

Conclusion

I opened this book with the words of Nazir, a blacksmith who lived, worked, and wrote poetry in Rampur in the mid-twentieth-century, postindependence, and post-Partition period. Nazir, in his verses, referenced the revelation of knowledge by God to the blacksmith, a theme we have returned to repeatedly throughout this book. He asserted, moreover, that such revelation and wisdom had forced the *sarmāyāhdār*, or capitalist, to keep his “head bowed,” suggesting a labor politics and class solidarity that centered the (God-given) power of workers.¹

Artisans engaged with narratives of the Muslim past and claims on Islamic piety to navigate a bevy of social and technical challenges. One of the several contributions of artisan Islam that I have highlighted in this book was its impact on class-based solidarities. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Nazir indicated the continuities in connections between Muslim claims on artisan traditions and class-based movements and identities. By way of epilogue and conclusion, I first draw together stories from across the chapters to ask how artisan Islam informed twentieth-century North Indian laboring class-based identities.

Second, I turn to the partition of artisan Islam and the post-Partition marginalization of Muslim artisans’ technical knowledge by both India and Pakistan. Partition violently disrupted and reoriented Muslim artisans’ networks of technical and religious knowledge exchange, just as it disrupted intellectual, material, and economic exchange across the subcontinent.² Rather than the gradual remaking of Muslim artisan communities and reimagining of artisan Islam through migration to urban centers, Partition represented a radical break from former localities and the rapid consolidation of new migrant communities. For those who migrated from regions such as the United Provinces—which remained entirely within India—to the newly established nation of Pakistan, the ability to maintain a pious connection with centers of worship and practice in their home regions was often made tenuous or broken. Conversely, those who remained in newly independent India, like Nazir, found themselves with more limited access to the translocal

narratives and practices of artisan Islam that had characterized the previous century. These disruptions and reorientations are reflected in the archive of artisan Islam itself, and in its often piecemeal nature. The challenges of tying together writing produced in cities that were once part of tightly bound networks of knowledge exchange but are today divided between two (frequently oppositional) nation-states undoubtedly shaped the stories I was able to tell in this book.

In the final segment of this Conclusion, I return to the question of how *Pious Labor* might challenge our conception of the histories of South Asian Islam. Integrating the histories of labor and technology into our study of South Asian Islam suggests new potential paths within all three fields. Most notably, *Pious Labor* provides an opportunity to trouble persistent elisions in the study of South Asian Muslim communities. Placing laboring lives at the center of a study of South Asian Islam forces us to critically consider not only why they have so often been absent but also what forms of knowledge are lost by the insistence on a canon that privileges elite intellectual spaces.

RELIGION AND LABOR BEYOND COMMUNALISM AND CONFLICT?

Throughout this book, we have encountered early twentieth-century *kārigars* who engaged in or encouraged class solidarities and labor organization through narratives of artisan Islam. This was not the only way that *kārigars* asserted artisan Islam in contexts of wage labor and increased middle-class oversight, intervention, and ownership of their sites of work. But it was one prominent means by which artisan Islam not only retained but also broadened its social relevance in expanding, industrializing cities of urban North India.

Muslim claims on artisan traditions within Indian labor- and class-based movements in the early twentieth century suggest a potential nuancing of Dipesh Chakrabarty's depiction of the "inherent duality" of laborer politics. I do not dispute, as Chakrabarty argues, that in colonial India "act[s] of revolt against the authorities, such as . . . strike[s]," sometimes shifted, taking on "communal" characteristics that spurred religious conflict among workers.³ But the examples analyzed in this book suggest that "revolts against the authorities" too were sometimes informed by narratives of piety and the religious past. Muslim experiences of pious labor informed worker solidarity, even shaping Muslim artisans' and laborers' willingness and ability to challenge the capitalist authority of workshop and factory owners or middle-class supervisors.

