

**Title—Representations of Indian Muslims in British Colonial Discourse**

**Author—Alex Padamsee**

**Year—2005**

Categories: Colonialism, India, Culture, Writings

Place: Colonial India

Time: 1780-1960

Argument Synopsis:

Padamsee's book is concerned with the varying representations of Indian Muslims found in the writings of the British Empire. He criticizes the current historiography on British constructions of Indian society for stopping short of attempting to test out its full implications. According to Padamsee, historians either situate their engagement with representations of Islam in India in the pre-1857 period or treat them as unproblematized examples of the broad sweep of colonial epistemologies of difference. The aim of his study is to construct an alternative, more coherent narrative of some of the main components of the fuzzy and tendentious thinking of nineteenth-century colonialist perceptions of Indian Islam. The book is intended to serve as another strand in the reconstruction of the full terms of dialogue involved in the formation of Indian political identities in the later colonial period. Essentially, colonialist representations of Indian Muslims have become a blind spot for theoretical studies of the evolution of nationalist discourse—a blind spot which Padamsee aims to fill. He claims that to fully understand the politicization of ethnicity and race by Indian socio-political movements in the modern period requires the coherent analysis of the colonial state in which those movements engaged.

The book is organized into three parts; the first part sets out the parameters of the discourse as it had evolved by the early twentieth century, the second part provides a discussion of some of the accounts of Muslim conspiracy in 1857-59 with a close look at the rhetorical role played by the Indo-Muslim 'fanatic' in structuring the self-presentation of the persecuted official, and the third part utilizes Zygmunt Bauman's *The Stranger* as a useful concept for interpreting the broader currents of official attitudes over the subsequent half century. In order to achieve this, Padamsee uses detailed readings of a wide range of Anglo-Indian texts in an attempt to trace and account for the discourse of the 'fanatic' from its initial appearance in 1857 until the first physical enactment of its underlying rationale in the partition of Bengal in 1905. Specifically, Padamsee focuses on the interdependent elements of alien-ness, antagonism, and paradox as manifested in these texts; these texts include: fiction, travel writing, socio-political essays, journalism, and memoirs. Padamsee traced these elements back to their genesis in the perception of conspiracy in 1857—a perception through which Indian Muslims emerged for the first time in British eyes as an integrated pan-Indian entity. Anglo-Indians came to require constant clarification of Indo-Muslim separateness and unity as a means of forestalling an engagement with the ambivalence and instabilities contained in their own self-projection as the secular, neutral, & discontinuous arbiter of that society. Overall his book is a contribution towards the recent attempts by scholars to disaggregate the monolithic categories through which Islam is still being constructed, in both the North and the South.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Historians have largely overlooked the contradictory ways in which conspiracy was imbricated in 1857 with a peculiarly Anglo-Indian crisis of self-representation
- It is the very elusiveness of the Indian Muslim in Anglo-Indian discourse that underwrote his descriptive isolation
- British conception of Indian Muslims questions the stability of the notion that they were a unified and separate entity—post-1857 this discourse required them to be represented as such in order for the British to maintain their understanding of their own relationship to Indian society