

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN INDIAN HISTORY AND SOCIETY

# Islam and the Army in Colonial India

SEPOY RELIGION AND THE SERVICE OF EMPIRE

Nile Green



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## Islam and the Army in Colonial India

A ground-breaking study of the cultural world of the Muslim soldiers of colonial India. Set in Hyderabad in the mid nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the book focuses on the soldiers' relationships with the *faqīr* holy men who protected them and the British officers they served. Drawing on Urdu as well as English sources, the book uses the biographies of Muslim holy men and their military followers to recreate the extraordinary encounter between a barracks culture of miracle stories, carnivals, drug-use and madness and a colonial culture of mutiny memories, Evangelicalism, magistrates and the asylum. It explores the ways in which the colonial army helped promote this sepoy religion while at the same time attempting to control and suppress certain aspects of it. The book brings to light the existence of a distinct 'barracks Islam' and shows its importance to the cultural no less than the military history of colonial India.

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# Islam and the Army in Colonial India

*Sepoy religion in the service of empire*

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Nile Green



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In memoriam  
Russell Parker Jones  
*Raconteur*  
1968–2003

O! Matter and impertinency mix'd;  
Reason in madness!

*King Lear*



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## Preface and acknowledgements

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‘As July advanced, the bazaar at Malakand became full of tales of the Mad Fakir. A great day for Islam was at hand. A mighty man had arisen to lead them.’<sup>1</sup> So wrote the young Winston Churchill in his account of the rise of Mullā Mastān, ‘the Mad Fakir of Swat’, on India’s North-West Frontier in the 1890s. Churchill was by no means the first Englishman to spread rumours of rabble-rousing ‘fakirs’, and, from the southern to the northern tip of the subcontinent, the imperial memoirs of many a British officer are replete with similar stories. Such tales were a common currency of the old India hand and a familiar pattern in the discursive fabric of empire. In the wake of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 especially, one strand of this fabric lent colour to reports about *faqīrs* rousing trouble among Indian soldiers under British command. By the 1920s, the tales of *faqīr* intrigue reached a crescendo of incredibility. It is to Raleigh Trevelyan that we owe the recording of perhaps the most extraordinary account of a *faqīr*-instigated rebellion. Trevelyan records how at the time of the Bacha-ye-Saqaw uprising in Afghanistan in the late 1920s,

A ridiculous rumour had circulated in India that T. E. Lawrence – when as Aircraftman Shaw he was trying, or pretending, to lead an anonymous life in the desert outpost of Miramshah in Waziristan – was behind the rebellion. It had actually been claimed that Lawrence had dared to disguise himself as a holy man. I remember Walter [Trevelyan (1893–1953), Special Service Officer of the Kashmir State Infantry stationed in Gilgit 1929–33] saying he had been in Lahore at the time and a real holy man there had been lynched because word had got around that he was Lawrence.<sup>2</sup>

The fog of war and rumour that had long surrounded the *faqīrs* was now fuelling even the wildest assertions. Yet for all the abundance of such reports in the archive of empire, historians still have precious

<sup>1</sup> W. S. Churchill, *The Story of the Malakand Field Force* (repr. Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger Publishing, 2004 [1898]), p. 27.

<sup>2</sup> R. Trevelyan, *The Golden Oriole: Childhood, Family and Friends in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 111.

little sense of the character of these *faqīrs* as they appeared to their followers and of the nature of their relationship to the Indian soldiers on whom British rule in large part depended. At its simplest, this book aims to sift through the reports and rumours to answer precisely these questions: Who were the *faqīrs*? And what was their relationship with the colonial soldier?

