

APRIL 2021

# CURRENT HISTORY

A Journal of Contemporary World Affairs



## SOUTH ASIA

### **Social Strains**

**The Persistence of Caste and Its Pandemic Costs**

Ashwini Deshpande

**Pakistani Education's Big Test**

Faisal Bari

**Afghan Customary Clout**

Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili

### **On the Map's Edge**

**The Maldives Navigate Growth**

Eva-Maria Knoll

**The Saints of the Sundarbans**

Sufia Uddin

### **Plus:**

**The Uneasy Chinese–Indian Border**

Sumit Ganguly

**What Happened to Hindustan?**

Audrey Truschke

# CURRENT HISTORY

FOUNDED IN 1914

APRIL 2021

VOL. 120, NO. 825

## Editor

JOSHUA LUSTIG

## Associate Editor

MARK THOMPSON

## Senior Editor

WILLIAM W. FINAN JR.

## Copy Editor

SHERRY L. WERT

## Contributing Editors

CATHERINE BOONE

London School of Economics

HOLLY CASE

Brown University

URI DADUSH

Bruegel

DEBORAH S. DAVIS

Yale University

ALEXANDRA DÉLANO ALONSO

The New School

LARRY DIAMOND

Stanford University

MICHELE DUNNE

Carnegie Endowment

BARRY EICHENGREEN

University of California, Berkeley

C. CHRISTINE FAIR

Georgetown University

SUMIT GANGULY

Indiana University

MICHAEL T. KLARE

Hampshire College

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

Northwestern University

JOSHUA KURLANTZICK

Council on Foreign Relations

PAMELA McELWEE

Rutgers University

MICHAEL McFAUL

Stanford University

RAJAN MENON

City University of New York

JOSEPH S. NYE JR.

Harvard University

EBENEZER OBADARE

University of Kansas

MICHAEL SHIFTER

Inter-American Dialogue

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

University of California, Irvine

## COMING IN MAY

# Africa

DESPITE DIRE WARNINGS, most African countries avoided catastrophe during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Painful recent experience with other epidemics, notably HIV/AIDS and Ebola, may have prepared governments, health systems, and citizens for the coronavirus. The African Union has also emerged as an effective coordinator of multilateral cooperation on the continent. But vaccines are scarce and a dangerous new mutation of the virus is spreading from South Africa. *Current History's* May issue will cover these and other developments across the region. Topics scheduled to appear include:

- **How the African Union Mobilized Against COVID-19**  
Thomas Kwasi Tiekou, Western University
- **The Pandemic and Its Predecessors in West Africa**  
Adia Benton, Northwestern University
- **Urban Space and Justice in Johannesburg**  
Caroline Wanjiku Kihato, University of Oxford
- **An Authoritarian Turn in Tanzania**  
Felicitas Becker, Ghent University
- **Nigerians Tackle Police Brutality**  
Ebenezer Obadare, University of Kansas
- **Can Africa and the United States Reconnect?**  
Benjamin Talton, Temple University
- **Who Is an African Jew?**  
William F. S. Miles, Northeastern University

*Current History* (ISSN 0011-3530) (Online: ISSN 1944-785X) is published monthly (except June, July, and August) by University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. See [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory/pages/subscriptions) for single issue and subscription orders, and claims information. Postmaster: send address changes to University of California Press, 155 Grand Avenue, Suite 400, Oakland, CA 94612. Copying and permissions notice: Authorization to copy article content beyond fair use (as specified in Sections 107 and 108 of the U.S. Copyright Law) for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by The Regents of the University of California for libraries and other users, provided that they are registered with and pay the specified fee through the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC), [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). To reach the CCC's Customer Service Department, phone 978-750-8400 or write to [info@copyright.com](mailto:info@copyright.com). For permission to distribute electronically, republish, resell, or repurpose material, use the CCC's Rightslink service, available at [online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory](http://online.ucpress.edu/currenthistory). Submit all other permissions and licensing inquiries to [permissions@ucpress.edu](mailto:permissions@ucpress.edu). Copyright ©2021 by Regents of the University of California. *Current History*® and *History in the Making*® are registered trademarks. Periodicals postage paid at Oakland, CA and additional mailing offices. U.S. and Canada.

# CURRENT HISTORY

April 2021

Vol. 120, No. 825

## CONTENTS

- 127 How India's Caste Inequality Has Persisted—  
and Deepened in the Pandemic** . . . . . *Ashwini Deshpande*  
Groups at the bottom have suffered most during COVID-19 lockdowns, reflecting the persistence of a system of social stigmatization that many Indians insist is a thing of the past.
- 133 Pakistan's Education Reform Test.** . . . . . *Faisal Bari*  
Despite a constitutional guarantee of education, Pakistani schools are failing to deliver on quality, equity, and opportunity. Now a curriculum debate is raising tensions over national identity.
- 140 The Endurance and Evolution of  
Afghan Customary Governance** . . . . . *Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili*  
While expensive state-building projects faltered, traditional authorities stayed relevant in rural areas, solving disputes and providing services. Will the ascendant Taliban push them aside?
- 146 Shared Traditions for Living in the Sundarbans.** . . . . . *Sufia Uddin*  
Landless Hindus and Muslims in the delta sprawling across the Bangladesh–India borderlands have common class interests, depend on the same imperiled ecosystem, and even share saints.
- 152 How the Maldives Have Navigated  
Disease and Development** . . . . . *Eva-Maria Knoll*  
Eradicating malaria opened the way to development of the remote Indian Ocean island chain in the last century. COVID-19 has posed a new challenge to an economy dependent on global tourism.
- PERSPECTIVE**
- 159 Is the Deep Freeze Between China and India Turning Hot?** . . . . . *Sumit Ganguly*  
Increasingly violent standoffs between the two Asian powers on their long, mountainous border will be harder to resolve with nationalist strongmen digging in on both sides.
- BOOKS**
- 162 Recovering Hindustan and India** . . . . . *Audrey Truschke*  
A new book explores a premodern historian's vision of the subcontinent as a home for all religious traditions—and the role of colonialism in promoting a Hindu-centric idea of India.

# CURRENT HISTORY

April 2021

*“The economic distress resulting from India’s pandemic response is intensifying preexisting structures of disadvantage based on social identity.”*

## How India’s Caste Inequality Has Persisted—and Deepened in the Pandemic

ASHWINI DESHPANDE

In his 2017 book *The Great Leveler*, Austrian economic historian Walter Scheidel argues that throughout human history, four types of catastrophic event have led to greater economic equality: pandemics, wars, revolutions, and state collapses. In Scheidel’s analysis, these upheavals cause a surge in excess mortality that raises the price of labor, leading to declines in inequality. The validity of Scheidel’s argument for the current pandemic can only be assessed after it is over. But some have already described COVID-19 as a leveler in similar, if looser, terms. They argue that the disease can strike anyone, and that the resultant slowdown of economic activity has led to widespread job losses and economic hardships across the range of income and occupational distributions.

However, evidence from several parts of the world indicates that these assumptions are incorrect. The incidence of the disease is not class-neutral: poorer and economically vulnerable populations are more likely to contract the virus, as well as to die from it. Nor are the pandemic’s economic impacts neutral with respect to social identity. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have found that racial and ethnic minority groups are at greater risk of getting sick, having more severe complications, and dying. The groups that are more vulnerable to the disease are also unequally affected by the unintended economic, social, and secondary health consequences

of COVID-19 mitigation strategies, such as lockdowns and social distancing.

This is true globally, and the story in India is no different. Since data on the incidence of the disease in India is not available by social group categories of caste and religion, it is impossible to assess which groups are at greater risk of mortality. But there is evidence that the economic impact of the pandemic has not been uniform across social groups.

A key element of the early pandemic control strategy adopted by most countries was to shut down economic and social activity. India’s nationwide lockdown started in the last week of March 2020, with only a few hours’ warning—resulting in a last-minute scramble to stock up on provisions. Even though the initial announcement was for 21 days, there was massive uncertainty about how long it would actually last. For the first month, the lockdown was among the strictest in the world, with a near-complete suspension of all economic activity.

The lockdown proceeded through four phases over 68 days. On June 1, 2020, the process of “unlocking” the economy started, and restrictions were gradually removed from various economic and social activities, based on the severity of COVID-19 incidence in different areas. In February 2021, at the time of writing, scheduled international flights remain suspended, university teaching is online, and office work is being conducted with a mix of online and on-site methods; but factories and most service establishments are open, apart from gyms, pools, and cinemas in some places.

My ongoing work with fellow economist Rajesh Ramachandran, using national-level large data sets, shows that the lockdown affected the marginalized, stigmatized group of lower-ranked castes

---

ASHWINI DESHPANDE is a professor of economics and the founding director of the Centre for Economic Data and Analysis at Ashoka University, India. Parts of this essay are adapted from an online piece by the author published in December 2020 by IAI News.

much more severely than the higher-ranked castes. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has not proved to be a great leveler in India; in fact, it has worsened labor market inequality among caste groups.

In India, the finding that the economic impact of the pandemic-induced slowdown has been harsher for those at the bottom of the caste ladder is largely met with incredulity. For international readers who associate India strongly with the caste system, this disbelief might appear surprising. But large segments of the Indian population either are genuinely convinced that caste inequalities are not systemic or structural, or are persuaded by the Hindu right's denunciations of any discussion of caste inequality as an attempt to break a mythical or presumed Hindu unity. There is widespread support for the idea that contemporary gaps are either sporadic or just a hangover from the past, and certainly should not be discussed and analyzed candidly.

This essay juxtaposes the findings of the caste-differentiated economic impacts of the pandemic with the context of the longer-term trend of caste inequality in India. By summarizing the new reality and the contemporary grammar of the caste system, I hope to show why the pandemic has deepened the preexisting fault lines of the caste system.

## AN UNWRITTEN GRAMMAR

Some readers might imagine that Indian castes are racial divisions, since American journalist Isabel Wilkerson has described US structural or systemic racism as a caste system in her bestselling 2020 book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. That would be incorrect. This is not a mere semantic quibble; an accurate understanding of caste divisions is essential to working out appropriate policy responses.

Despite the caste system's appearance of being fixed in a timeless state, there have been important changes over the centuries in the manifestation and grammar of caste. In its contemporary version, India's caste system consists of several thousand groups, known as *jatis*. This is not a binary division between "high" and "low" groups, though if one were to take a binary view of the caste system (as important anti-caste thinkers and social reformers such as Jotiba Phule advocated in the nineteenth century for the sake of subaltern unity), the latter groups would collectively form the majority,

not a minority of low castes similar to Wilkerson's characterization of the American situation.

The precise number of *jatis* is not known with certainty. Although the system is clearly hierarchical, and there is no ambiguity about higher-ranking *jatis*, the precise contours of the hierarchy vary from state to state: *jati* is a regional category, not a national one. Typically the two ends of the spectrum are clearly identified; there is a definite local understanding of which *jatis* are dominant and which are subordinate. But a *jati* that is dominant in one state or region might not be dominant in another one. For example, *Jats* are powerful in the northern state of Haryana, but less so in neighboring Rajasthan.

A key element that defines the status hierarchy is the notion of ritual purity. In the scale of ritual purity, Brahmins rank the highest everywhere in the country. Correspondingly, *jatis* whose traditional occupations are considered ritually impure are the lowest in the hierarchy everywhere.

The latter occupations have included scavenging, dealing with dead animals (butchery) or dead bodies (cremation), leather work, and even midwifery. Before India attained independence in 1947, members of these *jatis* were considered "untouchable"—touching them, seeing them, or even seeing their shadows was considered polluting for everyone else. Thus, these

groups were ostracized and subjected to severe social restrictions. They were forced to live in separate hamlets outside villages, and were barred from upper-caste Hindu homes, temples, and sources of water. They were known as the *atishudras*, the lowest of the low.

Untouchability has been abolished since India won independence from British rule in 1947 and breaches of the ban are punishable by law. The Indian Constitution guarantees equality to all citizens regardless of caste, religion, gender, or any other social identity. Nonetheless, members of the formerly untouchable castes are still among the most marginalized and stigmatized groups in the country, even though they are entitled to preferential affirmative action in the form of quotas in government-funded higher educational institutions and public sector jobs.

The affirmative action program, known as the "reservations" system, has allowed members of the stigmatized caste groups to enter positions to which it would have been difficult for them to gain

---

*Formerly untouchable castes are still among the most marginalized and stigmatized groups.*

---

access otherwise. There are also electoral quotas at all levels of government: the rise of politicians and political parties belonging to the lower-ranked caste groups has been termed “India’s silent revolution.”

Since these castes are listed in a government schedule, they are lumped together in the omnibus administrative category of Scheduled Castes (SCs). Whereas SC is an administrative term for the purpose of affirmative action, members of this group have claimed “Dalit” as a term of identity and pride. (The word comes from Sanskrit and means “the oppressed.”) There is an analogous category of Scheduled Tribes (ST), who are also referred to as Adivasi (original inhabitants).

A third category of castes and communities identified for affirmative action is Other Backward Classes (OBCs), a large and heterogeneous collection of groups that rank low in the socioeconomic hierarchy but were not considered untouchables. Despite the fact that landowning and locally dominant groups have managed to find their way into this legal category (possibly to benefit from reservations or quotas), indicators show that the average standard of living for OBCs is still below that of the Hindu upper castes.

For quantitative assessment of caste inequality, data are available for the broad categories of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, OBCs, and Others (everyone else). Any three- or four-way comparison understates the actual extent of caste inequality, since we cannot isolate, in the data, outcomes of jatis at the top end of the “Others” spectrum. But when we focus only on Hindus, “Others” makes a good proxy for the upper (ranked) castes. The broad hierarchy of the caste system thus consists of Hindu upper castes at the top, OBCs in the middle, and Scheduled Castes, or Dalits (along with STs or Adivasis), at the bottom.

A disclaimer before proceeding further: the use of the terms “lower (ranked)” and “upper (ranked)” is intended to reflect the hierarchy found in the reality on the ground. It is not, and should not be read as, an endorsement of caste hierarchy.

## EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT GAPS

In research examining the evolution of caste inequality in India, Rajesh Ramachandran and I have found that caste gaps in basic educational attainment (up to the secondary school level) have narrowed over the past few decades. However, in higher education—which is what matters for

getting good jobs—the gaps have increased over time. Younger cohorts of OBCs have moved closer to the upper castes, but the gaps between Dalits and Adivasis on the one hand and Hindu upper castes on the other have widened in the pursuit of higher education and white-collar jobs.

Adult life course disparities among caste groups seem to originate in early childhood malnourishment, which perpetuates a vicious cycle of disadvantage for Dalits and Adivasis. Due to caste gaps in nutrition, children from the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes are 40 percent more likely to be stunted than children belonging to the upper castes. This has long-term implications for educational and cognitive development.

COVID-19 struck in this context, and appears to have deepened the existing caste fault lines. We have found that the labor market or employment effects of the pandemic have been much more severe for the more disadvantaged groups—the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and the OBCs. Their early job losses—during the first month of the strictest lockdown—were three and two times higher, respectively, than Hindu upper castes experienced.

Our results indicate that the heavier job losses among Scheduled Castes are accounted for by two main factors: their higher representation in precarious, vulnerable daily wage jobs, and their lower levels of education. Meanwhile, caste differences are minimal (though not completely eliminated) among the better-off workers—those who have more than 12 years of schooling and are not engaged in daily wage jobs.

The current pandemic is likely to exacerbate educational differences. Data from another nationally representative survey, the India Human Development Survey for 2011–12, show that 51 percent of Scheduled Caste households include adult women who have zero years of education—who are illiterate—and 27 percent include illiterate adult male members. In upper caste households, the corresponding proportions are 24 percent for women and 11 percent for men. Faced with current school closures, Scheduled Caste parents are less equipped than their upper caste counterparts to assist their children with any form of home learning.

There are other crucial differences. Only 49 percent of Scheduled Caste households have savings in a bank account; 62 percent of upper caste households do. Twenty percent of upper caste households have access to the Internet, compared with just 10 percent of Scheduled Caste households. These differences in access to information

technology are critical in shaping access to online education during the pandemic: almost a year since the first lockdown, most schools are still closed.

