

Book Review: An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad: Scandal in the Raj by Benjamin Cohen

Amanda Ford

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#), [Communication Commons](#), [Economics Commons](#), [Geography Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ford, Amanda () "Book Review: An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad: Scandal in the Raj by Benjamin Cohen," *International Social Science Review*. Vol. 96 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol96/iss1/6>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Cohen, Benjamin B., *An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad: Scandal in the Raj*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019. xi+347 pages. Hardcover, \$28.95.

The study of British rule in India is generally divided into two categories—before 1857 and after. The shock of the Sepoy Mutiny created ripple effects that were felt not only in India, but throughout the entirety of the British Empire. The consequences of this rebellion were felt politically, socially, and culturally and it is hard to overstate the importance of this division in describing the difference between before and after. Or so we think. Benjamin Cohen's *An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad: Scandal in the Raj* uses a sexual scandal to shrink this demarcation and highlight the ways in which lived experience can complicate this neat historical division. Rather than a more traditional monograph with a tightly structured thesis and supporting narrative, Cohen's work is a narratively driven exploration of race, class, gender, politics and empire. *An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad* is less interested in answering questions than it is in posing them.

At the heart of this story is a couple—Ellen and Mehdi Hassan. She was Anglo-Indian, daughter of an Irish immigrant, and he was from a middling Indian Muslim family. They married when she was nineteen (probably) and he went to become a powerful member of the Deccan political structure, essentially second in command to the prime minister. Mehdi was called to the bar and the couple even traveled to Britain and where they were briefly received by Queen Victoria herself. The first third of the book traces their family backgrounds and Mehdi's meteoric rise within Deccan political society, and Cohen pays particular attention to the ways in which having an Anglo-Indian wife made this ascent possible. However, Mehdi's ambition and success also made enemies, and Ellen became an easy target through which they could bring him down. That brings us to the scandal at the heart of the story. On April 6, 1892 an eight-page pamphlet titled,

“An Appeal to the Ladies of Hyderabad” was published anonymously. This shocking document argued that not only were Ellen and Mehdi not legally married, Ellen was a prostitute before publicly presenting herself as the wife of a public official. In response to the release of such a salacious document, Mehdi sued the supposed author, a man named Mitra, and for the next nine months the two engaged in a very public court battle, which Mehdi lost. After this defeat the couple lost all social standing, and Mehdi was fired. He was dead within two years, and Ellen had to rely on wealthy friends to pay her rent and bills. She died in April 1912, and friends were forced to sell her piano to pay off her debts.

This court case revealed many of the fault lines within Indian and Anglo-Indian society in the late nineteenth century. Ellen was born into a poor Anglo-Indian family, but her whiteness was still a social benefit to Mehdi, at least until it was not. At the trial several defendants argued that, in fact, Ellen was at least partially of Indian extraction—she was not *really* white. She converted to Islam in order to marry Mehdi, but after their move to Hyderabad she shunned the traditions of *purdah* and behaved publicly as a white Christian woman, which for many threw the legitimacy of the marriage into doubt. Most importantly for British officials Ellen met Queen Victoria as Mehdi’s wife and the horror of a possible prostitute/mistress of an Indian man meeting the Empress of India was too much to bear, which is one reason why they helped force Mehdi out of his position in the princely state.

It is easy to see how this case crosses over so many fault lines within the historiography of the Raj. Studying this marriage is a unique chance to look at the lives of lower-class Anglo-Indians and Indians who were not part of the elite class but had ambitions to join the elites. It seems clear that the strict divisions between British and Indian in the post-1857 world were not carried down through all levels of society. Cohen’s work would be perfect for an undergraduate classroom

because it raises so many questions that historians are interested in answering, but it does so in a very approachable way. The fact that the book remains so open ended is both a boon and a frustration. It leaves a lot of space for the experienced historian to layer their own arguments on top of the narrative, but there are times Cohen could be more forceful with his analysis. For instance, Cohen argues that Mehdi understands that having a white—or possibly white passing—wife would be a boon to his political ambitions, but at the same time devotes very little space to an analysis of Mehdi’s understanding of himself as an Indian man in a British empire. Early in the book, Mehdi is brought to tears at the sight of Queen Victoria smiling at his wife, but by the end of his life, after he lost everything Mehdi questions how differently his case would have turned out had he been white. Cohen devotes one paragraph to this change of heart, but it feels like a much bigger moment, and one with larger implications for historical analysis. One is left with many questions at the end of this story, but also many avenues for further discussion.

Amanda Ford, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of History
Carson-Newman University
Jefferson City, TN