Today, as 150 years ago, the topic of Islam and warfare remains a tendentious one. Ever since the emergence of a colonial historiography of India, the association between Islam and military conquest has been a fraught theme in the study of India's past. Given the subject matter of this book, it is therefore necessary to make a few clarificatory remarks about the all too easy connection to be made between Muslims and violence. Many discussions of this topic assume some sort of innate Islamic predilection towards holy war. Whatever its dubious attractions, the assumption of such innate civilisational drives makes a travesty of the basic principles of historical enquiry on which this book is built. In a study investigating the connections between Islam and the armies of imperial India it would be particularly inappropriate to assume the trans-historical validity of attitudes towards Islam which were themselves only being formed in the colonial era. This is not to deny the long-standing association of India's Muslims with the soldiering profession, an association that ironically (and perhaps paradoxically) rendered the Muslim soldier one of the main building blocks of empire. But if James Mill's foundational early nineteenth-century narrative of a medieval 'Muslim invasion' had its forebears in the historiography of the Indo-Islamic sultanates themselves, recent research has shown that this picture of an expressly 'Islamic' conquest was more akin to the rhetoric of a book-writing clerical class than to a more general picture of agency and motive. Islam had no innate relationship – hostile or supportive – to any empire, and, as the following chapters show, its relationship to the life of the colonial soldier was a malleable and inconstant one.

By drawing attention to the forms of Islam associated with Muslims serving in one of the armies by which Britain maintained its control over India, this book aims to take discussions about Islam and warfare in new directions, not least by turning around the familiar terms of debate in which Muslim violence is seen as perpetually directed against colonial objectives. As *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* hopes to demonstrate, the Muslims and their religion were at times less the enemies of empire than its assistants. By looking at the religious practices associated with the Muslim sepoys of the Hyderabad Contingent, this book places Islam into colonial history proper, showing how a historically mutable Islam helped shape the fortunes of empire while at the same time being itself reshaped by the military structures

of sepoy life. The relationship between the religious traditions of the Muslim soldier and the exigencies of the British Empire was therefore one of give and take: the Islam of the Indian soldier was capable of assisting or resisting imperial agendas, lending mechanisms of loyalty no less than rebellion. The book is not primarily intended as a study of the Indian Army but is instead an attempt to link up a series of historiographical threads from different spools in Islamic and religious studies as well as colonial and military history. The intention is to offer new perspectives on writing 'history from below' by looking at the opportunities and predicaments presented by the interaction of empire with the religious culture of the Indian soldier that range from festivity and evangelicalism to madness and drug-use. In uncovering the world of the *faqīrs* long vilified in the rhetoric of empire, the book is in the end a study of what was in more ways than one a "subaltern" Islam.

Given the potential danger of the misuses of scholarship for political ends, it is perhaps worth issuing a word of caution. What is seen in this book is only a slice of India's Islamic history and an interpretation of that slice at that. Explored in *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* is the encounter of Islam with the military culture of the British Empire, an investigation which could probably be repeated to similar effect with regard to the Hindus and Sikhs who also served in the armies of British India and whose religious customs and sacred spaces were also shaped by military service. Although this book draws attention to the Muslim sepoy followers of such *faqīr* holy men as Afzal Shāh, Banē Miyān and Tāj al-dīn, it is important to state that in their lifetimes they also counted ordinary Hindus among their followers. After their deaths, their shrines became places of Hindu no less than Muslim veneration, and their current successors have done much in the service of communal harmony.

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The book had its origins in the noisy courtyard around the tomb of a former colonial soldier. Like other Muslim shrines in India, the grave of the old soldier serves as a stronghold of memory, a treasury of tales brought there by people seeking blessings, gossip, amusement, exorcism or simple respite from the traffic. If I initially fell into the latter category, my curiosity was soon captured by the faded photographs of sepoys that decorated the shrine's saloon and the stories I was told about the man who was buried there. At first there were just spoken tales to collect, not least from Muinuddin Khan Sahib, the great-nephew and last living link with the dead soldier-saint, who was by then in his late nineties and who as a boy used to lead the old man round by the arm. On a later visit to India, I was introduced to another distant relative, Mustafa Shah Biyabani, who with the uncanny timing of the *faqīrs* handed me a copy of

the sepoy's biography. It was the first I had heard of the text's existence, and it was to entirely transform the direction of my research. Since searches in numerous libraries in India and Britain have failed to locate another copy of this small-town Urdu lithograph, there is much to be grateful for to those who preserved what has proven to be a valuable and perhaps unique source. Without Mustafa Shah's sense of the fragility of history, and his generosity in sharing his books with me, my own book would not have been possible.

