

## Introduction

### A RUMOUR OF MIRACLES

At 10.15 on the night of 31 May 1903, the D-block of the recently completed Sita Ram Building in Bombay ‘suddenly came down with a crash’.<sup>1</sup> Most of the multi-storey building was unoccupied, but on the ground floor was a saloon bar which over the past months had done a brisk and boozy trade with the port’s many British sailors. It was mainly the customers of the bar who made up the dead and injured when the building collapsed. Because the Windsor Bar stood right across the road from the shrine of a Muslim saint, rumours spread quickly that the disaster occurred through an insult to the holy man by the Hindu bar-owner and his bibulous Christian patrons. But for all his defence of the anti-alcoholic norms of *sharī‘a*, the saint in question was himself something of an oddity. His name was Pedro, and according to urban legend he was a Portuguese sailor who had converted to Islam two centuries earlier. This Pēdrō Shāh was no more commonplace a saint than his feat of levelling a tower block was an act of everyday grace. From his shrine’s location in the heart of Bombay’s bazaar district, his spectacular miracle was symptomatic of the larger pressures of cosmopolitan modernity that helped create a marketplace of religions in the city surrounding him.

The implications of Pēdrō Shāh’s story – that the moral life of the metropolis was regulated by supernatural policemen, that capitalist cosmopolitanism could be undone at the whim of a dead Muslim – have profound implications for the ways in which the trajectories of religion in the nineteenth-century Indian Ocean should be understood, and it is the goal of *Bombay Islam* to unravel these implications. The fact that rumours of

righteous supernatural indignation causing Sita Ram Building to collapse spread so quickly tells us something important about the moral landscapes and vernacular imagination of a city which at the turn of the twentieth century stood at the vanguard of industrialization in both India and the Indian Ocean. For Pēdrō Shāh's cult was not the superstitious detritus of an earlier age, but part of a larger supply of religious productions being generated by the experiences of modern urban life. If such supernatural interventions as that seen in the punishment of the Windsor Bar drinkers are not part of the familiar story of the industrial city, then, like the internationalized Yoga of Swami Vivekananda in Chicago and the scientific table-tappers of Victorian London, they comprised the ruptures and reprises of culture that accompanied the ascent of the no less invisible powers of capital.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time that, in London and Manchester, Marx and Engels were attempting to identify the vast but hidden forces that governed the industrializing process, the labourers and merchants of Bombay were developing their own readings of those powers. Just as the two overseas Germans made their models from the building-blocks of their continental intellectual heritage, so did the Muslims who gathered in Bombay from all around the Indian Ocean resort to their own cultural resources to make sense of their brave new world of cotton mills and dockyards. With its saints and miracles, its theologies and pamphlets, its festivals and schools, Bombay Islam was no less a response to industrial change than the leftist ideologies and working-men's clubs that form the familiar stock-in-trade of the labour historian. If the Methodist, Spiritualist and other alternative Christianities of the proletarian Atlantic are now well known, this book tries to draw from their shadow a parallel oceanic Islam of the industrial era.<sup>3</sup>

While the collapse of Sita Ram Building was an unusually dramatic intervention of enchanted agency in the humdrum life of the city, it was unusual in scale and not kind. For in Bombay and its continental and maritime hinterlands, the new social conditions of modernity were highly receptive to an Islam of holy men and their strange powers. The survival – indeed, the increasing production – of such 'old' religious forms in the industrial epicentre of the Indian Ocean demands a reconsidering of industrial modernity and the ways in which Muslims responded to and experienced it. If the story here is one of Bombay, then it is one of a Muslim city which has long stood in the shadows of other Bombays, whether British, Maharashtrian or Parsi.<sup>4</sup> It is also a story of the oceanic reach of Bombay Islam that through railways to Hyderabad and Gujarat and steamships to Iran and South Africa found markets far beyond the city's own platforms

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and quays.<sup>5</sup> As the rumours of a Portuguese Muslim imply, the picture painted by *Bombay Islam* also differs from familiar depictions of other globalizing Asian or African cities of the nineteenth century, where the social and intellectual forms of modernity have been read through secular or national trajectories.<sup>6</sup> Seated similarly in the second carriage is the colonial, for *Bombay Islam* is constructed in the main from indigenous materials that, in reaching beyond the colonial archive, question the scale of imperial influence on the urban lower classes. In focusing on the Indian products of Bombay's 'economy of enchantment', the following chapters place Muslim writings in the trans-regional languages of Persian, Urdu and Arabic at centre stage to explore an industrial and cosmopolitan environment that was at the same time enchanted with imaginaries and energies that industrialization did as much to empower as suppress.