The economic distress resulting from India's pandemic response is intensifying preexisting structures of disadvantage based on social identity. Investments in education and health that close gaps between social groups will be essential to build resilience in the face of future shocks.

## THE PERSISTENCE OF CASTE

These findings might appear surprising to anyone under the impression that caste has either vanished or declined in importance in a modernizing, urbanizing, and rapidly globalizing India. To understand the persistence of caste, and of such conflicting views about its reality, it will be useful to briefly delve into an important pre-independence debate that continues to shape beliefs about the caste system to this day.

The debate took place in 1936 between Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Bhimrao Ambedkar, two titans of the Indian nationalist movement and leaders of the Congress Party.

Gandhi wrote, "The law of *varna* [caste] teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling." Ambedkar prepared a sharp rejoinder in a speech titled "Annihilation of Caste." It went undelivered but became a definitive statement (after the text was published that year) on why the caste system could not be reformed but had to be destroyed altogether.

Ambedkar asked, "Must a man follow his ancestral calling even if it does not suit his capacities, even when it has ceased to be profitable? Must a man live by his ancestral calling even if he finds it immoral?" He argued that this was "not only an impossible and impractical ideal, but it is also a morally indefensible ideal." According to Ambedkar, the reality of the caste system was a "system based on the principle of each according to his birth," rather than a division of labor based on abilities or merit. Those born into the untouchable castes were condemned to a life of stigma, discrimination, oppression, and humiliation.

The belief that the caste system is a benign division of labor (Gandhi's view) instead of a malignant division of laborers (Ambedkar's view) continues to be held widely in India. The Ambedkarite view is just as strongly held.

After Indian independence and the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, a constituent assembly was established to debate the new constitution, which was finally adopted on January 26, 1950. Ambedkar served as the chairman of the drafting committee and went on to become India's first law minister. It was his understanding of the caste system that shaped the constitutional provisions for reservations, which he argued were necessary to resolve the central contradiction of newly independent India: the ideal of formal equality was enshrined in the constitution but superimposed over substantive inequality on the ground.

Although the practice of untouchability has been illegal in India since 1947, and the Constitution guarantees all citizens equal status regardless of caste or religion, the reality is that caste simply has a new grammar. Since 1991, India has seen a rapid increase in new opportunities thanks to globalization and liberalization, but upper castes have benefited disproportionately. The lower-ranked castes are often deficient in the basic skills needed to take advantage of these new opportunities. Access to higher education has expanded, but labor market discrimination has blocked occupational mobility. Caste continues to mediate economic outcomes and assert its presence in society and politics.

A wealth of evidence shows the long-standing disparities among broad caste groups in material outcomes such as education, occupation, consumption expenditure, wages, and asset ownership. But many Indians assume that these disparities are either largely rural or a mere residue of discrimination in the past. There is a strong and pervasive belief that caste discrimination is absent from the urban formal sector in contemporary India.

The debate over the degree of the caste system's persistence still centers on the relationship between caste and occupation, since the system traditionally assigned specific occupations to castes. So the debate is really about change: the degree of association, or dissociation, between caste and occupation ought to be a measure of how much the system has changed.

Which castes work in the traditional caste-based occupations now? Are modern occupations (those that do not have a caste counterpart) allocated purely based on ability? In other words, now that the range of occupations in contemporary India far exceeds the occupations assigned by the

---

*Gaps have widened in the pursuit of higher education and white-collar jobs.*

---

caste system, how thoroughly has the deck been reshuffled? To what extent does the overlap between caste and status or privilege persist?

The spectrum of modern occupations is not caste-based: caste is not legally recognized, except for the purpose of compensatory affirmative action. All Indians are free to choose their occupation of choice. Yet the higher-ranked castes are concentrated at the top of the occupational spectrum, and the lower-ranked castes are concentrated at the bottom. It turns out that traditional occupations have not broken caste boundaries.

People's beliefs about how earnings or status correspond to caste are not necessarily informed by evidence. In the 1936 debate, Gandhi said, "I do not find a great disparity between earnings of different tradesmen, including Brahmins." But the empirical record reveals a significant earnings gap that has widened over time among the top half of wage earners.

Labor markets in the formal sector, which predominantly comprises the modern occupations, display features that are not meritocratic. Firms often have hereditary "reservations"—being born into a business family guarantees access to the top spots. Such hiring practices reveal the pernicious role of networks in informal and personalized recruitment: whom you know is often more important than what you know.

Employers find this convenient and efficient, since it minimizes recruitment outlays, ensures commitment and loyalty, and lowers transaction costs associated with disciplining workers and handling disputes and grievances. But it leads to a narrow distribution of senior positions: top jobs are not representative of the underlying composition of society. (The official affirmative action system of reservations does not extend to the private sector.)

Employers, including multinational corporations, like to use the language of merit. But managers are seemingly blind to the unequal playing field that produces what they take to be meritocratic outcomes. Their commitment to meritocracy tends to be based on the conviction that merit is fairly distributed by caste and region. This results in a process whereby the qualities of individuals are supplanted by stereotypes that make it harder for qualified job applicants to gain recognition for their skills and accomplishments.

## THE MIRAGE OF EQUALITY

Many Indians proclaim that they are casteless—but is it equally easy for different caste groups to shed their caste identities?

The truth is that it is far easier for those born into privilege to shed caste than it is for those who continue to bear the stigma of untouchability. As Ambedkar wrote, "[A]lmost every Brahmin has transgressed the rule of caste. The number of Brahmins who sell shoes is far greater than those who practice priesthood."

Dalits nonetheless have tried to organize to transcend their low status. Initiatives to promote Dalit entrepreneurship have included the formation of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. The objective is to develop entrepreneurial activities as a means of circumventing labor market discrimination. Fostering "Dalit capitalism" will help Dalits be "job givers, not job seekers"—and eventually lift enough Dalits to the top of the social pyramid to end the caste system.

The implicit assumptions in this argument are that self-employment activity would be concentrated at the top end, and that discriminatory tendencies would be absent from other markets critical to the success of entrepreneurship. Both of these assumptions are doubtful. There is now an emerging group of Dalit millionaires who could be "job givers," but most Dalit businesses occupy a very different place in the production chain: they are bottom-of-the-ladder, low-productivity survival activities, like roadside kiosks or tiny repair units.

After independence, the first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, announced that India had a "tryst with destiny" and was poised to become a force to be reckoned with on the world stage. Underlying this optimism was the hope that the nation would unshackle itself from antiquated ideas. As the economy modernized, a casteless society would emerge. Caste-based affirmative action was seen as a temporary step to achieve a level playing field.

Yet caste has turned out to be fiercely tenacious, reinventing itself over time. This has made the extension of remedial policies necessary. Despite affirmative action's moderately amelioratory effects, the annihilation of caste has come to seem a herculean task, partly because of the widespread belief that the caste system has ended or is merely a benign cultural artefact. In fact, it continues to be hierarchical, oppressive, and discriminatory. It has morphed to suit the contemporary milieu.

Since the landslide election victory of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party brought Prime Minister Narendra Modi to power in 2014, the current political dispensation strongly advocates the



unity of all Hindus—against other religions, especially India’s Muslim minority—and actively denies caste divisions. A typical claim is that Dalits, being part of the Hindu majority, are insiders—even though historically they were considered too low for and hence unfit to be assigned a *varna* (caste), and were the *avarnas* (with no caste), in contrast to the upper-caste *savarnas* (those with caste).

Caste-based reservations and other policies regarding Dalits have continued under Modi, though his government started a quota for “economically weaker sections” that was ostensibly not caste-based. But even if official policies have not shifted very drastically, there have been major changes on the ground.

### A MARCH FOR INDEPENDENCE

August 15, 2016, marked India’s 70th Independence Day. As Modi unfurled the national flag from the ramparts of the Red Fort and delivered his annual address to the nation, an unprecedented gathering was underway in Una, a city in the western state of Gujarat, about 1,300 kilometers from the capital. Thousands of Dalits, who had set out from Ahmedabad on a *Dalit Asmita Yatra* (Dalit Pride March) ten days earlier, congregated in Una to declare their own independence—not from the British Empire, but from the stigmatizing and dehumanizing occupations traditionally assigned to them.

These occupations branded them the lowest of the low within the caste system, stamping them with a stigma that has not weakened with India’s post-independence growth and development. The marchers pledged never again to collect human excrement, dispose of cattle carcasses, or perform other humiliating caste-assigned tasks.

It is noteworthy that this gathering took place in Gujarat, the poster child for the presumed ability of economic growth to lift all groups out of poverty and put everyone on the path of socioeconomic advancement, regardless of social identity. (Modi cultivated this reputation while serving as the state’s chief minister for over a decade.) The Dalit gathering demonstrated that something was amiss with this development-lifts-all rhetoric.

Una had been chosen as the site of this momentous event in response to a grim incident in the city the previous month. A “cow vigilante” (*gau rakshak*) group had chained seven Dalit youths to a van and publicly thrashed them for skinning a dead cow. This atrocity, which was filmed and proudly circulated by the perpetrators, went viral via online sharing on various social media platforms. It led to a wave of anger and protest, finally culminating in the historic march.

In sharp contrast to the official event in New Delhi, this Independence Day celebration was bursting at the seams with the voluntary participation of the marginalized. They, too, saluted the national flag, but it was unfurled by Radhika Vemula—the mother of Rohit Vemula, a Dalit research scholar at the University of Hyderabad who had committed suicide in January that year. He and others had been subjected to harsh disciplinary action for their activities as members of the Ambedkar Students’ Association.

The past few years have seen growing majoritarianism in India, accompanied by a sharpening of caste cleavages. The emboldened cow vigilantes have targeted traditional Dalit livelihoods, particularly the meat and leather industries. There have also been vicious attacks on Dalit–upper caste mixed couples.

Meanwhile, economic gaps and wage and occupational discrimination continue undiminished and appear to be getting worse due to the pandemic, deepening caste inequality. There are anecdotal accounts of a surge in discrimination and the stigmatizing practice of untouchability under the pretext of social distancing.

In a little less than a year, the scientific community moved heaven and earth to develop vaccines to halt the spread of the pandemic. But there are no one-shot cures for inequality and discrimination. Unless a strong anti-caste, egalitarian social movement emerges, caste will continue to embroil individual lives, just as divisions based on differences such as race continue to define the socioeconomic realities of the advanced industrialized nations of the West. ■

---

*Caste has turned out to be fiercely  
tenacious, reinventing itself  
over time.*

---

“After more than a decade of high-profile reforms, there is still no visible change in learning outcomes, and enrollment numbers remain stagnant.”

## Pakistan’s Education Reform Test

FAISAL BARI

Some 20 million 5–16 year olds in Pakistan are out of school, even though the Pakistani Constitution promises to provide “free and compulsory” education to this age group. The majority of those who are in school receive poor-quality education. The education system is deeply divided and fragmented. Access to quality schooling is only available to those who have resources to pay for it; the public system remains severely underfunded. Despite sustained reform efforts over the past two decades, progress (if any) has been slow on the key issues of increasing access, improving quality, and providing equality of opportunity.

This lack of progress should have provoked the government into doing some deeper thinking about needed changes. Instead, Prime Minister Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which came to power in 2018, has chosen to put its political capital behind the idea of introducing a Single National Curriculum (SNC). Critics argue that the SNC will not address access, quality, or equity, as the government asserts, but could lead to restrictions on school and parental choice. Questions have also been raised about the intentions behind the SNC project regarding provincial autonomy, linguistic diversity, and national identity.

In any case, an examination of recent developments indicates why this curriculum revision is unlikely to fix any of the major problems in Pakistan’s education sector, which is in for a bumpy ride over the next few years.

### ACCESS DENIED

School access is perhaps the most urgent shortcoming to address. There has been significant

progress in primary-level (grades 1 through 5) enrollment, and the net enrollment rate (the percentage of this age-specific cohort in school) has risen to about 80 percent. But the progress has slowed over the past decade or so, and it has been uneven across provinces and the rural–urban divide, with rural areas of Sindh and Balochistan provinces trailing far behind.

Progress at the middle (grades 6–8) and secondary (grades 9–12) levels has been much slower. Large numbers of children continue to drop out as they complete primary schooling and transition to the middle and higher levels. It is estimated that of every 100 children who enroll in the first grade, fewer than 10 reach the tertiary level of education.

In recent decades, Pakistani education policies have prioritized getting more children into schools. All provincial governments have required that there be one primary school in every five-kilometer radius, and one middle/high school for every 4–5 primary schools. Over time, an expansion of school facilities has proceeded more or less in line with the policy, though some areas have remained underserved.

Private provision of primary schooling has expanded greatly as well over the past three decades. This is especially true in bigger cities and in urban and peri-urban areas. Even large villages (with sufficient market size) now have multiple private schools.

But the expansion of primary schooling, impressive as may be, has not been enough. Roughly one in five children in the primary cohort remains out of school (with significant variations, especially by geography). But this has been by default as well as by design.

Distance to school is a strong predictor for enrollment as well as dropout rates. Five kilometers, for small children, is still far. This is even more of an issue for girls in Pakistan, given safety

---

FAISAL BARI is an associate professor of economics and education and interim dean of the School of Education at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

concerns. Transport is expensive and is not provided by the state (there are no school buses), so distance to school becomes even more of an impediment.

Private schools usually conglomerate where there is more population density. This creates difficulties for children living in the periphery. Balochistan has a very small population spread over a large area, which has made school provision even more difficult. Similarly, settlements in rural Sindh (known as *goths*) tend to be very small (15–20 families). Providing a school in every goth and keeping it functional across all grades, when there might be just one or two children in a given grade, is a challenge.

The required ratio of one middle/high school for every 4–5 primary schools means that distance to school increases substantially as children transition from primary to middle school, leading many to drop out. Punjab, the largest province, has some 32,000 government primary schools and only about 6,000 high schools. These high schools were not designed to enroll every child graduating from all of the surrounding primary schools. A certain dropout rate was expected and built into the design.

Most public middle and high schools are segregated by gender. Even today, fewer high schools are available for girls than for boys. When a girl enters middle school, her school changes along with her friends and teachers. She has to travel a much longer distance, yet there is no public provision of safe transportation, so parents must pay for expensive private alternatives. She is often going through puberty as well (children enroll in schools a year or two later than usual in Pakistan's rural areas), intensifying safety concerns and often prompting early marriages. Higher dropout rates are to be expected.

The state has not been able to address these issues adequately. It must either bring the school closer to the children or bring the children closer to the school. In the first case, more schools are needed; in the second, safe and secure (and possibly free or subsidized) transport. So far, neither has been delivered. Middle and high school expansion has not accelerated yet, and there are no public transport systems for students in any of the provinces.

Upgrading of selected primary schools to the middle-school level and of middle schools to the high-school level continues, but this is a very slow process. Most provinces have imposed

moratoriums on new school construction for the past couple of decades. The provincial governments want to form private–public partnerships to build new public schools, but these partnerships have not yet materialized.

Middle and high school education is more expensive to provide, requiring subject specialists, libraries, and laboratories for effective teaching. Most private schools, especially the low-fee schools that form the bulk of the private education sector, start as primary schools; over time, the successful ones add middle and high school sections. The private school pyramid is, therefore, no different from the public one: most private schools are primary schools. Private sector expansion has not addressed the issue of school availability at the secondary level.

Article 25A, guaranteeing the right to education, was added to the Pakistani Constitution in April 2010 as part of the 18th Amendment. Previously, there was no right to education as such, though educational provision at the primary and secondary level was held to be a responsibility of the state, and some provinces had laws mandating universal primary schooling.

Article 25A was inserted in the basic rights section of the Constitution. It says: “The State shall provide free and compulsory education to all children of the age of five to sixteen years in such manner as may be determined by law.” In other words, it requires that every child have at least 10 years of education. But even though the article has been in force for more than a decade, policies have not been changed to implement this mandate.

## QUALITY CONCERNS

System-wide assessments clearly show that the quality of education provided to almost all Pakistani students, barring a very small percentage in high-fee private schools and elite public schools, is very poor. Large samples of children across the country have been tested for the Annual Status of Education Reports over the past decade and a half. The results indicate that student learning outcomes are dismal and have hardly budged over this period.

