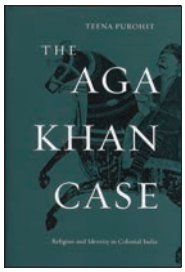

Teena Purohit, *The Aga Khan Case: Religion and Identity in Colonial India*

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Teena Purohit's *The Aga Khan Case* straddles several disciplinary boundaries, including history, textual analysis, religious studies, and anthropology. Her ambition is to examine change in religious tradition through legal and historical textual analysis. She traces the transformation of the Khoja *Satpanth* (true path) from an Indic "dissonant" Islam at the beginning of the nineteenth century to a modern, reformist, and sectarian (or what she calls "identitarian") Islam in the middle years of the twentieth century. She locates the initiation of this change in the legal dispute of the Bombay Khojas known as The Aga Khan Case. The legal representation of the Khoja religion as sectarian Islam is contrasted with a textual analysis of the several *ginān*s (lit. knowledge, Khoja religious poems) in chapter 3. The exegesis of Khoja identity, as manifest in law and in text, is read against the story of the early nineteenth-century religious preacher named Sahajanand Swami and his *Shikshapatri* (religious text containing the teachings as commandments) in chapter 4. She describes Sahajanand's association with the *Satpanth* shrine of Pirana (in Gujarat, India) and the disappearance of this association in the colonial establishment of the Swaminarayan "sect," a reformist community within Hinduism that was established during the late nineteenth century. The final phase of identitarian Islam is described in the policies and work of the third Aga Khan in the last chapter, where she locates the manipulation of secular categories in the making of a sectarian or identitarian Islam in public life, while coinciding with the messianic Shi'i *Satpanth* in the inner domain of Khoja religious life.

Purohit applies Sudipto Kaviraj's enormously productive model of change in Indian society that moves from from fuzzy to enumerated communities. Kaviraj (2010), drawing on several historical discussions of the colonial period, has suggested a trajectory of change that led from a "fuzzy" status to an "enumerated" existence of local groups including religious, caste, and linguistic communities. Purohit employs this transformational trajectory to explain changes in Khoja religious identity from *Satpanth* as a fuzzy community to Ismaili as an enumerated sectarian one.

Her argument weaves together the historical developments in colonial law with an analysis of the *ginān* texts of the community, as well as the oral history of the Swaminarayan *saṃpradāya* (faith tradition) to illustrate this colonial transformation. She argues that textual analysis reveals an Indic development of Islam in the *Satpanth*. This Indic development is devalued by the Colonial/Orientalist legacy as well as by the modern understanding of what religion should be (Asad 2003). The orientalist legacy focused on the Arab milieu as the locale for classical Islam.

The new "modern" identification of religious belonging, what Purohit refers to as "identitarian logic," led to a "reformist" transformation of being Indian Muslim. She draws on Richard Eaton's discussion of becoming Muslim in South Asia (14), then builds on the work of several earlier scholars of *ginān*s who have noted the transformation she describes in this body of religious poetry during the last 150 years (for example, SHACKLE and MOIR 1992; SILA-KHAN 2007; BOIVIN 1998; 2007). To some extent it is a response to Tazim Kassam's earlier questioning of the academic traditions of studying the *ginān* genre as a type of conversion literature (KASSAM 2007).

The first two chapters of the book examine the legal battles within the Khoja community from 1847 to 1866, the period between the first Aga Khan as recent arrival to Bombay and the emergence of the leading Khoja *seṭh*s, the merchant princes of the city. Here she treads on the fairly well-established grounds of Khoja history. What she adds to the discussion is the focus on the *ginān* titled *Dasavatar* as the key text for locating the Khojas in an Islamic conversion narrative. Purohit has not commented, however, on the suggestion that this use of the *ginān* in a legal historical argument has transformed the nature of community governance and inspiration (SHODHAN 2007). The *ginān* as conversion literature withdraws it from the plural sources of its production and transfers authority to the Aga Khan as the sole spiritual source and guide for the community. Indeed, later in chapter five, she perceptively argues that Sultan Mohammad Shah relies on the *ginān*s that are written to celebrate his Imamate in the twentieth century. Thus, while his public position may be secular and reformist, his private position within the community employs the *Satpanth* Indic idiom of *ginān* to establish his authority as the Imam. The messianic concepts "were active within the private, specifically Isma'ili, sphere of religion" (119) and in the development of *ginān* compositions under his Imamate.

In chapter 2 she looks closely at the *Dasavatar*, and also the *Buddhavatar* and the *Yog Vani*. She analyzes these three *ginān*s to demonstrate how they are a "refraction" (9) of the Quran in the Indic idiom. She analyzes the *Dasavatar* as embodying the Indic milieu of Islamic interpretation; that is, the refracting and translating of concepts from the Quran through Shi'i messianism in an Indian local idiom. The term s*atpanth*, for example, is a re-presentation of the Arabic *ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm* (true path), while other technical terms found in the *Dasavatar* are translations of Shi'i messianic concepts focusing on Ali.

Purohit analyzes the *ginān* texts as refracting Quranic concepts of time and place. It is indeed crucial that premodern texts are analyzed in their theological contexts and modern ideas of religious identity are not read into them. Her analysis of the *Dasavatar* and *Yog Vani* are important correctives in this regard. Mallison's reading of Pir Shams' *garbī*s (songs) and other texts opened up the field, in which she demonstrated how Shams' texts question the categories of Hindu and Muslim (MALLISON 1991).

In order to understand the Khoja *ginān*s in their theological context without essentializing the categories of Hindu and Muslim, she posits two domains of Islamicate and Indic spiritual geographies. Her analysis of the two different ways of dealing

with this coexistence of vocabulary and concepts in Indian Muslim texts responds to the same problem as Stewart's (2001) ideas of dynamic equivalence and Kassam's (2007) acceptance of an overlap between semantic domains (61–62). Purohit feels her analysis of the *Dasavatar* and *Yog Vani* would go beyond the semantic to the theological, and as such does away with linguistic boundary markers, such as Perso-Arabic or Sanskrit-Bengali, thereby accessing a shared, interpenetrated, and simultaneous conceptual domain. The idea of *Narayana* (a Sanskrit term for God) and *Mowla* (an Islamicate term for religious leader) or *nabī* (prophet) and *avatār* (incarnation) thus are not mutually exclusive in the *ginān*s but simultaneous.

It would be interesting to trace historical manuscripts of the *ginān* texts to examine the equivalences and simultaneity further, as the author's study is a historical argument of the existence of multiple eschatalogies and theologies based on only a single nineteenth-century version of the *Dasavatar*. It still is very relevant nonetheless to a nineteenth-century understanding of self and identity, one that is struggling with colonial exclusivist categories and inherited inclusivist ones.

The Aga Khan Case is much more than the legal case, and the subtitle of the book suggesting religion and identity in Colonial India is really what the book is about. It deals with the question in a multivalent and complex manner. Purohit's analysis goes beyond the legal texts to the religious texts. She moves beyond the Khoja to the Swaminarayan texts, explicating in the process not only the colonial transformation of identity that occurred but also the pre-colonial Indic and simultaneously Islamicate developments in religiosity located in Shi'i messianism. Purohit ironically discovers this alternative religious identity at a historical moment when it is being lost in the public life of the Khoja and Swaminarayan communities. She makes a valuable argument that should be read by scholars interested in modernity and the historical and religious developments during the last two centuries in South Asia, as well as those interested in examining the autonomous development of Islamic traditions in India.

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