

## Monograph Synopsis

### Summary:

My monograph-in-progress, *Life After Conquest: Afghan Pathways in Early Colonial North India (ca. 1774 – 1857)*, explores the world of autonomous Afghan service professionals that emerged during the British East India Company's piecemeal annexation of the grid of Mughal successor states where they were settled. These states operated as an outpost of the Durrani Afghan Empire, only to be dominated by the Company during the long establishment of colonial rule. This frequent change of hands propelled the formerly secure Afghan service professionals—scribes, legal officers, petty bureaucrats, and soldiers—to observe and document successive political transitions as they experienced them. In their works, primarily comprising diaries, poetry and chronicles written in Persian and Urdu, they articulated new conceptions of regional identity, religious affiliation, military service, and customary law. Drawing upon their works, I examine how these figures responded in writing when faced with the choices of adapting to, actively resisting, or escaping early colonial rule. Their stories offer valuable insights into an autonomous Persianate public sphere that flourished in the interstices between empires, but which was eclipsed and overwritten by subsequent tides of colonial and nationalist modernities.

### Methods and Disciplinary Implications:

My work is in dialogue with three major fields of inquiry. First, it is squarely located within the ever-evolving field of Persianate studies. In the years since Tavakoli-Targhi first issued a call to comprehend the “homeless texts of Persianate modernity,” scholars have begun to draw attention to the historically contingent specificities of the multiple Persianate cultures that were stitched together by the enduring use of the Persian language over centuries across Eurasia. My work joins these efforts by examining the continued use of Persianate forms of expression by a newly autonomous set of actors—Afghan servicemen in search of work—at the crucial moment of early colonial conquest when the traditional structures of social and cultural patronage were scrambled and in the process of reconfiguration.

Second, my book responds to classic studies of the transition between the Mughal Empire and British colonial rule in South Asia that have emphasized an organic evolution of late-Mughal occupational groups into modern social classes. In contrast, I disaggregate the problem of the transition to colonialism by focusing on the Company's initial conquests and the responses that they elicited from the ranks of servicemen. The writings of these groups were generally ignored by colonial and subsequent historiographies because they lacked literary sophistication and many of them were produced without the oversight of well-known patrons. Therefore, whereas previous analyses, based solely on the Company's records and the works of Mughal scholarly elites, tended to search for the roots of late-colonial modernities, my book demonstrates the underestimated historical interest and importance of a distinct early-colonial world of autonomous authorship.

Finally, my book speaks to debates about colonialism and nationalism in Afghan studies. By taking as its premise an understanding that, in the pre-modern world, Afghan communities were scattered across the borderlands of multiple empires, it clarifies that Afghan histories and community-consciousness were often forged outside the modern nation state of Afghanistan, in this instance by Afghans in early colonial North India, who wrote prolifically and with deep purpose.

## Overview of Chapters

Chapters One and Two of my book examine the unraveling of two major Afghan ruling households which, having established quasi-autonomous states in northern India, were overrun by the Company at the turn of the nineteenth century. For the time that they were able to operate as functioning rulers, the Rohilla and Bangash Afghan chiefs of Rohilkhand and Farrukhabad oversaw the employment of Afghans and members of the myriad local pastoral and landed communities—recruited as *chelas*, or enslaved “disciples.” These service members who were attached to the Afghan ruling households reckoned with the transformations wrought by early colonial conquest. Many documented their memories of Afghan authority in the wake of the crumbling Mughal center, while others reached for lofty dreams of a grand restoration of Persianate imperial forms in India.

Chapters Three and Four examine how Afghans from northern India adapted to a life on the move in circumstances of continuing colonial annexation, recording the dislocations that they and their immediate kin experienced as they wandered in search of work. These histories are drawn from Persian and Urdu accounts of the state-making endeavors of Amir Khan (d. 1834), a figure who was routinely dismissed as a “soldier-of-fortune” by the Company, and the writings of autonomous Afghan soldiers who followed in his wake. They are also found in collections of anecdotes that attest to Afghan Sufi adepts who frequently oscillated between their itinerant soldiering professions and the respite of an inward turn that Sufi *khāneqāhs* offered them at this time.

The concluding chapter of my book builds upon foregoing discussions by directly engaging a central tool of early colonial “pacification”—the delegitimization of the final claims on a weakened Persianate political order in the decades preceding the revolt of 1857 and the inauguration of formal colonial rule. It contrasts the Company’s actions, such as the dilution of political threats by the guarantee of pensions and land assignments and its assumption of control over law and order, with the codes of customary law that were written by the descendants of former Afghan chiefs in their efforts to retain vestiges of legal autonomy that had been granted to them under Mughal rule.