

greatest success of Farooqui. He lends the events of 1857 in Delhi a rare poignancy, succeeding in dealing a deft human touch to the ultimately tragic event of 1857 without really appearing to do so.

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Devotional Islam and politics in British India: Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi and his movement, 1870–1920, by Usha Sanyal, New Delhi, Yoda Press, 2010, 392 pp., Rs. 395 (paperback), ISBN 9788190666862

As a period of intense intellectual, social and cultural activity among the Muslims of South Asia, the late nineteenth–early twentieth century has appropriately attracted numerous academic enquiries. Usha Sanyal's book on the *Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at* or 'people of the [Prophet's] way and the community' has made its mark since its first appearance in 1996 and reprint in 1999. This new edition by Yoda Press is a welcome addition, not only in making an out-of-print book available but also in bringing a thoroughly researched work back in discussion. As researchers continue to unravel aspects of the fascinating history of this time period, this book is a reminder of one of the major Sunni movements in South Asia.

Devotional Islam and Politics is about the making of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement in its formative years. But like any good book, it engages with various issues entwined in its historical backdrop. By looking into this Sunni movement, Sanyal deals with questions pertaining to identity formation, Islamic reform, renewal movements, regional politics and religious authority. In her discussion, she also looks at contemporaneous movements – particularly of the Deobandis and the Wahhabis – which played a defining role in the making of the Ahl-e Sunnat identity. Those outside the fold refer to the followers of Ahl-e Sunnat as the 'Barelwis', simply because of the town of Bareilly in Rohilkhand where Ahmad Raza Khan Barelwi (1856–1921) was born and which he never left except for twice when he went to perform Hajj. Although it is not uncommon to be identified by place-name, the Ahl-e Sunnat cohorts often prefer to be known by their movement's name instead.

The 'central figure' of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement, Ahmad Raza Khan Barelwi is known among his followers as *Ala Hazrat* (His Exalted Presence) and spelt 'Raza' rather than 'Riza', a fact recognized by Sanyal in this new edition. Like many contemporaries, he received his education from his father, Maulana Naqi Ali Khan, himself a scholar of repute, and then went on to self-teach himself. Although Sanyal chooses not to turn her work into an intellectual biography of Ahmad Raza, she takes an empathetic approach in presenting his worldview and his movement in their own terms. While doing so, she makes use of the extensive body of *fatwas* (religious verdicts), *Fatawa-e Rizawiyya*, written by Ahmad Raza as the 'central source-material' for her study. Ahmad Raza wrote several volumes of these fatwas, answering to his followers' queries or self-generated questions, to provide a trail of judgments concerning everyday life situations and the prophetic path.

Besides considering the formation of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement in a comprehensive manner for the first time, this book is significant for a number of other reasons as well. It shows how this movement, and other such concurrent movements, should be seen in

the historical context of British colonialism, particularly as the Muslims of late nineteenth century India wriggled with the loss of power and privilege that they had formally lost in the aftermath of the revolt of 1857. Ahmad Raza offered them one of the ways to deal with the circumstances. To him, Muslims were at low ebb because they had strayed from Islam and the correct Muslim behaviour, which could be remedied by strict adherence to the paths of the Prophet. The Ahl-e Sunnat thus was a reform movement aimed to recreate 'in an existing society or community of Muslims the moral climate thought to have existed at the time of the Prophet' (p. 11). Sanyal defines this kind of 'reform' as synonymous with 'renewal' of faith (*tajdid*) and shows how these efforts, in many instances, were inspired by the life and example of the Prophet Muhammad. The early years of Ahl-e Sunnat was, hence, a time to revive prophetic traditions by measures such as the opening of madrasas, the writing of fatwas, the publication of journals and treatises, the performance of oral debates and the formation of voluntary associations as institutional bases of the movement.

Ahmad Raza's devoutness to the Prophet was based on his belief in the 'limitless virtues and abilities of the Prophet' (p. 153). For him, Muhammad was in all his words and acts prophetic, and thus extra-human. Furthermore, the benchmark of Ahmad Raza's personal piety for the Prophet was reinforced by the Prophet's power of intercession between the man and God. With his familial Sufi background in the Qadiri order, his veneration was as the 'lover of the Prophet' (*Ashiq-e Rasul*), which shines through his poetry and other writings. Sanyal provides a nuanced discussion of how such factors led to the distinctive 'style' of Ahmad Raza, 'caused by the determining role in his life of the Prophet and of his defence of the Prophet against perceived disrespect or slight' (p. 165).