First place in the roster of thanks must therefore go to Mustafa Shah Biyabani and to those others who introduced me to the *faqīr* Banē Miyān and through him to the religious world of the sepoys. I have already mentioned Muinuddin Khan and the hospitality he, Kashifuddin Khan and their family showed me at Banē Miyān's shrine in Aurangabad sowed the seeds of this book in my imagination. I would especially like to thank Sarkar for his own tales of the soldier's life and for the generosity of a true officer and gentleman. During several frantic days, Riazuddin Nehri was tireless in introducing me to the right people in Aurangabad, and the *majālis* of my friend Bashir Nawaz made my evenings no less memorable. In Qazipeth, I was helped in my enquiries about Afzal Shāh by Syed Shujathullah Hussaini Biabani, Iqbal Biabani and Aziz Baig, who provided me with several other rare texts and guided me around the padre's shrine. Numerous other hosts showed me around the many other tombs, cantonments and churches that I visited during several research visits to India, and I am thankful for their kindness too. I was given a judicious measure of assistance by the librarians of the Salar Jung Library and Osmania University Library in Hyderabad, for which I am commensurately grateful.

Outside India, I was helped by a number of individuals and institutions. Doug Peers was particularly generous in sharing his vast knowledge of the literature on the Indian Army and its predecessors. At an earlier stage in the project, I was encouraged to problematise my Urdu sources through participating in a small Oxford workshop on 'Indian Texts in their Historical Contexts' with David Washbrook, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Frank Clooney. The day-to-day interaction with colleagues at Manchester University (particularly John Zavos, Jacqueline Suthren Hirst and George Brooke) provided me with the supportive but intellectually challenging environment needed to push my ideas in new directions. In later stages in the project, my readings were supplemented by the timely tip-offs of Anindita Ghosh, Elizabeth de Michelis, Michael Snape and Feroze Yasamee. A new home and colleagues at UCLA proved the perfect setting for making the final revisions to the text. My thanks in particular to Sanjay Subrahmanyam.

I am also grateful to James R. Newell for providing me with a copy of *Tazkira-e-Bābā Tāj al-dīn Awliyā* and giving permission to use his photographs of Tāj al-dīn and the Nagpur asylum. The comments of audiences at the Royal Asiatic Society, UCLA and the universities of Manchester and Cambridge have also worked their way into the following chapters. On a regular scale, Christopher Shackle and Francis Robinson were generous as ever with their advice. Timely assistance in preparing the manuscript was lent by Melissa Markauskas, and I am especially grateful to Joseph Bottrill for patient typesetting and for the recommendations of the three anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press, as well as for the encouragement of Marigold Acland. The remaining faults and extravagances are all mine.

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Final thanks to Nushin, for sharing house for so long with the shades of bumptious *sāhibs* and their subalterns.

## A note on terminology

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The names of the Muslim soldiers and holy men who appear in this book have been standardised in a simplified version (preserving macrons but removing underdots) of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* system for the transliteration of the Arabic and Persian alphabet. To avoid confusion, for Urdu words the same simplified system has been used with slight modifications to reflect Urdu pronunciation. While Indian personal names have been transliterated according to this system, Indian place names have been rendered in their most familiar form.

Given the inconsistency with which ‘Hindustani’ Urdu words passed into English, it is also necessary to clarify the book’s usage of two key terms. In general, the Anglo-Indian designation ‘sepoy’ is used in reference to any Indian soldier in colonial employment and not in its more restrictive sense of a foot soldier (which was in any case a misnomer, given the word’s derivation from the Persian *sipāhī*, ‘horseman, cavalryman’). To avoid an overload of terminology, I have only used the Anglo-Indian term for a cavalryman (‘sowar’, from the Persian *sawār*, ‘rider’) when referring to specific Indian cavalymen.

