

Megan Eaton Robb. *Print and the Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. 264 pp. \$99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-008937-5.

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Pasts of a *_Qasbah_* in North India

In a co-edited volume published in 2017, *Muslims against the Muslim League*, Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan E. Robb highlight divergent Muslim voices in South Asia that were critical of the idea of Pakistan in order to “open up new ways in which ideas about Muslim political subjectivities can be conceived at interstitial levels.”[1] In this independently authored work, Robb continues her interest in alternate Muslim politics through “an emphasis on locales constructed over and against national identities” (p. 78). In *Print and the Urdu Public*, Robb traces the history of *Madinah*, an Urdu newspaper based in the town of Bijnor, and illustrates how print and material texts are deeply connected to urban spaces and attitudes to time. The book broadly covers the colonial decades of the twentieth century with a strong emphasis on First World War and the inter-war years. Robb argues “that in order to understand this period it is important to pay attention to attitudes towards time and space in delineating the Urdu public sphere” in which the small town, or *qasbah*, “stood apart from the vibrant development of the Urdu public in the early twentieth century” (p. 2). A *qasbah* was a settlement with a population above several thousand, but Robb argues that it is the *qasbah*’s distinctiveness that carries relevance for its public culture. Started by

Muhammad Majid Hasan in 1912, *Madinah* newspaper allowed the *ashraf*, or Muslim elites, of Bijnor to debate national and international issues while remaining deeply engaged in their local political context. In connecting print to urbanity, Robb specifically aims to show that characteristics of the *qasbah* of North India as well as the newspaper were produced simultaneously to “create productive alterities to European and nationalist imagined feature” (p. 4).

The book lies at the intersection of urban and cultural history and demonstrates how Islam was a crucial conceptual category in the Urdu public sphere. Using the newspaper *Madinah* along with secondary literature on Urdu print culture and state archival collections of newspapers and periodicals, Robb connects the newspaper intimately with the aesthetics and ethics of Islam comprised of networks of elite Muslims who saw journalism as a duty in which “the Urdu public as it appeared in *Madinah* was mapped by roads linking the *qasbah* with the holy cities of Islam, the *ashraf* with the global Muslim community, and a thorough mixing of the present with Persianate and Arabic pasts” (p. 101).

Robb begins her story by situating *Madinah* in the larger world of Urdu newspapers, including

al-Hilal, *Comrade*, and *Zamindar*, where young journalists, editors, assistant editors, and writers were linked to each other through common networks and shared concerns and moved from one newspaper and cultural forum to another in their journalistic careers. One of the strongest contributions of the book here is that it does not just emphasize the discursive content of *Madinah* alone but shows that newspapers were extensions of social networks in which even the physical appearance of the newspaper was connected to correspondences. In this cultural world, opinions and attitudes to critical political and religious issues shifted over time, and “working within a network of publications that traded writers and editors regularly, *Madinah* became a recognizable, distinctive publication that represented a Muslim voice from the *qasbah* context, a set of voices that gained influence precisely because they resisted easy categorization” (pp. 48-49).

After contextualizing the journalistic world of *Madinah*, Robb examines the role of time in the formation of public space in Bijnor. Historical figures, editorial writings, and advertisements connected the past and future of Islam in the pages of *Madinah*. Technology also had a specific impact on the character of Bijnor and the newspaper *Madinah*. The expansion of the telegraph by the 1870s transformed Bijnor, but it was not connected to the railway line until 1930. Explaining such contradictory effects, Robb writes, “in going without a railway connection for so long Bijnor *qasbah* incubated an alternate landscape specific to that locality, while simultaneously making use of the telegraph and the postal service to sew itself into the fabric of the international world, receiving news and transmitting its own influential perspective far afield” (p. 66). Well before the telegraph, *Madinah* occupied a world in which *ashraf* networks of correspondence played a key role and the cultivation of values of hard work, devotion, and reputation were to constitute the ideal subjects of Bijnor district.

Robb also gives a detailed description of the lithographic printing process and discusses the role of lithograph in the preservation of calligraphy, in which the newsprint and its visual culture had “irruptive power, influencing patterns of community formation, knowledge transmission and the texture of knowledge” (p. 94). The aesthetics of newspapers, with its emphasis on Urdu calligraphy, continued to rely on older traditions, combining Arabic and Indo-Persian influences. Calligraphy was also central to the Islamic identity of *Madinah* and Robb argues that with the shift to the printed word, excellence in calligraphy “became elevated as important to religious experience” (p. 114).

The final two chapters of the book focus on political coverage in *Madinah*, including international events and domestic affairs. In her discussion of international events like the Italo-Turkish and Balkan Wars, Robb argues that *Madinah* attempted to reconcile both “fealty to the British Empire and obedience to Islam” and that it “went to elaborate lengths to insist that there was no tension between the heritage Indians claimed from European Christians on the one hand and their link to the Ottoman Empire on the other” (p. 135). Robb discusses several strategies that *Madinah* adopted to achieve its goals of balancing loyalty to Britain with concerns for the caliphate and Islam. Such reconciliation had important consequences for the Urdu press, and these international debates in *Madinah* “gave shape to a new Urdu public of global proportions, a public that, while it built on a dichotomy between Christian and Muslim power, avoided relating Britain explicitly with the Christian half of that dichotomy” (p. 136).

At the same time, Robb also demonstrates that some efforts at demonstrating British loyalty were the result of colonial censorship. Colonial legislation implementing censorship often produced solidarity among newspapers, and Robb writes that newspapers commented on the censorship of others even though they could not comment on

their own censorship. Such solidarity “presented the newspaper conversation as an essential space for Muslims, public in the sense of providing a forum for open airing of views outside the limitations of the private correspondence networks” (p. 143). *Madinah* expressed skepticism through the 1910s due to British indifference to the Turks, but it was during the Khilafat movement that *Madinah* made a clear connection between the interests of Muslims in India and Muslims of Turkey. After the passage of the Rowlatt Act and the end of the First World War, *Madinah* increasingly aligned with Congress and linked it to the Muslim community.

Domestic politics also distinctly shaped *Madinah* and in the 1920s and 1930s, the newspaper increasingly opposed the Muslim League and defended cooperation with Hindus in Islamic terms. But it was during the by-election of Bijnor in 1937 that the newspaper openly supported Congress, showing, according to Robb, “that Islam was the language not only of Muslim League proponents but also of influential supporters of Congress, including *Madinah*’s writers and editors” (p. 175). In studying the local politics of *Madinah* and its emphasis on Bijnor, Robb’s aim is to complicate our understanding of Muslim politics. She argues, “a range of authentic and politically significant regional cultures lay beyond the Hindu/ Muslim dichotomy and the equally notable urban/rural dichotomy. As a multidimensional approach to time and geographic location, the concept of the timescape captures the richness of this variety, punctuated by the distinctive temporal rhythms of Muslim life” (p. 176).

Robb’s work is rich in factual detail and represents an important intervention in the urban history of South Asia but also departs from it. Recent historiography on *qasbah* towns, particularly work by M. Raisur Rahman, emphasizes families as building blocks of *qasbahs* that were embedded in literary tradition, whereas Robb explicitly links space to the reproduction of material texts and the construction of modern Islam. As she argues, *Mad-*

inah “transformed its geographic location into a source of moral authenticity for the modern age, and as a modern Islamic voice it wove its local public onto the fabric of history being lived by Muslims in many places” (p. 182).

Note

[1]. Ali Usman Qasmi and Megan E. Robb, ed. *Muslims against the Muslim League: Critiques of the Idea of Pakistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 6.

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