Children in the fifth grade are generally one to two grades behind in their learning. Many of them have problems with basic skills of reading, writing, arithmetic, and comprehension. The World Bank's estimates of quality-adjusted years of schooling discount almost half the time spent in Pakistani schools as wasted.

The poor quality of education is a contributing factor in the country's high dropout rates. Parents who send their children to low-fee private schools or most public schools do not see any discernible returns to education for children who might have completed as many as 10 years in school. Their incentive to keep a child in school, as opposed to marrying the girls early and sending the boys to learn a vocational skill, diminishes.

The most recent results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), marking the first time Pakistan has participated in this assessment, show that Pakistani fourth-graders are among the weakest in mathematics and science learning in the world, placing second to last of 58 countries. Just 27 percent of Pakistani children reach the low international benchmark in mathematics (basic knowledge of addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication). The results for science are even worse. The TIMSS results did not come as a surprise to educators in Pakistan.

Most children in Pakistani schools take the matriculation examination (in grades 9 and 10) and intermediate examination (grades 11 and 12) at the end of their school years. These are large-scale, high-stakes public exams. The results determine, to a large degree, whether a child will obtain admission to a college or university—and if so, of what quality. But all of these “Board” exams mostly repeat questions that have been asked in the prescribed textbooks. This encourages memorization, rote learning, and teaching to tests. The exams do not test for intelligence or even comprehension of material. There is quite a bit of evidence that even after 10 years of education, many students are not able to show basic mastery of Urdu and English, the two languages that are taught throughout their schooling.

The high-stakes nature of the examinations brings about other distortions as well. Failure rates are quite high, and many children just drop out instead of retaking the exams. Fear of failure, especially in English, is another cause for leaving school: many students decide to drop out earlier and avoid the exams altogether.

The educational system tends to be rigid and inflexible when it comes to allowing opportunities for reentry if a child drops out of school. In a survey that I conducted with colleagues three years ago, we asked more than 5,000 young people from

across Pakistan if they wanted more schooling. Over 60 percent said that they would have liked to go back and complete their education, but they felt that there were no opportunities to do so.

The quality of teaching obviously has a significant impact on the learning outcomes of children. Teacher selection, recruitment, posting, compensation, and career paths all contribute to quality problems. In Pakistan, teaching is not the profession of choice for most people who end up as teachers.

Economic returns to teaching, for both the private and public sector, are relatively low in Pakistan. Public sector salaries for teachers have increased over the past two decades, but they are still low. The public sector does offer job security, which makes these jobs attractive. There are almost 800,000 public sector teachers in Pakistan and nearly the same number of private sector teachers.

Public sector teachers are hired on the basis of academic performance rather than teaching ability. Once teachers are hired, it is almost impossible to fire them. Nor does the public sector offer individual incentives. This makes it difficult to manage teacher motivation, which tends to be low.

All Pakistani provinces have raised educational requirements for incoming teachers over the past two

decades: applicants are now required to be college or university graduates with at least a bachelor's degree. Although there is no indication that this has improved learning outcomes, it has had some unintended consequences. It has increased the social distance between teachers and students in the public sector, and has also made the recruitment base for teachers more urban. Both of these factors can affect learning outcomes.

The private sector market for teachers is even more complex. The majority of private schools in Pakistan are categorized as low- or medium-fee. There are no mandated minimum standards or educational requirements for teachers. Most teacher salaries in these schools are below the minimum wage. Schools mostly recruit young women from the neighborhood. Many exit the labor market when they get married or find other, more lucrative jobs. Given the high turnover and low salaries, employers do not invest in teacher training, and teachers generally do not have resources to invest in their own training.

---

*Pakistan's public education sector  
continues to be severely  
underfunded.*

---

## ELUSIVE EQUITY

Imagine two children: a girl born in a poor household in rural Balochistan, and a boy born in a wealthy household in Karachi. Will their educational opportunities be similar?

Balochistan's high infant mortality rates suggest that the girl might not survive that long. If she does, it is unlikely that she will be enrolled in a school. And the chances of her getting 10 years of education are almost negligible. If she happens to have any physical, learning, or cognitive challenges, as is the case for about 10 percent of any child population, her chances of survival and education fall even lower.

Meanwhile, the boy from Karachi will have access to high-fee private schools, culminating in A-level examinations under the British system. He might even go abroad for his undergraduate education. The state promises "free and compulsory" education to both of these children, but their educational experiences will be so different that they might as well be "denizens of alien worlds," as one commentator put it.

The Pakistani education system is divided along many dimensions. An estimated 60 percent of enrolled children attend government schools. Of the 40 percent who attend private schools, the majority go to low- or middle-fee for-profit schools. A small percentage, possibly 2–3 percent, go to high-fee elite private schools; another 2–3 percent attend madrassas (religious schools); and there is a small segment of not-for-profit schools, accounting for another 1 percent or so of the total, run by philanthropic organizations.

Schools are divided by the type of examination for which they prepare students. Madrassas have their own system, high-fee schools are geared to the British O- and A-level system, and low-fee and government schools prepare students for the local matriculation examinations.

Another difference is language. Private schools tend to use English as the medium of instruction. Government schools, by and large, use Urdu. Depending on which examinations they are preparing students for, each school type tends to use different curricula and textbooks as well.

The state decided to open up the education sector to private providers in the early 1980s. The next three decades brought massive expansion in the private provision of education in Pakistan.

Private schools have contributed to increasing enrollment numbers, while public provision has stagnated by design and default. Private schools

have also introduced a kind of product differentiation in the market by catering to parental choices about cost, language of instruction, curriculum and books, examination systems, and even ideological underpinnings. These differentiations have worsened inequalities in the system and have created many different types of educational experiences for children. These experiences, at the extreme, lack a common core and any guarantees of a minimum standard.

The poor quality of education generally provided by government schools has led to the exit of all children whose families can afford private alternatives. This exit of lower-middle, middle, and higher income groups has weakened the voice for reform and quality provision in public schools.

Access to education largely depends on family income and wealth, geography (by province and the rural–urban divide), gender, and, in some cases, the ideological outlook of the parents. The state guarantee of "free and compulsory" schooling does not guarantee either access to or a minimum standard of education. It is difficult to square notions of equality of opportunity with the inequities that are built into Pakistan's current educational landscape.

## THE REFORM PARADOX

Until almost a decade ago, most of the debate on education policy and reforms in Pakistan centered on expanding access. Quality or equity issues were thought to be secondary to ensuring access. The most important concern was to get all children in schools. Once that happened, there would be plenty of time to turn to questions of quality and equity.

Poor learning outcomes, especially in public sector schools, became the focus of attention only over the past fifteen years or so. Evidence from studies funded by international donors, especially the World Bank and the UK Department for International Development (DFID), now the Foreign, Commonwealth, Development Office, as well as from various learning assessments highlighted the scale of the problem. Some of the larger grant and loan programs from the World Bank, the DFID, and the US Agency for International Development sought to address it.

Policymakers decided that the best way to improve learning outcomes was to focus on the provision of school infrastructure. In their initial years, these programs focused almost exclusively

on providing boundary walls, classrooms, functional bathrooms, access to electricity and running water, and textbooks and other supplies.

The traditional designs for a government primary school consisted of a two-room building, yet each of them was supposed to house at least five classes (grades 1–5). These designs were eventually updated, but by that time most of the provincial governments had stopped building new schools at the primary level. So construction of more classrooms in existing schools became a large part of even the newer programs focused on improving quality of education. Similarly, policymakers rightly thought that functional bathrooms, especially in schools for girls, would be important to ensuring girls' attendance.

The bulk of resources made available to education reform efforts went to the provision of such infrastructure. Infrastructure quality and functionality, as documented by government as well as independent sources, has improved notably over this period.

Two other areas also drew attention. A typical government primary school had only two teachers, and multigrade teaching was the norm. Policymakers recognized that teacher availability, recruitment and selection, career path management, remuneration and benefits, training, professional development, and support all required major reforms. Such reforms have been successfully implemented across all provinces of the country.

Teacher recruitment, which used to be fraught with issues of nepotism and corruption, has been made merit-based through independent testing and reliance on more objective measures for ranking and selection. Minimum entry requirements have been raised: a bachelor's degree is now required as a minimum qualification to even apply for a teaching position, and most successful applicants tend to have a master's degree.

Public sector teacher salaries have been increased significantly. Career paths have been more clearly delineated. Provincial governments have introduced professional development and support programs. Teacher numbers have gone up, across all provinces. But even in the best-funded province, Punjab, there are still only about 3.5 teachers for every primary school.

Finally, policymakers believed that better governance could deliver improvements in learning

outcomes. Some provinces introduced a new approach formally, while others did not, but they all focused reform efforts on improving governance in the education system. All of them introduced technology-based monitoring of school functioning, teacher attendance, and time spent on various tasks. All provinces also introduced some level of incentives for encouraging better performance by teachers and principals, as well as administrative officials in the higher bureaucratic tiers.

The private sector education providers were left by and large alone over this period. Some requirements for school registration were introduced, but otherwise none of the reform efforts were geared toward regulating the private sector.

The key question here is: Where has all the reform gone? After more than a decade of high-profile reforms, there is still no visible change in learning outcomes, and enrollment numbers remain stagnant. In some cases, lapses in implementation of reforms have hampered their impact. But this does not seem to be the case

with many of the reforms listed above. Changes in teacher recruitment and selection, credentials, and compensation, in monitoring systems and the introduction of incentive mechanisms, and in infrastructure provision

are all well documented.

Yet we still do not see major changes in educational outcomes. A colleague has described the Pakistani education sector as the “graveyard of reforms.” Almost every reform one can think of has been tried, but outcomes have not moved in line with expectations. This remains one of the sector's more puzzling and important policy questions.

Pakistan spends around 2 percent of gross domestic product on public sector education; the minimum recommended by United Nations agencies is around 4 percent. Pakistan's education expenditure, as a share of GDP, is lower than what most of its neighbors in the region spend. Although almost every incoming government over the past two or three decades has promised to double educational expenditures, none has succeeded. The public education sector continues to be severely underfunded. There are not enough schools, and the existing schools need more infrastructure, more human and material resources,

---



---

*Policies have not changed to implement the constitutional guarantee of basic education.*

---



---

and higher teacher salaries. Almost every aspect of public education requires more resources.

## CURRICULUM CLASH

The PTI, led by Imran Khan, won control of the federal government and three out of four provinces in 2018. The party came to power saying that human development was one of its top priorities for reform and investment—and within that area, education would be its main focus. The PTI manifesto promised to increase funding for education and to ensure implementation of Article 25A's guarantee of quality education for all children in Pakistan.

There has been little or no progress on the implementation of 25A over the decade since the passage of the 18th Amendment. And there has been no progress over the first two and a half years of the PTI government.

But in early 2019, the federal education ministry announced plans for a Single National Curriculum, which it asserted would bring to fruition the promises that the PTI had made in its election manifesto. It argued that a single curriculum for all schools, including madrassas, would address the inequities in the education system, improve the quality of education, and provide equality of opportunity for all children. In its simplest terms, the vision is that the girl in rural Balochistan will be studying the same curriculum as the rich boy in Karachi.

Thus far, the government has developed an SNC for primary grades. Two provinces, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have announced that they will implement the curriculum starting with the next academic year, beginning in August 2021. Sindh and Balochistan have not announced any plans as yet. (School curricula are treated as a provincial mandate, requiring approval from the provincial government.)

Yet much still remains unclear about the SNC. Does it mean a single curriculum, or minimum standards for a curriculum? A single selection of textbooks? A single language of instruction? A single set of examinations? It remains an open question whether even this level of uniformity, if actually imposed, will reduce inequities that might be emanating from household differences—whether the range of educational outcomes will narrow and equality of opportunity will be

provided for all. But concerns have been raised about other possible objectives behind the government's curriculum initiative.

The SNC does not address the needs of the 20 million 5–16 year olds who are out of school. It does not address issues of access. Even if it requires low-quality schools to focus on improving the quality of provision, it does not promise any resources for implementing that change. Critics have asked why the SNC does not call for any attempt to improve mathematics and science curricula to discourage rote learning and memorization and encourage more inquiry-based learning.

The only way SNC can succeed in narrowing outcomes is by imposing uniformity through curriculum, language, books, and examinations. But that still might not be enough, if household income differences prevent the playing field from being leveled for all. So if the SNC is not really designed to improve the quality of education delivered by government and low-fee private schools, will it create equality by pulling down higher-quality schools?

The SNC is an attempt by the federal government to take back some of the authority over primary and secondary education that was devolved to the provinces by the 18th Amendment. Federal government ministers

have said repeatedly that devolution went too far and authority over standards and curricula should have been kept at the federal level. But instead of proposing another constitutional amendment, the PTI government is using the SNC as a vehicle for this agenda, under the rhetorical cover of reducing educational inequities.

The SNC has also been criticized by many education experts as an attempt to impose a certain identity on Pakistani children, in response to conservatives' fears that provinces designing their own curricula might lead to national identity becoming more fragmented along linguistic, regional, and cultural lines. This debate involves the content of subjects like history, religion, civics, and literature, rather than mathematics or science.

Many figures in the broader conservative coalition have warned that teaching diverse readings of history and multiple languages, varying curricula for religious education, and providing students with exposure to regional cultures weakens

---



---

*Critics say the state is using its curriculum initiative to reshape national identity.*

---



---

national identity. A former Supreme Court chief justice said his “dream” was “one curriculum, one book, one examination, one uniform, one school” for every child.

Critics believe that the SNC is their response. Since model textbooks are being printed in Urdu, many critics have warned that one objective is to impose Urdu as the main language of instruction, at the expense of regional and local languages. Some critics have also argued that by increasing the content of religious instruction (specifically on Islam) in the curriculum, not only is the state furthering the national identity project with a specific identity in mind, but it is also trying to appease the religious right.

Federal Education Minister Shafqat Mahmood and other advisers have said that they are trying to convince madrassas to adopt the SNC and thereby bring them into the mainstream. Their stated aims are to enable madrassa students to transition to mainstream education; to prepare them for a wider range of employment opportunities; to make madrassas more transparent; and to introduce madrassa students to diverse views in order to prevent the inculcation of fundamentalist or extremist mindsets. But critics have argued that instead of mainstreaming madrassas, the SNC is an attempt to make the mainstream schools more like madrassas.

## DREAM AND REALITY

Although Article 25A, with its guarantee of “free and compulsory” education for all children up to age 16, was added to Pakistan’s Constitution more than 10 years ago, huge problems remain unaddressed. Chief among them are the lack of access to schools, the poor-quality education received by the overwhelming majority of students

who are in schools, the lack of equity in the education system, and the severe inadequacy of funding, despite high-profile attempts at reform.

Never in Pakistan’s history has more attention been given to education issues, but the result of all the reforms of the past decade and a half has been minor improvements in access, relative stagnation in learning outcomes, little increased financing, and no gains in providing equality of opportunity. The constitutional mandate of giving the right to quality education to all children has yet to be implemented.

The disappointing outcomes of the recent reform efforts merit a deeper investigation into causes and possible remedies. But the government has chosen to put its political capital behind the idea of a Single National Curriculum to address the issues of education access, quality, and equity. This is a work in progress, but it has already raised serious concerns about intended and unintended consequences.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and exacerbated problems with access, quality, and equity. School disruptions have resulted in significant learning losses, and school closures have raised fears about increasing dropout rates, especially among girls. The lack of an adequate government response so far has increased concerns that many children will end up with long-term knowledge deficits. This could lead to even more difficulty with student retention over the next few years.

In the face of all these challenges, Pakistan is still far from realizing the dream of providing quality education to all children. Current policy debates and government choices suggest that we are not even headed in the right direction. ■



“Despite many predictions of its demise, customary authority in rural Afghanistan has endured, renewing and sometimes reinventing itself.”

# The Endurance and Evolution of Afghan Customary Governance

JENNIFER BRICK MURTAZASHVILI

Afghanistan has a rich history of customary or traditional governance structures, especially in rural areas. Although many countries have such customary bodies, in Afghanistan they have remained central to the lives of most citizens. This is because the state has never been a viable alternative—either it has been largely indifferent to the plight of those outside a few urban centers, or it has seen local authorities who draw legitimacy from sources outside the state as a threat.

