Islam along the South Asian Littoral

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The Muslim communities inhabiting the littoral regions of the Indian subcontinent represent unique and uniquely neglected nodes in the broader network of South Asian and Indian Ocean Islam. Shaped by the maritime forces of the Indian Ocean, and largely independent from their northern co-religionists, these communities appear to have developed a distinct Muslim politics that is little understood.[1]

It is a mystery of modern South Asian studies that so little is known about the Muslim communities inhabiting the coastal regions of the Indian subcontinent. Historically, the Muslim communities of littoral––which we take to include the Gujarati, Konkan, Malabar, and Coromandel coasts, Sri Lanka, the islands of Lakshadweep, and the Republic of Maldives––served as important entrepôts in the flow of goods, ideas, and religious personnel around the Indian Ocean. Today, the Muslims of this region continue to orient themselves along very different lines of cultural and political influence than those shaping Islam in the northern hinterlands. Overshadowed by their co-religionists in the north and long ignored by anthropologists and historians alike, these Muslim communities stand in need of sustained academic attention. Our aim in this essay is not so much to repair the neglect, but to highlight its existence and suggest some directions for future study. Additional study of the littoral communities will enhance understanding of the spatial and temporal transformations of Islam and allow for a more sensitive analysis of contemporary patterns of polity, social loyalty, and religious transformation.

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Gujarati vessels voyaging between Zanzibar and western India in the 1950s.

Why the neglect?

Given the abundance of experts working in the subcontinent, it is worth considering why there have been so few studies of Islam along the littoral. Historiographical lacunae can be explained by the scant supply of source material, particularly for the pre-colonial period. It is fair to say that while we know roughly how and when Islam arrived––Arab seafaring merchants would have included Islam in their wares not long after Mohammad's message reached the southern ports of the Arabian Peninsula and perhaps even before Muslim rulers reached Sind in the eighth century––we know virtually nothing of early processes of conversion and Islamization. Primary evidence for the pre-colonial era tends to be culled from mythical accounts and a few prominent texts such as Ibn Battuta's fourteenth century account of Muslim social life in Malabar, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. While the lack of sources is clearly acute, scholarly work on early periods of the spread of Islam––especially between the Hadhramaut and India's western coasts––should provide some clues for historians of the subcontinent. Additionally, although dominant forms of oral tradition along the coast are often noticeably tainted by the concerns of authenticity, nationalism, and chauvinism, these traditions may also reveal truths about early Islamic history.

In a more encompassing sense, however, the neglect of littoral Islam appears to be the result of the kind of centre-periphery models that have affected the study of Muslim societies in general. It is often assumed, for example, that textual and ritual practices of the southern parts of the subcontinent are inferior to those of the northern scholastic traditions––in a rather similar fashion to the subordination of South Asian (the periphery) traditions in relation to those of the Middle East (the core). The recent scholarship of Barbara Metcalf, Francis Robinson, Richard Eaton, and others has gone some way toward demonstrating that the subcontinent has substantive textual, theological, and legal traditions of its own, but this work too has focused largely on the north, the legacies of Mughal rule, and the doctrinal and textual traditions of Delhi, Lucknow, and Bengal. Evidence from the littoral, however, questions the existence of clearly defined divisions in Muslim practices and thought between the north and south

of the subcontinent; it also challenges the more generic idea that the peripheries necessarily equate with vernacular traditions and centres with the authentic.[2] The conventional academic division of the subcontinent into northern and southern zones is based largely on the geographies of language, kinship practices, and Hindu ritual traditions. For Muslims, the geography of the subcontinent appears to be rather different, albeit currently poorly understood. India appears to be divided into different zones in which different schools of Islamic law dominate and where certain practices, sectarian interests, and cultural traditions are emphasized. These zones overlap with other kinds of religious geography such as networks and hierarchies of shrines, scholarly circuits and, as in the past, trade and migration. The littoral communities also remain intimately connected to wider Indian Ocean networks as the following ethnographic example illustrates. A Gujarati Muslim trader with contacts in Calcutta took a skeleton crew to the Andaman Islands in 2001. Once there, they took command of a dhow from a shipyard in Indonesia, ordered from unseen faces known to them only through association. The vessel was taken to Colombo because its new owner was unpleased with the vulgar Indonesian carving on the prow and wanted it removed before he could consider the vessel auspicious and thus seaworthy. The vessel was then commissioned and today steers a regular course between Mumbai, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia, returning annually to Gujarat for the monsoon months.

A "littoral" world-view?

The kind of comparative exercise required to understand the broader effects of such movements of people, ideas, and resources faces a number of difficulties. For example, attempts to identify parallels, similarities, and differences among the many Muslim communities in the region often reinvent "Galton's Problem." This problem, dating from the nineteenth century, suggests that particular traits diffuse across "cultures" and therefore we can never know absolutely if such cultural traits arose independently as adaptive responses or were a result of diffusion. The comparative project raises other questions as well. Are there, for example, distinct South Asian conditions that create a littoral sociology, a littoral religiosity or a littoral worldview? How can we analytically distinguish between movements of people, ideas, and religious forms? What would a sacred geography of South Asian Islam look like? Furthermore, in what ways is it connected to other geographies? Are there common threads in either patterns of cosmopolitanism, orthodoxy, or expectation that tie littoral communities together?

