



## Book Review

Razak Khan. (2022). *Minority Pasts: Locality, Emotions, and Belonging in Princely Rampur*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Pp. xiv + 316. Price: \$75.00. ISBN: 9788194831686.

Simon Daisley  
Independent Researcher, New Zealand  
Email: simon.daisleynz@gmail.com

It is fitting that I should write a review of *Minority Pasts* by Razak Khan following a recent visit to Najibabad in Uttar Pradesh, India. Founded in the 18th century by the Rohilla *nawab*, Najib ud-Daulah, the town does not often feature on the itineraries of foreign visitors. However, my day excursion from Delhi had been driven by a desire to study the fortress of Pathargarh. Built by the *nawab* at a time when the Rohilla's military strength stood unchallenged, it now stands empty and in ruins. My visit to Najibabad was brief and unfortunately it did not allow me further time to investigate whether the local Muslim population still upheld the Rohilla traditions of the town's founders. Were the Muslims I passed in the street descendants of these 18th century Rohillas or were they descended from Muslim families who had migrated to the town following the upheavals caused by the 1857 war and the independence of 1947? If they claimed descent from the families who had settled under Najib ud-Daulah, what remaining Rohilla traditions separated them from other Muslims? Was their identity still derived from Rohilla heritage or did they primarily see themselves as part of a broader, pan-Muslim community?

*Minority Pasts*, however, is not a study of Najibabad but rather about the city most often associated with the Rohillas, Rampur. Once the capital of the former Princely State of Rampur, following 1947, the town was subsumed into the modern nation of India and is now situated within the state of Uttar Pradesh. From the outset, Khan raises the issue of how the study of Muslim communities in both British India and contemporary India has been overshadowed by studies that treat Muslim communities as a cohesive body. *Minority Pasts* challenges this assumption by demonstrating that the Muslims of Rampur, whether they were Rohillas or migrants, middle class or nobility, were responsible for establishing a variety of Muslim identities that evolved and adapted to new circumstances arising after 1857. The author approaches the subject from a variety of disciplines including history, political studies, religious studies, and sociology, making the work suitable for students and readers of these fields. While the book does require that readers are familiar with the Muslim cultures of North India, it is not too overwhelming for a newcomer either. The book consists of an introduction, 5 chapters, and an epilogue, the text accompanied by 2 maps and 6 illustrations. Along with various archives on national and local levels, the bibliography reveals that the author has consulted a wide range of primary and secondary sources in English, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu. The author has also conducted interviews with individuals who have connections to Rampur both in India and in Pakistan. The study of Rohilla history is still limited in Western scholarship, with the Rohillas having often been overshadowed by the Shi'a Nawabs of Awadh. While the work to which one is often directed, *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, C.1710-1780* by Jos J. L. Gommans (1995), *Minority Pasts* does much to address the neglect in scholarship.

In chapter 1 *Oasis in the Desert: Rampur as a "Muslim Princely State" in the Aftermath of 1857* (pp.26-54), Khan examines how Urdu poetry was used to convey an image of Rampur as a haven for Muslims in the wake of the Indian Mutiny. He shows that this portrayal of Rampur as heir to Mughal and Awadhi culture, shattered in the aftermath of 1857, was utilised both by Urdu poets who were attracted to the stability provided by the court of Rampur, and Nawab Kalb-e-Ali Khan (r.1865-1887). For the latter, Urdu poetry was a vehicle to propagate his image