The fall of the Taliban government in 2001 and the start of a liberal state-building effort led by the United States and supported by its allies raised great hopes that a new era would be ushered in for the people of Afghanistan. It was envisioned that customary authority would become less important to citizens: they would be able to rely on a newly elected democratic government that represented the will of the people. But this change never happened.

Ironically, at the height of the push to build a new Afghan state, the popularity of customary authority surged among citizens. They relied on these community-based bodies to solve disputes and provide small-scale public goods and services. Customary institutions also fulfill an important political function: they serve as a bulwark of protection against predatory government officials. This became all the more important after 2001, as corruption became a national epidemic, thanks in part to a surge of international assistance that was poorly executed and inadequately monitored.

Over the past two decades, the United States, together with the international community, has provided trillions of dollars to construct a more durable state in Afghanistan. Like many liberal

state-building efforts around the world since the end of the Cold War, the effort has focused on expanding governance capacity while simultaneously supporting new democratic institutions. Implicit in this focus on democracy is an assumption that organizations rooted in tradition and custom are incompatible with the demands of a modern state.

Rather than build on these informal social institutions, which many outsiders and leaders seeking to modernize Afghanistan view as bastions of conservative values that undermine the state, the international community preferred to build new organizations at the community level that they believed would be more compatible with democracy. In the years after 2001, the Afghan government embarked on a bold project to replace customary authorities with more than 30,000 newly created village councils, many of which withered away when donor funding dissipated.

This was a replay of a historical pattern in Afghanistan. Rulers bent on modernization have at best viewed customary society with disdain, and at worst treated it with neglect. No Afghan leader has ever embraced its institutions as a source of support. They have always been viewed from Kabul as a threat. Despite such perceptions, customary governance structures based in villages have remained resilient. They have evolved and changed over time to adapt to the needs of citizens.

In this sense, such authority is not “traditional,” since it is not frozen in time. Rather, it is “customary,” because customs and norms change over time. While many of the names of this type of authority have not changed, the rules by which it operates have evolved.

Some policymakers—both Afghan and international—began to appreciate the centrality of customary authority in rural life a few years after 2001. But few could explain why it was effective.

---

JENNIFER BRICK MURTAZASHVILI is an associate professor of international affairs and the director of the Center for Governance and Markets at the University of Pittsburgh.

The inner workings of customary governance seemed to be a black box.

Before Afghanistan's communist revolution in 1978, anthropologists and historians had documented the features of customary governance, noting its importance in rural parts of the country. Customary authorities included many local khans who were denounced as "feudal" by Afghan communists. These critiques neglected the fact that customary organizations assumed a vital role in providing public services and solving disputes, in many instances acting when the state was unwilling or unable to do so.

When the post-2001 international state-building effort began, most international and Afghan policymakers assumed that this local form of self-governance had withered away due to war and migration. Diagnoses of how to rebuild the state thus were based on a faulty assumption that rural areas had no governing authority, and that new authority was needed to connect Kabul to the countryside. This assumption led not only to wasteful policies, but also to a missed opportunity for the nascent state to partner with community leaders, who were generally eager to cooperate.

Despite many predictions of its demise, customary authority in rural Afghanistan has endured, renewing and sometimes reinventing itself.

Although many of the faces changed at the local level, these institutions have continued solving disputes and brokering relations between communities and local governments, making them indispensable to citizens. Two decades after the state-building effort began in earnest, the state still cannot fulfill many of these functions, so customary authorities continue to fill the gap. The resilience of these organizations is a paradox: they became stronger at a time when international efforts to rebuild the Afghan state were at an apogee.

Throughout history, governments have pursued development strategies that either presumed the failure of customary authority or opposed it as a "backward" obstacle to development and state consolidation. Yet it is often the most effective source of governance in a situation where the state has been unreliable, hostile, or both.

Unfortunately, post-2001 Afghanistan did not see the transformation of the state that so many had expected. The state gained a reputation for being corrupt, predatory, ineffective, or

completely absent. Customary organizations remained important because they provided essential public goods—and because they were much more accountable to citizens.

Rather than continue to view customary governance as a threat, the state should recognize that its persistence reflects its effectiveness. The challenge for future Afghan leaders is to build on the legitimacy of customary institutions rather than ignore them or attempt to eradicate them.

During the ongoing peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government, the future status of customary authority has remained uncertain. In some instances, customary leaders have found ways to work with the Taliban. In other cases, they are under threat from the Taliban, who perceive customary leaders as a threat to their authority—a potential source of resistance.

### INFORMAL AUTHORITIES

Afghanistan is a diverse country, but despite substantial assistance, it has been unable to conduct a census since 1978. Both the exact size of the

population and its composition remain unclear. The World Bank estimates there are around 38 million people in the country. Pashtuns comprise about 40 percent of the population, Tajiks roughly 30 percent, Hazaras

10 percent, and Uzbeks 9 percent. The remainder of the population includes Aimaq, Turkmen, Baluch, and various other groups.

The state is an Islamic republic, and most of the population is Sunni, with a Shia minority of 10–20 percent (the largest Shia group is the Hazaras). But many Afghans identify according to their *qawm*—a term of great fluidity. Depending on the context, it can refer to an ethnic group, tribe, sub-tribe, or even locality.

Despite ethnic, religious, tribal, and *qawm* differences, there is a great deal of similarity in the structure of informal, customary village organizations across the country. Villages are typically organized around three key informal political authorities: deliberative bodies (most referred to as *shuras* or *jirgas*), religious leaders (usually *mullahs*), and village representatives (known as *maliks*, *qaradars*, and *arbabs*, among other titles).

*Shuras* and *jirgas* are not fixed organizations that meet regularly. Instead, they convene when issues arise in a community that parties cannot

---

*Every household has  
the right to participate  
in meetings.*

---

resolve on their own, such as land disputes. Frequently, shuras or jirgas from two or more communities come together to try to resolve intercommunity disputes. Participants in shura or jirga meetings are most often men, but every household in a community has the right to participate. Decisions are made not by a majority vote, but rather through a consensus-building process that often takes days.

When communities cannot resolve disputes on their own, they often turn to *woluswals* (district governors), at the lowest level of formal government. Afghanistan has 34 provinces and more than 400 districts, which are directly beneath provinces.

Participants in shuras or jirgas are usually called elders or “white beards.” This honorific connotes a status based on respect within a community. It is not uncommon to find “white beards” who are in their thirties and have no gray hair. This is also because life expectancy in Afghanistan is among the lowest in the world.

Mullahs play an important spiritual role but also take on governance obligations. Members of a community may call on a mullah to resolve disputes, especially those that occur within families or fall within religious domains, such as matters of inheritance and property. Mullahs often provide testimony during community hearings. They also play a role in shura or jirga processes. Many villages have more than one mullah, and inhabitants describe the size of their village by the number of mosques it boasts: “Our village is large, we have five mosques.”

Finally, maliks are not leaders who have authority over others, but first among equals, informal public servants in the community. They are often described as the bridge between citizens and the state, representing communities to the outside world. In many districts, the *woluswal* considers maliks to be his village-level liaisons. After more than 20 years of state building, there is still no formal village government structure below the district authority in rural Afghanistan. This has been the case throughout Afghan history.

Maliks also serve as repositories of information about villages. Typically, they will be the holders of customary deeds or an informal land cadastre. Customary deeds are often countersigned by maliks in each community to confirm land ownership.

The role of maliks has changed over time. In the centuries before the Soviet invasion, many maliks (also known as khans or arbabs, depending on local usage) were large landowners. In some

instances, they ruled as local dictators, though these norms evolved during the twentieth century. By the early 1970s, anthropologists found that the role of these maliks or khans had changed and they were no longer as powerful as they once were.

This evolutionary process sped up after 2001, when citizens were no longer content to be subjects of the state or anyone else. Maliks came to be seen more as community representatives. To serve in this role, a malik had to have a reputation for fairness. Most importantly, they had to be literate, in order to deal with government documents and officials. (In Afghanistan, the literacy rate hovers around 40 percent.) Although historically maliks were men, since 2001 it has become possible to find women serving in these positions.

## MODERNIZATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Customary governance played a notable role in Afghanistan’s history. Indeed, the country dates its founding to 1747, when Ahmad Shah was accepted by a group of customary representatives as the first king (shah) of the Afghan people during a meeting in Kandahar. The convening process for such a meeting is called a *loya jirga* (grand council). Its authority is based on custom, and Ahmad Shah’s legitimacy partly depended on the support he received from these representatives of distant communities. After his reign, the country had a series of relatively weak leaders who rarely sought to impose central authority over rural areas. This changed when Abdur Rahman came to power in 1880.

Rahman earned the nickname “Iron Amir” with unrelenting cruelty toward his adversaries. He had a singular objective during his brutal twenty-year rule: to centralize political authority and break the customary bonds of Afghan society. He believed that Afghanistan’s weakness was due to insufficient state centralization, which he blamed on the persistence of customary authority and tribal allegiances. During his bloody reign, he waged dozens of campaigns against customary and tribal representatives, whom he regarded as middlemen and petty tyrants challenging his authority.

Subsequent rulers were not as violent as Abdur Rahman, but they displayed similar animosity toward customary organizations. The Iron Amir’s grandson, Amanullah, who took the throne in 1919, pursued a more secular modernization strategy based on Atatürk’s model in Turkey (itself based on France’s secularization of society). Amanullah also viewed customary authority as a threat to the state. He elevated the role of formal courts

and criminalized many customary practices. This alienated customary leaders and communities throughout the country. They refused to pay taxes and stopped participating in the traditional conscription system, which relied on maliks to send recruits from villages to enlist in the king's army. Short of soldiers, Amanullah was deposed in 1928 by a rebellion led by a Tajik outsider with no military experience, Habibullah Kalakani.

Kalakani proved inept at governing and was overthrown by Amanullah's former general, Nadir Shah, less than a year later. Nadir Shah in turn was assassinated in 1933, leading to the ascension of his son Zahir Shah, who came to power at the age of 19. He was unable to lead on his own and ruled initially through his uncles, who were powerful military men. During the four-decade reign of Zahir Shah, the government relaxed its stance toward customary governance, focusing instead on building up the military with foreign assistance, in the process becoming an aid-dependent rentier state.

Zahir Shah relied on maliks as intermediaries and rarely interfered in community life. But he also did little to develop rural economies. This underdevelopment ultimately contributed to the next wave of hostility toward both customary governance and the monarchy.

In 1973, Mohammed Daoud overthrew his cousin Zahir Shah in a bloodless coup. Daoud ended the monarchy and declared a republic, naming himself president. He began a series of reforms aimed at spurring economic development, many of which were designed to weaken customary authority through tactics such as small-scale land redistribution. Scorning his pace of reform as too slow, Khalq, a radical faction of the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, overthrew and executed Daoud, along with his family, in the April 1978 Saur Revolution.

The Khalqis' approach to economic reform involved replacing customary representatives with government agents, as well as stripping local maliks of authority, or even killing them. The Khalqis embarked on a program of extreme land redistribution, ignoring customary claims to private ownership. This triggered unrest in cities and rural areas throughout Afghanistan.

Fearing greater instability on its southern flank that could potentially destabilize the region, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979,

immediately deposing Khalqi leaders and replacing them with a somewhat more moderate faction that advocated a less violent path toward communism. During their 13-year reign, however, these communist leaders ordered killings of untold numbers of customary leaders in rural areas, viewing them as a threat to their authority.

The Soviet invasion triggered decades of conflict, which subsided to some degree when the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996. As a religiously motivated movement, the Taliban elevated the role of mullahs in rural areas, preferring to rely on a network of religious leaders to run the country. Customary leaders were not always natural allies for the Taliban. Many were targets of assassination campaigns by the Taliban, just as they were during communist rule.

### STATE-BUILDING STUMBLER

After the US military, alongside local factions from the Northern Alliance, helped topple the Taliban in 2001, the Americans and their allies embarked on a massive effort to build a viable,

democratic Afghan state. At that time, most actors involved in international state-building efforts did not see that task as a formidable challenge, in part because they believed that there was a dearth of authority at the community level. One key

assumption was that decades of conflict had decimated community structures not only through mass violence, but also through mass migration. After the Soviet invasion, millions of Afghans left their communities and headed to neighboring Pakistan or Iran as refugees. Many others migrated internally, leaving conflict-stricken villages for more peaceful urban centers.

There was an internal tension in the state-building project. On the one hand, many international organizations and governments involved in the project believed that they needed to step in with massive investments to create new organizations in light of this perceived vacuum. On the other hand, it was widely believed, especially among international development agencies, that the persistence of customary authority was an obstacle to the state.

Within a few years, US and other NATO military commanders, along with some Afghan government officials, saw that efforts to build new formal governance institutions were not working. The Taliban

---

*The international community  
struggled to understand  
and effectively engage  
community leaders.*

---

had begun to reassert themselves throughout the country, waging a new insurgency. Searching for an alternative to the state, which many Afghans increasingly viewed as corrupt and incapable, US military officers, in particular, started to look more favorably on customary institutions. They argued that these local bodies had proved their resilience by not collapsing during the war, and had provided communities with a badly needed alternative to the state.

Recognizing the important role that these institutions increasingly played in local governance, US and NATO military forces began to engage with them more systematically in efforts to fight the Taliban. They realized that many customary leaders were both neglected by the state and targeted by the insurgents. Foreign soldiers serving in some of the most contested terrain in Afghanistan began writing publicly for blogs like the Long War Journal about the vital functions such institutions assumed in villages around the country. They noted that customary authority was largely neglected by the international community. Rather than seeing a vacuum of authority at the local level, they hoped that communities, elders, and tribal authorities might provide an antidote to the Taliban.

These arguments were soon adopted by coalition commanders. US military leaders drafted a new counterinsurgency strategy in 2006 that called for soldiers on the ground to engage and work with local leaders. They believed that customary authorities could help mobilize citizens against the Taliban. Many customary leaders had been executed by the Taliban over the years, since the insurgents understood that in most communities the most potent challenge to their authority came not from the state, but from these local figures.

US and other foreign military forces thus tried to build on the legitimacy of customary authority and incorporate local leaders into their strategies. They supported many local communities with generous funding and provided arms in an effort to revive *arbaki*, or local tribal militias. But the international community struggled to understand and effectively engage community leaders, especially at the height of an armed conflict, and its interventions were ultimately unsuccessful.

As soon as an influx of resources arrived in a community, it shifted the local power dynamics, creating incentives for every individual to claim customary leadership. Efforts to arm communities also did the opposite of what was intended. Rather than create

a fighting force composed of locally legitimate units drawn from communities, they ended up creating militias that empowered warlords, some of whom had few ties to the communities they were supposed to represent but instead terrorized.

## EVOLVING INSTITUTIONS

Missing in all of these initiatives was an understanding of how customary governance was now organized after decades of conflict. Customary authority in Afghanistan had not disappeared during decades of war. It evolved to become more adaptive and responsive to citizens' needs.

Outsiders failed to appreciate the constructive role that such authority might play in state-building efforts. Rather than build on what was already there, external actors and the Afghan state sought to create new parallel organizations at the village level that were supposed to replace customary institutions. Instead, they withered away when donor funding dwindled.

For many Afghans in rural areas, where around 75 percent of the population still resides and where the insurgency is being fought, customary governance remains the most important source of authority. Yet customary authority did not emerge unchanged from decades of war. In many ways, it became more participatory and even more democratic. In some villages, communities began selecting their customary leaders using ballot boxes. In others, women served as *maliks*—something almost unheard of in the past.

Dispute resolution is still a critical function of customary governance. Afghans trust customary leaders more than any other authority to resolve disagreements ranging from land to family matters. Formally, state courts have authority to resolve conflicts over land, but few Afghans go to court. Instead, they continue to turn to customary leaders. In Taliban-controlled areas, the insurgents have usurped this power. But most public opinion data show that citizens overwhelmingly prefer customary authorities to resolve such disputes.