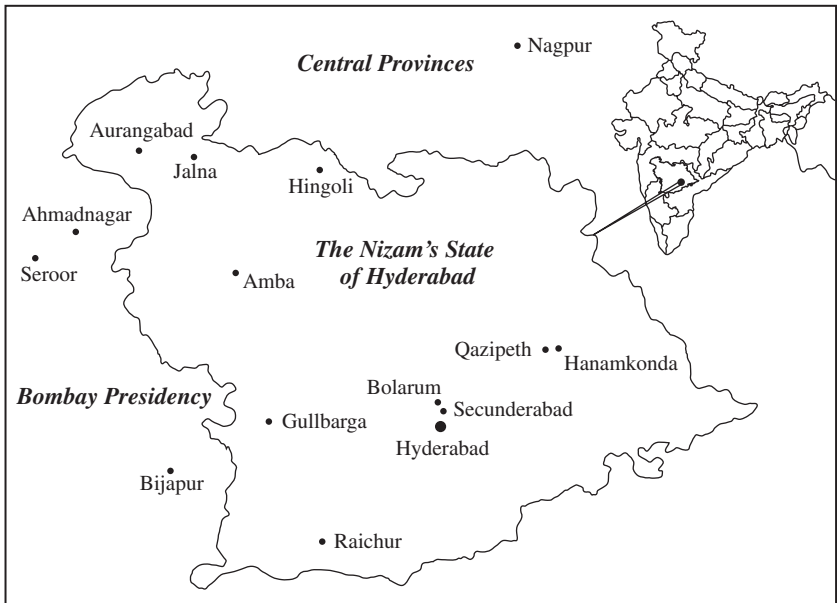


## Glossary of Urdu and Anglo-Indian terms

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<i>barakat</i>	blessing power, life-force, <i>élan vital</i>
<i>bhāṅg</i>	cannabis leaves prepared for drinking
<i>charas</i>	cannabis resin prepared for smoking in a <i>chilam</i> pipe
<i>faqīr</i>	‘poor man’; a mendicant or holy man; a fakir
<i>gānjā</i>	leaf cannabis
<i>jazb</i>	‘attraction’; ecstasy; licit madness (see also <i>majzūb</i> )
<i>kontinjant</i>	‘Contingent’; collective term for the British-commanded regiments of Hyderabad State
<i>mahfil</i>	a social or religious gathering, typically for a musical performance
<i>majzūb</i>	a person ecstatically ‘attracted’ to God; a holy fool
<i>mawlawī</i>	‘my master’; an authority on Islamic tradition; a mullah (Anglicised as <i>maulvi</i> )
<i>munshī</i>	a writer, or secretary, usually working in Persian or Urdu; an amanuensis
<i>nawbat</i>	a kettle drum or reveille
<i>nazar</i>	a vow or offering (in cash or kind) made to a prince or a holy man
<i>pādrī</i>	a Christian priest or military chaplain; a ‘padre’
<i>pāgalkhāna</i>	‘mad house’; colloquial term for an asylum
<i>pīr</i>	‘old man’; a spiritual elder or patriarch; a holy man
<i>qalandar</i>	an antinomian wandering Muslim holy man, traditionally wearing a shaven head
<i>qāzī</i>	a Muslim judge or magistrate
<i>risāla</i>	a regiment
<i>sādhū</i>	‘perfect, virtuous honourable’; a Hindu holy man
<i>sāhib</i>	‘master’; a term of respect, often demanded by Britons in India (Anglicised as <i>sahib</i> )
<i>sepoy</i>	Anglo-Indian term for an Indian soldier (from Persian <i>sipāhī</i> , ‘soldier, cavalryman’)

sowar	Anglo-Indian term for an Indian cavalryman (from Persian <i>sawār</i> , ‘rider’)
subaltern	a low-ranking native officer; a ‘subordinate’
<i>walī</i> (pl. <i>awliyā</i> )	a ‘friend’ or ‘client’ of God; a Muslim saint
<i>zanāna</i>	‘women’s space’; the female or domestic quarters of a traditional Indian house or shrine



Map Nizam's State and its cantonment towns



# Introduction

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*For a crowd is one man, and the Dancing Fakir had hit upon an old secret of leading rabbles.*

Captain John Eyton, *The Dancing Fakir* (1922)