With shipping routes connected together from every direction, such was the city's status as travel hub of the west Indian Ocean that even Muslims making the *hajj* from Africa, Central Asia or Iran found themselves on layover there.<sup>7</sup> Muslim Bombay was to maritime itineraries in the second half of the nineteenth century what Dubai would become to aeroplane journeys in the second half of the twentieth. All underwritten by commerce, these steamship and sailboat networks ferried in African deckhands and Iranian merchants to add to this character as Islam's industrial *carrefour*. Drawing Muslims from far and wide, in the mid-nineteenth century Bombay emerged as the cosmopolis of the Indian Ocean, a global city in which Muslims were forced to deal with the competitive pressures that also shaped its Atlantic counterpart, New York.<sup>8</sup> Bombay's industrialization was signalled to these Muslims in many different ways. Its mechanical advances offered urban visions of a progressive future; its iron printing-presses produced books in Persian and Arabic, English and Urdu, Malay and Swahili; its steam-fed factories created a jostling of new Muslim proletarians; its sheer size allowed Muslims to alternatively discover the collective unity of the *umma* or to learn instead that they were above all 'Indian'. By the mid-nineteenth century, not only was Bombay *urbs prima in Indis* (as its proud citizens were fond of calling it), but also a primary city of Islam.<sup>9</sup> While in the same period Istanbul, Alexandria and Beirut experienced comparable patterns of demographic and cosmopolitan expansion, in scale and speed none could compete with Bombay's industrialized pace of growth, and the oceanic rather than Mediterranean remit of its pluralism. From Africa, India and the Middle East, Bombay attracted Muslim industrial workers; from the small towns of the Konkan came others in their tens of thousands, along with shiploads of Iranian pilgrims whose

journeys to Mecca now involved a stopover of weeks or even months in Bombay. For the Muslim aristocracy of landlocked Hyderabad, Bombay served as a window to the world; for Iranian political and religious exiles as a place of refuge. For a new breed of Muslim missionaries the city's demoralized workforce offered fertile ground for proselytization, while the wealth of its Muslim merchants lent these missionaries the routes and resources to expand beyond Bombay. The city brought together far more linguistically and ethnically diverse Muslim groups than the smaller *dār al-Islām* of the ports of the Mediterranean.

In the earliest major source on Bombay Islam, the Persian *Jān-e Bombā'ī* (Bombay soul), written in 1816, the port was already presented as the crossroads of the world. In addition to the English, Portuguese, Greeks, Dutch, Zoroastrians, Jews, Chinese and the many 'sects' (*farqa*) of Hindus described as residents of the city, *Jān-e Bombā'ī* spoke of a bewildering range of Muslim groups who also lived there: Arabs and Turks, Iranis and Turanis, Sindis and Hindis, Kabulis and Qandaharis, Punjabis and Lahoris, Kashmiris and Multanis, Madrasis and Malabarais, Gujaratis and Dakanis, Baghdadis and Basrawis, Muscatis and Konkaniis.<sup>10</sup> These Muslims did not collapse themselves into an indistinguishable and uniform religious community, and the author of *Jān-e Bombā'ī* tells us that each group deliberately made themselves appear different through their forms of dress: 'Every one of them has invented an attractive and different style of tying their turbans (*dastār*) and of curling the locks of their hair in individual ways.'<sup>11</sup> Drawing Muslims from Iran and Iraq, Central Asia and Arabia, as well as every corner of the Indian subcontinent, with its wide pull of visitors Bombay came to serve as the mercantile shadow of Mecca that would in time produce its own Islams in boisterous counterpoint. Bombay's structures of migration were moreover unique in channelling the mass movement of an industrial Muslim workforce and not the smaller flows of technocrats, ideologues and merchants attracted from mid-century to the likes of Istanbul and Alexandria. The gravity of capital thus ensured that the full medley of Muslims from Bombay's vast maritime marketplace was represented on its streets and wharfs. As one of the city's residents described the dazzling assortment of Muslims visible there in 1912:

There, mark you, are many Bombay Mahomedans of the lower class with their long white shirts, white trousers and skull-caps of silk or brocade ... Arabs from Syria and the valley of the Euphrates; half-Arab, half-Persian traders from the Gulf, in Arab or old Persian costumes and