Customary governance has notable challenges with scale. Its institutions are not able to provide larger-scale public goods like clinics or build other infrastructure, but they can organize effectively within their communities. It is at the intra-communal level that customary authority breaks down and outside intervention is most needed. There is a complementary role for government to take on, if it can accept a burden-sharing division of labor with customary organizations.

Most Afghan leaders and many international donors saw the relationship between customary authority and the state in zero-sum terms. But foreign military leaders regarded customary authority as a complement to the state, rather than as a competitor. Although the coalition forces made major missteps in their dealings with customary organizations, their approach was more nuanced than others.

Customary authority can partner with Afghanistan's weak state, providing governance in response to smaller-scale challenges in areas that the state is simply unable to reach. Increasing the state's effectiveness is still a critical task. But this is difficult when the presumption that customary governance is inherently opposed to the state results in neglect of the potential for a complementary relationship.

## TRUST FACTOR

Two decades after international efforts to rebuild the Afghan state began, the central government is weaker than it has been at almost any point in recent history. More than half of the country's territory is in the hands of the Taliban insurgency. The state is not only weak in terms of its ability to provide security; it also lacks legitimacy among many of its citizens.

The Afghan government, with the support of the international community, has focused on centralizing power in Kabul. This renewed effort at state-building has failed to take account of two important factors. First, it has not recognized the strength and legitimacy of customary authority throughout much of the country. Second, it has overlooked the deep distrust of the central government that has persisted among Afghans for centuries.

The missteps by both the international community and the Afghan government repeated previous errors by earlier governments and donors. Each succeeding attempt to build a state in Afghanistan has been based on the assumption that increased aid can produce a centralized government, and that this process requires a simultaneous withering of customary authority at the local level. In other words, it is presumed that community institutions whose legitimacy relies on traditional or customary sources are at odds with a modern state.

For the past 150 years, Afghan leaders have sought to build the state based on this mistaken assumption. They have missed opportunities to

connect with communities and build legitimacy through cooperation with customary leaders, who are often eager to engage with the state.

Part of the problem is that customary authority in Afghanistan remains poorly understood. Unlike many tribal societies where chiefs rule on hierarchical lines, Afghan customary governance is largely decentralized and egalitarian. It is also competitive, with shuras, maliks, and mullahs balancing each other's authority at the community level.

The Afghan experience holds lessons for rulers trying to consolidate their authority and modernize their societies. Even democratically elected leaders often believe that they must centralize authority to achieve progress. Leaders in Afghanistan have pursued this strategy throughout the country's modern history, with unfortunate results. In the past, customary authorities were subjected to extreme violence. Today, they are largely neglected by the central government, which continues to view them as an obstacle to modernization, development, and state consolidation.

Despite this hostility, customary authority remains central to community life in Afghanistan. It

has persisted and evolved to fill a governance gap at a time when the state and the Taliban insurgency have been unable to provide a better alternative. Yet Afghan central government leaders have never tried to partner with or earn the

trust of customary leaders in rural areas. This has proved an enormous obstacle to gaining the trust of citizens and building peace in Afghanistan.

Despite the persistence and evolution of Afghan customary authority, its voice has remained largely unheard during the peace talks with the Taliban. Many local leaders have called for greater decentralization of power to provinces, districts, and communities. There is some hope that a power-sharing agreement between the Taliban and the current government could lead to such decentralization. This would give much more power and authority to customary leaders and the communities they represent at the local level.

Yet there is much uncertainty on the path to peace. In its history as a modern state, the government of Afghanistan has never devolved power to authorities at the subnational level. Without such decentralizing reforms, it will be challenging for a nation of such diverse communities, with different visions of the role of the state in society, to achieve peace. ■

---



---

*Customary authority evolved to become more adaptive and responsive to citizens' needs.*

---



---

“Conflict between classes and castes supersedes any interfaith conflict between lower-caste and lower-class Muslims and Hindus in the Sundarbans.”

## Shared Traditions for Living in the Sundarbans

SUFIA UDDIN

As Bangladesh took steps toward creating a secular democracy after gaining independence from Pakistan in 1971, the country experienced a combination of famines, economic insecurity, and the rise of religious fundamentalist parties, authoritarianism, and military rule. Minorities were subjected to social exclusion as a result of majoritarian politics, despite being guaranteed equal rights by the constitution of the nascent nation. In the violent 1947 and 1971 partitions of India and Pakistan, many Hindus fled to India from what is now Bangladesh. Hindus continued to flee Bangladesh in its subsequent crises. Many hoped to settle in nearby West Bengal, where they knew the language and culture, and sometimes had kinship ties.

Meanwhile, India has witnessed growing communalism targeting Muslims, which has taken on an increasingly state-sponsored form, especially since the rise of the Hindu fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Spearheaded by the BJP-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was passed in 2019. This law creates a path to citizenship for people from neighboring countries, but excludes Muslims. In doing so, it violates the principle of secularism on which the nation was founded. Tied directly to the CAA is the problem of the National Register of Citizens. In the state of Assam (which borders Bangladesh) alone, more than 2 million people, many of whom are poor Muslims, have been left off the registry. This provides the state with an effective means to deport Muslims whom it sees as infiltrators.

These are just a few examples of how the divisive nature of politics in both India and

Bangladesh has resulted in a lack of political will to secure the rights of all citizens, and even in the use of policy to persecute minorities. In many regions of the two countries, protests in recent years have frequently turned violent; often the victims are religious minorities. Out of either bigotry or ignorance, religion in these cases is treated by the state as the primary identity of individuals who may not see religious identity or religious issues as their primary concern—as if religion is an essentialized and undifferentiated practice among adherents.

Yet religious identity is more complex than it is widely perceived to be, and should not be treated as an undifferentiated factor. Ethnicity, gender, race, class, caste, and individual psychology all play a role in human motivation. Wherever there is conflict, its causes and roots are more complicated than mere ideological divisions, and they cut across religious differences.

In my own research, I have found that communities of landless Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans, a river delta area that sprawls across the Bangladesh–India border, share values geared to living in the vast mangrove forest in a way that is supportive of a healthy ecosystem. They have shared beliefs and practices that often defy commonly held assumptions about religious difference.

Veneration of the Muslim saint Bonbibi (the Lady of the Forest) is at the core of what these Muslims and Hindus have in common. This tradition is not new, nor is it some confused notion of any general understanding of Islam and Hinduism. It is rooted in the history of settlement in the region.

The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world, rich in natural resources, with a complex, delicate ecosystem. It lies in a delta where three rivers meet the Bay of Bengal. It is also one of the largest carbon sinks remaining on the planet:

---

SUFIA UDDIN is a professor of anthropology and religion at Connecticut College. Her next book, on Bonbibi veneration in the Sundarbans, is forthcoming from Lever Press.

the forest efficiently captures and stores atmospheric carbon dioxide, making it a critical resource for containing climate change. But over the past two centuries, the tidal forest has been threatened by human activity, particularly land reclamation.

Today, more than 7.5 million people live in the Sundarbans of India and Bangladesh. Human activity in the region includes shrimp and crab farming, shipping traffic, the constant dredging of canals to maintain shipping lanes, and the construction of the coal-fired Rampal power plant—a joint venture between the neighboring countries.

Although the Bangladeshi part of the Sundarbans has experienced an economic boom, not everyone has benefited from forms of development that destroy the forest that the poorest residents rely on. These landless Hindus and Muslims share the experience of economic marginalization. And they are the first to suffer the devastating impacts of climate change, the rising waters and ever more devastating cyclone events, since they live on the most vulnerable land.

## SPECULATOR AND SAINT

Over the centuries, explorers, traders, and adventurers navigated the Sundarbans, writing about the riches and dangers of the forest, but also what they perceived as a vast, empty wasteland. They were unable to see the complex ecosystem for what it was. They determined that the northern region of the Sundarbans would provide fertile land once the forest was cleared, whereas the southern stretches were dense forest, making passage nearly impossible except by sea.

As early as the Bengal Sultanate period, from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, efforts were made to clear land for wet-rice cultivation. In their later accounts of the region, British civil servants such as W. W. Hunter and James Westland detailed the challenges of land reclamation efforts. Hunter described the immense size of the intertwined mangrove trees and the impenetrable brushwood that had to be painstakingly hacked away. Crocodiles and tigers were ubiquitous.

Despite the danger and physical challenges, the forest was steadily turned into farmland. Driven by economic imperatives, these efforts continued under Mughal and then British rule. In the historian Richard Eaton's 1990 study of human settlement in

the Sundarbans, he states that in 1765, the Sundarbans were “double their present size.”

One of the earliest successful attempts at land reclamation in the region was carried out by Khan Jahan Ali, a high-ranking officer in the Bengal Sultanate who arrived in the Sundarbans with the sole purpose of obtaining, reclaiming, and cultivating land in the early fifteenth century. With a *jaghir* (land grant) obtained from the sultan and a labor force of companions and soldiers, Khan Jahan left his mark. Once this impassable land was cleared, he brought in farmers to cultivate rice so he could collect rents.

A measure of Khan Jahan's success is the multitude of construction projects he sponsored. He built the famed Sat Gumbad (Sixty-Domed) mosque in Bagherhat; 360 water tanks (small reservoirs); a brick road from the Bhairab River to Sat Gumbad; his own tomb, which is still a popular pilgrimage site today; and another tomb at the same location for his finance minister, known as Pir Ali.

Khan Jahan Ali is celebrated as a Sufi saint for creating a new economy by transforming what had been perceived as a wasteland into cultivable land. As Eaton says, Khan Jahan may have come with an army, but he never used it to subdue the local population—because

there was no population to convert. It was the forest, not nonbelievers, that needed to be subdued.

Khan Jahan is said to have arrived in the region on the backs of two crocodiles. This fantastic testament to his power over nature was intended to reinforce his status as a *pir* or saint. Saints are central to the story of Islam's presence in the region. Eaton suggests that Khan Jahan Ali typifies the saints of Bengal's extreme south, far from the centers of authority, where historical figures are remembered and venerated for bringing Islam to the region and civilizing the wasteland.

Such narratives are found throughout the eastern and southern reaches of Bengal. Many of them explain how vast stretches of land were transformed into farmland. Those who led these efforts viewed the forest as an untapped resource. And Khan Jahan Ali would be venerated as the saint who pioneered this project.

Tony K. Stewart, a specialist in the religions and literatures of early modern Bengal, explores how

---

*Landless Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans have common beliefs and practices.*

---



such narratives work in his recent book, *Witness to Marvels: Sufism and Literary Imagination*. Stewart writes, “Rather than thinking of the religious ideal as some fixed theological or doctrinal content, it can be better understood as a *perspective*, a way of understanding and operating in the world that, if followed through, would result in some utopian goal; this perspective and the cosmology it implies endorse ethical sensibilities that are imparted through action and deed.”

For example, a Bengali telling of the story of Adam and Huwa (Eve) articulates a purpose for human existence that fits in with the religious ideal of land reclamation. In a 1982 essay, John P. Thorp summarizes this version of the creation myth. The Muslim farmers of Bangladesh view Adam’s primary role as master (*malik*) over earth. Farming is Adam’s right but also his duty (*kartabba*), a fundamental aspect of his being and faith.

There is no Islamic doctrine concerning agriculture, but stories that the first man and woman farmed the land provided a way of operating in this world, both for those who set in motion the transformation of land and for those who would farm it. Khan Jahan Ali is venerated for having served as God’s instrument in this region when he made farming possible. This is a religious ideal that is simultaneously a capitalist justification for those who collect rents and taxes. But what are the religious ideals of those who have no land and live off the forest resources?

If religious ideals are perspectives on the world, a way to comprehend it, and a guide for how to act ethically in it, they must be shaped by immediate experience and sense of place. People who fish and collect honey and wood from the Sundarbans to feed their families express different concerns and hopes through their faith and actions than farmers and urban dwellers do, since they live in a different manner in this region. The forest can provide sustenance, but it is also a dangerous place for those who must rely on its resources.

## PROTECTOR OF THE POOR

Unlike Khan Jahan Ali, Bonbibi is not a historical figure, but she does have a history—one associated with people’s reliance on the forest. Her story does what many saint stories do. Saints and sainthood in Islam are bound up with people’s access to divine blessings and power. Saints provide the link between people and God, a means of addressing worldly problems and hopes.

The saint tradition in Islam is rooted in Sufism. Sufism is not a sect of Islam, but rather a form of worship in Sunni Islam meant to intensify one’s loving bond with God. Those who are thought to have this bond are often regarded as saints, but there is no formal process for designating someone a saint in Islam. The rise of Islam in Bengal was due overwhelmingly to Sufi practitioners, not to any coordinated effort by rulers. Thus, Islam in West Bengal and Bangladesh is profoundly influenced by Sufism. Any anti-Sufi sentiment today is a product of so-called reform movements of the modern period.

All that we know about Bonbibi is what is in her story, as expressed in the text of the *Jahura nama* and performed in the Bonbibi *jatra* (play). The *Jahura nama* is a poem that tells the story of Bonbibi’s origins and how she came to be venerated. Its ritual recitation has become a central element in the annual festival that celebrates Bonbibi. The *jatra* tradition is a folk theater art form. Bonbibi’s *jatra* is typically performed on the evening of the annual festival.

The *Jahura nama* has three major themes. The first part establishes Bonbibi’s sainthood, the second illustrates whom and how she helps, and the third imparts instructions to her devotees on ritual and ethical behavior. Together, they provide both an origin story and a model of ethical living in the region.

According to the *Jahura nama*, Bonbibi and her twin brother Shah Jangali were born in the forest. Abandoned by her mother, Bonbibi survived under the care of the forest creatures. After being reunited with her brother and parents, she tells her brother that he must accompany her to Medina, where they will become *murids* (disciples) of Hasan, the elder son of Fatima, Prophet Muhammad’s daughter. Having reached Medina, they visit Fatima’s grave, and Bonbibi hears Fatima’s voice informing her that she has been chosen to go and settle in the tidal country and protect those who seek her aid.

Once Bonbibi and her brother arrive in the forest, she engages in a fierce battle with Narayani, the mother of Dakshin Rai—a local deity who takes the shape of a tiger—and her army of demons, witches, and other supernatural creatures. Bonbibi prevails and begins her reign over the forest. Shah Jangali is tasked with supporting his sister in her mission and performing the call to prayer. But soon after Bonbibi establishes herself in the forest, Dakshin Rai attempts to take a human sacrifice.

A wealthy merchant named Dhona plans an expedition into the forest to collect honey and wax. He needs another man for his crew, so he calls on a local villager named Dukkhe, who lives with his mother and never has enough to eat. His mother warns him not to go, arguing that it is too dangerous, but Dukkhe insists. She reluctantly bids him a safe journey and advises him to call out to Bonbibi if he encounters trouble.

When Dhona and his men arrive in the forest, Dakshin Rai approaches Dhona and tells him that if he wants to take so much of value—seven boatloads of honey and wax—he must leave behind a human for the tiger to feast on. Dhona decides to sacrifice Dukkhe. As he is about to be attacked by the tiger, Dukkhe remembers his mother's advice and calls out to Bonbibi. She arrives instantaneously, frightening off Dakshin Rai.

Once Dukkhe returns to his village, his relieved mother tells him how to show his gratitude to Bonbibi. In this last part of the *Jahura nama*, instructions for giving thanks and celebrating Bonbibi's compassion and mercy are detailed. This signals the institutionalization of Bonbibi veneration.

Unlike Khan Jahan Ali's saint narrative, there is no mention of land reclamation in Bonbibi's story. It serves as an introduction to other ways of living and being in the Sundarbans. The central character of this story is Dukkhe, and the people who venerate Bonbibi today are, like him, the landless poor who rely on the forest to sustain themselves and their families.

It is important to note that Dukkhe is betrayed by someone from a different class. Dhona, the wealthy merchant, seeks to extract natural resources from the forest. He is never described in sympathetic terms, but rather as a person driven by greed, someone who treats the less fortunate as disposable. There is hardly any mention of religion in the Bonbibi narrative, only economic difference. The tensions in this story are between people of different classes, not different religious communities.