## **Of *faqīrs*, sepoys and madmen**

A visitor to the British cantonment of Aurangabad in the early years of the twentieth century may have been surprised at the sight of the naked Indian seen roaming most days round the orderly streets of the compound, occasionally calling out to passing soldiers or pausing to reload his pipe with cannabis. Had our visitor stopped to ask who this audacious fellow was, he may have received any one of a number of answers. Some person may have replied that he was a former soldier, invalided from the Army on account of insanity but whose presence in the cantonment was tolerated on account of his years of service. Another may have replied that the naked man was a holy fool, a gymnosophist celebrated across the land for his miracles; his errant behaviour was proof in itself of his communion with God. Some further respondent may have told our visitor that the dirty fellow was a mere beggar, an idle native who preferred the pleasures of the pipe to a proper day's work. Others still may have given the reflex response to visitors' curiosity about the many such figures seen in the streets of colonial India: he was a 'fakir'.

With his links to a customary Islam of miracle-working holy men and to the patronal networks of Sufi affiliation which surrounded them, it is this figure of the *faqīr* who stands at the centre stage of our investigation into the religious world of the Indian Muslim soldier or 'sepoy' of the high colonial era. For during this period, the meaning of the label 'fakir' was caught between British conceptions of a traditional, passive and superstitious East and pre-colonial Indian notions of the strange powers of poverty and madness. With its literal meaning of 'poor man' derived from the Arabic *faqīr*, the different valence that the term *faqīr* acquired in its transition to English from its older usage in Arabic, Persian and the

regional languages of India was symptomatic of wider transformations in the meaning of madness and poverty, of 'true religion' and rationality, that characterised many an encounter between Indians and Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The description of the 'fakirs' penned by the Methodist missionary Revd William Butler (1818–99) is a good example of both the denigration of this old-style religion and of its links to the Indian soldier:

These horrible looking men, with their dishevelled hair, naked bodies, and painted breasts and foreheads, are constantly roving over the country, visiting shrines, making pilgrimages, and performing religious services to their disciples. The Sepoys greatly honoured and liberally patronized these spiritual guides [...] But no one who has seen and known them can doubt that the great majority of the Fakirs are imposters and hypocrites.<sup>1</sup>

Summed up in Butler's disdainful prose are three of the key themes of this book: the nature of the 'service industry' that the *faqīrs* controlled; the character of their relationship with the Indian soldier; and the results of colonial Christian denigration of their form of Islam. Rather than focus on the abstract notion of 'Sufism' that European scholars developed to describe an Islamic counterpart to 'true religion' comprising high moral teachings, exquisite poetry, refined metaphysics and, in a word, 'mysticism', this book instead focuses on the neglected physicality that, in the vile bodies of the *faqīrs*, was obscured by this refined and intellectualising agenda.<sup>2</sup> The *faqīr* was Islam in the flesh, with all of the problems and prospects which that implied.

As historians of colonial India have widely recognised, the Army was one of the most influential institutions to broker exchange between Indians and Britons. While merchants, bureaucrats and Orientalists make up a familiar side of the story of the colonial encounter, a strong case has been made for the centrality of the Army in negotiating the formative relationship between Indians and Britons.<sup>3</sup> After the 'Mutiny' of 1857, the Indian Army played an increasingly prominent role in the practical no less than imaginary lives of the British in India, from its role as the provider of employment and housing for thousands of British soldiers and their families to its provision of a culture of martial storytelling that lent a narrative template for encounters with living Indians.<sup>4</sup> As Douglas Peers has noted, as the largest single employer in India, the Army 'stands out as the institution in which the closest and most sustained contacts were made between the colonial state and its subject peoples'.<sup>5</sup> But to render the Army as a simple tool of empire is to miss the complexity of the colonial encounter: the Indian Army was no less a source of employment, pride and identity for the millions of Indians and their dependents

whose lives were shaped by its offer of prestige and a regular salary. The effects of the colonial military on Indian society were at once minute and vast in their reach. Over the past two decades, the emergence of a 'new' military history of India has sought to examine the different armies of India's past against a range of culturalist concerns, from the transformation of the Indian peasantry to the reading habits of the Victorian school-boy.<sup>6</sup> This book seeks to understand the interface between the Army and religion as it found expression among the Indian soldiers of the Hyderabad Contingent between around 1850 and 1930. As such, the book provides a particular case study of the wider cultural negotiations demanded by the presence of vast numbers of Muslim soldiers in the multifarious regiments of the subcontinent.

