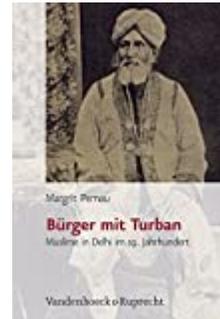




Margrit Pernau. *Bürger mit Turban: Muslime in Delhi im 19. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008. 404 S. ISBN 978-3-525-36843-5.



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Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (October, 2009)

M. Pernau: Muslime in Delhi

During the past decade many members of the historians' community have launched appeals to transcend narrow nationalistic and ethnocentric frameworks and write truly 'interactional' or 'entangled' histories. Almost immediately, less adventurous scholars have reacted by pointing to the methodological pitfalls and practical difficulties that are inherent in such culture-crossing endeavours. With her monograph on the emergence of a Muslim middle class in Delhi in the long 19th century, the German historian Margrit Pernau has taken up the challenge and produced a remarkable study that puts into practice what others only preach. Pernau belongs to the rare subspecies of historians who are well qualified for such a project, since she has been thoroughly trained in both European and South Asian history. Her area studies background allows her to use material written in Persian and several Indian languages, while her grounding in European (and specifically: German) history permits her to apply a theoretical framework that is rarely used by South Asianists, comprising Niklas Luhmann's theory of structural differentiation and the Bielefeld school's extensive research on German 'bourgeois society' (Bürgerliche Gesellschaft). Given this extraor-

inary combination of qualifications, it is hardly surprising that Pernau has set ambitious goals before herself. Her objective is to 'overcome the compartmentalization of European and South Asian history' and develop methods and concepts that are capable of describing the interaction between cultures. (p. 9 f.) The somewhat clumsy German title of her monograph 'Bürger mit Turban' would roughly translate as 'turban wearing citizens' and contains the central argument in a nutshell. If we manage to widen our

notion of a perceivedly archetypical European social character to the extent that we can imagine a 19th century Bürger (bourgeois or citizen, according to context), wearing a turban rather than a top hat, Pernau maintains, the conceptual apparatus of European history has been truly enriched and modified through the input of Extra-European historical expertise. Beyond the actual narrative about the transformation of the middle and upper layers of urban Muslim society in modern South Asia, Margrit Pernau's study thus has far-reaching claims to make. Ultimately the creation of a new historiographical approach is at stake. The 'entangled historiography' (p. 12) she advocates, dismisses the often heard

appeals promoting a hermetic cultural relativism and instead pleads for a new universalism in the humanities. However, it is a universalism avoiding the a priori privileging of European concepts and categories that has been prevalent so far. It is precisely the validity of such concepts in non-European contexts that is seen as the litmus test for their general usefulness.

The narrative is structured chronologically, taking three major political crises in North India as focal points. The establishment of British rule in the Delhi region in the first decades of the 19th century, the 'Great Rebellion' in the 1850s and the political reforms introduced during the 'high-noon of the Raj' in late 19th and early 20th century were critical catalysts in the processes of social transformation examined by the author.

The central problematic that is taken up in all the three sections is the question pertaining to the shifting understandings of self, identity and ethos among Delhi's Muslim elites in the period under survey. Eschewing a simplistic account of Muslim identity as being largely, if not solely, determined by the religious doctrines of Islam, Pernau underscores that other factors were also at play. Next to religion (and particularly the various strands of Islamic reformism emerging since the late 18th century), social status, family and clan, gender as well as education are hence other important categories that are put under scrutiny by the Berlin based historian. Margrit Pernau shows how Muslim self-identity, was constantly negotiated and re-negotiated by the historical actors she is concerned with. This complex process of identity production involving several axes of differentiation, one of her key arguments runs, created not one but multiple identities that were not only partly overlapping but also constantly changing over time. In spite of the complexity of this picture, she is able to pinpoint some salient general trends and developments.

In the early 19th century, the urban Muslim elites in North India were not organised in a manner that would qualify them for a comparison with the German *Bürgertum*. The main dividing line was social status based on (sometimes fictitious) notions of descent. The group of the ashraf ('nobles') united the traditional landholding aristocracy with the new administrative and intellectual elites in the realm of respectability but it excluded merchants and entrepreneurs, i.e. groups that were constitutive of the German bourgeoisie. (93 f.) This pecking order started changing in the wake of the 'Great Rebellion' of 1857/8. The crushing of the so-called 'Mutiny' by the British meant also the end of the

social esteem previously held by the established Muslim ruling classes. Delhi's ashraf increasingly distanced themselves from the aristocracy and sought a rapprochement with the economic elites which had hitherto been counted among the *ajlaf* or 'commoners'. (p. 195 f.) A new set of values centred on the ideals of education, industriousness and self-restraint gradually replaced older upper-class standards embodied in a lifestyle of chivalry and conspicuous consumption. The new 'firmament of bourgeois values' (p. 210) that became visible over post-rebellion Delhi eventually allowed for an accommodation of economically and demographically significant groups like the Punjabi traders among the ranks of the ashraf.

The self-fashioning of the newly emerging middle class as a rational and morally superior alternative to the old elites built both on elements borrowed from the British and indigenous cultural resources. Furthermore, it was by no means connected with a thorough secularisation. Quite the reverse: The religious rhetoric of (reformed) Islam was a prominent element in this development. In many other ways, however, it was comparable to the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe. The fixation on the provision of the right type of Western education (pp. 239-60), the emergence of a public sphere complete with newspapers, debating clubs and a vibrant associational culture (pp. 117-24 and 261-78) as well as concerted efforts to disseminate new gender role models (pp. 290-308) could likewise be found in European societies only few decades earlier. According to Pernau, the turban wearing north Indian *Bürger* was thus the end product of a long transformation process that was largely completed by the first decades of the 20th century.

The translation of Western knowledge into Indian vernaculars was one of the central preoccupations of the new Muslim middle class that Pernau describes. The 400 densely printed pages of her book likewise offer a highly original and, I daresay, successful exercise in translation. On the one hand she manages to fruitfully apply concepts emanating from debates in German history and sociology in a South Asian context. On the other hand, she translates insights from South Asian history into an idiom that is palatable for a European reader. Particularly scholars of German history might be surprised to find how illuminating an excursion to allegedly 'exotic' settings can be, precisely because of the many commonalities one can discover.

Admittedly, *Bürger mit Turban* is no light reading. Non-specialists might not always find it easy to follow the author through the extremely rich genealogical, bi-

ographical and anecdotal details that she uses to bolster her arguments. The author's at times somewhat stilted writing style makes the reading experience even more challenging. Students of South Asian history will face additional problems: As Pernau's volume is addressed to a German readership without a previous knowledge in the region, she has to give a survey on the broader historical background in each chapter together with the more specific findings of her inquiry. Being confronted time and again with well established facts can become a bit annoying for specialists. But such a predicament

could hardly be avoided in a book which is designed to transcend the borders not only of regions but also of disciplines. At any rate, these are minor points of criticism, hardly detracting from the merits of what can only be described as a path-breaking study. One cannot but hope that this well structured, thoughtfully argued and meticulously researched piece of history-writing will find large audiences beyond the usual suspects interested in either the history of colonialism or that of the Indian subcontinent.

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Citation: Harald Fischer-Tiné. Review of Pernau, Margrit, *Bürger mit Turban: Muslime in Delhi im 19. Jahrhundert*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. October, 2009.

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