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Post-Orientalist Blues: Cultural Fusions and Confusions

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Strumming at the cultural chords of political nationalisms is the latest rage among scholars needing to cheer themselves out of the post-orientalist blues. Neo-orientalist melodies are not very different from studies of the 'other' which bore the brunt of Edward Said's ruthless critique. While assuming various tonalities, orientalism in its most recent incarnation takes the self-projections of the subjects seriously and uncritically. Odd references to irony, even contradiction, are explained away by invocations of cultural specificities. Smothered with sympathy, the 'other' remains as inaudible and inscrutable as ever.

David Gilmartin's well-researched and important study* echoes the cultural nationalist interpretations emanating from certain circles in American academia. Fine historical insights are lost in a mystifying haze of inadequate and well-worn cultural explanations. A disturbing discord between the empirical evidence and the conclusions, and between more focused analysis and broader arguments, betrays the conflicts of a scholar minded to pursue the logical implications of his field research yet unable to shake off the dominant influences of his intellectual milieu. Gilmartin appears to have succumbed to these influences late in the day. There are multiple instances where he blunts, qualifies or altogether drops his line of argument. Astute readers would do well to separate the research from the contrived overtones of the conclusions. But for many, Gilmartin's study may confirm the more stubborn misconceptions surrounding the role of Islam in the movement for a Pakistan.

It is Gilmartin's contention that the Pakistan movement was the 'first and perhaps most successful' attempt to 'bring about an Islamic transformation of the postcolonial state' (p.1). Recognising the paradoxes of the Pakistan movement, he admits that its political objectives were moulded by the institutional structures of the British colonial state. Yet he endorses the view of Pakistan's officially subsidised historians that the Muslim League's movement succeeded in defining new cultural foundations for the Pakistani state (p.9). Organised around these twin propositions, the study sets about unravelling the dialectic between the colonial state structure and the Islamic nexus of the demand for a Pakistan. While Gilmartin presents an insightful and penetrating account of the British colonial state system and its relationship with the local kin-based structures of rural Punjab, he remains tentative and obtuse in his analysis of the highly complex and contradictory cultural underpinnings of the Muslim League's movement. At his pioneering best in the first part of the book, Gilmartin is trailing in the blaze of received wisdoms in the second.

He is clearly more comfortable in the former than in the latter role. Gilmartin's most significant contribution is his examination of the compulsions under which the British established their imperial system of authority in the Punjab and its subsequent interactions with local power structures as well as Islamic ideas and institutions. More than in other parts of India,

*David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*, University of California, Berkeley 1988.

the British imperial system in the Punjab rested on accommodations of convenience with indigenous social structures. British perceptions of Punjabi society were quite as important in defining the nature of the accommodations as the actual nature of the multifarious local settings. So although there was 'little evidence of a clearly demarcated system of 'tribal' leadership or political organization in most of the Punjab' (p.19), the British came to see the 'tribe' as the fundamental unit of organisation in the province. This obfuscated, if not distorted, the variations in rural social structures with large implications for Punjabi customary law which, in seeking to protect 'tribal' structure even where it did not exist, became farther removed from the tenets of the Islamic Sharia. Gilmartin, however, argues that the notion of 'tribe' was not entirely a figment of the colonial imagination. The dominant form of social organisation in rural Punjab, after all, was based on descent. But tribal and 'biraderi' (patrilineal kinship group) structures of authority are not one and the same. Wholly absent is an account of how Punjabis themselves perceived the tribe and biraderi - an unfortunate omission in a study that makes so much of indigenous cultural peculiarities.

What Gilmartin does provide is a most useful discussion of the administrative difficulties the British faced in fitting the 'tribal' category with Punjab's little local complexities. Expediency tended to get the better of colonial dilemmas. Nothing demonstrated this more strikingly than the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900. The kingpin of an imperial system based on the collaboration of rural intermediaries, the Act became a magna carta for all those whom the colonial mind deemed politic to classify as 'agricultural tribes'. This gave impetus to the proliferation of agricultural tribes. Although imperial policy barred against the distribution of land to religious institutions, the political logic of British administration soon overcame secular considerations. Religious leaders claimed and were accorded the status of 'agricultural tribes' and, depending on their local influence, received landed gentry grants. By the early twentieth century pirs and sajjada nashins had become part and parcel of the landed 'tribally' based leaders who were the mainstay of British administration in the Punjab.