## CASTE CONFLICT

An important illustration of these same tensions in recent history is the Morichjhanpi massacre of 1978–79. West Bengal, the region in India that borders Bangladesh, has had a long history of tensions between upper-caste and low-caste Hindus,

ever since the 1947 Partition. The subsequent influx of people from what was then East Bengal led to further persecution, and to the exclusion of low-caste Hindus from opportunities to settle in West Bengal. Many people arrived from the district of Khulna, which includes the Sundarbans, hoping to be resettled in the Sundarbans of West Bengal. Instead, the poorest were resettled in camps in Dandakaranya, a region in east-central India that they found inhospitable and unlike their native land.

Given hope by a promise from the opposition Left Front that it would resettle them in the Sundarbans, the refugees waited. In 1978, the Left Front came to power. Of their own accord, some 15,000 refugee families left Dandakaranya for the Sundarbans.

After having sold whatever possessions they had to cover the cost of travel, the refugees found that the Left Front had changed its policy. Some of the refugees were arrested and forced to return to the camps. Others slipped passed law enforcement and settled on the island of Morichjhanpi, only to be subjected to violent expulsion months later. When the islanders refused to return to Dandakaranya, they faced blockades, police shootings, drowning, starvation, and disease. Some 17,000 people died.

As anthropologist Annu Jalais has written, this tragic episode in the life of the communities of the Sundarbans is remembered as a betrayal of the lower castes by the *bhadralok* (upper caste). Jalais found that villagers in Gosaba recall the Morichjhanpi massacre as the moment when tigers were disturbed by human violence and developed an appetite for human flesh. Efforts by *bhadralok*-led conservationist groups to save the tigers often are interpreted by the low-caste residents of the Sundarbans as another signal to the tigers that the poor are an acceptable food source—that the lives of tigers are more valuable than theirs.

Conflict between classes and castes supersedes any interfaith conflict between lower-caste and lower-class Muslims and Hindus in the Sundarbans. Bonbibi veneration represents their common struggle to live. Bonbibi is known through narratives about a constellation of local and regional saints, spirits, and deities that have been circulating in Bengal since the beginnings of land reclamation efforts. Varied interests, classes, and castes inform the ways in which people identify their

---

*Saints are central to the story of Islam's presence in the region.*

---

community in the unique environment of the Sundarbans.

## A FOREST FESTIVAL

Taken together, Bonbibi's origins (associated with the birthplace of Islam), her charge from Allah by way of Fatima, and the power she has to care for and protect people all clearly mark her as Muslim. However, it is not the case that her devotees are necessarily Muslims too. The *Jahura nama* and the Bonbibi play mention nothing about devotees' religious identity. All that is required of devotees is that they believe in the power of Bonbibi's mercy and compassion, and that they humbly request her blessings when going into the forest. They must demonstrate due regard for the forest and its inhabitants as they enter her domain, take what they need, and then leave and give thanks to her.

Bonbibi is not a Hindu deity one will find in home shrines, nor does she have a *mazar* (tomb) that people visit (*ziyarat*), like Khan Jahan Ali's. But there is an annual Bonbibi *mela* (festival). Hindus erect platforms in villages and on the edge of the forest, on which they install freshly made clay figures of Bonbibi, her brother Dukkhe, the tiger Dakshin Rai, and sometimes other characters. The platform is decorated to depict a dense jungle scene. During the process of preparing the scenery, the story of Bonbibi is recited aloud, and people make offerings in a festive atmosphere. Although Muslims may not construct images of Bonbibi, they do participate in the performance of the play or as audience members.

The differences between Muslim and Hindu religious identities are less pronounced in these moments. Outsiders tend to project doctrinal distinctions without considering religious ideals, as though trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Travelers, scholars, and civil servants have designated any examples of shared ethical practice and veneration as a deviation from correct practice. Yet many religious ideals can be shared across faiths, especially when the same life struggles are also shared.

If religion is the practice of what is deemed right, that which is right differs from place to place. And place is certainly a protagonist in the lives of communities that live and rely on the environment around them. Comparative religion scholar Jonathan Z. Smith contends in his 1992 book, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, that our experience of a place is based on the body's orientation within that space. In this way, marginalized Muslims and Hindus bring their sense of the

Sundarbans into being through their shared traditions. Paying attention to the intersection of locality, ritual practice, and class difference helps make sense of shared Bonbibi veneration.

By elevating the importance of how one lives, and what work one does, we can better observe a shared experience based on labor, class, and caste, regardless of religious identity. In fact, the labor one performs can be more significant than other identities, taking into account the hardships involved. The risk that accompanies subsistence living in the forest is not experienced by a farmer living inland or the owner of a fish farming business. For the poorest, no matter what religious identity they may share with those who need not go into the forest, the presence of risk in their lives is constant—and this is what draws them to the veneration of Bonbibi.

## ENDANGERED HABITAT

Bonbibi veneration reflects the reality and aspirations of the landless poor who depend on the forest to eke out a livelihood. For these Muslims and Hindus alike, the Sundarbans is a sustaining habitat. It shapes their everyday experience and informs the way they live. The *Jahura nama* and faith in Bonbibi provide a way of knowing and living in the Sundarbans that can protect both people and forest. In other words, the tradition provides an embedded knowledge system for the landless. Bonbibi veneration is not dependent on some abstract notion of Islam or Hinduism; it is a lived tradition, woven into the fabric of life from the bottom up.

Scholars have ignored the role of place and a community's relation to it by overdetermining the role of particular religious doctrines, failing to recognize the importance of lived experience in the context and religious ideals that are particular to a certain place. Religion is treated as a stable factor that produces predictable outcomes, but this is simply not so. Place is more important than abstract categories of "Islam" and "Hinduism," though those religious traditions provide vocabulary and terminology that sets us on the path to comprehending what we observe.

In the Sundarbans, where the very survival of a community is so dependent on the place, we cannot ignore the environment's impact on people's ethical decisions. Although some Muslims and Hindus may wish to extract forest resources without regard to sustainability, honey collectors and fisherfolk are acutely aware of the importance of maintaining ecological balance in the forest.

Despite these inhabitants' best efforts to live in a manner that is mutually sustainable, the forces of global capitalism and their capacity to devour resources faster than they can regenerate have devastated the Sundarbans. Bonbibi venerated have had little voice in determining the destiny of this critical mangrove forest. Shrimp and crab farming are lucrative, but they have decimated wild shrimp and crab populations and poisoned the soil. Fresh water sources are becoming scarce. The biodiversity of the region is threatened by this unplanned development, which contributes to the forest's destruction and thereby to climate change.

On a trip to the Bangladeshi Sundarbans in January 2020, I observed that no platforms and images of Bonbibi had been erected by the side of the protected forest. I was told that too many tourists were visiting and leaving behind plastic water bottles and other refuse. Without the ritual displays to attract them, tourists would remain on their boats.

As the sea level continues to rise as a result of climate change, more and more people in the Sundarbans who rely on the forest will lose their homes and sources of food. They will become climate refugees. Where will they go? ■

“[S]hifts in health, tourism-driven development, and religious worldviews have defined the country’s recent history.”

## How the Maldives Have Navigated Disease and Development

EVA-MARIA KNOLL

For much of their remarkably autonomous history, the Maldivian islands were known as an area to be avoided rather than sought out. Nautical charts from the early period of European sailing voyages to the Indian Ocean, such as Fernão Vaz Dourado’s map from 1570, often displayed this chain of islands to the southwest of India in disproportionately large scale. The apparently almost impenetrable barrier of closely nestled islands, reefs, sandbanks, and shoals sent an unambiguous warning to the foreign seafarer.

Shipwrecked sailors and traders undoubtedly contributed to local gene pools, cultural developments, and the historiography of the island kingdom. Like regular visitors, they were plagued by hordes of mosquitoes and the legendary, often deadly “Maldivian fever.” The fourteenth-century Muslim traveler Ibn Battuta and the French merchant chronicler François Pyrard de Laval, who was shipwrecked on Maldivian shores in 1602, both described how they barely survived the fever. Carl Wilhelm Rosset, a German adventurer and collector who visited in 1885, was convinced that almost all Europeans who landed on these islands fell victim to the fever-laden breath of the Maldivian lagoons. It was not until the last quarter of the twentieth century that fundamental changes in the cohabitation of humans, mosquitoes, and malaria parasites allowed for the transformation of the dreaded islands into an exquisite, sought-after holiday destination.

Health hazards and general resource scarcity, in addition to the nautical challenges of mastering an

archipelago of 1,192 coral islands more than 750 km long and nearly 120 km wide, kept European colonial interest at bay for centuries. This left the Maldives to a largely self-governed and distinct sociocultural trajectory. Due to their limited solid ground of barely 300 km<sup>2</sup> within a liquid surface of 90,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and the rather poor soils on their low-lying coral islands, the Maldivian islanders—or Dhivehin, as they call themselves—had always been dependent on the ocean and on contacts with the world beyond. As excellent fishermen and navigators, they traded dried tuna, cowry shells, and coconut products for rice and other staple foods, metal products, and other daily needs. Even basic materials for some traditional crafts, such as tree sap for lacquerwork, had to be imported.

This small sea-foraging community, scattered over hundreds of islands, developed a unifying, centralized political structure before the twelfth century, as well as its own distinctive language and script. Today, some 400,000 speak Dhivehi (Maldivian) and write in Thaana in the Maldives and on Maliku (or Minicoy), an Indian atoll some 130 km to the north with historical, linguistic, and cultural affinities to the Maldivian archipelago. During its history as an independent kingdom, the Maldives also had ethnic and linguistic ties to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and stayed closely connected politically and economically to this neighbor throughout the colonial period. Only during the late colonial era, in 1887, did the archipelago officially become a British protectorate, but it regained independence in 1965. Since then, shifts in health, tourism-driven development, and religious worldviews have defined the country’s recent history.

### OLD MALADIES AND NEW SPECIES

Malaria surveys from the second half of the twentieth century put the documented 600 years

---

EVA-MARIA KNOLL is a researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences. This article is an outcome of a Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council partnership project on the Indian Ocean, “Appraising Risk, Past and Present.”

of raging Maldivian fever in perspective. They reveal that these small coral islands were mixed infection zones where humans were vulnerable to three different malaria parasites: *Plasmodium falciparum*, *P. vivax*, and *P. malariae*. Unsurprisingly, the naive immune systems of visiting foreigners were hit hard by this endemic malarial cocktail and additional health problems, such as gastrointestinal infections related to water of doubtful quality.

Global malaria eradication efforts organized by the World Health Organization reached the Maldives comparatively late. The archipelago's malaria control program started in May 1966, about a year after independence. Twenty years earlier, Ceylon had become the first country in Asia to carry out a nationwide malaria eradication program. But the colonial power left the small, Muslim population of the Maldives largely to themselves in this fight, as in other administrative and religious affairs.

The malaria eradication program involved blood tests, mass drug administration, elimination of potential mosquito breeding sites, and spraying homes and islands with DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane). The hospital vessel *Golden Ray* carried the malaria team through the scattered islands of the archipelago. Local island communities, including trained family health workers and spray-men, shouldered much of the burden of detection, treatment, and follow-up care of malaria patients, as well as vector control activities. By 1974, the malaria-transmitting *Anopheles* mosquito species had almost disappeared from the islands.

This successful effort coincided with the arrival of a novel human species: the first international tourists enjoyed a Maldivian beach in 1972. The last indigenous case of severe *P. falciparum* was recorded in 1975, and the last somewhat more benign *P. vivax* case in 1984. In the 40 years that followed the defeat of Maldivian fever, the archipelago that had been among the poorest, most remote, and least developed countries on the globe was transformed into one of South Asia's most affluent nations.

The World Bank recorded the Maldives' 2019 gross domestic product at \$10,627 per capita—five times India's, 2.7 times Sri Lanka's, and 5.7 times Bangladesh's. The tourism sector contributed 26 percent of GDP. Successful malaria eradication was a decisive turning point on the Maldivian post-independence road to affluence.

Initially, the malaria eradication program found it difficult to cover the small communities dispersed among the Maldives' 200 inhabited islands. In the long run, however, this unique kind of small-scale settlement structure, well adapted to coral island environments, turned out to be conducive to sustained eradication efforts. The island communities were sufficiently small to implement systematic blood testing, case detection, treatment, and surveillance.

Movement to and from islands (including migration, tourism, the traffic of goods, and interisland commuting) can be monitored and controlled, providing some inherent advantages in dealing with epidemics. Small island communities allow for quick recognition of outbreaks, identification of index cases, and a rapid flow of risk-prevention communication. In island states with small populations, and in archipelagos with their geographical segmentation into even smaller units of atolls and island communities, contact tracing is a powerful tool.

But epidemics travel fast through these close-knit communities, where everyone knows each other and people live in extended family groups. Everyday interactions involve close social relations. In such a context, it may be more difficult for people to keep their distance than in an anonymous metropolis.

---

*The Maldivian islanders have always been dependent on the ocean and contacts with the world beyond.*

---

## PANDEMIC ISOLATION

Some of these advantages and pitfalls of islandness have been evident since early 2020 in the COVID-19 pandemic, during which island societies have generally fared somewhat better than landlocked countries. On March 7, 2020, the Maldives reported its first COVID-19 case, a 69-year-old Italian tourist staying at a resort located in Lhaviyani Atoll. The next reported cases also largely remained within the tourism sector. Within one week, a state of public health emergency had to be declared, and the country closed its borders on March 27.

By April 15, transmission of the virus to local communities was confirmed when clusters of infections were identified in the capital, Male'. (The greater capital region comprises the islands Male', Hulhumale', Vilimale', Thilfasuhi, and Gulhifalhu.) About one-third of the Maldives' total population of 370,000 lives in this multi-island urban conglomerate, which covers about 8 km<sup>2</sup> and ranks among the 25 most densely populated cities in the world.

A large proportion of the estimated migrant worker population of 161,000, about 44 percent of them unauthorized, also lives and works in the capital. Their living conditions make a mockery of calls for physical distancing. By May 2020, the virus had spread more than three times faster among the foreign workforce, predominantly males from Bangladesh and India, than across the local population.

In pandemic times, the experience of islandness involves feelings of safety as well as the realization of dependency, both due to relative isolation. Global flows of health professionals, migrant workers, and transoceanic transport services were cut back or shut down, posing threats to health and food security in the Maldives. The emptied shelves of shops and supermarkets demonstrated to local residents the consequences of interrupted supply chains and the extent of the nation's import dependency. The national carrier, Maldivian, transported cargo from Sri Lanka, India, and Thailand in its passenger planes to ease the shortages.

With the suspension of resort tourism, thousands of migrant workers were dismissed or furloughed without pay. Tightened travel restrictions, followed by the cessation of international air travel, blocked them from returning home. Many moved to Male' in search of work, but they often ended up in misery, without accommodation or money. Hastily organized repatriation flights took stranded migrant workers and tourists home, while other flights returned Maldivian citizens from abroad.

As with malaria eradication, the hundreds of small island units and the centralized settlement structure once again proved advantageous in a health crisis. Authorities were able to implement early detection, isolation, and qualified treatment of positive COVID-19 cases, meticulous contact tracing resulting in quarantine for anyone found to have been in close contact with an infected person, and interisland travel restrictions and quarantines for people arriving in the outer islands from the Greater Male' area. These measures saved the archipelago from an exponential increase in cases and helped limit the majority of infections to the capital and to individual islands and tourist resorts.

Local islands inhabited only by Maldivians and resort islands reserved for tourism served as natural quarantine units, conveniently located at a safe distance from one another in the Indian Ocean. The Maldives' lockdown comprised a curfew in the Greater Male' area, bans on interisland

transport and public gatherings across the country, and nationwide closures of government offices, schools, universities, restaurants, cafes, public places, and tourism facilities. The border was closed for 110 days, and the economy had to endure the temporary suspension of the crucial tourism sector, after a record of 1.7 million visitors was set in 2019.

In 2019, the \$5.2 billion economy of the Maldives had grown by 5.3 percent, with tourism generating more than 60 percent of foreign income. By mid-October 2020, the government was projecting a 13 percent contraction for the year.