It is a contention of this book that the sheer scale of Muslim employment allowed the Army, through its institutions as well as attitudes, to disseminate certain forms of religiosity among its soldiers at the same time that it restrained others. Beneath this proposition, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* provides a detailed reconstruction of the interaction of sepooy religion with the colonial Army as found in the military fellowships of four *faqirs*. Like any exercise in micro-history, the extent to which the findings can be generalised is a separate matter, and it will be clear to readers that the evidence provided shows primarily what it shows: a particular story of a particular time and place. But if they are to be of any use to other historians, such small-scale investigations need to suggest forms of connection to conversations about processes on the larger scale. While recognising the dangers of over-stepping the evidence, the book therefore offers parallels in passing where they are apparent to circumstances in other parts of India before, in the conclusion, extrapolating a set of processes that are offered for wider application. The extent to which these processes may be regarded as more general is up to other researchers to decide. By drawing on a series of cheap print Urdu biographies of the holy men associated with sepoys in the princely state of Hyderabad (also known as the Nizam's State), what the following chapters do provide is the first detailed reconstruction of the religious life of the Muslim soldiers, and, as such, a study of Indian military life that is unique for being built on a foundation of 'native' sources. The perspective that these sources provide allows us to assess the degree to which, in Hyderabad at least, the British Empire promoted or alternatively reformed the religious life of 'Jack Sepoy' and so to paint a picture of an Islam that was subject to the forces of history as expressed in the meeting of the Indian soldier and the British officer.<sup>7</sup> Shaped by the quotidian concerns of the soldier's life between barrack hall and battlefield, this was

an Islam that at once served and was served by the interests of empire: it was what we may term a 'barracks Islam'.

According to a popular Persian idiom, the anonymous masses of history are referred to as *siyāhī-e-lashkar*, the 'blackness of the Army'. Nameless and forgotten, but for a few exceptions, we have till now little sense of the individual character and concerns of the Indian soldiers by whose efforts Britain's empire in India was created and sustained. The memoirs of British former officers in India survive in their hundreds, just as there also exists a smaller (and late) English-language memorial literature penned by Indian members of the native officer class. But in comparison to the wealth of studies of the British officer and (to a lesser extent) foot soldier, the intellectual, emotional and spiritual world of the sepoy is lost in the anonymity of the lower ranks.<sup>8</sup> A similar preponderance of studies of 'big men' characterises the history of Islam in colonial India more generally, in which the lion's share of attention has been given to the rebels and reformists whose movements seemingly caught the current of history with their sense for the needs of a changing society.<sup>9</sup> *Islam and the Army in Colonial India* deliberately avoids this main beam of historical attention to look at a series of figures whose histories have till now been lost in the proverbial 'blackness of the Army' but are recoverable through their appearance in a number of early twentieth-century Urdu texts that detail the careers of the Muslim holy men attached to the sepoys of the Hyderabad Contingent, the British-officered army stationed in the cantonments of the Nizam's State. For though our visitor to the Aurangabad cantonment was a rhetorical invention, the naked Indian he saw alternatively loafing or parading there was no figure of fiction. But as the range of answers offered to our visitor suggests, precisely who this figure was – sepoy, *faqīr*, idler – was unclear, and no less contested. Had our visitor returned to Aurangabad a few decades later – say around 1925 – he may have been even more surprised to find that a pilgrimage centre had developed around the grave of the beggar whose shouts had caught his attention years earlier. Or perhaps, with the intervening years imbibing the 'wisdom' of empire, he had learned that in India there was nothing out of the ordinary in common people worshipping the bones of 'charlatans' or 'fools'. Between these possible attitudes of wonder and disregard lies an uncharted history of the personal and institutional transformations that made possible such traffic between holiness and poverty, soldiering and madness, a history that also reveals the impact of colonial attitudes towards the Indian subalterns on the framing of later attitudes towards 'popular religion'. As much as this is a book on the Army, it is also a study of the fortunes of 'popular' religion