis and Khojas, and second, it moves beyond devotional rituals and popular religious practices to aspects which allow it to uncover both the internal and international workings of the Shi'i community of South Asia.

Sajjad Rizvi's chapter highlights the contributions the noted Shi'a *mujtabid* Sayyid Dildar 'Ali Nasirabadi (1753–1820), made in lending a theological legitimacy to the rulers of Awadh. The ‘new conception of Shi'i theology’ (p. 33) devised by Sayyid Dildar Ali promoted ‘anti-Sunnism, anti-Akhbarism, and anti-Sufism’ (p. 35) leading gradually to the emergence of an exclusivist and distinctive form of Twelver Shi'ism in the state of Awadh. The most blatant manifestation of this

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<sup>1</sup> Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A Socio-Intellectual History of the Isna 'Ashari Shi'is in India*, in 2 Vols. (Canberra: Ma'rifat Publishing House, 1986); J. R. I. Cole, *Roots of North Indian Shi'ism in Iran and Iraq: Religion and State in Awadh, 1722–1859* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi'i Devotional Rituals in South Asia* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); David Pinault, *The Shiites: Ritual and Popular Piety in a Muslim Community* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), and *Horse of Karbala: Muslim Devotional Life in India*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Toby Howarth, *The Twelver Shi'a as a Muslim Minority in India: Pulpit of Tears* (Abingdon: Routledge 2005); Syed Akbar Hyder, *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Karen G. Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood and Everyday Practice in South Asian Shi'ism* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Diane D'Souza, *Shia Women: Muslim Faith and Practice* (New Delhi: Zubaan Publication, 2012); Justin Jones, *Shi'a Islam in Colonial India: Religion, Community and Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Shi'i assertiveness was the insistence on *tabarra* (the ritual cursing of the first three Caliphs) which, as Tahir Kamran and Amir Khan Shahid's chapter demonstrates, led to a 'sharpening of sectarian identities' (p. 178) between the Chishtis and Shi'as of Punjab during the nineteenth century. This insistence on exclusivity and community boundaries pervaded relations not only between sects but also within them, as pointed out by Michel Boivin's article which charts the process whereby the Isna Ashari Khoja community of Karachi refused to accept 'the Aga Khan as a divine figure' (p. 56) resulting in a 'final break' between them and the Isma'ilis.

If Sayyid Dildar Ali's theology was insular and polemical, his descendant Ali Naqi Naqvi attempted to reinterpret Husain and the story of Karbala anew by laying greater emphasis on the temporal qualities and 'worldly agency' (p. 86) of the subjects. Through a close reading of his works, Justin Jones demonstrates that in Ali Naqi's 'Husainology', the figure of Husain was transformed from a Shi'i Imam to a moral exemplar 'relevan[t] to all of mankind' (p. 103). This malleability of the Karbala paradigm was exploited by Arif Husain al-Husaini in his attempts to mobilise the Shi'is of Pakistan during the 1980s and rally them behind the central figure of Ayatollah Khomeini. In al-Husaini's speeches and activism, Simon Wolfgang Fuchs identifies a discernable attempt to elevate Khomeini as the most worthy *marja*, even at the expense of the *ahl-i bait* and the martyrs of Karbala. The distinctive peculiarities of Shi'i Islam in Pakistan, especially the fragmented nature of its clerical establishment, however, often led to hostile responses to al-Husaini who was dubbed a 'self-made fraud.'

Soumen Mukherjee and Shireen Mirza's chapters both explore the topic of the transnational networks and connections between the Shi'i of South Asia and those of the global community. The discourse of social service and welfare manifested in the present day workings of the Aga Khan Development Network, Mukherjee argues, were borne out of shared colonial experiences of the Isma'ili communities of South Asia and East Africa. In much the same vein, Mirza studies two contemporary Shi'i organisations; the World Islamic Network and the Tanzeem, both of

whom deploy the technology of print and electronic media to propagate ‘moral universalisms’, but which are each informed and moulded by ‘their respective local material cultures’ (p. 132). The connections between South Asian Shi’i and the larger world, however, had a longer and more intimate history, as borne out by the ties of marriage and scholarship between the Mahmudabad family, the largest Muslim landholders in northern India and leading members of the *ulama*. Detailing these connections and focusing on the Madrasa’t-ul Wai’zeen, Muhammad Amir Ahmad Khan argues that the Mahmudabad family employed the Madrasa as a ‘local hub of a network that spread its nodes both domestically and internationally’ (p. 78).

A glaring lacuna in the text, one that is taken note of in Francis Robinson’s introductory remarks, is the absence of any chapter that highlights the role of women in the dynamic and vibrant South Asian Shi’i communities.<sup>2</sup> This shortcoming notwithstanding, the book provides ample evidence of the growing interest and scholarship on the Shi’i communities of South Asia and reflects the diverse and wide-ranging themes currently being explored by scholars in the study of minority Islamic communities in this area of the world. While there continues to exist a great disparity in the sheer volume of academic work on Sunni vis-à-vis Shi’i Islam, one hopes that this gap will only grow narrower.

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<sup>2</sup> Works on Shi’i women of South Asia include Ruffle, *Gender, Sainthood*; D’Souza, *Shi’a Women*; Mary Elaine Hegland, ‘The Power Paradox in Muslim Women’s Majales: North-West Pakistani Mourning Rituals as Sites of Contestation over Religious Politics, Ethnicity, and Gender’, *Signs* 23:2 (1998), 391-428.