as a pious Muslim ruler and the chapter concludes by noting that it was not only the elites who were establishing a shared culture in Rampur during the latter half of the 19th century. Here, Khan introduces the rising Muslim middle class of Rampur who took advantage of the newly introduced printing press to create public discussions and to disseminate their own political and religious views in contrast to that of the Nawabi court. Chapter 2, *Courtly Modernity: Tradition, Reform, and the Politics of "Muslim Culture"* (pp.55-109), examines the various ways in which Rampur, as a Nawabi princely state, was portrayed by its own middle class Muslims, colonial administrators, and nationalists during the reign of Nawab Hamid Ali Khan (r.1889-1930). Khan shows how, during the regency of Nawab Mushtaq Ali Khan (r.1887-1889), factionalism among the Rampur royal family and Rohilla clan leaders led to further interference by colonial officials and the encroaching influence of the British on Rampur society. Public debates and interfaith clashes between Hindus and Muslims, which were resolved by community leaders, were instrumental in producing a cohesive Rampur identity in which both colonial officials and the Rohillas from Najibabad were considered an 'other'. Khan builds upon a theme introduced in chapter 1 here, that of the binary notion of the decadent *nawabs* and the reformed Muslim middle class. However, he shows that these were not static categories but rather, both parties were influenced by external factors.

Chapter 3, *Princely Progress: Colonialism, Nationalism, and the Cultures of "Muslim Politics"* (pp.110-155) covers the reign of Nawab Raza Ali Khan who succeeded his father in 1930. While his reign oversaw the modernisation of Rampur, with changes being made in areas such as administration, education, and industrialisation, these changes were not imposed without resistance. Khan demonstrates that the changes to Rampur were not only forcibly made by the *nawab* but were also shaped by local citizens of Rampur through public protest movements that sought to protect their traditional rights. In this chapter, which culminates in the integration of Rampur into the Indian Union in 1947, Khan also touches upon the creeping influence of translocal voices who sought to bring Rampur in line with the rising nationalist vision. In chapter 4, *Locality, Genre, and Self-Definitions of Rampuris* (pp.156-189), Khan moves beyond the discourses of the *nawabi* court and public to examine the personal writings of Rampur subjects. Part of this focus is driven by the need to recognise that within scholarship, local Urdu writing has often been overshadowed by the Persian dominated culture of the Mughals. In doing so, Khan touches upon three forms of Urdu literature: *tarikh* (history), *tazkira* (biographical compendia), and *hayat* (life writings). Khan shows that local and emotional knowledge of Rampur was produced within these writings that offer readers a different insight into the culture of the Rohillas in contrast to the knowledge produced by colonial administration. By examining the writings of former Rampur residents, Khan shows that Rampur is not only a physical location but encompasses a shared emotional geography. Chapter 5, *Princely Past, Subaltern Present: Memory, History, and Emotions* (pp.190-216) builds further upon the theme of a shared emotional geography by examining the works of four writers who have connections to Rampur in the period following Partition. While the first two, Abid Raza Bedar and Shaair Ullah Khan are from India, the latter two, Zakir Ali Khan and Saul ul Hassan Khan are from Pakistan. The works of Bedar are particularly poignant, as he argues that the primary identity of Rampur's Muslim community should be that of a Rampuri rather than as part of a broader pan-Islamic community.

Although *Minority Pasts* places Rampur under a specific research lens, the methodology used by Khan could easily be applied to other cities in contemporary India. The topics discussed in the book force us to reassess how we perceive the modern inhabitants of cities whose social groups allegiances have been fractured by the displacements following 1857 and 1947. While *Minority Pasts* addresses a post-1857 Rohilla society, the broader study of Rohilla culture and history still offers readers access into an untouched area of scholarship that is fruitful to furthering explorations, particularly for the decades following the defeat of the Rohillas by the

British in 1794. The forthcoming work of other scholars such as Naveena Naqvi may indeed help to contribute to this scholarship. When reflecting upon my trip to Najibabad in hindsight, I am struck by a couplet that Khan quotes and translates (page 209):

*Ab bhi hai kuch purani yadgareh  
Tum aana shahr mera dekhne ko*

There are still some old memorials left  
You must come and see my city

While written with Rampur in mind, these lines could easily be applied to Najibabad as well.

## References

Gommans J.J.L., (1995). *The Rise of the Indo-Afghan Empire, c. 1710-1780*. Leiden: E.J.Brill.