

Sudha Sitharaman and Anindita Chakrabarti, eds. 2020. *Religion and Secularities: Reconfiguring Islam in Contemporary India*. Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan. 240 pp. Rs. 795 (hardback).

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The book examines anthropological scholarship on Islam in contemporary India and engages critically with the conundrum that marks our times—the resurgence of religion alongside the processes of secularisation and modernisation. As the title conveys, the focus of the book is on the categories of the religious and the secular, which are both contested within as well as demarcated by indeterminate, shifting boundaries. Posited as an alternative to the normative, modernist theorisation of secularism, the notion of multiple secularities foregrounds these internal contradictions while also allowing for the possibilities that emerge on account of their mutual interpenetration. The chapters in the book engage with these secularities in various ways and to differing degrees and are held together by their focus on the processes of negotiation between everyday piety, state law and the public sphere.

The book is divided roughly into three sections that focus on syncretism, law and religion, and the Islamic public sphere respectively. The first section, categorised under the label ‘Debating Indian Islam’, includes only one chapter by Aditya Kapoor. Based on the ethnography of a Muslim community centred around the shrine at Furfura, the study questions the Sufi-reformist binary by examining everyday practices of Muslims. Contextualised as *farz* (obligatory duty), *niyom* (desirable practice) and *parampara* (local traditions), religious practice often overlaps with the secular, blurring the boundary between the two, throwing into relief the central question dealt with in the book. This section would have benefitted from the inclusion of another chapter, perhaps from the vantage point of another school of thought.

The most cogent among the three is the section that explores law as an expression of the secular power of the state and the modalities of its interaction with religion. In this section, Aleena Sebastian's study of the Mappila *tharavad*, the codification of its customary practices and its strategic redefinition by women serves to foreground the socio-political context that determines the nature and direction of legal reforms.¹ This ties in neatly with Suchandra Ghosh and Anindita Chakrabarti's chapter that studies the possibilities of manoeuvring between the religious and civil judicial tribunals, enabled through the terrain of inter-legality between sharia *adalats* (courts) and civil courts. Finally, Sudha Sitharaman's incisive analysis of the dispute at a shrine in the Bababudhan hills turns around the liberal and right-wing romanticisation of political secularism and establishes it as the very means through which religious difference is produced, regulated and hardened, thereby polarising the communities further.

The section on the Islamic public sphere includes three chapters, all of which are based on studies conducted in the state of Kerala. Using public debates among various Muslim religious groups in Malabar, T. Hashim delves into the claims of each to represent 'true Islam' and the ways in which they negotiate with the secular public sphere to carve out their own legitimacy and spheres of authority. Two 'reformist' movements mentioned by T. Hashim are studied in further detail in the other two chapters in this section. Shahul Ameen K.T. examines the Solidarity Youth Movement (SYM) and its civil society engagements on a range of issues from environmental concerns to adivasi and dalit protests. Employing the polymorphous notion of *haqq* to establish the natural alignment of religious duty and civic responsibility, SYM seeks to create solidarities that transcend the distinction between the religious-secular domains through their activism. The chapter by R. Santhosh seems to echo almost identical theoretical concerns in the field of palliative care in Kerala and in the role of the activists of the Mujahid movement within it. Both these chapters emphasise the interpenetration of the religious and secular contours of activism, which involve constant negotiation on the part of activists who strive to

¹ *Tharavad* is the social unit among people governed by the Marumakkathayam system of inheritance. It comprises of individuals who claim descent in the female line from a common female ancestress (p. 78, notes).

become 'better' Muslims while practising their activism in a multi-religious society and under a secular state.

One of the most important contributions of the book is to draw attention to the contestations that mark the categories of religion and the secular, and the impossibility of demarcating the two in practice. Such an endeavour is particularly significant in light of the debates that continue to rage across the world, which presume both categories to be self-contained and exclusive. By demonstrating their mutual linkages and the ways in which they constitute each other, the book invites the reader to rethink the processes through which the secular imperative shapes the engagement of the state with religion. Particularly in the context of Islam in India, it is impossible to understand the fluid articulations of religion without taking into account the modern nation state and its secular underpinnings, an idea aptly encapsulated in the subtitle of the book.

While the anthropological engagement with Islam in India theoretically strings together the different chapters, some aspects seem understudied whereas others find repeated mention. The introductory chapter discusses the theoretical and empirical limitations of the idea of syncretism and takes a critical look at anthropology's own contribution to the privileging of syncretic practice as progressive, which differs from the view of believers themselves. The idea of syncretism is significant, inasmuch as it encapsulates a particular relationship between the religious and the secular, and a section examining it would have been a welcome addition to the volume. On the other hand, out of the seven, there are three chapters which discuss the Islamic public sphere in Kerala, limiting the possibilities which could have been explored in an interrogation of other ethnographic sites. While they add to the ethnographic richness of the book, their contribution to the theoretical framework is not significantly different from one another. Finally, the political ascendancy of the right-wing in India has brought about a significant shift in the discourse on secularism, as indicated by the currency gained by the term 'pseudo-secularism' in ordinary speech. An examination of this repositioning would have been an important contribution to the study.

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