The pandemic peaked with over 200 new cases daily (close to 50 per 100,000 population) during the rainy and stormy season of the southwest monsoon, between July and September 2020. This is the time when the annual cold and flu epidemics also peak, as does dengue fever, transmitted by *Aedes* mosquitoes in annually increasing case numbers since it became endemic in the Maldives by 2004. As of mid-December 2020, the Maldives had recorded a total of 13,804 coronavirus infections, of which 599 cases were active and 25 hospitalized.

There had been 48 fatal cases, for a death rate of 0.35 percent. The deaths included 41 locals and 7 migrant laborers from Asian countries. Extrapolating from the small population, that amounted to a death toll of roughly 90 per million. The Maldives' COVID-19 figures thus were comparable to some of the best-performing European countries in this pandemic, notably Finland, with 84 deaths per million, and Norway, with 73. Compare that with the present author's home country, Austria, which had suffered 524 deaths per million as of mid-December.

## REOPENING THE RESORTS

Just in time for the high tourism season, the Health Protection Agency reported only eight new cases for December 21, 2020, bringing the rate of new infections per 100,000 down to 3.46. Germany's popular leisure airline Condor and several other carriers resumed two weekly flights to Male', despite the worrying number of new COVID-19 cases and deaths in Europe, reaching new highs on an almost daily basis. By Dec. 17, Velana International Airport was receiving about 4,000 tourist arrivals per day, nearly back to the pre-pandemic maximum of 5,000.

As part of the country's reopening, the Ministry of Tourism issued safety guidelines for visitors and people working in the sector. Visitors to the

archipelago must fill out an online health declaration form prior to departure and take a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to verify that they are not infected. On arrival, tourists undergo thermal screening, must wear masks, and are strongly encouraged to maintain physical distancing and install the local contact-tracing app on their mobile phones. An additional health check is carried out at resorts before departure, and PCR testing can be arranged if requested by the home country. Tourists placed in quarantine (for having been in contact with infected persons) or in isolation (if they have tested positive or developed a high temperature or other symptoms) are not allowed to exit their resorts except for medical emergencies.

In contrast with these accommodations for tourists, migrant workers face a mandatory quarantine period of 14 days on arrival. So do Maldivian staff arriving at a resort from the Greater Male' area or a local island being monitored for active cases by the Health Protection Agency. Workers returning to a local island from a resort with active cases also face a two-week quarantine period. The prohibition on daily commutes between local and resort islands has a disproportionate impact on female Maldivian workers, who are already underrepresented in the resort tourism industry; most are used to commuting between their home island and resort on a daily basis.

Instead, Maldivian resort workers usually stay for a month on a tourist island in shielded staff quarters, followed by four days off. This form of intra-archipelagic labor migration cannot be easily reconciled with Muslim family values, including care for small children.

Some 40 resorts had already reopened by mid-July 2020. By late December, the Ministry of Tourism had approved the reopening of 140 resorts, as well as more than 200 guesthouses in Male' and on local islands.

## TOURISM AND ISLAM

The Maldivian tourism industry emerged within the interplay among local island settings, malaria eradication efforts, economic and social development in the archipelago, and the demand for leisure on a global scale. As malaria cases went down and more fishing sailboats could be

equipped with engines and repurposed for transport, tourism was introduced to the island nation in 1972 with the opening of the Kurumba resort in North Male' Atoll—the first Maldivian island dedicated to foreign visitors.

If malarial fevers had still been raging in the islands, or if modernized transport infrastructure linking the islands had still been lacking, the tourism industry could not have taken off and fueled the archipelago's overall development trajectory. By the mid-1980s, over 70 resorts were in operation. Tourism had replaced fishing as the country's largest industry.

As a result of Maldivian resort tourism's organization in insular enclaves, many guests see little more of the country than its international airport and their resort island destination. Often they do not even know that they are vacationing in a fairly conservative Muslim country. President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, an autocrat who ruled for three decades until 2008, was a graduate of Cairo's al-Azhar University, to this day one of the leading academic centers in the Muslim world. Gayoom had belonged to the first cohort of Maldivian students that received state-funded secular and religious education abroad. (In 2020, at the age of 83, he became the Maldives' most prominent COVID-19 survivor.) He was

also the architect of the one-island-one-resort model that became the touristic signature of the archipelago.

This model transformed the spatial organization of a highly centralized island nation into a cultural geography of two distinct sets of islands. On resort islands, international visitors may enjoy alcohol and pork, wear bikinis, and have sex without a marriage certificate. All of these practices are strictly against the law on islands inhabited by the local Muslim population.

Coinciding with the defeat of Maldivian fever and the advent of the tourism industry was the rise of religious conservatism. Since the Republic of Maldives declares itself to be a 100-percent Sunni Muslim nation and links citizenship with religious faith, Maldivian identity is closely intertwined with Muslim identity. As with any religious community, there are more radical as well as more moderate views, values, and practices. Historical Indian Ocean trade networks have informed distinctive local Islamic practices in the Maldives for

---

*Malaria eradication was a turning point on the post-independence road to affluence.*

---



centuries. This tradition of interregional religious exchange with external centers has continued to inform contemporary practices, mostly in peaceful and moderate ways and forms.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, the first Maldivian student cohorts returned home with Wahhabi-inspired Islamic influences from madrasas in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Religious conservatism gained ground with the eventual fading of Gayoom's power, as the Maldives made a gradual transition to democracy and political liberalization by the mid-2000s. Radical elements sought to exploit this shift.

In 2007, the Maldives recorded its first terrorist attack when a homemade bomb exploded in the capital's Sultan Park, injuring 12 tourists. Extremist Islamist groups contributed to growing social and political turmoil during the presidency of Mohamed Nasheed, accusing him of not sufficiently appreciating and protecting cultural and religious values. This culminated in his contested February 2012 resignation, which he claimed had been coerced by the police and the military. Amid street protests on February 7, the day Nasheed left office, a small group of radical Islamists stormed the Maldives National Museum and smashed Buddha statues and other pre-Islamic artifacts.

In 2014, the first two Maldivians were killed in combat in Syria, where they had joined local armed extremists as volunteers. In 2015, some protesters marched in Male', carrying the flags of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, another extremist Islamist group in Syria. International media reported that fundamentalism was on the rise in the island paradise.

Radical and violent extremes should not be confused with everyday Muslim piety and ways of life. Nonetheless, the turn to more conservative Islamic values, and the influence of external support for these views, is evident in the Greater Male' cityscape. Mosques with large domes and minarets have risen alongside the traditional coral stone mosques that have long been architectural landmarks. The new mosques embody deepening ties with the Arab Gulf states. The Masjid al Shaikh Qasim bin Muhammad al-Thani was built on Hulhumale' in 2005 with financial support from Qatar. The recently opened King Salman Mosque in Male', the largest in the country, was funded by Saudi Arabia.

Muslim religious values thus are still being disseminated to the Maldives, much as secular influences are spread by tourism. Both continue to

create, in their specific contemporary ways, sets of transoceanic and global entanglements similar to those that the Maldives always had to navigate.

Island segregation between tourist enclaves and zones of everyday life, introduced with the Maldives' first island resort in 1972, lasted until 2009. By that time, the industry had shifted toward a community-based form of tourism that emerged internationally in the mid-1990s. In 2009, the government issued permits to operate so-called guest houses on local islands, bringing together socio-cultural and religious worlds that had been neatly separated for decades.

Inhabited islands became a new sphere of cultural interaction, calling for creative solutions. One guesthouse on the island of Gan (in Laamu Atoll), for example, offers a beach area surrounded by a 1.7-meter-high wall separating local Muslim life on the outside from the sunbathing tourists inside. The wall keeps tourists' activities invisible to local inhabitants while protecting the Muslim island community from the tourist gaze, allowing for their coexistence in close proximity within limited island space.

Another example is a safari boat named *Floating Bar*, moored in the lagoon of Maafushi, which serves alcohol to tourists only when offshore. The island of Maafushi, in South Male' Atoll, pioneered the liberalization of tourism in the archipelago when the first guesthouse in the Maldives opened in 2010. The 0.3 km<sup>2</sup> island is home to about 3,000 Maldivians. With over 60 guesthouses in operation, it now features the highest density of this form of accommodation in the country.

## VANISHING HERITAGE

The Maldivian islanders also have pursued a distinct path in religious matters within their archipelago's historical entanglement in cross-oceanic connections. The state chronicle *Dhivehi Tarikh* marks 1153 CE (548 AH) as the year when the country embraced Islam and transformed from a Buddhist kingdom into an independent sultanate. The Maldives are linked to the Muslim communities of the Indian Ocean littoral by following the Shaf'i school of Sunni law in combination with various folk traditions. This has distinguished them from Muslims within the Indian subcontinent, who predominantly belong to the Hanafi branch of Sunni Islam.

The distinct trajectory of Maldivian Islam within cross-oceanic Shaf'i Sunni communities and the wider *ummah*, the global Islamic community,

manifests itself in the archipelago's cultural heritage of remarkable mosques. Maldivian coral stone mosques are a vanishing legacy of astonishing beauty and elegance. They are simple buildings raised by several steps within a compound that typically includes wells for ablutions and a cemetery with coral stone tombstones; a minaret is the exception rather than the rule. Steeply sloped and tiered roofs with large overhangs protect the faithful from the tropical sun and monsoon rains.

As documented in great detail by architects Mauroof Jameel and Yahaya Ahmad, these mosques are built from interlocking coral stone and usually have a timber roof, originally thatched with palm fronds, but more recently covered with tiles and corrugated metal. The exterior typically is decorated with intricate ornamental carvings, while the interior features timber columns, lacquerwork, and calligraphy.

Coral stone architecture has been practiced in a much wider area along the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean littoral. Yet the version found in the Maldives is unique. Its style of carpentry originated in the pre-Islamic Buddhist period. The oldest Maldivian coral stone mosque in use dates to the late 1300s. The techniques and skills of this craftsmanship vanished around the first half of the nineteenth century.

Rising demand for coral stone led to a ban on coral mining in the 1990s. It was sought after as a durable construction material by the burgeoning tourism sector and the fast-growing Maldivian population, especially in the rapid development of Male' but also on the other islands. Originally, Maldivian vernacular architecture used coconut leaves and locally available timbers; coral stone was reserved for important uses such as mosques, tombstones, and other types of public installation. But when the flourishing tourism and mechanized fishing industries brought more income to island communities, the desire for lasting and more prestigious construction materials grew.

The extraction of living, reef-building, massive Porites corals (from the stony coral family *Scleractinia*, called *hirigaa* in Dhivehi), coral sandstone (lithified coral sand known as *veligaa*), and sand for construction purposes has put the island nation at serious risk. Healthy coral reefs serve as a strategic, natural offshore sea defense against waves and tides. They also provide important

habitats for marine life (especially juvenile fish) and thus serve as the major income-generating playground for the diving and snorkeling tourism industry. Facing rising sea levels and weather extremes triggered by global climate change, the Dhivehin are more dependent than ever on the resilience of healthy coral reefs.

## NEW ENTANGLEMENTS

Reef protection cannot be easily combined with the major infrastructure projects that have recently been undertaken in the Maldives. These projects, inseparable from geopolitical tensions involving Asia's big powers, have tested the Maldives' ability to navigate through troubled waters.

The most contested recent entanglements have involved increasing reliance on China in the two main fields of tourism and infrastructure. In 2019, the Maldives recorded 14.7 percent more tourist arrivals than the year before. Europe still was the largest source, but Asia already had become the second-largest market.

The Maldives' largest land reclamation project so far was the 1997–2002 construction of the largely artificial island of Hulhumale' to expand the urban area of Male'. Plans for connecting the two islands were eventually realized with the Chinese-financed Sina-male Bridge (previously known as the China–Maldives Friendship Bridge), which opened in 2018, linking Male' island with the neighboring airport island of Hulhule' and the adjacent living quarters of Hulhumale'.

This project was part of an intensified affinity with China under the 2013–18 presidency of Abdulla Yameen. China's growing presence proved somewhat detrimental for the archipelago's relations with India. The Chinese–Indian competition in the Maldives has been part of an emerging geopolitical rivalry for economic influence and strategic footholds in the wider region. Like other small island states in the Indian Ocean, such as Mauritius, the Seychelles, or the Comoros, the Maldives had traditionally been close to India. Because the widely scattered islands of the Maldives offer strategic vantage points in the center of the Indian Ocean, just 500 km off the Indian coast, it was poised to play a pivotal role in China's global Belt and Road Initiative.

Since being elected in 2018, however, President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has resumed closer

---



---

*Tourism had replaced fishing as the country's largest industry by the 1980s.*

---



---

relations with India. In 2020, India announced that it would fund a competing infrastructural landmark, the Greater Male' Connectivity Project, a set of bridges and causeways linking Male' with the three islands to the west: Villingili, Thilafushi, and Gulhifalhu (another ongoing land-reclamation project).

At a time when intensifying geopolitical competition and increasing anthropogenic impacts intersect with local island history and its cultural legacies, the Maldives face enormous challenges. Mastering them will require continuing to creatively navigate islandness and connectivity, pursuing a distinct trajectory within multiple entanglements. ■

# Is the Deep Freeze Between China and India Turning Hot?

SUMIT GANGULY

In mid-June 2020, units of the Indian Army and the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) clashed in the Galwan Valley in the Himalayan region of Ladakh, using clubs, rocks, and other improvised weapons, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and 4 of their Chinese adversaries, according to official accounts. Chinese construction of some tents and bunkers on the Indian side of the poorly demarcated Line of Actual Control (LOAC) was the immediate cause of the skirmish. It is widely believed that the PLA had taken these steps in response to India's road-building activities near the disputed border. In 2019, India completed a road several hundred kilometers long, connecting a military base to an airfield at Daulat Beg Oldi that is believed to be situated at the highest altitude of any such facility in the world.

The building of this road alone cannot explain the decision of the PLA to make incursions across the LOAC, where a confrontation is laden with the risk of dangerous escalation between two nuclear-armed rivals. According to some analysts, the other key factor was India's August 2019 move to strip the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir—in which Ladakh is located—of the autonomy that it had enjoyed under the Indian Constitution. This unilateral action was intended to undermine Pakistan's long-standing claim to the region by removing its special status. Since the People's Republic of China (PRC) deems Pakistan to be its "all-weather ally" and has staked its own claims to portions of Ladakh, India's aggressive action on Kashmir constituted a serious provocation in the eyes of Beijing.

In the wake of the June clash, a tense standoff ensued between Chinese and Indian forces in Ladakh. Both sides bolstered their capabilities in this remote, desolate area. It was not until early

September, when Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with his Indian counterpart, Subrahmanya Jaishankar, on the sidelines of a summit in Moscow, that the two sides managed to restore a modicum of normalcy in the region, agreeing to pull back their forces from the immediate vicinity of the border. Neither country, however, made the slightest concession in their joint communiqué, and the troop deployments that had been made since the initial confrontation remained in place.

In late January 2021, two more incidents punctuated the border tension. Indian press reports, based on satellite imagery, suggested that the PRC had built a village four and a half kilometers across the LOAC in the Upper Subansiri district of the disputed state of Arunachal Pradesh. The PRC denied that the construction of the village had transgressed the border.

The other incident took place along the border at Naku La in the Indian state of Sikkim. According to Indian sources, PLA units made incursions across the LOAC, leading to a violent clash with Indian Army troops. Although no shots were fired, soldiers sustained injuries on both sides.

This series of recent skirmishes came in the wake of yet another eyeball-to-eyeball confrontation that occurred in the summer of 2017 near the Bhutan–China–India trijunction on the Doklam plateau. Bhutan, the small Himalayan kingdom sandwiched between India and the PRC, had urgently sought India's assistance when PLA engineers started to build a road across territory claimed by Bhutan. India, which has a treaty relationship with the kingdom, quickly moved troops into the area in an attempt to deter the PLA from continuing with its construction activities.

New Delhi's willingness to intervene with such dispatch stemmed not only from its concerns about Bhutan's security, but also from the proximity of this border area to the narrow Siliguri

---

SUMIT GANGULY is a distinguished professor of political science at Indiana University and a Current History contributing editor.

