

National Seminar on *Histories, Cultures, Politics: Islam in South India*

The seminar was a two-day event, held on August 17 and 18th. There were two sessions on each day, with five papers being presented on the first day and six on the second. There was an additional presentation by the Telugu Muslim writer and poet Mr. S.K Yousuf Baba on the second day. The focus of the seminar was on various social, historical and theoretical concerns in the field of the study of Islam and Muslims in the main south Indian states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. We also wanted younger scholars, who have just begun their research, for example, along with more experienced and better-known names in the field to come together at the seminar, so that one may both get a sense of the fresh research being done, as well as benefit from the perspectives provided by the way the field has been thus far researched.

The preparation for the seminar began about 10 months in advance, when we began a reading group. A regular group of ten to twelve people, from Anveshi, CIEFL and Osmaia University met once a month to discuss readings drawn from different books and journals, dealing with contemporary Islam, Muslims, and secularism in India and the world. The invitees- discussants and those who presented papers- were based mainly in the academy, that is, in various universities and research institutions across India (Prof. M.A Kalam from Madras University, Dr. Neshat Quaiser from Jamia Milia Islamia, Prof. Janaki Nair from CSSS, Kolkata etc.) However, we also had some freelance researchers and other professionals, whose areas of interest and specialization coincided with the topic of the seminar- for instance, S. Anvar from Chennai, who made a presentation on the history of Tamil Muslims, and Dr. J. Raja Mohamad from Pudukottai (Tamil Nadu), who retired as the Curator of the Government Museum in Pudukottai, and is the author of several books related to the history of Islam in Tamil Nadu. Students and faculty of Osmania University, University of Hyderabad and The English and Foreign Languages University, representatives of organizations such as COVA and several researchers and activists from Hyderabad, Bangalore, Bombay, Delhi and Kerala made up the rest of the

numbers. For this diverse audience, we had arranged for Urdu and Telugu translations of the abstracts of the papers.

The Discussions in the Seminar: A Brief Account

As can be seen from the schedule, a variety of topics of contemporary relevance were discussed. Conversion; the dominant discourses of secularism and modernity through which Islam and Muslim issues are discussed in India and the world over (Aisha Farooqi and Nigar Ataulla's papers- and the very interesting responses to them); the way that archives of art (paintings, murals, sculpture), architecture (the planning of cities, eg. Mysore), monuments (cave-temples, mosques, viharas etc.) can be delved into to excavate various historical narratives about Muslim life in the South (S. Anvar's presentation and Dr. Nair's paper). However, by far the major topics of discussion over two days were 1) the question of history and memory- can one serve as a 'corrective' to the other, or are their operations and significance in completely different registers? And if this is so, then how do we take account of both in the contemporary forms of ethical and political subjectivity that become available to Muslims in the south- whether in Kerala, or Hyderabad, or Tamil Nadu? 2) The question of caste in relation to Muslim life and identity; how does one think in terms of political alliances, shared lifeworlds (or not), conflict, negotiation, or overlaps? Do we have the theoretical equipment to begin thinking about these questions?

M.A Moid's paper on the 'Muslim Situation in Hyderabad' and Prof. Susie Tharu's response to it aroused a great deal of interest and discussion, especially around the post- Accession history of Hyderabad. In an earlier session, Dr. Shamshad K.T had discussed the role of women's memories of the Mapilla Rebellion of 1921, as an important archive to gain some understanding of an event that has been much written about. Both papers, though coming from completely different disciplines, with a different set of concerns and arguments, raised discussion about memory and memorializing events- how is an 'event' remembered by the group of people affected by it, and what can be the various consequences/implications of this memory?

The discussion that followed Prof. M.A Kalam's paper, as well as B. Venkat Rao and Shefali Jha's papers, centered on the question of caste and Muslims in India. The poet S.K Yousuf Baba's presentation, on the political stance of a group of vocal Telugu Muslim writers and poets, expressing solidarity and shared social spaces and lives with Dalits in AP, was also an important intervention in this regard. There was some discussion about whether various 'occupation groups' within Muslims could actually be equated with castes, and what was the relationship between these groups, and whether we had enough research and theoretical thinking in this area to engage with this question and its implications; the more interesting discussion was about how one could begin thinking in terms of alliances and politically shared agendas.

Seminar related Public Events

At the close of each day we had public events; on the first evening was the well-attended public lecture given by Prof. Shahid Amin, the well-known historian and a founder-member of the Subaltern Studies Collective. The title lecture was 'Making the Nation Habitable Or Towards an Alternative History of India's Medieval Past'. It was Prof. Amin's first public lecture in Hyderabad, and his first visit to the city in more than thirty years. Prof. Amin highlighted the need for historians in India to write 'non-sectarian histories of sectarian strife', especially when writing about Hindus and Muslims in India.

On the evening of the second day, that is August 18, we had reading and interactive session with Khadeer Babu, who is a well-known Telugu Muslim writer, particularly in the genre of the short story. This was organized at Anveshi, as a sort of closing event to the seminar, and it turned out to be interesting and lively in equal measure. The questions discussed were mainly about his writing and its politics: what he imagines his audiences to be like, why he writes stories about Muslim life from a particular region, what is behind the particular style that he has adopted etc. The session ended with him reading one of the stories in the collection *Dargahmitta Kathalu*.