
A REVIEW OF RAZAK KHAN, *MINORITY PASTS: LOCALITY, EMOTIONS, AND BELONGING IN PRINCELY RAMPUR*

TERESA SEGURA-GARCIA

Universitat Pompeu Fabra
Barcelona, Spain
teresa.segura@upf.edu
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2094-6384>

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Razak Khan's *Minority Pasts* is a rich, insightful study of Rampur — the Muslim-ruled princely state in the United Provinces of British India and the city that, in contemporary Uttar Pradesh, has pejoratively become a byword for “Muslim vote bank” politics. In this compelling monograph, Khan resituates Rampur as a historically and politically significant locality. He does so by crafting a textured account of the complex negotiations around identity, emotion, and belonging among Rampur's Muslim inhabitants across the colonial and postcolonial periods. Crucially, the book argues for the importance of locality as a key category of historical analysis. Khan's nuanced examination of how place, emotion, and politics intersect in the making of Muslim identities in this particular site provides a powerful counterstatement to homogenising portrayals of Muslims in South Asia.

Minority Pasts is the first comprehensive English-language monograph on the local history and politics of Rampur. It is rooted in an impressive range of sources, including Persian, Pashto, Urdu, Hindi, and English-language archives, as well as oral histories from Rampuri interlocutors. Khan draws on this multilingual body of knowledge to explore the layered political, religious, literary, affective, and cultural history of Rampur and its inhabitants. In doing so, he deftly combines archival research with conceptual

insights drawn from the history of emotions, South Asian political culture, and India's princely states.

The book opens with the aftermath of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the evolving political strategies of Rampur's rulers under indirect colonial rule. Chapter 1 focuses on Nawab Kalb-e-Ali Khan (r. 1865–1886), whose long reign offers a template for what Khan terms “poetic sovereignty”. This chapter explores how piety, patronage, and poetry were mobilised to construct Rampur as “Arampur” — a place of repose and cultural refinement amidst the upheavals of the post-1857 period. Through careful attention to poets, patrons, and textual production, Khan reveals how literary culture became a means for articulating forms of political legitimacy and spiritual authority under colonial paramountcy.

Chapter 2 traces the crisis of governance of the colonial regency period (1889–1896), when direct colonial intervention intensified elite power struggles and generated new forms of resistance. The rise of the Najibabad family, led by General Azimuddin Khan, is contextualised alongside Rohilla rivalries and contestations within the royal household. Khan establishes that, while colonial narratives dismissed these disputes as evidence of a “violent Rohilla” political culture, the primary sources reveal more complex critiques of colonial oppression. The author interprets Nawab Hamid Ali Khan's subsequent reign (from 1896) as a moment of cultural reinvention, with Rampur emerging as a centre of knowledge, literature, music, and Unani medicine. The chapter situates these developments within broader debates among North Indian Muslims about culture, decadence, and modernity. Rampur was variously cast as a “decadent Nawabi locality” (by Muslims in the Urdu public sphere), a “loyalist princely state” (by Indian nationalists), and a “violent Rohilla locality” (by British administrators). Khan resists these pejorative framings, reading Nawab Hamid Ali Khan's era as one of cultural cosmopolitanism, in which princely traditions were strategically deployed to claim a place in modern Indian public life.

The third chapter moves into the era of Nawab Raza Ali Khan (r. 1930–1949), examining how Rampuri politics were shaped by both elite initiatives and popular mobilisation. While elements of the older elite resisted state-led reform, local actors increasingly

asserted themselves in a burgeoning public sphere. The author frames this moment as a shift from a *darbar* (court)-based authority to a *majlis* (assembly)-based political culture. The modernising state thus became not only an instrument of rule but also a platform for the articulation of subjecthood and rights. Yet, the vitality of this local political culture contrasts with the sense of loss that followed Rampur's integration into the Indian Union in the wake of Partition. Khan argues that the very process of national integration, which ostensibly resolved questions of territorial sovereignty, also effaced the multiple "minority pasts" that had shaped Rampur's local identity. The chapter powerfully critiques how the historiography has often flattened variegated local trajectories into a singular narrative of postcolonial state formation.

In Chapter 4, the perspective refreshingly shifts from Rampuri rulers to Rampuri subjects. Through a careful reading of Urdu writings — including local histories, biographical compilations, and personal narratives — Khan explores how literary expression became a vehicle for articulating identity and attachment to place. He introduces the concept of "Rampuriyat" (sense of belonging to Rampur) to describe this affective investment in locality, showing how emotional geographies shaped emotional attachments to space. In these literary sources, identity emerges not as a fixed or essential category but as a site of negotiation, informed by gender, class, kinship, and occupation. Khan's reading of these texts reveals how Rampuris made sense of their world, in ways that often challenged colonial and nationalist attempts to define them through reductive typologies.

The final chapter considers Rampur's postcolonial trajectories and the fate of its princely and Muslim legacies in India and Pakistan. Here, Khan adopts a transnational frame to trace the circulation of memories, texts, and emotions across the fraught India-Pakistan border. Drawing on theories of the politics of emotion, the chapter examines the role of remembering and forgetting in the making of postcolonial Muslim identity in South Asia. In charting how Rampuris in both India and Pakistan have remembered or forgotten their shared past, Khan makes an important contribution to debates on postcolonial memory and minority politics. He persuasively argues that engaging with the princely past is crucial for understanding the place of Muslims in contemporary South Asia.

In its totality, *Minority Pasts* offers a bold rethinking of governance, resistance, and political belonging in the princely states. Khan moves beyond the well-trodden binaries of colonial versus princely, moderniser versus traditionalist, and elite versus subaltern. In this way, he reveals an intricate landscape in which ideas of ethical governance, charismatic leadership, and popular aspiration coexisted and contended. The book contributes significantly to conceptual debates around civil society, public culture, and the history of emotions. It offers compelling methodological insights into how historians might use emotions, literary texts, and local archives to recover minority pasts that have been marginalised by dominant historiographies. Khan's work makes a strong case for the continued relevance of local histories in understanding complex present realities.

Minority Pasts is a book of depth and originality that will be of interest to historians of modern South Asia, including those interested in the history of emotions, the emergence of public spheres, and the princely states. The monograph offers rich insights that may equally be relevant to researchers in other disciplines. Literary scholars will appreciate the book's exploration of Urdu poetry and prose as vital expressions of identity, locality, and emotion. Political scientists can engage with its analysis of princely state governance, minority politics, and the negotiation of Muslim identities under colonial and postcolonial regimes. Anthropologists will find value in the detailed study of belonging, public culture, and the lived experiences of Rampuri subjects, which foreground how locality and emotion shape social and political life. Together, these perspectives demonstrate the book's interdisciplinary relevance to understanding South Asia's cultural and political landscapes.

WORKS CITED

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TERESA SEGURA-GARCIA is a Tenure-track Professor of Modern South Asian History at the Department of Humanities at Universitat Pompeu Fabra (UPF), Barcelona. She holds a PhD in History from the University of Cambridge. Her research on nineteenth and twentieth-century India explores several often overlapping topics: the global links of the Indian princely states, gender and masculinity, the history of the body, and visual culture.