This heightened the age-old contradictions between doctrinal Islam and the more worldly and mediational forms prevalent in the rural localities. With the disintegration of central Muslim state power, reformist ulema had turned to emphasising the internal spiritual regeneration of the community. The structures of religious mediation were an obvious target of attack. On the basis of select case studies, Gilmartin pinpoints the anomalous position of pirs and sajjada nashins within Punjab's Islamic cultural system. Some came to imbibe the teachings of the reformist ulema, but were too ensconced in the imperial political system to launch an Islamic challenge against the colonial regime. Shrines set up by reformist pirs invariably combined scriptural Islamic teachings with the popular and syncretic Punjabi world view in which the old forms of mediation remained central. Gilmartin's subsequent arguments are implicitly based on treating the reformist movement as a bridge between the orthodox and reformist Islam of the urban areas and the syncretic and mediational forms of the rural areas. Yet as his own empirical evidence shows, reformist movements did not resolve the contradictions so much as mitigate some of the tensions between doctrinal and popular Islam.

Even in the urban areas, the hierarchies supported by the colonial state served to constrain independent political expressions of an Islamic identity. In the twentieth century, Punjab's cities were developing a style of communal politics based on increasing manipulation of Islamic symbolism. The practical political meaning of urban communalism, however, was limited by the

secondary role of the cities in the structure of imperial authority, and by the patronage systems nurtured and sustained by the colonial state. Despite the growth in urban communalism, Gilmartin shows how the institutional politics of Punjabi Muslims failed to develop independently of a state system based on the collaboration of sprawling intermediary networks.

Though he does not make the connections, Gilmartin's discussion of urban communalism is important in understanding the chronic absence of organised parties and the dependence of politics on the state in post-independence Pakistan. The chapter on the Unionist party, a supra-communal alliance of 'agriculturist' tribes, is particularly illuminating. Gilmartin vividly traces the quandaries facing the Unionist party with the coming of full provincial autonomy and the extension of the franchise under the Government of India Act of 1935. Needing a counterweight against urban communalism, the Unionists relied upon Punjab's rural systems of mediation and the Land Alienation Act of 1900 to claim an indigenous cultural justification for central authority. The support of the pirs ensured a religious following for the Unionists even as they rejected urban communal politics. Defining the Land Alienation Act of 1900 more broadly, the Unionists now stressed differences between agriculturists and non-agriculturists on cultural rather than on purely economic grounds. Gilmartin reminds the reader that the Act did not define community on the basis of religion and so could not solve the Unionist party's problem of cultural legitimacy. Much the same would appear to be the case with the Unionist-pir nexus. But Gilmartin does not make the point, possibly because in his view the reformist movement apparently had narrowed the gap between urban communalism and the rural structures of religious mediation. This takes away the sharpness of his otherwise astute analysis of the Unionists' strategy for self-perpetuation. The discussion of the impact of the great depression is skilful and convincing, as is the account of the Unionists' success in using local factions to their electoral advantage without in fact building up a real political party organisation. Case study after case study underscores the importance of local patronage structures in determining factional alliances. Gilmartin notes the disjunction between politics at the local and the provincial levels. 'Class' and 'religion' were the main idioms of party formation in provincial politics. But the role of local hierarchies and patronage structures in factional politics meant that rural voters were not directly tied to the political system.

Having painstakingly established the centrality of local structures and their constraining influences on provincial politics, and specifically those of an Islamic identity, in both the rural and the urban areas of the Punjab, the author leaps into the upper stories of intellectual discourse. The ideas of various pamphleteers and thinkers are invoked to trump the realities and contradictions of Punjabi Muslim politics as he now thunders ahead to clinch on behalf of the Muslim League a new cultural definition of state power. The thinking of Mohammad Iqbal, according to Gilmartin, is a key to understanding the ascendancy of the Muslim League in the Punjab during the late nineteen-thirties and forties. A votary of the urban Muslim communal tradition, Iqbal deplored Punjab's rural system of religious mediation and ideologies of state power derived from local kin-based identities. This in some ways linked his thinking with that of the reformist ulema, albeit with very different political implications. Iqbal's conception of the ideal Muslim state and an active and self-concentrated commitment to the unifying features of the Muslim community, transcending local kin-based identities, rejected the passive acceptance of Islamic scriptures by the people. The cultural definition of state authority depended on symbols and political leaders and, above all else, on each Muslim's active commitment to Islam.

