

AAS

OMAR KHALIDI

Differentiation and homogenization was the theme of a panel at the Association of Asian Studies meeting in Boston on 12 March 1999. Sponsored by the South Asian Muslim Studies Association (SAMSA) and chaired by Prof. Theodore P. Wright, Jr (retired, State University of New York-Albany), the panel brought four papers, one read in the absence of the presenter, and a discussant, Prof. Ali Asani of Harvard University. The ideology of Muslim nationalism in India dominant during the 1940s held that Muslims constituted a nation distinct in every respect from other Indians. The fieldwork of the anthropologists published in the 1970s contended that contrary to the ideology of 'two nations,' Muslims were regionally, linguistically, ritually and behaviourally diverse, in addition to the division by sect. Our panel re-examined this issue, interrogating both differentiation and homogenization in recent decades.

Omar Khalidi (MIT) presented a paper on the homogenization of Konkani Muslims of coastal Maharashtra to Urdu, a language spoken in North India and the Deccan. Konkani Muslims are adopting Urdu instead of native Konkani for education, formal speech, and mass communication amongst

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themselves and others on a large scale. Khalidi argued that if the present trend continues, it is likely that this group will be fully homogenized with the Urdu speaking communities of North India and the Deccan.

Similarly, Jonah Blank (a recent Harvard PhD and presently with US News & World Report) presented a paper on the Islamization and modernization of the Daudi Bohras of Mumbai and western India. Over the past decades, the clergy of the Bohras has attempted – with great success – to establish a group identity that is at once universally Islamic and unique to the denomination. It has done so not by rejecting modern or Western ideas and technologies, but rather by embracing them: the Bohras have used modernity as a tool to reinvigorate their core traditions. Jonah's case study should serve as a powerful refutation to those who would essentialize Islamic revivalism or even (to use a more ideologically-laden term) Islamic fundamentalism as anti-modern.

Jonah's argument seems to confirm some of the conclusions reached by Ali Asani of

Harvard University (panel discussant) in a 1987 paper on the Khojahs, an Ismaili denomination similar in many ways to the Bohras. Asani had concluded that within the short span of half a century, the Khojah sense of identification with the larger Islamic tradition has become so strong that many young members have come to regard their community's earlier beliefs as belonging to a phase in history when the early missionaries had to make concessions to the Hindu milieu. At present, they affirm that they are merely returning to their proper fold in Islam.

The third paper delivered by Laura D. Jenkins (University of Cincinnati) was on 'Caste, Class and Islam: Debating the Boundaries of "Backwardness" in India.' While normative Islam is caste-free, educationally and economically poor Muslim groups are often associated with low social status, some of whom are grouped as Other Backward Classes (OBC), a bureaucratic category comprising both Hindu and Muslim poor. Many Muslim OBCs are seeking affirmative action to

improve their conditions, but the question is beset by the problem of group definition of backwardness, which has the potential of splitting Muslims along quasi-caste lines. Jenkins' paper thus shows the persistence of differentiation based on caste or caste-like clusters among Indian Muslims, particularly if some groups benefit from inclusion in the OBC category and others not.

Finally, the paper by Frank Fanselow (University of Brunei-Darussalam), read in his absence by Khalidi, described and analysed the conversion of Dalits to Islam in the early 1980s. Although it was a local affair confined to an obscure village called Minakshipuram in Tamilnadu, the publicity surrounding the conversion drew national attention souring Hindu-Muslim relations in a state known for inter-communal harmony, thus negatively homogenizing it with the national trend. ♦

*Dr Omar Khalidi is an independent scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Cambridge, USA.
E-mail: okhalidi@mit.edu*