

Book Review: Law and Muslim Political Thought in Late Colonial North India

By Adeel Hussain

London: Oxford University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780192859778

<https://doi.org/10.56529/isr.v5i1.584>

Manzoor Ahmed

¹Universitas Islam International Indonesia

manzoor.ahmed@uiii.ac.id

²Bahria University Health Sciences Campus, Karachi, Pakistan

manzoorahmedk@outlook.com

Adeel Hussain writes *Law and Muslim Political Thought in Late Colonial North India* as an academic study which investigates colonial responses from North Indian Muslim intellectuals toward British colonial transformations. The analytical text belongs to historical and political assessment, which studies how law combined with modernity and Muslim identity evolved in a dramatically changing era.

The book initiates its discussion by observing that different communities hold unique cultural practices that require laws to evolve according to these traditions for governmental stability. The thought originating from Sir Syed Ahmed Khan's writings establishes the central theme of the entire book. Throughout the book, Hussain shows how Muslim elites worked to redefine their political rights and legal position after major political events affected them during the 1857 Rebellion. The book is centered on the Mughal traditions that were inherited and the way they clashed with the modern needs of British colonialism to create a modern legal framework. The book explains that Indian Muslims worked alongside British rule to transform laws and politics through internal debates that led to modern reforms of the Indian political system.

The opening chapter defines all essential ideas that will guide readers throughout the publication. The foundation of the essay begins with Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, who strongly stated that laws need to fit local customs and societal opinions of various nations. As per the chapter, the rebellion of 1857 shaped the future direction of Indian Muslim history. When British colonial rule replaced Mughal power, the traditional Muslim leadership (Shurafā') lost all their former authoritative functions.

According to Hussain, the political losses that Muslims experienced extended into their personal domain along with cultural realms. The colonial law introduced modernity as an overwhelming force which forced the 'Shurafā'' to adjust their positions. To Sir Syed and others, this scenario was seen as an opportunity to carry out internal reforms and debates. They refused to merely grieve their fallen status, so they commenced internal evaluations about societal position while addressing their connection to the modern legal system. The chapter constructs the main theme of the book by demonstrating how Muslim political thinking experienced a transformation between colonial rule and revolutionary dedication.

In the 2nd chapter, Hussain explores more about the Muslim elite experiences in post-1857. The author demonstrates how British authorities assigned all the rebellion blame to Muslims before blocking their political advancement. Some intellectuals led by Sir Syed found this situation beneficial for discussion and legislative reform, while escaping immediate administrative responsibilities.

According to the author, multiple concrete instances show how Muslim intellectuals applied legal language while communicating with Britain's colonial administration. Hussain explains how legal discourse among Muslim intellectuals emerged as both an effect of Indian liberal ideas spreading throughout the country and a result of Muslim intellectuals applying liberal concepts to their traditional values. The description of Sir Syed as a classic liberal applied, but his particular form of liberalism involved offering guidance to the state instead of expecting demands to be fulfilled. Muslim responses to colonial rule existed on multiple levels, as this chapter demonstrates, while showing how people used innovative political methods to adapt to new circumstances.

This chapter investigates the conflict that exists between traditional customs and the requirements of the colonial modern era. In his work, Hussain traces how

Muslim intellectuals questioned the influence of customary and religious and legal systems that would mold their collective future. Some Muslims wanted to keep old legal customs, but various writers believed that modification of laws was essential to face present challenges.

The chapter justifies these arguments using certain evidence from speeches and writings. The British did not recognize the significance religion held for Indians according to Sir Syed, while they attempted to enforce laws based on their understanding that disregarded traditional local beliefs. Hussain explores the redefinition of *akhlāq* (civility) and other terms by using Victorian values and colonial pressures on Indian society. This chapter shows how tradition is connected with modern ideas to produce the development of Muslim political ideas.

Hussain examines the 1857 rebellion and its consequences through this chapter. The rebellion served as a critical moment while carrying transformative power. The tragic destruction, together with violent events, forced Muslim intellectuals to profoundly evaluate their state and inter-Muslim relations.

