Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*, Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2015, 348 pp.

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'Gandhi visited the district of Gorakhpur in eastern UP on 8 February 1921, addressed a monster meeting variously estimated at between 1 lakh and 2.5 lakhs and returned the same evening to Banaras', begins Shahid Amin's celebrated essay on Gandhi (Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma", Subaltern Studies III, 1984). It is only now, some years later, that Amin reveals that the only ground in Gorakhpur large enough to hold those hundred thousand plus was the fairgrounds associated with the warrior-saint Ghazi Miyan. That fairground emerges a *locus classicus* of a 'Ghazi Miyan country' that corrals Gorakhpur, Bharaich, Satrikh, Rudauli and other sites in Uttar Pradesh. In this country, the birthplace of Amin himself, the historical memory of an eleventh-century warrior-saint Salar Masud or Ghazi Miyan frames public and private devotional practices and moulds the forms of storytelling and history. This memory and history is the subject of Shahid Amin's *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan*.

Shahid Amin is one of the most important historians of modern India whose work within and for the subaltern studies collectively has shaped several decades of scholarship on contemporary and historical Muslim pasts. His undertaking here is textual, contextual, ethnographic, architectural, historical and, most significantly, *local*. The book, he states, is an argument for a 'new history we should strive towards' (p. 6). It is both a historical argument and a method for doing history.

Who is Ghazi Miyan? Why is he, or his memory, important to Amin or to us? The answer to the first question is given at the outset—on a single page prefatory part deliberately entitled 'Storyline': He was reportedly born in 1011 CE to the sister of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni in Ajmer and he reportedly died on the day of his marriage in 1034 CE. During his brief life, he became a veritable holy man who performed miracles, destroyed idols, protected cows and cow-herds from oppressive kings and gave up his life in fighting for them. However, the events of Ghazi Miyan's life has many a twist and turn, additions and elisions—presented in Persian romances, colonial ethnographies, Urdu epics, oral histories, ballads and

built structures. Amin answers the second 'why' question by 'thumbing through the weave of the text and traces of the culture of rural Hindustan' (p. 179).

The book is divided into five parts—A Life, Lore, Shrine, Counter-histories and A Long Afterlife—with short episodic chapters filling up the parts. 'A Life' begins the book with Abdul Rahman Chishti's *Mirat-i Masudi*, an account of the Saint's life from the 1620s. Amin does a nuanced reading of the Persian text, highlighting its reliance on 'Hindi histories' (p. 22) and the ways in which it incorporates landscape and social practices within an older textual genre (prose praise narratives for a Muslim Saint). Amin notes that the divergences in the text underline the politics of faith—that little attention is paid to issues of conversion (p. 39). Amin then follows the text through its 'discovery' by Henry Miers Elliot who included it in his translated canon (Elliot worked as a Magistrate and Collector across Uttar Pradesh from 1827 to 1852). Prompted by this discovery, an Urdu version of the *Mirat* is printed in 1879. Amin then traces the divergences in the Persian and Urdu text—such as the demonisation of the Hindu opponents of Salar which was absent in the Persian text.

This textual transcreation sets up Amin's significant engagement with the performative and ritual memory of Ghazi Miyan in 'Lore'. Amin notes that it is only by 'braiding the *Mirat* and the ballads sung to this day in the Awadhi and Bhojpuri dialects of north India' (p. 87) that one can attempt an understanding of this Saint's history and memory. The chapters in 'Lore' examine ballads and oral histories collected during colonial regimes with significant thematic cross-currents: Zohra Bibi (a later female devotee), the Ahir and Teeli nomadic, cow-herding castes, his horse, his purity and his iconoclasm. Amin links stories of Ghazi Miyan to Ahir caste histories (the Bhojpuri *Lorikayan*), making a local, UP-based case for how traces of tales from the Shi'a Muslim tradition, epic storytelling traditions and caste histories interweaved and congealed in performative rituals in nineteenth-century and twentieth-century Ghazi Miyan country. Amin's insights are alive with attention to both textual and material cultural variances in these traditions.

