

Simulating the Social: A Comparative Ethnography of Subjectivity and Belonging among Ahmadis in Northern India and the United Kingdom.

Abstract

Situating historical debates on Islam in the South-Asian region has long been a contested and methodologically challenging endeavour. Ahmadi Muslims constitute one such sensitive and often contested subject within the broader landscape of these debates. The Ahmadi movement and its rise in the early 1900s significantly reshaped the articulation of Islam, presenting it in a new light. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the founder of the movement, received great opposition from other Islamic sects especially from the Sunni scholars. This opposition culminated in the constitutional curtailment of their rights through the 1974 amendment in Pakistan, which formally classified Ahmadis as non-Muslims. They were imagined as an anomaly or controversy rather than agents who were reforming the religious sphere of Islam on a global scale. Therefore, the thesis addresses the absence of Ahmadi Muslims from both scholarly discussions and the public sphere by re-examining the terrain of concealment and everyday life. This is achieved by investigating the everyday gestures performed by communities that are ostracized based on their religious practices to navigate their existence as othered identities. Using this as a premise and further borrowing from Goffman's (1963) conceptualisation of stigma and the presentation of individuality in reference to an 'other,' the study tries to uncover the historical trajectories, social experiences, and modulated interactions used by persecuted religious minority groups to assert themselves in the public domain. I conduct an ethnographic exploration of Ahmadis in four different field sites, spanning from North India to South London. Being an Ahmadi Muslim at the altar of Islamic paradigm is probed with questions like how does Muslimness of Ahmadis come to fore when the social milieu comprises a Muslim majority? To address this question, the thesis engages with the everyday worlds inhabited and shaped by Ahmadis, through which they ground their existence within spaces of relative safety and cohabitation. Memory becomes a refuge for the migration anxieties embodied by dispossessed communities in a globalised world. In this context, the thesis asks whether personal memoirs can serve as testimony to the neglect and oppression experienced by Ahmadis as a historically marginalised community. It incorporates such literature to build a parallel repository of archives, bringing collective memory into print through autobiographical and biographical sketches authored by Ahmadis. At the same time, fieldwork challenges often leave researchers disarmed, calling for new methodological approaches that can read silences as meaningful forms of expression. Responding to this, the thesis moves away from the vocabulary of heterodoxy and deviation to foreground a more lived account of Ahmadis and the ways in which they perform religiosity in the everyday.