For instance, in the first chapter of this book, I analyzed the experiences of early twentieth-century lithographic laborers. For these workers, many of whom shared Muslim religious identities, popular understandings of social difference within the industrialized lithographic presses were often shaped by their labor, rather than along religious lines. Scribal workers sought to differentiate

themselves from other lithographic workers by virtue of their claims on a distinctive engagement with a Muslim past and Muslim religious tradition for scribal practice. This was true even in a context like the Lahore lithographic presses, where a significant majority of laborers across most trades within presswork were Muslim.

In that context, the distinction that sometimes threatened to upend labor solidarities within the lithographic presses was not, in most instances, religious communalism. Instead, it was the varied social status and prestige ascribed to different technical and trade practices. Within individual trades such as scribal work, Muslim identity and narratives of the past operated as a force for cohesion and even solidarity. Islam, in the context of scribal labor at the lithographic presses, offered workers who had trained within the presses access to shared narratives of the Muslim past, even at times when they did not have access to prominent *ustād-murīd* lineages of scribal work. These narratives of trade-based social distinction, which often assumed shared Muslim identity, spurred the creation of a distinct union for scribal workers, though they did not, ultimately, prevent moments of workers' collaborative agitation against press owners and management.

Both at the presses and in other fields, Muslim owners and managers of factories and workshops sometimes sought to assert their shared religious identity with workers. In doing so, they aimed to reorient Muslim *kārīgars*' forms of protest and resistance toward projects that held political resonance for elite and middle-class Muslims, and away from working-class agitation. In the first aim—securing mass participation in movements initially led by Muslim intellectuals and elites—they sometimes were successful, with urban laborers ultimately providing numerical strength for many of the major Muslim political movements and protests from the early twentieth century through to Partition in 1947.⁴

But this did not mean that *kārīgars*' forms of protest were successfully oriented away from labor solidarities. On the contrary, in many of the trades studied in this book, Muslim workers remained committed to asserting their identities as both workers and Muslims. They drew on models and narratives from artisan Islam to demand improved wages and working conditions.⁵ Commitment to identities and forms of solidarity were often rooted in a shared conception of physical labor as a distinguishing, pious practice. Even upwardly mobile and socially prominent master artisans such as the electroplater Mirza Ibrahim, the boilermaker Hakimuddin, and the lead mason Riyasat 'Ali Sarshar insisted on an artisan laboring identity that valorized physical work with one's hands as a pious practice, and one deserving of status and renumeration.

At the same time, engagement with labor politics was far from the only way that artisan Islam was reimagined in early twentieth-century contexts of technological and industrial change. As I show in chapter 3, artisan Islam was sometimes reasserted to meet a perceived challenge from emerging colonial and charitable educational institutions, with tailors insisting on the inherently masculine, heritable

nature of the pious, Muslim, form of their labor. In other cases, such as through the Anjuman-i muṣlah-i qaum-i āhangarān (Organization for the Uplift of the Community of Blacksmiths) explored in chapter 5, artisans sought to assert social status and prestige for their trades and laboring communities.

In their study of the adaptation of the Hindu tradition of Vishwakarma worship—often associated with artisans—in contexts of industrial labor, Kenneth George and Kiran Narayan note that there is “no intrinsic or immutable politics in Vishwakarma worship.” Instead, it has the “capacity to lend itself for use as a public, political resource for mobilizations of different kinds.”⁷⁶ The same might be said to be true of the traditions associated with artisan Islam that I have explored in this book; there are certainly no *intrinsic* politics to artisan assertions of Islam. But what has interested me, throughout this book, is the fact that so many artisans from across a wide range of trades sought to engage artisan Islam to improve the economic, social, and material well-being of their communities, be it through labor politics or other avenues. In Tirthankar Roy’s framing, master artisans of the sort who wrote and circulated many of the texts examined in this book were often motivated by their efforts to distinguish themselves and improve their status as exceptionally innovative individuals.⁷ But by claiming artisan traditions for their trades and asserting the pious nature of their materials and technologies, the artisans I have analyzed here sought to improve not just their own economic conditions and social status but also those of their communities. They sought to create new social spaces that privileged and valorized physical labor within a colonial economy that more often disciplined and marginalized members of their communities.