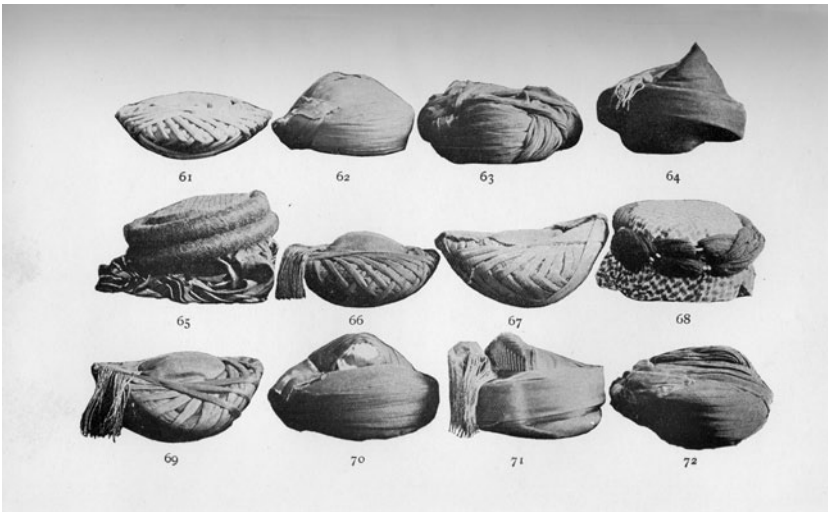


FIGURE 1. Many kinds of Muslim: Samples of Bombay Muslim headdress

black turbans with a red border. Here again comes a Persian of the old school with arched embroidered turban of white silk, white ‘aba’ or undercoat reaching to the ankles, open grey ‘shaya’, and soft yellow leather shoe; and he is followed by Persians of the modern school in small stiff black hats, dark coats drawn in at the waist, and English trousers and boots. After them come tall Afghans, their hair well-oiled, in the baggiest of trousers; Makranis dressed like Afghans but distinguished by their sharper nose and more closely-set eyes; Sindis in many buttoned waistcoats; Negroes from Africa clad in striped waist cloths, creeping slowly through the streets and pausing in wonder at every new sight; Negroes in the Bombay Mahomedan dress and red fez ... Malays in English jackets and loose turbans; Bukharans in tall sheep skin caps and woollen gabardines, begging their way from Mecca to their Central Asian homes, singing hymns in honour of the Prophet, or showing plans of the Ka’aba or of the shrine of the saint of saints, Maulana Abdul Kadir Gilani, at Baghdad.<sup>12</sup>

The attractions of the city to these Muslims is self-evident: between 1840 and 1915 Bombay became the third-largest city in the British Empire, the largest port in Asia and, after overtaking Calcutta, the industrial centre of all India and the economic centre of the west Indian Ocean.<sup>13</sup> From the beginning of its great expansion around 1840, Bombay drew Muslims as diverse as the merchants and political exiles of Iran and the rural poor of the surrounding country in the Konkan and Gujarat. From mid-century

onwards, its growth came to rely on migrant labour from its continental hinterland, creating not only a Muslim labour force but huge market demand for religious productions. In 1850 Bombay was already home to around 100,000 Muslims.<sup>14</sup> By 1872 the number had grown to some 137,000, around one-fifth of the city's overall population, and by 1901 over 155,000 Muslims lived there.<sup>15</sup> This position in turn afforded the city's producers and consumers of Muslim religious forms an impact on religious consumption across this vast region. Yet Bombay was not an indiscriminate Muslim melting pot in which difference was dissolved into a single Muslim community demanding a single formation of their faith. In its cosmopolitan environment, different Muslims protected their customary community boundaries; and in the period with which we are dealing, the idea of an Indian Muslim 'nation' or a collective Pan-Islam was still a minority discourse of the privileged and few. Bombay's distinct *mohalla* quarters housed separate *jamā'ats* or communities of Mongol, Irani, Habashi, Konkani, Pathan, Hadhrami, Mēmon, Bohra and Khōja Muslims, who married among their own and kept their working and religious lives in similarly communitarian distinction. The city's mosques were typically affiliated to these community groups: Bombay's oldest, the Jami' Masjīd (founded 1217/1802), was ruled by an exclusive board of Konkani old families, while the Zakariyya Mosque (founded 1238/1823) served only the Mēmon community.<sup>16</sup> In the eighteenth century the many Iranian Shi'ites who gathered in Bombay founded their own mosque in turn, shipping ceramic tiles from their homeland as a visual symbol of their separation. Other Muslim communities had their own distinct places of worship. In such circumstances, Pan-Islamic visions of a single *umma* under Allah were insubstantial indeed, and visions that, in circumstances of increasing religious production, comprised only one of many Islams on offer.