This section explains how the British response to the rebellion disempowered Muslim administrators while striking their institutions, thereby giving birth to fresh political opportunities. According to Hussain, the Rebellion became a hidden benefit for Muslims because it released them from governing responsibilities while enabling essential internal discussions about reform. This chapter presents extensive historical information and a fair perspective on how the rebellion affected Muslims.

Hussain examines legal pluralism, which describes the simultaneous existence of multiple legal programmes within a given society in the 5th chapter. The British attempt to standardize Indian law during colonization faced failure because they did not comprehend or failed to recognize domestic practices and beliefs.

Hussain illustrates, through examples, how Muslim populations reacted to these modifications. Colonial law met two reactions according to local societies: some resisted its entry, but other communities adjusted through legal protection of their inherited traditions. The text shows how Indian Muslims maintained their ability to influence and shape their legal structures and political conditions, even though British colonial dominance existed.

A significant portion of Hussain's analysis also focuses on the later phase of colonial India, particularly the legal and political debates of the 1920s and the 1930s. In this context, he examines the contributions of key figures such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, highlighting how Jinnah engaged with constitutional law and colonial legal frameworks to articulate Muslim political demands and minority rights within an evolving political order (pp. 115–140). Hussain demonstrates that Jinnah's approach was deeply rooted in legal reasoning and procedural politics, reflecting a broader shift in Muslim political thought toward institutional negotiation and constitutionalism under colonial rule.

The final section of the book explores how the reform movements and debates discussed earlier permanently affected the region. Following colonial rule, Muslim intellectuals from late colonial North India retained their intellectual production influence, which powered local political thinking and governance.

He examines the continuing impact of Sir Syed alongside other notable figures through various political and representation movements that took place across India and the global Muslim community. The conclusion section highlights the importance of knowing this historical approach to explain the present arguments about law enforcement and identity formation, along with political systems.

Readers from all backgrounds can easily understand the intricate historical and legal material that Hussain presents because of his clear writing style. His readable narration also makes examples of the 18th-century and historical quotes real. Through its comprehensive exploration, the book presents Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and other major figures with full human complexity exhibiting motivations and achievements, thus making them vivid and unforgettable to readers. Hussain conducted detailed objective research on colonial times by showing how Muslims reacted to British governance without making their responses simplistic. The book relies on diverse sources, including official documents along with writings and speeches, to establish a sound basis for his analysis, which increases the validity of his arguments. The themes that address law development combined with identity transformation and adjustment to changes continue to influence present-day discussions across South Asia together with other regions throughout the world.

The book becomes substantial to read because it presents a great number of details, which slows down readers who lack historic background knowledge.

Repetitions occur various times throughout the book, which solidifies the main arguments, yet occasionally creates a feeling of unnecessary repetition. The author limited his analysis to elite ‘Shurafā’ perspectives because he predominantly studied their experiences while giving minimal attention to the lives of regular Muslims or other populations in North India thus producing a restricted view of the subject matter.

This book presents a detailed overview of late colonial North Indian Muslim political thought because of its thorough research. From my perspective, reading this book proved to be both educational and mentally stimulating. The book questioned some of my established beliefs about that period, which led me to value Muslim community members for their ability to persevere and adjust.

Every individual interested in South Asian historical developments and colonialism or legal and political thought theory should read *Law and Muslim Political Thought in Late Colonial North India*. Scholars, along with students and readers, should study this book because it showcases how current debates about identity law originated. The content is generally easy to read, with detailed explanations making it a useful reading even after the first difficult sections for an inexperienced reader.

This book is an important contribution to the history and politics of South Asia. Hussain illuminates the intricate dynamics of the interaction of law, tradition, and modernity in colonial India through the lens of the experiences and thoughts of Muslim thinkers at a time of significant change. The book is a blend of solid academic content and a simplistic language that can confer much historical knowledge on different readers.

References

Hussain, A. (2022). *Law and Muslim Political Thought in Late Colonial North India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Khan, S. A. (1873). *The Causes of the Indian Revolt*. Benares: Medical Hall Press.

Bayly, C. A. (2012). *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.