Paradoxically, it was Mohammad Ali Jinnah with his secular leanings who best fitted Iqbal's bill for leadership of the Muslims. Gilmartin sees Jinnah's handling of the controversy over the Shariat Bill of 1937 as the most profound instance of a symbolic bridging of the mental gulf between adherence to Islamic ideals and attachment to the structures of local power. By treating the Shariat as a symbol of Muslim solidarity and by forestalling a challenge against local structures of rural power, Jinnah was able to assuage the extreme communalists without alienating the rural leaders. Gilmartin is confusing the politics of compromising expediency with the politics of coherent symbolism. The most trenchant critics of Jinnah's stance were naturally the reformist ulema who 'saw in the achievement of Muslim unity at the expense of the religious content of Muslim identity a mockery of the ideals they stood for' (p.173). But while conceding the ambiguities in Jinnah's position on the Shariat, Gilmartin sees it as paving the way for a symbolic commitment to Muslim unity.

Yet the symbolism pieced together by the author was not more important than actual socio-cultural and political dynamics. Gilmartin would have been nearer the mark if he had distinguished between Islam as ideology and Islam as culture. Conflating the two is to misunderstand and, consequently, to misrepresent the dialectic between Punjab's local cultures and the Muslim League's self-proclaimed ideology. Gilmartin's abiding faith in symbolism becomes increasingly more incredulous as he ventures deeper into his analysis of the League's movement for a Pakistan. Those who know their Quaid-i-Azam will be surprised to learn that Jinnah's demand for Pakistan 'grew directly from his efforts to define a cultural foundation for Muslim power'(p.181). Replacing political with cultural may be consistent with recent trends in studies of the 'other', but can hardly lend validity to this novel interpretation of Jinnah's concerns. Gilmartin's resort to an exasperating degree of vagueness seems intended to make his argument emphasising singularity over diversity more formidable. Jinnah's symbolic equation of all Muslims with Pakistan is said to have been based on his view of the community 'not as an organized competitor for power within the colonial system but rather as a political entity standing above the organization of society'. Such a conception of community had nothing to do with the organisation of society or even on the structures of power, but on the 'significance of the state as a symbolic political expression of Muslims' common Islamic identity' (p.187).

Even if one were to concede a measure of plausibility to this rather long-winded formulation, Gilmartin's own findings are reason enough to pause and consider. As he correctly records, the reformist ulema lambasted Jinnah precisely because he sought to build support for the League within the structures of colonial politics. So there were some Muslims at least who were not persuaded by the tactic of separating the battle from the symbolism. Given the difficulties of reconciling urban communalism with the systems of religious mediation in rural Punjab, it is impossible to see how the projection of symbolism from the higher planes onto the lower planes could impart a new cultural foundation to the demand for a Muslim state.

Gilmartin takes the apparent resolution of contradictions at the symbolic level more seriously than their persistence at the practical level. In one breath he argues that the Punjab Muslim Leaguers were cut from much the same cloth as the Unionists. But in the very next he suggests that the League succeeded in developing an independent rural base of support. This was because the younger generation of Unionist stalwarts upon joining the League drew a distinction between themselves and their fathers 'by rhetorically rejecting the ideology...[tying] rural society to the structure of British rule' (p.192). Rhetoric and practice are quite different. Such naivety

stems from Gilmartin's desperate concern to attribute cultural explanations to the Muslim League's hard-headed political manoeuvrings in the Punjab. He does not entertain the possibility that younger landlords may have begun leaning to the League, not due to a sudden cultural awakening, but because of the changing relationship between the colonial state and society on the eve of the British withdrawal. If Gilmartin is to persist with this line of argument he will have to return to the drawing board and assess why cultural considerations became more important for the Punjab's landed families during the forties and not earlier.