PARTITIONING ARTISAN ISLAM

Why has artisan Islam so often been overlooked, and how might we change our approach to the historical record to engage with traditions that circulated among Muslim workers? We have encountered several reasons for the marginalization of Muslim artisans and their pious labor in our understanding of the South Asian Muslim past, most notably persistent colonial-era claims that their Islam was “unorthodox” and even un-Islamic. Another reason that artisan Islam is often overlooked is rooted in the history of the partition of the subcontinent into the two new nation-states of India and Pakistan in 1947.

Partition marked a radical breaking point for many of the translocal and trans-urban networks of technical, material, and religious knowledge on which *kārīgars* relied. It also contributed to the marginalization of the archive of artisan Islam, as the archival preservation practices of the two new states centered collections that highlighted the narratives and processes of their own creation. Tracing the mobility of the people, texts, and ideas central to artisan Islam thus becomes an exercise in reconstructing spaces and networks that were radically, often violently, disrupted.

As I have shown throughout the book, Muslim artisans exchanged understandings of pious labor across cities in colonial North India through the circulation of printed manuals and histories. These were, in turn, intended to be read aloud and interpreted within workshops and factories, with Muslim artisans likely adding notes and comments relevant to their localized communities. Likewise, regional migration within North India, often from small towns to larger cities within the same or neighboring provinces, brought localized inflections of artisan Islam into conversation with each other.

Partition spurred migration completely unlike the economic migration seen in previous decades on an unforeseen scale often remembered as “the largest mass migration in human history.”⁸ Partition migration often occurred during periods of extreme violence, with migrants moving because they feared for their lives and the lives of their families.⁹ Artisans and laborers who migrated as a result of Partition violence often did return to their trades—or related trades—in the cities and regions where they settled, finding and organizing new laboring communities despite their displacement.¹⁰ In an industrial neighborhood just outside the walled city of Lahore in summer 2022, I was introduced to several Muslim carpenters who told me of their pre-Partition familial origins in cities such as Amritsar, now in Indian Punjab, or in the towns of the United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh). Nearly all these Pakistani carpenters boasted that their ancestors had been successful in woodworking or related fields in India before Partition.

Nonetheless, the scope and magnitude of Partition make it impossible to study these migrations through the same lens of exchange and adaptation as those analyzed in chapter 4. Although some artisans almost certainly reasserted and reimagined their traditions of pious labor in the wake of the mass migration of Partition, the translocal networks that allowed these traditions and practices to circulate and expand were violently unmade. The contemporary carpenters I spoke to in Lahore expressed intergenerational nostalgia for their ancestral cities and towns in India, and some also asserted a connection to a shrine or saintly lineage in India. But even among those who had family on the other side of the border, none had visited, and the possibility of meaningful material exchange seemed foreclosed.

Partition and the creation of two new nation-states (later three, with the creation of Bangladesh in 1971) also furthered processes of marginalizing artisan claims on technological expertise through the creation of national claims on science and technology. As Gyan Prakash notes, in the immediate pre-Partition and post-Partition periods Indian nationalists sought to claim an “indigenous science” or identify “indigenous cultural resources for science.” In doing so, they “challenge[d] the dominant view that Western science’s epistemology transcended its cultural location.”¹¹ Simultaneously, in Pakistan, some of the state’s new leaders took up narratives of the “compatibility” of Islam and science through reference to the scientific prowess of eighth- through thirteenth-century Muslims. They relocated and nationalized an understanding of the Muslim scientific past that had also

circulated and been the subject of significant debate among Muslim reformists in colonial India.¹²

But there was little room for artisan Islam or Muslim artisan claims of technical expertise in either of these traditions. Prakash argues that even among Indian “secular nationalists” the indigeneity of scientific knowledge or resources was often rooted in an implicitly Hindu past.¹³ And in Pakistan, claims for Muslim pasts of science and technology continued to draw on the elite Muslim narratives of decline from a supposed “golden age,” one often emanating primarily from the supposed Arab and Persian ancestors of *sharīf* Muslims. Artisan Islam, in other words, had limited relevance to either of the new nationalizing ideologies of science and technology.