The discussion of oral histories and accounts of performances enters into the section on landscape and built architecture—'Shrine'. I would argue that this is the most critically engaged and theoretically significant portion of the book—significant specifically for its methodological arguments. Amin investigates the material history of the shrine of Ghazi Miyan—from its mythological pasts to its colonial administration and its afterlife under the Indian state. He provides a social history of those who support the shrine, memorialise and transcreate the epic in various forms for the pilgrims. Amin examines the symbols, signs and modes of sacrality through a sacral geography that flows across this region—triangulating the sacral cartography of devotion. Amin's discussion of the built environment, circulation of monies, artefacts and care-takers within the Shrine complex is instructive as a necessary context for the type of textual interpretative work he had done until then.

In 'Counter-histories', Amin circles back to the textual, focusing this time on the nineteenth century. As a response to the Urdu *Mirat* as well as to the popular

fairs and performances associated with the Saint in UP, a range of Hindu polemics against Ghazi Miyan and his cult begin appearing from the 1870s onwards. These polemics were often written to 'save' or 'reform' Hindu women—often from such 'lower castes' as the Ahir and Teli communities. Amin reads these tracts and political contestations as 'demotic warfare' where the object of conquest are the everyday ritual and public practices of 'neo-Muslims'. These 'counter-histories' lead Amin to his coda in 'A Long Afterlife' where such 'tensility of narrative' provokes him to return to the question of History itself: 'Maṣud cannot be accommodated within the stern pages of History' (p. 190).

Amin's body of work—including the aforementioned essay on Gandhi—has always wrestled with the question of imbricated narratives whose tellings refuse any direct truth claims. In *Conquest and Community* he concludes that he has written 'an alternative history' of 'submerged, abbreviated, strait-jacketed events—recalcitrant events and recalcitrant lives' (p. 196). What lies behind this need to declare alterity? After all, Amin cites no less a provenance then the medievalist historian Marc Bloch who had examined the narratives and object-histories across a 1,000 years in his first book, *Les Rois Thaumaturges* (1924). Why then does Amin repeatedly stress that his work is not *just* a work ascertaining 'fact'—though he never lets go of the attempt to think outside of a history of representation. Is it such that, despite Bloch, the rank and file of the historical profession refuses entry to the narrative threads Amin has weaved together as inadmissible evidence? (p. 197). Amin is certainly convinced that such is the case, and hence he declares his work 'an alternative history'.

This burden of 'alternative' is a central handicap dealt to the post-colonial historian. That is, the relationship between 'fact' history and whatever it is that we choose to address as 'empirical'. We contend with the question of 'empirical' for the colonial production of history constituted *us* as the site for excavating the 'empirical'. What history is possible for the subjects of History? The Subaltern Studies collective was formed itself to answer that question and its foremost thinkers—Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey—have all offered answers in different registers. Shahid Amin's answer lies here: To walk deeply into textual and oral landscapes and to document the protruding gnarled roots; that which refuses to be homogenised and refuses to disappear.

Amin has provided a template for how a historian can dig textually and spatially into the 'space for encounter' and provide an archaeological survey of what constitutes 'tolerance' or 'syncreticism' for contemporary India. Though his attention is on Ghazi Miyan, we can foresee similar excavations for a host of figures from pre-colonial pasts. For example, Ghazi Miyan's uncle Sultan Mahmud who hovers above History in this text and others. Amin's text is a method for doing history; and the three appendices (reproducing the oral and narrated versions of the 'storyline'), the four maps and nine photographs (emplotting the landscape of Ghazi Miyan country) lay bare his technique for us.

Conquest and Community is an indexical text but what it points towards is not only the roots of Indian syncreticism but that of Indian historiography and its relationship to the colonial knowledge project. It demonstrates that what constitutes 'event', 'fact' or even 'narration' cannot be, and is not, solved through the paradigm of understood 'academic' standards. It is not merely a matter of reconciling Ranke to Ramayana. The struggle over 'event' was the primary struggle of the right to narrate individual subjectivity for colonised Indians—a struggle manifested in the footnotes of Shibli Noṁani or Jadunath Sarkar at the turn of the twentieth century. That struggle is not over, for even a cursory look at contemporary newspapers reveals how divisive our understanding of collective pasts remains. *Conquest and Community* is an epistemological intervention and provides a blueprint for how to consider any framing of Indian pasts—that is, textually, orally, historiographically, ethnographically and locally.

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