An approach that dissolves the dominance of the centre-periphery model, escapes the over-determination of the north-south split, and allows us to examine independently the development of particular nodes through their interaction with others is to examine movement and interaction within a network of multiple core areas, each with its own spheres of influence. This approach requires that we understand each of the nodes on the network and distinguish between unique and shared cultural traits. Vernacular literary traditions, distinct architectural patterns, and ritual practices might indeed mark a littoral worldview. Here again, our limited knowledge of the region prevents us from moving from hypotheses to firm conclusions.

There are, however, points of broad consensus upon which to build further analyses. For example, scholars working in the region agree that these coastal communities were shaped in an environment largely determined by maritime trade patterns and Arab merchants, not in the crucible of land-based military conquest undertaken by Turkish and Persian Muslims. These coastal communities were clearly not hermetically sealed. Many of the merchant communities had contact with each other. Many––such as those in Gujarat and parts of Tamil Nadu––also had relationships of sorts with the larger power brokers of the Delhi Sultanates and Mughal Empire. Asymmetries of power between the north and the coastal regions do not, however, tell us much about patterns of religious consumption. We cannot assume, for example, that there was a "trickle-down" religious economy where Islam in the north sustained communities on the coast or in the south. While it is clear many of the connections on this South Asian network need to be explored, it also appears that the communities of the littoral developed in relative independence and far from the influence of their hinterland co-religionists. The processes of conversion and early Islamization were sustained not by a Muslim ruling elite, but rather by itinerant traders, clerics, and Sufis with few if any connections to these empires.

Scholars also agree that distinct histories of the littoral continue to shape contemporary religious politics. If it is true, for example, that the Muslim communities of the South Asian littoral have long inhabited worlds apart, distinct from the religious and political environment in north India and the Deccan, then one might imagine that such differences are manifest in the sphere of religious, communal, or public politics. Consider, for example, the experience of Muslims during the reign of the Delhi Sultanates and the Mughal Empire. Most of the communities on the littoral did not enjoy the glory or benefits of imperial rule. In trying to account for modern reform movements, either in the subcontinent or in the wider Muslim world, scholars have often argued that the loss of power and prestige that accompanied the decline of Islam's imperial age and the rise of European colonialism has produced an "Andalus syndrome" or "Muslim malaise." In turn, this malaise helps to explain why many Muslims in the contemporary period have sought, through a variety of reform or revival movements, to re-impose a golden age of Islamic rule thought to have existed in the seventh and eighth centuries (AD). Many pundits have even gone so far as to suggest that this malaise handicaps modern Muslims living under secular regimes or as minority communities in non-Islamic states. Evidence from the littoral suggests that coastal Muslims have been shaped by different forces and may be less susceptible to the anxieties and the antagonisms afflicting their co-religionists in the north. Has living on the littoral as minority communities better equipped these Muslims to navigate the hazardous waters of religious pluralism and competitive communal politics that characterize much of the subcontinent?[3] Additional study of the littoral would help confirm, or deny, this intriguing possibility.

Finally, how have these communities influenced worlds beyond the shores of the littoral? It is quite clear that currents of Arabian influence shaped littoral Islam for centuries and that contacts with the Emirates continues to condition local beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, the details of such encounters have gone largely unrecorded or have been lost. Scholars have determined that the Muslim communities in this region served as important nodes in a broader Indian Ocean network that extends from the South Arabian Peninsula to Southeast Asia, yet we have little sense of how Islam as a product of exchange was altered as it passed through the hands of the Muslims in Gujarat, Malabar, and the Maldives. At the moment, it is uncertain what impact the forms of Islam found in these regions have beyond regional zones. As far as we can tell, for example, there is no littoral equivalent of the Deoband or Tablighi Jama'at. And yet, Sufi groups, madrasas, and Islamic reform movements in Lakshadweep, Malabar, Tamil Nadu, and Sri Lanka have certainly influenced each other, and have sent their delegates as far as Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.

The analytical neglect of this region can no longer be justified. A wave of new scholarship by historians and anthropologists suggests that it is time to reassess the relationships between the littoral Muslims, their exchange partners abroad, and their north Indian co-religionists. It also suggests that the environment of the littoral continues to shape minority and Muslim politics in ways well worth exploring.

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Notes

1. The authors would like to thank the participants and audience of the round table discussion entitled "Islam along the South Asian Littoral" that took place at the 2004 Conference on South Asia held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In addition to the authors, the participants included Stephen Dale, Dennis McGilvray, Filippo Osella, and Paula Richman.
2. Bruce Lawrence's article "Islam in South Asia" is one of the few exceptions to this rule of centre-periphery thinking, in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*, ed. John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 278-284.
3. Ashutosh Varshney's recent work on the Muslims of Calicut strongly suggests this possibility, *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life: Hindus and Muslims in India* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).