The national narratives of both new states, but especially of India, also conceptualized “craft traditions” as part of a postcolonial understanding of heritage and identity. In India, as Abigail McGowan notes, there was a concerted effort to frame “national life” around craft production.¹⁴ Nationalizing narratives of craft sought to challenge colonial perceptions of the backwardness and inflexibility of Indian artisans, even as they also maintained the “timelessness” of Indian tradition. At the same time, they echoed colonial portrayals of the sharp distinction between “cottage” industries and urban, industrialized manufacturing. In this imagination of national crafts, there was little room for an urban Muslim *kārīgar* who moved between spaces of wage labor and familial workshops. Likewise, while not necessarily exclusively Hindu, nationalizing images of craftsmanship idealized a supposed timeless Indian village as the site of artisanship, often embodied by a rural Hindu woman.¹⁵ The implicit Hindu social identity of the idealized Indian craftworker in the post-Partition period meant that the body of knowledge produced by Muslim artisans was seen as irrelevant to assertions of Indian national tradition.

As noted earlier, Partition—and the attendant violent displacements of the mid-twentieth century—did not just disrupt the translocal connections, patterns of migration and mobility, and community spaces of Muslim artisans. It also remade the ways that the histories and narratives of Muslim artisans were collected and preserved, while shaping the language that we, as historians, have available to us to describe the traditions of Muslim social and political practice on the modern subcontinent. On the most practical level, it has contributed to the loss and marginalization of materials on artisan Islam.

At the time of writing, India is a nation increasingly—and overwhelmingly—politically dominated by Hindutva ideology and the accompanying violent disavowal of Muslim pasts and futures. But even before the contemporary political turn, archival collections and regional histories perceived as Islamic were sometimes seen as beyond the remit of the secular Indian state, except when they demonstrated the state’s understanding of an (often elite) aesthetic of Indian Islam. Many Indian public libraries devoted to the types of Urdu-language materials that may have circulated among artisans have been chronically underfunded. Collections

that existed before Partition often lost their most significant benefactors and patrons after 1947. Conversely, in Pakistan, while there is state support for Urdu-language collections and Islamic histories, histories that receive the most funding and promotion are those that highlight an inexorable march toward Pakistani statehood. While alternative Muslim politics—including Muslim social movements and ideologies beyond the *ashrāf*—have attracted increased scholarly attention, they remain marginalized by state efforts to cultivate a specifically Pakistani history.¹⁶

Moreover, as Saloni Mathur has argued in the context of art historical approaches to Partition, the events of 1947 and their aftermath sometimes threaten to “overdetermine” our reading of modern South Asian histories. Mathur asks how Partition—and in some cases, our study of it—has limited “our ability to think against the status quo,” in imagining both potential futures and past worlds.¹⁷ In examining the connections and exchanges embedded in the manuals and community histories of artisan Islam, *Pious Labor* has centered alternative pasts of Indian Muslims. Within these pasts, debates over Muslim identity and practice were not just oriented—always and inexorably—toward debates over “nationhood” but instead encompassed a wide range of social projects that emphasized the role of Islam within Indian laboring lives.

ARTISAN ISLAM AS ISLAMIC HISTORY

Pious Labor has engaged in several projects of recovery. It has highlighted stories that have been marginalized by Partition, by the dominance of colonial archives over the vernacular, and by assumptions that laboring religious identities in South Asia are inherently communal or oppositional. It has sought to recover these stories because they are interesting but also because they suggest a potential reorientation of our understanding of the Muslim past in South Asia. Historiographically, this book has also argued for locating Islamic history with labor history and the history of technology and, conversely, for reading these fields as Islamic history. We can only understand the vastness of Muslim pasts when we consider not only the version of Islam produced in debates among religious scholars, or in histories popularly coded as Islamic, but also the versions of Islam embedded in a wide range of Muslim documents on their histories and practices.