The final straw is Gilmartin's suggestion that a single pamphlet written by two former student leaders reveals how the Muslim League partly overcame the dilemma of finding an Islamic cultural definition while at the same time operating within the existing context of the imperial system. According to the pamphlet, the idea of Pakistan was derived from classical Islam and transcended all local divisions. Endorsing Iqbal, the pamphleteers argued that the urgent imperative was not the reform of the religious or administrative structure of society but the commitment of individual Muslims to Islam. Thoroughly persuaded, Gilmartin elaborates on the crucial role of the pirs in making a success of the League's electoral contest with diehard Unionists. He believes that a number of pirs developed a personal stake in the League's election campaign; not because this was the most appropriate tactical response to the prospect of a British transfer of power but because the pirs saw in the Pakistan movement an opportunity to break out of the colonial structures that had for so long thwarted their religious interests. The irony of pirs - those lynchpins of the system of mediation between the believer and Allah - preparing the ground for the equation of Pakistan with the assertion of a personal Muslim identity is lost on Gilmartin. But then symbolism can dissolve the most glaring of contradictions. Gilmartin maintains that Muslim voters who, we were told earlier, had been prevented by local factional structures from relating directly to provincial politics, in the 1945-46 elections managed to identify individually with the broader political community of Islam and were not merely swayed by the change in allegiance of their local spiritual leaders. If his own evidence is anything to go by, local identities rather than religious symbolism played a decisive role in voter choices in most constituencies.

Translating the League's expedient wooing of the structures of 'tribal' authority into the practical expression of each individual Muslim's commitment to the ideal Islamic state requires a considerable sleight of hand. Otherwise the worldly more than spiritual systems of religious mediation in rural Punjab, anathema to urban communalists, cannot be seen to have facilitated the League's search for a new and religiously informed cultural definition of state power. Even Gilmartin seems to be in two minds about the ideological significance of the League's electoral victory. He realises that the League's reliance on the local identities guaranteed the survival of 'critical elements in the ideological structure of the colonial system' (p.222). Yet three pages later, Gilmartin asserts that the Pakistan movement 'destroyed the ideological foundations' of the colonial system (p.225). It may have been better, certainly more consistent, to argue that the persistence of Punjab's local rural systems of mediation implies that the League's success lay not in destroying so much as incorporating the more salient aspects underlying the ideological foundations of the colonial state. This admittedly goes against the grain of his central proposition that the communal symbolism employed by the League in itself gave a new cultural definition to the Pakistani state. Yet the real value of Gilmartin's study lies in demonstrating just the converse. Despite its use of religious symbolism, the League could not reconcile Punjab's urban

and rural Islamic cultures. Gilmartin is imaginative, but unconvincing, in trying to pass off symbolic resolutions of conflicts and contradictions as a would-be fusion of the little and the great traditions of Punjabi Islam. Without such a fusion it is misleading to argue that the League's movement had in fact found a new and unifying cultural definition on which to base state authority in Pakistan. This becomes apparent when Gilmartin discusses the problems of identity and state legitimacy in Pakistan. In his opinion the heart of Pakistan's dilemmas is the difficulty in squaring the ideological basis on which the state was founded with the structures on which power is organised in the localities. While the dilemmas are very real indeed, Gilmartin's work furnishes proof that they are essentially dilemmas of distorted perceptions and misplaced symbolisms. These flow from assertions of a monolithic ideology and a narrowly defined cultural foundation to which both state and society are expected to conform.

The grand title notwithstanding, Gilmartin's book has little to say about either empire or Islam beyond the confines of a single province. Though it blocks the broader contexts, his work stands as a valuable piece of research on the Punjab. Gilmartin's arguments would have been more consistent if he had resisted bowing to the cultural orthodoxy of his academic environment. Recourse to an overarching Islamic ideology, however construed, has been a political device aimed at denying the rich mosaic of local cultures in the Punjab as well as the non-Punjabi provinces of Pakistan. By investing it with greater symbolic meaning than it merits, Gilmartin has missed an opportunity of enlightening the scholarly world about the relatively autonomous and complex diversities of local Punjabi cultures. The people of the Punjab, the corner-stone of Pakistan, have been far more comfortable basing their lives on a complex weave of Islamic and syncretic cultural norms and values than a handful of ideologues and scholars have been prepared to allow. It is a gulf which separates those who live and feel a culture from those for whom culture as an artificial construction is an explanatory variable of an uniquely irrefutable and overpowering kind.