

Discipline

In the essay ‘State and Its Margins’, Veena Das and Deborah Poole complicate the idea of the state as a rational, centralized sociopolitical organization with fixed boundaries. Instead, they suggest that the state is produced along its margins where forms of illegibility, partial belonging, and disorder legitimize its modes of order and lawmaking.¹ The state is brought into being through invocations of the anarchy, wilderness, and barbarism that exist beyond its authority but also challenge it from within. Following this conception, Part I demonstrates how religion, as the most significant social margin of secular governance, was essential to the formation of the modern colonial state and at the centre of an epistemic rupture in a shifting landscape of economic and political power. Envisioned by East India Company officials, missionaries, and orientalist as the locus for the development of rational subjecthood, religion was the site for the establishment of a new moral economy that aligned with the norms of the colonial state. However, as the East India Company was at pains to demonstrate its religious neutrality, the location of religion had to shift, as Peter van der Veer notes, from being part of the state to being part of an incipient bourgeois public sphere.²

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 illustrate how religion created the colonial public. Opinion was moulded, diversified, and fissured by the reorganization of religion through the orientalist and juridical emphasis on textual authority for Indian customs, missionary proselytism, and new opportunities for social mobility. The vernacular public sphere was not primarily an interlocutory realm with the state. Instead, it functioned as a conduit

for the reconfiguration of ephemeral, figurative, and allegorical custom into disenchanting and indisputable detail, thereby interanimating several complex overlapping movements: the reformation of Hinduism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism and the coinciding development of a religious orthodoxy; the marginalization of precolonial forms of knowledge and shifts in conceptions of historical time; the rise of a bourgeois, middle-class intelligentsia and the formulation of colonial masculinity as normative. In order to demonstrate an intellectual equivalence with Christianity, the ritual incantations of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism were deontologized; a phenomenology of faith contingent on literalism, utilitarianism, and a historically specific mode of inquiry stemming from capital accretion emerged; and a rational, true religious core that was textually discernable was unhinged from mystery, superstition, miracles, and magic.

In the colonial formation, religion facilitated ‘rational’ debate because it required adherents to consent to fixed doctrines that could be evaluated and scientifically compared. Aligned with secular capital accumulation, law, science, and universal history in homogenous time, reformed religion signified an entitlement to citizenship, scientific rationality, and modernity. Part I traces how a hegemonic textuality characterized by evidence gathering, documentary proof, and post-Enlightenment forms of intellectual inquiry reconfigured ritual performance and spurred new forms of intra- and inter-communal conflict. It delineates how the rapidly growing colonial *entrepôt* Bombay functioned as a pluralistic, religious marketplace where faith had to be plied to a discriminating audience. Missionaries, colonial officials, and orientalist scholars were competing agents who used new channels such as the vernacular press to create a competitive religious environment where communities could no longer rely on the unwavering adherence of their members.³

The Parsis—followers of Zoroastrianism—were loyal comprador subjects who swiftly took to English models of administration, jurisprudence, and education. During the first half of the nineteenth century they established the *Mumbai Samācār*, the first Gujarati-language newspaper in Western India, in order to deliver market rates and news quickly and cheaply. Chapter 2 demonstrates how missionary attacks on the Zoroastrian religion in this newspaper prompted both the flourishing of a bourgeois public sphere and religious conversions. Conversion here is to be understood in manifold ways. Specific cases of Parsi conversion to Christianity in the 1830s paralleled broader transformations in a spiritual economy of representation where religion was distinguished from magic,

and where unruly populations were converted into law-abiding subjects. The illegibility of Parsi customs under English law—and the incompatibility of Parsi religious prescriptions and proscriptions with colonial capitalist morality—underscored their civilizational otherness. Through the press and theatre, these customs were reformed in line with colonial ideals of civilization and progress and an emerging global order of transaction, value, and desire. A characteristic feature of the colonial reform of religion was its visibility or publicness and correspondingly its theatricality. As Tanika Sarkar notes in the context of Hindu debates on sati and widow remarriage, popular discourse and official legal proceedings on the most intimate aspects of religious custom could be followed through newspapers, reports, and popular texts. ‘The structures governing one’s innermost beliefs, closest relationships and everyday practices ... were now being dragged out, debated and contested in the public eye. In the process, the ideological basis of prescription and common sense was demystified and made transparent’.⁴

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate how the Parsi theatre, as an integral component of the vernacular public sphere, functioned in its infancy in the 1850s and 1860s on multiple scales. Parsi dramas on Bombay’s stages that depicted ‘illogical’ superstitions, the emptiness of rituals performed by an ignorant priesthood, corrupt communal leaders, and a new de-allegorized Persian history stripped of myth and magic were subplots in a larger performance of the reconfiguration of ‘tradition’. Appropriating orientalist and Christian missionary distinctions between ritual accretions and a true faith discernible in Zoroastrian scripture, Parsis performed new understandings of ethics and paganism, the sacred and profane, private morality and public ceremony. In seeking to fashion Zoroastrianism as a legitimate, rational, monotheistic religion, reformists policed traditional performative modes involving ghosts, spirits and demons, shamanic rituals, and idol worship—beliefs that provided alternative epistemological frameworks to the colonial order. Bodies were disciplined according to a Victorian ethos of bourgeois propriety; hitherto unquestioned customs were interrogated, cast off, or aggressively codified; and communities were pushed into history. In the process, new social hierarchies materialized, and monolithic imaginations of community with hard boundaries took shape. Religion thus not only shaped but was also shaped by the emerging vernacular public sphere.

NOTES

1. Veena Das, Deborah Poole, 'State and its margins: comparative ethnographies', *Anthropology in the margins of the state*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7–11.
2. Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 27.
3. See Nile Green, *Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).
4. Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2017, first published 2001), 74–75.