Muslim artisans meaningfully engaged with the emergent elite-led religious movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and these movements had significant popular political and religious impacts. Indeed, Muslim intellectual addresses to the working classes and the popularization of religious movements that had originated within Muslim intellectual circles were common in early to mid-twentieth century South Asia.¹⁸ But if we read colonial-era South Asian Islamic history through the technical manuals and community histories examined in this book, it becomes apparent that artisan engagement with Islam extended far beyond a popularization of elite reformist ideologies. We must therefore

contend with Muslim experiences that differ radically from those reflected in the writings of Muslim intellectuals and the movements they create.

When we read Muslim religious, social, and material lives through the *Risālah-yi Idrīsiyah*, the *Tazkirah al-aiwān*, or the *Iksīr-i malm 'ah*, we confront alternative narratives of the Muslim past. We are also exposed to the myriad ways that Muslims attempted to make sense of—and sometimes challenge—colonial economic and technical authority. The writings of master artisans such as Khwaja Muhammad, Riyasat 'Ali Sarshar, and Mirza Ibrahim center concerns about how to negotiate the economic and material marginalization of their communities under colonial authority. We should acknowledge that these concerns were themselves sometimes exclusionary or hierarchical, particularly given their erasure of women and nonmale artisans. Still, drawing on their engagement with Islam through artisanship, their manuals and histories offered visions for the futures of artisan and laboring communities that lay beyond the consolidating forms of exploitation engendered through the colonial economy.

Even in the contemporary Indian economic context, often dominated by the rise of multinational corporations and upper-caste Hindu technical authority, Muslim artisans continue to engage with Islam to negotiate their economic, social, and religious positionalities.¹⁹ Despite the radical disruptions of Partition, artisan Islam seems to retain at least some personal and social relevance. And as in the past, artisan articulations of the Islamic nature of their work often seem to straddle divides between written and embodied knowledge.

For instance, in June 2022, in a scissor-making workshop in Meerut, I glimpsed a lithographed sheet of paper, hanging on the workshop wall in a silver frame. The page promised that “by hanging this page in the shop, it is protected from all evil and violence [*shar o fasād*].”²⁰ The same page provided numerical tables praising God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the early caliphs, emphasizing the number 786, which is often used to express “Bismillāh hir raḥmān nir raḥīm” through the *abjad* system where Arabic letters are assigned numerical value. And at the bottom was an *ayah* from the second *sūrah* of the Quran, *sūrah al-baqarah*, proclaiming: “God: There is no god but Him, the Ever Living, the Ever Watchful. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. All that is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to Him. Who is there that can intercede with Him except by His leave?”²¹ This lithographed page on the wall of the scissor-making workshop—which also served as the proprietor’s home—in contemporary Meerut suggests the continued relevance of Islamic knowledge and piety to spaces of artisan labor and production. Just as artisan Islam took on shifting social, political, and economic relevance in the context of colonial capitalism, we might speculate that contemporary Muslim artisans continue to remake the piety of their labor and religious practice today. That is, however, a subject for a different book, perhaps one that draws on methodologies beyond the archival. What I wish to highlight here is not the potential contours of artisan Islam in contemporary India but rather the persistence of artisanal forms,

spaces, and texts of piety, despite the intensifying religious marginalization of Indian Muslims and the emergence of a neoliberal economy.

To that end, we might end where we began: with Nazir, who wrote in the post-Partition period but drew on ideals of Muslim artisanship that had circulated in the North Indian print economy over the previous century. Like so many of the materials examined in this book, his poetry reveals that Muslim artisans imagined worlds in which the God-given skill of the artisan was recognized not only as a source of status but also as a form of wisdom at the center of technical production. They did so despite, and in some cases because of, the rise of spaces of production that challenged or undermined their technical authority, and the rise of elite and middle-class narratives that belied artisanal piety. In articulating artisan Islam, Nazir and his predecessors pursued laboring and technological futures that celebrated the work and piety of Muslim artisan communities.