Corridor (known colloquially as the Chicken's Neck) that links India's heartland with the states of its northeast. Although the Chinese and Indian troops did not come to blows on this occasion, they engaged in another standoff for weeks. The confrontation finally ended when the PLA-led construction concluded and both sides drew down their forces.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping sought to defuse the tensions, holding informal summits in Wuhan, China, in May 2018, and then in Mamallapuram, India, in October 2019. Despite their apparent cordiality at the first meeting and the fanfare that accompanied the second, neither made any real headway toward grasping the nettle in the relationship.

What explains these rising tensions in Sino-Indian relations? After all, the two sides had agreed on a spate of confidence-building measures since 1990s. More to the point, they have held as many as 21 rounds of high-level talks since the 1980s, in addition to a number of summits designed to resolve the border dispute that had culminated in a brief, brutal war in October 1962. The recent sharpening of the rivalry can be attributed to the evolution of relations over the past decade or so, with nationalism on the rise, though it has deeper roots.

## HIMALAYAN FIXATION

The long-running territorial dispute stems from the British colonial legacy in South Asia. British India's Himalayan borders with China had not been demarcated to the satisfaction of both parties by the time India obtained its independence from the British Empire in 1947. Matters worsened when the PRC invaded and annexed Tibet in 1950. The occupation of Tibet, which had maintained autonomous status since the eighteenth century, brought China directly to India's frontiers.

Well aware of its own limited economic and military capabilities, India sought to conciliate China in hopes of moderating its behavior. Despite some initial bonhomie between Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India and Chairman Mao Zedong of the PRC, a border dispute soon erupted. The PRC laid claim to large swaths of territory across the Himalayan region. Two major clashes between Indian and Chinese patrols took place in 1959 along the disputed border.

In an attempt to reach a resolution, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai visited New Delhi in 1960. But extensive discussions between the Chinese delegation and Nehru's cabinet deadlocked, and no progress was made toward defusing tensions. India subsequently embarked on its so-called forward policy, which involved sending lightly armed troops into areas that the PRC had formally claimed. This strategy was fundamentally flawed, since the Indian units lacked adequate firepower or logistics. Not surprisingly, the Indian positions were swiftly overrun when battle-hardened PLA forces, which had earned their spurs in the Korean War, launched an offensive in October 1962. The war ended within less than a month when the PRC declared a unilateral cease-fire and withdrew its forces from some of the areas that it had occupied. However, it held on to about 15,000 square miles of territory.

No other military engagement in India's post-independence history has had as much salience for its armed forces or political leadership as the debacle of the 1962 war. Both military and civilian decision-makers have remained fixated on the security threat posed by the PRC. India's nuclear weapons program fitfully evolved in the wake of the first Chinese nuclear test in 1964. And India has maintained a high degree of vigilance along its northern borders over the past several decades, while making a series of attempts to resolve the demarcation dispute.

Over the past decade, despite the efforts of various Indian governments to conciliate the PRC, the relationship has deteriorated. In large part, the sharpening rivalry and border tensions must be attributed to a shift in Beijing's perception of New Delhi.

India's current pandemic-inflicted economic doldrums aside, the country had been on a fairly steady growth path over the past two decades, enhancing its potential as a viable competitor to the PRC in Asia. During this time, India had also shed much of its anachronistic, reflexive anti-Americanism and started to forge a strategic partnership with the United States. Finally, it had refused to participate in Beijing's massive global infrastructure-building scheme, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Most importantly, New Delhi had raised serious diplomatic objections to a component of the BRI that involved the construction of

---

*The occupation of Tibet brought  
China directly to India's frontiers.*

---

a highway through disputed territory in Jammu and Kashmir under Pakistan's control. Beijing reacted aggressively to India's moves.

The PRC started a series of limited probes along the Himalayan border to test Indian resolve and preparedness. One of these incidents, involving a significant PLA incursion in Ladakh, occurred while Xi was on a state visit to India in September 2014. Despite this provocation, New Delhi continued with its efforts to conciliate Beijing. India's outreach to the PRC was mostly focused on personal diplomacy at high-level bilateral summits, designed to broaden possible arenas of cooperation, including trade and investment, while attempting to sequester the border dispute and other contentious security issues.

This strategy, as the events on the Doklam plateau and more recently in the Galwan Valley clearly demonstrated, has ended up in a cul-de-sac. Faced with growing nationalist anti-Chinese ire at home since the June 2020 clash, the Modi government has adopted a more unyielding stance toward the PRC. Apart from bolstering its military capabilities along the border, it has banned a range of popular Chinese apps, placed constraints on Chinese investments in India, and rebuffed invitations to join the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a Chinese-led Asian trade pact signed by 15 countries in November 2020—one of the largest deals of its kind. It is hard to envisage New Delhi changing its strategic posture toward Beijing anytime soon.

Given domestic public opinion, the PRC's unwillingness to ease its military posture along the

disputed border, and the shock of the Galwan incident, the Indian government can be expected to maintain a heightened state of vigilance. To that end, it will likely seek to boost its logistical and intelligence capabilities. It is also unlikely to resume its outreach to Beijing via high-level summitry. Even a return to normal diplomatic intercourse is unlikely, despite the mutual withdrawal in late February of all forces from the site of clashes that took place near Pangong Lake in Ladakh.

Meanwhile, India will also continue to strengthen its strategic partnership with the United States, though New Delhi expects that the Biden administration, unlike its predecessor, will not adopt a fecklessly strident tone in its dealings with the PRC. Finally, after much hesitation, India is already in the process of more overtly casting its lot with the Quad, the emergent naval cooperation arrangement among India, the United States, Japan, and Australia. The largely unspoken issue underlying this alliance is a shared set of concerns about the increasing assertiveness of the PLA Navy in the Indian Ocean. The US military's 2018 decision to rename its Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command signaled the significance of India in US strategic calculations.

This conjunction of strategic interests all but ensures that the Sino-Indian standoff in the Himalayas will remain fraught with the prospect of a wider conflict. And since India and China both now have authoritarian and nationalist leaders in charge, a resolution through compromise will be that much more difficult. ■

# Recovering Hindustan and India

AUDREY TRUSCHKE

**M**anan Ahmed Asif opens his most recent book with a question: What happened to Hindustan? I imagine that your average Western reader would meet this question with another: What is “Hindustan”? In that admission of ignorance lies one axis of the book. Asif wants to know, how and why was Hindustan forgotten—and what are the consequences of our failure to remember?

This forgetting is a story set squarely in colonial-era scholarship, mainly authored by British men. “Hindustan” is a Perso-Arabic term that was used during the second millennium CE to refer sometimes to the Indian subcontinent at large and other times to northern India specifically. It means, literally, “land of the Hindus”—the Perso-Arabic *hindū* often, in premodernity, denoted a subcontinental resident rather than a follower of a specific religion.

For Asif, “Hindustan” is more than a geographical descriptor. He aims to recover how the name once stood in for a capacious intellectual and political imaginary in premodern India. Exploring how the idea of Hindustan animated political thought and history writing is the second major axis of his book. The narrative is set in tenth-through seventeenth-century northern and central India, among an elite group of Persian-speaking Muslim men—most importantly, the seventeenth-century historian Firishta. Firishta wrote a history (*tarikḥ*) of India that proved highly influential—and, Asif argues, crystallized a sweeping vision of Hindustan.

## CIRCLING BACK TO COLONIALISM

Asif, a historian at Columbia University, proceeds in a circular fashion in his attempt to unpack

**The Loss of Hindustan:  
The Invention of India**  
Manan Ahmed Asif  
Harvard University Press, 2020

“simultaneously [the] history of Hindustan as a concept and its erasure.” He opens each chapter with a discussion of colonial-era historiography and then jumps back in time to recount ideas of Hindustan in earlier Arabic and Persian texts. He closes each chapter with a close reading of Firishta, especially his ideas on Hindustan and his historiographical innovations. While Asif’s brilliance shines throughout the book, it sparkles a little more brightly in the sections on Firishta.

As a result of Asif’s tripartite, spiraling method of analysis, readers never find a chapter devoted exclusively to either colonial or premodern thinkers. Rather, they are always paired in a fraught relationship of misinterpretation, loss, and attempted recovery.

As a reader, I was disoriented by Asif’s constant toggling back and forth between discrete time periods and groups of thinkers, often in a nonlinear fashion. Every time I settled, at the end of a chapter, into reading Firishta through Asif’s eyes, I turned the page to a new chapter to find myself thrust, once again, into colonial-era bastardizations of Firishta and other premodern intellectuals. This mental agitation was, I think, by design. Asif wants readers to be thrown off-kilter in order to force us to confront the weight and extent of our colonial-era intellectual baggage. In so doing, Asif intervenes not only in intellectual history as it has been written, but also in the reader’s own thought processes, thereby suggesting how we might reimagine this history going forward.

Within each triptych chapter, Asif devotes much of his attention to history writing among Arabic- and Persian-medium thinkers: Firishta and a range of his predecessors. Asif underscores the importance of placing Firishta within a robust intellectual lineage, arguing: “To approach Firishta through the lens of the historians who preceded him is already to dismantle the claims of colonial historiography.” He also demonstrates

---

AUDREY TRUSCHKE is an associate professor of history at Rutgers University–Newark. Her latest book is *The Language of History: Sanskrit Narratives of Indo-Muslim Rule* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

a deep interest in undoing colonial historiography by additional means, namely by directly engaging with it. In total, he devotes a third or more of his book to criticizing colonial-era European thinkers. In some chapters, he dedicates more pages to them than he spends on Firishta and the seven centuries of thinkers before Firishta combined.

Surely all historians of South Asia concur with the need to work through our colonial legacy of scholarship so that we might recover and formulate better ideas. Still, I wondered about other consequences of Asif's decision to give colonial-era voices so much airtime. He arguably accords colonial scholars more prominence by discussing their views at the beginning of each chapter. Asif promises the reader, again and again, that we will get back to Firishta, just after we hear more about the colonial-era men (they are nearly always men) who undervalued and misread Firishta. As Asif puts it, "Firishta's history acts as the last word" in each chapter. This is true, but it also means that Firishta never gets the first word. Asif does not allow Firishta or any other premodern Indian to speak without their voices being accompanied by those of the colonial-era scholars who largely butchered and mutilated premodern Indo-Persian texts.

Insofar as Asif's own scholarly interests lie, in part, in analyzing colonial-era scholarship, his emphases are unobjectionable. But how well does this approach serve his interests in Firishta and other premodern Arabic and Persian thinkers? Asif notes in his introduction that nobody has ever written a monograph on Firishta. He has now written one, in which he spends at least as many pages giving voice to British perspectives as he devotes to Firishta's writings.

I take Asif's point that we must work through colonial-era sources to see and thereby avoid repeating their biases. But must we grant them exposure equal to premodern Indian voices? Asif's call throughout his book to reimagine the past using a "deep archive of history writing that stretched from Juzjani to Firishta to Muhammad Habib" is compelling. I wonder if we can ever do that free of the need to rehash (and perhaps unintentionally reiterate) colonial-era ideas, or at least freer than we are now.

## DOWNHILL TROPE

*The Loss of Hindustan* tells a story of decline. Asif argues that there was an older, premodern idea of the subcontinent as Hindustan, a place for members of all religious traditions, that was supplanted during colonialism and in modernity by an India envisioned for Hindus alone. As Asif frames the narrative arc of this story, "By the end of the nineteenth century, Firishta's *Tarikh* and his Hindustan were both vestiges of a ruined past."

Stories of decline are popular in colonial and modern narratives of South Asian history concerning a wide range of things, including Indian Buddhism, Sanskrit literature, India's global position and economic strength, and Hindu culture. These narratives have varying levels of veracity, but the trope of a downhill slope runs powerfully through them all. This interpretive framework, also deployed by Asif, deserves further scrutiny.

Asif's vision of Hindustan—of what has been lost—is grand. He sees "Hindustan" as embodying a sort of inclusion that, although not envisioned specifically along religious lines, had the upshot of putting Hindu and Muslim views on an equal plane at times. I found myself convinced by the argument's arc, even while quibbling with some of its details.

For instance, early in his history, Firishta recounts the great Indian and Hindu epic, the *Mahabharata*, a startling departure from the more standard Perso-Islamic practice of relying exclusively on the Quran and other Islamic materials for early history. Asif uses this opening to argue that Firishta allows for two origin stories, one drawn from a Hindu epic and the other from the Islamic holy book, that operate in parallel temporalities. I agree that Firishta tells two stories, but I think he ranks them. In my reading of the same section of text (in my 2016 book *Culture of Encounters*), Firishta judges the *Mahabharata*'s narrative as inferior to the Quranic story.

Scholars often diverge in their interpretations. But in this case, I wondered if we should question Asif's reading as possibly playing too easily into his larger story of decline. Then again, in light of Asif's insights elsewhere in the book, perhaps I ought to question my own reading as possibly carrying over colonial assumptions that Firishta can offer nothing of intellectual value beyond basic political facts.

---

*Majoritarian political projects seek to deny modern South Asians access to their rich history.*

---



Asif's tale of loss ends, temporally speaking, in the present day, as majoritarian political projects in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh seek to deny modern South Asians access to their rich history and to flatten it, including that of Hindustan. As he puts it, "the making of 'India' and the unmaking of 'Hindustan' are twinned processes."

In his afterword, Asif notes that majoritarian and nationalist projects have been challenged at every step by formidable historians in several South Asian nations, such as Muhammad Habib, K. K. Aziz, and Romila Thapar. Some of them have endured heavy blowback for their commitment to historical research and refusal to bow to politically fueled narratives. Asif joins this illustrious lineup in reimagining the past such that, maybe, future thinkers will not see the current generation of historians as a story of decline.

## OTHER INDIAS

Firishta's Hindustan is part of a broader history of imagined "Indias." Asif gives an excellent exegesis on pre-Firishta Arabic and Persian sources on Hindustan, but we must look elsewhere for imaginaries of India found in other language traditions and pre-1000 CE. In this sense, Diana Eck's 2012 book *India: A Sacred Geography* makes an instructive read alongside *The Loss of Hindustan*. Eck observes early on that many people think "India" is a Western creation, and then she devotes over 500 pages to recovering various ways of imagining India in premodernity. She mentions many of the standard terms for the subcontinent or parts thereof in premodern Sanskrit—including *bharata*, *bharatavarsha*, *jambudvipa*, and *aryavarta*—and also uses pilgrimage and myths as means to gain insight into how some premoderns envisioned India.

Asif does not like using the term "India" for premodern South Asia because he sees it as delimited, first by colonial thinkers and since 1947 by the modern Indian nation-state. He recognizes the deep etymological history of "India," going back to

Vedic Sanskrit (though he does not mention the linguistic theory that it may go back still further, to Dravidian languages spoken in the Indus Valley Civilization in the third millennium BCE). But for Asif, the baggage of colonial and modern "India" seems to overpower its historical weight.

Other scholars, myself included, have seen this differently. Because of its Sanskrit (and, possibly, Dravidian) roots, "India" stretches back, at least in its antecedents, for several millennia. It cuts across language traditions and generally offers a depth, breadth, and temporal expanse needed for those of us who work on periods of Indian history when Arabic and Persian speakers were not yet around. When modern Hindu nationalists seek to limit the meaning of "India," both today and in reference to the past, it only underscores the exigency in using this historical term for premodern subcontinental history and thereby buttressing and developing its more capacious senses.

It is with both deep appreciation and a recognition of irony that, while pushing back against Asif's understanding of "India," I acknowledge that his book offers resources to help me think about how concepts are embedded in specific histories. But I still want a polyphonic India. Just as Asif wants to recover the layered imaginary of Hindustan, I want to recover the layered imaginary of India. Just as Asif wants Firishta, rather than colonial thinkers, to have the last word in his story, I want historians rather than nationalists to have the last word on "India."

*The Loss of Hindustan* is a tremendous contribution to how we understand an influential premodern Indian historian, Firishta, and the colonial legacy's implications for how we encounter the past. Asif intervenes in how we imagine India and Indian historiography—though Asif himself might cringe at my use of the terms. This is not only a book that you must read, but also one that you must chew over and debate—both with and about—so that, like Asif, you might develop an enhanced capacity to imagine the past. ■