

Introduction

After the Persianate

Mana Kia and Afshin Marashi

How should we write the histories of societies that emerged from the Persianate ecumene? Following the familiar assumptions of nineteenth-century historicism, an answer might go like this: a broadly interconnected cultural universe with a legacy rooted in the medieval and early modern periods experienced evolutionary transformations for the better part of a millennium. By the early nineteenth century the weight of an encroaching modernity began to fragment this already fractured cultural zone. What emerged is the more than a dozen national states and discrete societies that today inhabit this formerly bound geocultural, inter-Asian space (Iran, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkemistan, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kurdistan, Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Xinjiang).

And yet, any attempt to write the modern histories of the societies that emerged from a shared Persianate past will very quickly confront innumerable problems. On the one hand, while the assumptions of nineteenth-century Hegelian historicism may appear to have the advantage of coherently conceptualizing the spatial and temporal boundaries of a shared Persianate past, a more critical view would conclude that any such conceptual coherence is itself a product of the teleological assumptions of that history. On the other hand, rather than looking out across the spatial and temporal boundaries that give shape to the Persianate ecumene, the assumptions that animate more recent area studies paradigms of historical thought have instead tended to reify these same spatial and temporal divides. In fact, since the second half of the twentieth century, the divisions that have compartmentalized area studies into the intellectual silos of Middle East, South Asian, Central Asian, East Asian, and Southeast Asian studies,¹ or—just as consequentially—the conventions of periodization that have traditionally separated the modern from the premodern,² have worked to foreclose historical understandings of the Persianate that transgress these boundaries. While these conceptual divides have begun to erode in recent years, this traditional compartmentalization of our knowledge still casts a formidable intellectual shadow that must be explained

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1. For general discussions of the criticisms of the area studies model, see Miyoshi and Harootunian, *Learning Places*. See also Cheah, “Universal Areas,” 54–68. For Middle Eastern studies see Mitchell, “The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science,” 80–81, and Bayat, “Areas and Ideas,” 260–63.

2. Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia*, 1–6.

by something more than (to put it nicely) the fastidiousness of historiographic specialization. As much recent scholarship of analogous transregions has argued—such as the ongoing critical re-thinkings of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean geocultural worlds³—the conventional spatial and temporal partitions that have prevented critical transregional and transtemporal historical readings of the Persianate are products of intellectual genealogies rooted in mid-twentieth-century area studies paradigms, as well as the self-referential political ontologies of emergent nation-states. In other words, they are themselves products of certain historical moments, and they render the past according to the demands of their own present. These are the legacies that continue to obscure our understanding of the common and connected histories of regions stretching from Anatolia to Xinjiang, from Shiraz to Zanzibar, and from the Caucasus to the Malay Archipelago.

It would, however, be inaccurate to suggest that this interconnected Persianate legacy has gone unrecognized among scholars of early modern and modern history. The term *Persianate societies* was itself, of course, first coined and elaborated by Marshall Hodgson in volume 2 of his much-lauded three-volume work, *The Venture of Islam* (1974).⁴ Hodgson used the term to refer to a new type of polity that first emerged in the city-states of the eastern frontier of post-Islamic conquest Iran. These polities, as Hodgson suggests, used the New Persian language—along with a syncretic assortment of literary, ethical, and aesthetic sensibilities—as the basis for a new cosmopolitan political cultural system overseen by the authority of a princely sultan and a cadre of courtly viziers trained in an emerging canon of Persianate knowledge.⁵ From its tenth-century origins in the Khorasan region of eastern Iran and central Asia,

this new type of society grew to become the basis not only of a constellation of semi-independent polities, but of a broadly interconnected ecumene linking West, Central, South, and Southeast Asia through the early modern period.⁶

While Hodgson's contributions to our understanding of the history of the Persianate ecumene is today recognized as foundational, it is also fair to observe that Hodgson's accounting of the medieval and early modern histories of the Persianate is more intellectually convincing than is his account of this ecumene's demise in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This distinction between the premodern volumes of *The Venture of Islam* and volume 3 may have to do, in part, with Hodgson's inability to depart from the historicist assumptions that in his time still shaped both the nation-state and area studies paradigms of knowledge. As one of Hodgson's most sympathetic critics, Terry Burke, has argued, when Hodgson returns to the concept of the Persianate in the latter part of volume 3 of *The Venture of Islam*, his explanation for its "decline" and "eclipse" retreats into a pattern of causation rooted in the familiar mid-century Weberian-inspired categories of *rational-bureaucratization*, *structural-functionalism*, and—as Hodgson was fond of creative neologisms—the changes engendered by a newly formed *global technicalism* then sweeping across the societies of Asia.⁷