The period between 1840 and 1915 was therefore not only the heyday of Bombay's commercial and industrial dominance over its oceanic and continental hinterlands; it was also a period in which the fracturing effects of a new kind of pluralizing and competitive religious marketplace emerged. For as different Muslim individuals and groups migrated to Bombay, they realized (often for the first time) how different they were from other Muslims. The responses to this predicament with which this book is concerned are not the solutions of the Muslim Nationalists or the Pan-Islamists, even though in the persons of Muhammad 'Alī Jinnāh and Jamāl al-dīn 'al-Afghānī the cosmopolitan pressures of Bombay have a claim to the origins of both ideologies.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the main subject of this

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book is the process by which distinctive and often mutually competitive Islams were produced or refined in Bombay, and in some cases exported from there to the far regions of the west Indian Ocean. While Bombay's economy of Islams did not disappear in 1915, as the year before the Bombay lawyer Muhammad 'Alī Jinnāh became president of the Muslim League, that year forms a symbolic end point for our survey. From that period, the new imperatives of nationalism and the search for a unified Indian Muslim 'community' symbolized by Jinnāh pulled Bombay's Muslims in other directions, whether seen in their participation in the nationalism of the Muslim League or the internationalism of the Khilāfat movement. The point at which these larger and self-consciously national or transnational visions of community sought to draw together and 'monopolize' Bombay's plural marketplace of Islams marks the beginning of a different age in the history of the city and the ocean's Muslims. And so, with Jinnāh's rise to political prominence, the symbolic date of 1915 marks a point of closure for this survey. Unlike the leaders of the Pan-Islamist Khilāfat movement and the Islamic nationalist Muslim League, the organizations scrutinized in the following chapters had no interest in toppling the colonial government or creating a new Muslim state, and confined their activities to what, in its ideological and legal contours, colonial modernity had rendered as the private and thereby unregulated sphere of 'religion'.<sup>18</sup> By promoting religious productions that did not contradict the colonial formulation of religion as the private business of individual conscience and community custom, the individuals and groups discussed in the following chapters drew their success from being located in this sphere of 'religion' rendered distinct from 'politics'. Unlike the political activities of the Jinnāhs and the al-Afghānīs, the 'Wahhabis' and the Pirs of Pagaro, which became so thoroughly registered in the imagination and archive of empire as to offer historians the double attraction of being automatically 'important' and abundantly documented in colonial records, the Muslims discussed in *Bombay Islam* left no such imprint in the colonial register and, comprising hagiographies and etiquette manuals, poems and travelogues, prayer-books and contracts, the documentation they left is their own. In this sense, their place in nineteenth-century history is raw: their motivations and status have not been preordained by the colonial information order and its long echoes in academia.<sup>19</sup>

If the production of such unproblematically non-political forms of 'religion' passed under the radar of the colonial state, their neglect belies the efficiency of their producers' response to the displacement and anomie of a new Muslim working class and the moralities and anxieties of an



ascendant Muslim middle class. For, as the earliest steamships in the Indian Ocean entered Bombay's waters in 1825, the first train in Asia departed the city in 1853, and its streets were illuminated by gas lamps a decade later, this oceanic urban herald of industrialization produced forms of enchantment that were no less modern than the ectoplasmic enthusiasms of metropolitan London.<sup>20</sup> What the following pages offer is therefore not an account of the kind of Islamic modernity – global and deracinated, rational and individualist, disenchanted and 'Protestant' – that has long been the familiar face of the Muslim nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> For the swifter and cheaper travel of the nineteenth century that enabled this plurality of Islams had only one trajectory in the direction of Pan-Islamism, and the Reformist Islam of a small class of intellectuals was in turn only one response to the new social conditions.<sup>22</sup> While Bombay did help produce such Pan-Islamist and Reformist Islams, the greater number of religious productions to emerge there were made of the same stuff as the tower-block-busting Pēdrō Shāh.<sup>23</sup> Looming large over a market that stretched between Durban, Tehran and Hyderabad, Bombay produced and exported a bewildering supply of Muslim cults and services whose chief attractions were the promise of miracles, intercession and patronage.<sup>24</sup> As late as 1911 an Arab Christian observer could still note of Bombay's Muslims that, 'to the practice of white magic, soothsaying, and the procuring of luck-charms and amulets, they have, like other Moslems, no objection', adding, in a pointer to the economic dimensions of such services, that 'their advisors in soothsaying and witchcraft are poor Saiyids'.<sup>25</sup> In the industrial heart of the west Indian Ocean, such enchanted practices and the 'entrepreneurs' and 'firms' that produced them found a ready market of consumers: among not only the Indian and African workers in the cotton mills and dockyards, but through networks of commerce and labour as far as the towns of Iran and the sugar fields of Natal. For as the following chapters detail, Bombay's Islams were not limited to Bombay itself and, produced by the largest player in a maritime marketplace, spread from the northern to the southern reaches of an oceanic economy of religious exchange.

