

Pernau, Margrit: *Bürger mit Turban. Muslime in Delhi im 19. Jahrhundert*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2008. ISBN: 978-3-525-36843-5; XII, 404 S.

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Margrit Pernau's voluminous monograph (formerly a Habilitation dissertation for the University of Bielefeld, examined in 2006, and awarded the prestigious prize of the German Historical Society in October 2008) constitutes a path-breaking investigation in the field of trans-cultural history. Most innovatively, however, the study focuses on the life-world of Delhi's Muslims in the long 19th century. Whilst emphasizing the cultural specificity of the old Mughal capital's multifaceted environment (with valuable insights provided into the plethora of religious orders and schools, doctrines and inter-communal tensions, as well as into the recasting of Islamized society, its aristocracy, bureaucracy, legal and medical professions, educational institutions, notably the intellectual dynamism of Delhi College, together with glimpses of the courtly milieu with its noble women and courtesans, implicated in ambivalent reformatory developments), Pernau dexterously decodes the complex scenario for a German readership, intent on refining its understanding of the differentiated functioning of Indo-Islamic society and culture as the latter interacted with and became transformed under the increasing impact of colonial rule. Her foremost aim, thereby, is to highlight the ensuing tumultuous politico-economic changes, brought about through British colonial intervention in the Asian subcontinent, which radically altered the socio-political and cultural landscape, in particular of the once resplendent Mughal capital of India.

Pernau's lucidly and meticulously argued oeuvre is divided into five sections, including a sophisticated theoretical introduction (p. 1-24) and conclusion (p. 347-368). Its three monograph-like chapters judiciously examine in an incisive manner, on the one hand, the intercultural convergences and assimilations, and on the other, the seminal transformations and upheavals initiated first by the British

take-over of the Mughal capital in 1807, and again more devastatingly after the Great Rebellion of 1857 which marked a watershed in the history of British India; the latter event, to whose brutal suppression and ideologically coloured historiographical interpretations attention is drawn in a cogent and balanced manner, was to drastically transform and reconstitute colonial politics, all the while creating unbridgeable barriers in British-Indian relations which were to be increasingly determined by racist ideologies, rampant in the late 19th century.

Yet, in skilfully unravelling the complex dimensions and shifting asymmetries encapsulated in the Indo-Islamic colonially compounded social milieu, Pernau's avowed intention is to investigate the discursive formation processes of different identities – social, cultural, political, economic, religious, and gender specific – acquired and refashioned during this formative period by members of the Muslim ashraf (= gentry) community which, as she succinctly shows, in the early modern (or pre-colonial) dichotomously ordered societal organisation was situated above the commoners, or *ajlaf* (p. 71) populace. Most perspicaciously, in the course of her incisive study, Pernau underscores how this social ordering itself became reconfigured to metamorphose into a new tripartite structure: more specifically, she elucidates how the restructured ashraf community, from the latter half of the 19th century, began to comprise the middle stratum of society, and became distinguished from the nobility, or *nawab*, on the one hand, and the commoners, or *ajlaf* (p. 195, 357), on the other.

Not only is Margrit Pernau's detailed empirical analysis of this radical societal realignment innovative and enlightening, revealing as it does the crucial role played by contingent factors in influencing socio-historical processes during the zenith of the British Raj; but this is even more so the case with regard to the conceptual and theoretical underpinnings as well as the methodological implications integral to her analysis. As such, her sophisticated study can be viewed as a pioneering exercise in trans-cultural comparative inter-crossings, both empirical and intellectual, inviting the reader to take cognisance of

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the entangled interactions between colonized subjects and colonial master, their juxtaposed societies, cultures and traditions, and more specifically between the ensuing social and cultural productions. To elucidate: by having recourse to a pragmatic and reflexive inductive methodology, Dr. Pernau endows the above-mentioned socio-cultural transformation with paradigmatic meaning by demonstrating in a most effective manner that the newly reconstituted mid 19th century ashraf Muslim community can be perceived as representing the South Asian pendant to the German Bürgertum, and this: despite the very evident culturally specific differences (in particular with regard to religious practice) compounded by the historically determined political and economic factors. The outcome of her reflexively astute analysis is to quite convincingly underscore the legitimate use of the provocative neologism „Bürger im Turban“, or „citizen sporting a turban“, concretising thereby the intriguingly enigmatic product of entangled cross-cultural histories.

Indeed, this is the crux of the matter! And paradoxically enough, this cross-cultural apparition of the Muslim Bürger is shown to metamorphose into existence at precisely that crucial juncture in British-Indian colonial history when, in the wake of 1857, a gaping chasm was being established between British rulers and subjugated Indians. Notwithstanding this apparent *contradictio in adjecta*, by drawing on recent debates in comparative cultural and „transfer“ studies, as well as inspired by theoretical perspectives from the young discipline of connected and shared history (cf. the bibliography pp. 375ff., listing the most up-to-date post-modern studies on *histoire croisée* or entangled history), Margrit Pernau discursively argues the case for this challengingly innovative construction, however paradoxical it may appear. Furthermore, her theoretical claims are substantiated by meticulous empirical analysis of 19th century historical sources which constitute more or less virgin Persian, Urdu, and colonial archival material.

Yet, albeit the enthralling nature of this exercise in foregrounding trans-cultural interpenetrations, the inevitable cultural impoverishment and subsequent rigidification, con-

comitantly experienced by Indian Islamic society in the latter half of the 19th century remains relatively unheeded (with mere allusions made to this when dealing with emerging communalist and nationalist tendencies in the fore – and aftermath of the Khalifat movement, pp. 308ff). This perceptible shortcoming, however, scarcely detracts from the ambitious and courageous agenda of her painstaking work. For Margrit Pernau's ulterior aim is to initiate a much needed methodological amplification of historical scholarship, in particular in Germany, by laying the foundations for inaugurating trans-cultural history as a sub-discipline. Whilst focussing on this overall objective, Pernau is, nonetheless, cognisant of the crucial necessity (albeit at times only implicitly) to devise an equally meaningful as well as functional trans-cultural conceptual framework which renders diverse historical-cultural phenomena cognitively and mutually accessible to all „parties“ involved, in order to obviate tendentiously lop-sided conclusions.

A truly balanced trans-cultural perspective would, thus, ideally render transparent the entangled histories of interconnected societies (of colonial metropolis and colonised periphery), viewed from a variety of (opposed) vantage points. Formulated as a research desideratum, this would mean, according to Pernau, that rather than simplistically insisting on the comparability of their subjects or the need for their equal treatment, the stakes would be higher: namely, through a close analysis of the entangled nature of their histories, the intertwined processes of the respective societies constituting one another (i.e. through mutual influencing) would be underscored. Admittedly, a colonial historian, such as Pernau, would need to take more critically into consideration the asymmetrical contingent factors, impinging on colonial variants of *histoire croisée*, than is the case in the present study. Last but not least, conceptual analytical categories such as nation, religion, education etc., which conventional comparative approaches have tended to define as fixed, would be highlighted as constituting entangled constructs with shifting histories and trajectories – an astute observation made by Pernau who, in formulating this scholarly „manifesto“, charts viable trajectories for future research investiga-

tions.

All in all, Margrit Pernau's opus magnum constitutes a pioneering study with regard to the history of colonial South Asia, in particular, and more significantly so, in view of initiating new research perspectives for the discipline of trans-cultural history in German academia, in general. Hence, to render this prime example of cutting-edge research accessible to a wider audience, it would be desirable to have it published in English translation.

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