

Title—Indian Muslim Minorities and the 1857 Rebellion: Religion, Rebels, and Jihad
Author—Ilyse R. Morgenstein Fuerst
Year—2017

Categories: Islam, Religion, Colonialism, Intellectual History

Place: British Raj

Time: 19th Century

Argument Synopsis:

Morgenstein Fuerst's book is focused on the 1857 rebellion in colonial India, often referred to as the 'Sepoy Mutiny,' and specifically the role of this event in the subsequent categorization of Muslims in the British Empire. She categorizes the rebellion as a set of events that fundamentally altered the ways India was ruled and how Britons saw the people and landscape they ruled over. The rebellion resulted in a massive imperial reconfiguration which fundamentally altered the definitions of religion; she argues that the way the British categorized religion in India dramatically changed how religion is thought of (as a category) well beyond British imperial borders. Morgenstein Fuerst aims to trace how the role and racialization of Muslims in contemporary settings began with this colonial history as part of imperial formation and global acceptance of the narrative of rebellion. Centrally, her book is focused on how the 1857 rebellion came to be portrayed as a religious insurrection, and more specifically as a marker of the religious obligation of Indian Muslims. She argues that the intertwined processes of minoritization and racialization played a central role in the cultural and imperial production of Muslims as jihadis.

The 1857 rebellion began in May of 1857 and became a year of bloodshed, rebellion, suppression, and suspicion—marking it as one of the most important moments in both British and South Asian history. The event holds a place in Indian historiography and popular imagination that far outlasted the violence of 1857. For her analysis, Morgenstein Fuerst utilizes two texts from the period, Sir William Hunter's *Indian Musalmans* and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's review of Hunter's book, to demonstrate the process by which Indian Muslims became minoritized by the way the rebellion was conceived. She finds that after the rebellion, observers, including Sir Hunter, increasingly labeled its causes, events, and lingering effects as religious and may tied these uniquely to Islam. Hunter's ultimate claim was that Muslims were bound by religion to rebel against a non-Muslim ruler if that ruler did not meet their religious obligations. She represents this book as a powerful example of the minoritization of Muslims following the rebellion. Both Hunter's Book and Khan's response served to redefine a Muslim identity that was pan-Islamic, racialized, and minoritized; both saw Indian Muslims as holding an immutable identity transferrable by birth.

She concludes with a discussion of the high place the rebellion holds across the Indian subcontinent up through the present day. It is remembered on major anniversaries in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, although in India it is conceived of as a Hindu religious rebellion. Overall, Morgenstein Fuerst argues that the memory and memorialization of the rebellion ties Islam to revolt, paints Muslims as rebels, and marks Muslims as jihadis.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Classification of religions became a hallmark of the British Empire
- 1857 rebellion as a moment when jihad came to signify Muslims broadly and definitionally as religious actors and as (potential) subjects of empire; Muslims as inherently tied to ideas of violence is not a contemporary categorization
- Minoritization and racialization of Muslims a direct consequence of 1857 rebellion