#### BOMBAY'S RELIGIOUS ECONOMY

As an interpretative model which analyses the holistic interactions of the 'producers' and 'consumers' of religion in a given environment, religious economy (or the economy of religion) offers a way to track the relations of the large numbers and varied types of religiosity that typify complex



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modern societies.<sup>26</sup> To use such a model of religious economy is not to make judgements on the ontological or epistemological value of religion, nor is it to reduce religion to solely material or financial forces. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that the model of religious economy is a product of sociological rather than economic thought. The general principle of such analysis is that the complexities of religious activities and interactions are *like* commercial activities and interactions in their capacity to be rendered intelligible through the interpretive model of economy. Further, religious economies are *like* commercial economies in that they constitute a market of potential ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’, a set of ‘firms’ competing to serve that market, and the religious ‘products’ and ‘services’ produced or otherwise made available by those firms.<sup>27</sup> As a product of sociological thought, religious economy is concerned with the social life of religion, and as such addresses such fundamental questions as why one type of religiosity flourishes in a certain environment and not another, and how different types (or rival versions of the same type) of religiosity compete with one another. Religion is in this sense conceived as a social and collective enterprise, the result of interactions between different persons. One of the most important aspects of religious economy is therefore the way in which it brings together both the production and consumption dimensions of the social life of religion: the careers of thinkers, prophets or miracle-workers are held to be inseparable from the responses (or lack thereof) of those around them. The model of religious economy also has the advantage of being equally capable of explaining very different trajectories of religious development. In being fundamentally data driven and capable of envisaging a multiplicity of outcomes from the interaction of the participants within its purview, unlike certain forms of classical (particularly Weberian) sociology it avoids teleological explanations of religious development. For these reasons, the model has rich potential for making sense of the social history of religion, particularly in periods and places characterized by religious variety.

Theoretical models are meant to explain complex data and render it comprehensible. Since the model of religious economy was originally developed to explain highly pluralistic religious environments, it is particularly useful in making sense of the vast plethora of Muslim religious organizations or ‘firms’ that have emerged since the nineteenth century. The latter has usually been seen as a period in which a new Muslim conscience of ‘reform’ emerged and became increasingly hegemonic as the century progressed.<sup>28</sup> As research has excavated the range of voices and

positions in these nineteenth-century debates, it has become increasingly difficult to discern clear defining positions between them. The implicit heuristic model typically used to map this fracture between ‘tradition’ and ‘reform’ is one of a dialogue in which two polemical parties can be distinguished.<sup>29</sup> But as research on the range of parties involved has unearthed a cacophony of voices between which no clear dividing line can be discerned, the model of a dichotomous dialogue seems less and less helpful. It is here that the model of religious economy proves its usefulness. For as the cumulative research of recent decades has demonstrated, what we see in the nineteenth century is not the emergence of a smaller number of dominant religious ‘movements’ among India’s Muslims and of agreement between a small number of theological ‘parties’, but on the contrary a bewildering array of new religious ‘entrepreneurs’ and ‘firms’ whose positions on different subjects overlapped as much as they contradicted one another. The model of dialogue, or two-way debate, simply does not fit the evidence, and has the additional disadvantage of reflecting the self-proclaimed Reformists’ own rhetoric by collapsing their opponents into the static and monolithic category of ‘tradition’. While standardizing, nationalizing and even globalizing organizations did emerge by the 1900s, so did increasing numbers of sectarian, dissenting and localizing organizations.

In focusing on the city’s many Muslim productions – indeed, its many Islams – *Bombay Islam* is concerned with the way in which this larger and newly competitive religious economy both created and exacerbated fractures *within* what are too easily assumed to be either pre-existing religious communities of ‘Muslims’ or newly unified ones of Muslim Nationalism or Pan-Islamism that emerged in the nineteenth century. While the following chapters do occasionally touch on the more familiar topic of inter-religious competition (as with Bombay’s famous Hindu–Muslim riots) they are more concerned with challenging the notion that modernity created more standardized – ‘uniform’, ‘global’ or ‘national’ – forms of Islam.<sup>30</sup> Far from creating such a standardized or homogenous Islam, in the period from 1840 to 1915 at least, in the most industrialized city in the west Indian Ocean, industrialization and capitalist modernity encouraged the creation of an ever-increasing diversity of religious producers and consumers, with the latter made more demanding through their exposure to a growing marketplace of religious products and services. Bombay Islam was not one kind of religious production, but many.

What is seen overall in the nineteenth century is therefore a massive increase in Muslim religious production. In part, as in the case of Bombay,