Part of the reason for Hodgson's cursory account of the Persianate's demise may also have to do with the more general limitations of volume 3 of *The Venture*, having been published posthumously by Hodgson's students and colleagues from his least detailed lecture notes and his still incomplete and unpublished writings.⁸ Perhaps more consequentially, however, it is worth emphasizing that the conceptual and theoretical influences that shaped Hodgson's understanding of the modern

3. Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea," 584–90, and Yashin, "Beginning with the Mediterranean," 364–67. See also Philliou, "USSR South," 197–200. For how this enables a more self-reflexive approach to area studies, see Green, "Rethinking the 'Middle East' after the Oceanic Turn."

4. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 2:293–314.

5. Richard Eaton and Phillip Wagoner describe this system as, following Sheldon Pollock, a

"Persianate cosmopolis." For a concise history of the early formation of this Persianate cultural system, see Eaton and Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture*, 20–27. For a discussion of cosmopolis as a cultural and political order, see Pollock, *Language of the Gods*, 10–12; for a related discussion see Gould, "How Newness Enters the World," 543–45.

6. Arjomand, "The Saliency of Political Ethic," 22–27; Arjomand, "Evolution of the Persianate Polity," 126–28; and Dabashi, *The World of*

Persian Literary Humanism. For exemplary articulations of Persianate cultural and political order in early modern contexts, see Wagoner, "Sultan among Hindu Kings"; Alam, "The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan"; and Kinra, "This Noble Science."

7. Burke, "Marshall G. S. Hodgson and World History," xx–xxi.

8. *Ibid.*, 324–25. See also Smith, "Preface," viii.

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1 period were those that defined the intellectual
 2 horizon of the social sciences and humanities dur-
 3 ing the 1950s and 1960s. Despite his acknowledged
 4 iconoclastic creativity and historiographic genius,
 5 Hodgson did not live to engage with the paradigm
 6 shifts ushered in by the linguistic and cultural
 7 turns of the 1970s, nor with the postcolonial schol-
 8 arship that grew from Edward Said's *Orientalism*
 9 (1979). Hodgson's position within the intellectual
 10 history of a theoretically informed tradition of
 11 Middle East and Asian studies reflects the limits of
 12 established orthodoxies as much as it anticipates
 13 the moment of a definitive break from those con-
 14 ventions. Like many others still do today, he spoke
 15 from within the assumptions of modernity itself,
 16 which consisted of certain kinds of stories about
 17 premodernity and modernity's relationship with
 18 it. Indeed, conceptually, premodernity began as
 19 a construct of modernity seeking to outline itself.
 20 Reconsideration and repurposing of terms like *me-*
 21 *dieval* and *early modern* have begun, but these con-
 22 versations cannot be undertaken in isolation from
 23 temporal borderlands.⁹

24 The contributions that comprise this themed
 25 section of *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa*
 26 *and the Middle East* revisit the historical terrain of
 27 the Persianate in the nineteenth and twentieth
 28 centuries with a new set of questions that seek to
 29 contribute to ongoing discussion over conceptual
 30 categories. Rather than reifying the transition to
 31 modernity, the articles that follow blur the tem-
 32 poral boundary between the modern and the pre-
 33 modern and take seriously the legacies of long,
 34 sustained cultural contact across the Indo-Iranian
 35 terrain of the Persianate zone. The contributions
 36 also take seriously the geographic expanse of this
 37 Persianate cultural zone, by self-consciously look-
 38 ing across the artificial partitions of Middle East
 39 and South Asian studies to highlight sources and
 40 themes that have traditionally—as described
 41 by Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi—been rendered
 42 “homeless” by twentieth-century area studies pa-
 43 radigms.¹⁰ Collectively, the articles that follow in-
 44 vestigate these issues with a Hodgsonian spirit of ex-

ploring the Persianate geocultural terrain, but will
 do so by asking Saidian questions pertaining to the
 politics of knowledge production: How was the cul-
 tural heritage of the far and near past reimagined
 during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?
 What were the cultural erasures and elisions that
 accompanied modernist transformations of the
 Persianate cultural universe? What continuities
 extend into the nineteenth and twentieth centu-
 ries that might be obscured by an exclusive focus
 on the changes and transformations of moder-
 nity? What new forms of cultural interconnections
 emerged as a result of modernist imaginings? How
 did modes of knowledge defined by modernity and
 nationalism come to shape these processes of cul-
 tural reconstruction?