Sanyal's discussion of the Sufi family of the Barkatiyya Sayyids of Marahra demonstrates the importance of the 'reformist' Barkatiyya *pirs* in Ahmad Raza's life. By focusing on the Barkatiyyas, Sanyal also highlights the importance of the institution of the family in nineteenth-century British India as a source of authority (p. 97), thereby extending the argument of the centrality of Ahmad Raza's family in the making of the Ahl-e Sunnat movement. His proximity to the Barkatiyya *pirs* in some measure helped his movement internalize Sufi devotional practices and notions. Additionally, the Sayyid ancestry of the *pirs* was an important source of authority for him, enhancing his own family's *baraka* or grace in the eyes of the followers, and subsequently highlighting the importance of his intercession on behalf of the believer with God.

The Ahl-e Sunnat wa Jama'at, as reflected in its very name, emphasized on following the customary practices of the Prophet as the exemplary model for a Muslim as well as constituting the majority community. This twin emphasis, as Sanyal lays it, implied a 'claim linking its claimants with the Sunni Muslim world beyond the subcontinent', as also a simultaneous denial of that relationship 'to other Muslims whose beliefs fell short of standards which Ahmad Raza considered irreducible and uncompromisable' (p. 166). Such contentions brought Ahl-e Sunnat in conflict with other intellectual trends and reformist movements of the time. Not only did he label Ghulam Ahmad Qadiyani a *kafir* (infidel) for his claim to prophethood but, as Sanyal demonstrates, charged every other group as guilty of 'false' belief. Such groups included Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his supporters, Shi'ism, Nadwat al-'Ulama, Tablighi Jama'at, the Wahhabis and the Deobandis, among others. In fact, Ahmad Raza saw the Deobandi ulama as the 'other' and the two movements have constantly disagreed to this day on multiple issues, based on their respective differences on prophetology, Muhammad's intercessionary role and so on. What, for instance, set the Deobandis and Ahl-e Sunnat apart was Ahmad Raza's belief in the prophet as *hazir-o-nazir* (present and seeing), whose power of mediation continued even after his death. Furthermore, Ahl-e Sunnat viewed the graves, which marked the last earthly homes of

exalted beings and saints, to be associated with baraka or grace (p. 258). Such practices were conflicted by the Deobandis, with their own logic behind them. As another example, the call for celebrations by Ahl-e Sunnat of the Prophet's birth anniversary (*majlis-e milad*) was compared by the Deobandis to Hindu celebrations of the birth of Krishna (p. 267). Although such instances are in abundance, Sanyal comes up with a convincing argument and relates this competitive environment among various reformist groups as a process of identity formation: 'the seriousness of the debate between them was motivated by a sense that only one of them could be right' (p. 3).

Ahmad Raza is seen by his followers as the *mujaddid* (renewer) of the fourteenth century, as per Islamic calendar, succeeding Shah Abdul Aziz – Shah Waliullah's eldest son – the *mujaddid* of the thirteenth century. As there are more claimants than one as different groups looked to their own leaders as the *mujaddid*, the finality of Ahmad Raza being the *mujaddid* may be questionable. However, Ahmad Raza was successful in providing a fresh reading and interpretation of Qur'an and hadith that came to view the Prophet as uniquely endowed by God. Overall, Sanyal is successful in presenting a compassionate yet academically sound study. As one would wish, this edition comes with a new – though brief – introduction by the author seeking to place the book and its continued significance in the light of the new scholarship since its first print. The strength of this book can be further gauged by the relevance of the subject and the freshness of its matter, despite being reissued almost after a decade and a half later. It is highly recommended to anyone interested in South Asian Islam, British colonialism, religious movements and Muslim societies, in general – either as a first-time read or as an attempt to renew one's knowledge in these areas.

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Rukmini Devi: a life, by Leela Samson, New Delhi, Penguin Viking, 2010, xii + 244 pp., Rs. 550 (hardcover), ISBN 9780670082643

Everything about Leela Samson's biography of the Bharatanatyam legend Rukmini Devi Arundale sounds 'authorized'. In the absence of autobiographical control within a biography, it is such authorization that is supposed to lend credibility to the biographer's voice. But the need for authorization also means that the biography ends up regurgitating an official picture of its subject. Samson does not draw on the usual techniques of authorized writing such as inserting herself as a central character in the narrative to affirm her truth-claims (Rita Ganguly's bloodless biography of Begum Akhtar *Ae Mohabbat: Reminiscing Begum Akhtar* comes to mind) or writing a made-to-order memorializing hagiography (such as Savita Devi's several-holds-barred tribute to her legendary mother Siddheshwari Devi in *Maa . . . Siddheshwari*). Leela Samson's biography of Rukmini Devi is more dignified and measured in its tone, like her own dance style, than either of these techniques would admit. But it martyrs its subject to canonization.

The authorized nature of this project is hard to miss. Samson, as the current director of Kalakshetra, the monumental institution founded by Rukmini Devi to educate young Indians about their 'classical', 'traditional' art forms, walks in the shadow of Rukmini Devi