

Dean Accardi

Madison Conference Paper Abstract

Panel:

Re-Defining Religious Community: Shifting Boundaries, Strategies, and Sources of Authority in Early Modernity

Title:

Ascetic Discourses and Trans-Religious Community Formation in Early Modern Kashmir

Abstract:

Kashmir is notorious today for the international struggle over its religious and political identity, which is widely understood as exemplary of the failure of secular modernization in the subcontinent under colonialism and the subsequent postcolonial encounter between political Islam and Hindu nationalism. However, during the early modern period, religious institutions and political entities were not easily divided along communal lines, nor were they entirely syncretic. Instead, asceticism as a set of shared practices and discourses served to create a common grammar of authority applicable to both religious and political spheres. By linking power and status to the ascetic cultivation of physical, psychological, and spiritual discipline, members of a variety of Hindu and Muslim religious sects and political factions formed hierarchical social networks based on common ascetic ideals and disciplinary practices. Drawing upon examples from Persian and Sanskrit texts written by Kashmiris who held positions in major religious institutions and the royal court, this paper argues that early modern Kashmir witnessed the formation of a common ascetic community in which members retained religious identities affiliated with different Hindu and Muslim groups. This ascetic community accepted, across religious lines, the status and authority of ascetic saints, the veracity of the miracles they produced, and the existence of hidden spiritual powers and beings accessed through asceticism, but the ultimate, and unprovable, sources and causes for these commonly accepted phenomena were expected to differ according to one's theological imaginary. Since early modern ascetic saints continue to be invoked by political actors involved in the Kashmir conflict today, the fact that a shared grammar of asceticism may still be embedded in these saints' legacies as a source of their authority suggest the possibility, if not presence, of alternative religious and political formations to those predominating the Kashmir conflict today.

Dean Accardi

Sanskrit in Persianate India Pre-Conference Paper Abstract

Title:

“A Pakistani Hero in Sanskrit Sources: ‘Ali Hamadani and Body Politics”

Abstract:

In 1987, a conference was held in Azad Kashmir Pakistan to pay tribute to the Kubrawi Sufi saint and scholar Saiyid ‘Ali Hamadani. Many Pakistani elites, including President Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq, presented at this conference, casting ‘Ali Hamadani as an exemplar of Islamization, a notion prevalent among the Pakistani body politic. Whether he engaged in Islamization or not, it is generally understood that the effectiveness of Hamadani’s social and political activities was contingent upon the broader acceptance of his religious authority. While many today focus on Hamadani’s jurisprudential writings, late medieval and early modern records demonstrate that Hamadani’s religious authority was based on the power of his personal religious practices that in no small degree included ascetic bodily practices, a kind of body politics. This connection between asceticism and broader religious and political authority in Kashmir is not unique to Hamadani. Examining early writings on Hamadani against the backdrop of other Kashmiri political and religious texts, this paper argues that some of the ways in which asceticism articulates with religious and political authority in regard to Hamadani are closely related to how asceticism and religio-political authority are connected in some Kashmiri Sanskrit texts, including those of a pre- and non-Muslim variety. Thus, the authority of Hamadani, a model of Islamization in contemporary Pakistan, is based on religio-political paradigms that Islamization seeks to eradicate.