Talinn Grigor presents us with two parallel
 (and sometimes intersecting) narratives of the
 artistic practices of separate but interdependent
 communities in Iran and India. While the logic
 of both Iranian and Indian nationalism have long
 seen the coming of modernity as tied to a cotermin-
 ous revival of antiquity, Grigor's genealogical
 examination of Indo-Iranian architectural neo-
 Zoroastrianism finds the traces of this “revived”
 antiquity rooted both in selective borrowings
 from Orientalist knowledge and in early modern
 Persianate conceptions of art, edifice, and space.
 The story of select architectural structures erected
 from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1930s pro-
 vides two views of how the Persianate was (re)con-
 structed and situated as the culturally authorita-
 tive basis for diverging ideological projects.

Mana Kia's article asks us to reexamine the
 work of well-known figures, highlighting the pres-
 ence of the Indian interlocutor cast in the role of
 the beloved Persianate friend, an idea central to
 older notions of moral transformation and ethi-
 cal community. Figures that have been examined
 primarily as exemplars of secular Persian nation-
 alist thought, pan-Islamism, and Iranian constitu-
 tional reformism all stage their respective visions
 of ethical selves and communities through this
 same idiom of the beloved friend. That this friend

9. For instance, see Ali, “The Historiography of the Medieval”; Richards, “Early Modern India and World History”; and O'Hanlon, “Contested Conjunctures.”

10. Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran*, 9.

is specifically Indian and cast as Persian-speaking forces us to reconsider the power of a remembered shared cultural past of ethical social associations.

Alexander Jabbari traces the interdependence of key texts engaged in the creation of literary modernity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He considers both the temporal links with the early modern Persian *tazkirah* tradition and the continuing intertextuality of scholars across regions, bringing into focus the way in which the creation of Persian literary modernity was far more than an Iranian nationalist endeavor. Part of a larger global conversation about literary modernity, these transregional articulations depended on a shared set of references and sources, as well as new sexual aesthetics.

Farzin Vejdani examines the social basis of the cultural reimaginings of linkages between Iran and India by focusing our attention on actual crossings between Iran, India, and Europe, for educational, journalistic, and missionary purposes. Rather than providing a conventional intellectual history tracing the origins of the *national idea*, Vejdani traces how patterns of travel and networks of exchange among an emerging class of modernist literati produced imaginative possibilities of new forms of transregional cosmopolitanism. As he argues, these new cosmopolitanisms did not follow the conventional logic of “rupture” from the premodern, but rather had much in common with templates of culture rooted in the Persianate past. He specifically addresses the way in which the Persian language was reimagined in relation to modern ideas of culture and how religion was brought to bear in these new early twentieth-century articulations.

Taken together, these articles incite a broad set of questions about the shared process of modernity as constituted beyond the context of a national state or colony-metropole relationship. One might also ask: What is the relationship between the Islamicate and the Persianate? Is one just a particular idiomatic expression of the other? Does the Islamicate completely subsume the Persianate within it? Scholarship on the earlier period has

argued the contrary.¹¹ If we do not assume that the modern period is necessarily post-Persianate, then what happens when Islam becomes a modern religion and Persian becomes a modern culture? For example, what if questions about shared decline narratives of history common to Iran and India with respect to their newly “classical” pasts were reframed according to continuing interactions between Iran and India rather than just the hegemony of Orientalism? If pre-Islamic Persianate history had long been a prominent feature of Persianate accounts of history and historical meaning making, what was new about the way in which pre-Islamic Persian history was narrated and put to use from the late nineteenth century? Such a question allows us to decouple modernity’s own claims of radical rupture with the premodern from our analytical frames, which can lead to richer views of modern history, ones that allow for modernity as a process of becoming, with features both distinct from and common with what came before, across regions.

These continuities and the nature of the changes between Iran and India point to two broader sets of scholarly concerns. First is the general nature of the relationship between cultural change and political history, which is anything but straightforward. The essays in this special section should, we hope, provoke a rethinking of how we conceive of what is important to the study of a culture in light of political changes, such as whether the divergence of political fate necessarily signals a social or cultural one. Second is the nature of these new fates, and the way in which political realities ostensibly provoked by actual or threatening European colonial powers are perhaps linked to other seemingly unrelated regions through enduring common social and cultural ties.

In the context of the themes that emerge in these essays, we repose the title of this section as a question: Are the nineteenth and twentieth centuries between Iran and India, indeed, after the Persianate? □□□□

11. See Wagoner, “Sultan among Hindu Kings”; Eaton and Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture*; and Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam*, 46–80. See also Kinra, “Master and Munshi.”

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