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Research Article

History of Hajj Pilgrimage in Colonial South Asia: An Analytical Review of Rishad Choudhury's Hajj across Empires

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Abstract. The Hajj pilgrimage has historically served as more than a religious obligation; it has functioned as a conduit of transregional exchange and political imagination across the Muslim world. Rishad Choudhury's *Hajj across Empires: Pilgrimage and Political Culture after the Mughals, 1739-1857* explains on this dynamic in the context of South Asia, specifically in the period after the fall of the Mughal Empire and during the rise of British colonialism. The book is a prominent contribution to Islamic, South Asian, and transimperial history, providing an exact account of how pilgrimage intersected with politics, identity, and empire. Choudhury traces how the Hajj functioned not only as a spiritual journey but also as a political and cultural encounter in the age of empire. Through a comparative lens, the book highlights the ways in which South Asian Muslims navigated the shifting dynamics of British and Ottoman imperial politics, as well as local social transformations, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study emphasizes the importance of viewing pilgrimage not merely as a religious duty but as a complex, historically contingent phenomenon shaped by broader geopolitical forces. A particular focus of this study is the tragic incident at Ezhimala during the colonial period, where a Hajj-bound ship was set ablaze, resulting in the loss of numerous pilgrims' lives. This

event, though often overlooked in broader narratives, serves as a poignant example of the vulnerabilities faced by pilgrims in a politically charged and racially stratified colonial maritime world. By analyzing this episode within the framework of Choudhury's trans-imperial perspective, the paper explains on the perils of religious mobility under colonial surveillance and highlights the localized tensions that mirrored the broader imperial contestations surrounding the Hajj.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Trans imperialism, Colonialism, Political Culture, south Asian Islam

INTRODUCTION

The Hajj pilgrimage, a central pillar of Islamic practice, has always been a profound spiritual journey and a defining moment of Muslim identity. Historically, it has served not only as an act of devotion but also as a critical site of cultural exchange, political expression, and socio-religious networking. In the context of colonial South Asia, the dynamics of Hajj underwent significant transformations as colonial powers sought to regulate and often control the religious practices of their Muslim subjects. These interventions gave rise to a complex interplay of politics, power, and faith.

Rishad Choudhury's work, *Hajj Across Empires: Pilgrimage and the Politics of Space in Colonial South Asia*, offers an incisive exploration of the Hajj as it intersected with the broader colonial and imperial histories of the region. Choudhury unravels the multifaceted layers of the pilgrimage during the colonial period, shedding light on how the practice of Hajj was shaped by British administrative policies, logistical challenges, and the imperial agenda. His work also deals with how the pilgrimage became a medium for political resistance and identity formation among South Asian Muslims, reflecting their agency within the constraints of colonial rule.

Within this broader context, this paper also turns attention to a lesser-known but historically significant incident near Ezhimala, on the Malabar coast of present-day Kerala. In the year 1502, an early and brutal episode of maritime violence occurred when a fleet led by Vasco da Gama, under the Portuguese crown but seen later in line with colonial European expansion, attacked a ship carrying Hajj pilgrims in the Arabian Sea. This ship, filled with men, women, and children, was set ablaze off the coast near Ezhimala—an act of terror that resulted in the death of over 300 innocent pilgrims. Though predating British colonization, the incident reflects the long history of imperial hostility toward Muslim mobility and maritime religious journeys. Today, the site lies near the Indian Naval Academy at Ezhimala, symbolically linking past violence with present national military infrastructure. This massacre not only marks a grim moment in the history of Hajj but also prefigures the kinds of colonial interventions and oppressions that Choudhury explores in his work.

The Social and Cultural Significance of Hajj across Centuries

The Hajj pilgrimage has held profound religious, social, and cultural significance for Muslim communities across different regions and historical periods. Far beyond a personal act of devotion, the Hajj has long served as a powerful symbol of unity, identity, and mobility within the global Islamic ummah. Its influence has

extended into the spheres of politics, education, trade, and diplomacy, making it a central institution in shaping Islamic societies throughout history.

In medieval Islamic societies, the Hajj acted as a major site for transregional interaction. Pilgrims from South Asia, East Africa, Central Asia, and the wider Muslim world converged in Mecca, creating vibrant spaces for the exchange of ideas, goods, and religious thought. Historical accounts such as those of the Moroccan traveler **Ibn Battuta** in the 14th century describe the grandeur and diversity of the Hajj experience, reflecting its role as a melting pot of Islamic cultures.

Throughout the centuries, rulers and empires have invested in facilitating and displaying their support for the Hajj. The Mamluks and later the Ottomans saw the protection and sponsorship of the pilgrimage as a source of political legitimacy. For instance, the Ottoman Sultans maintained and guarded the Darb al-Hajj (pilgrimage route) from Damascus to Mecca, while also building infrastructure such as the Hijaz Railway (completed in 1908) to ease the travel of pilgrims—demonstrating how Hajj was both a spiritual and state concern.

In South Asia, Sufi networks and scholarly communities also reinforced the cultural significance of Hajj, often connecting pilgrimage to the spread of religious reform and education. The 19th-century reformist Shah Waliullah of Delhi undertook the Hajj and returned with new theological insights that influenced his revivalist thought. Similarly, the writings of **Francis Robinson** (*The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia*) and **Barbara Metcalf** (*Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*) explains on how pilgrimage served as a bridge between global Islamic ideas and local religious reform movements.

However, the modalities of Hajj travel have changed drastically over time. In earlier centuries, the journey could take months, often through perilous desert routes or long maritime voyages. Pilgrims traveled in caravans, facing threats from bandits, disease, and environmental hazards. The arrival of steamships in the 19th century, and later air travel in the 20th century, radically transformed the logistics and accessibility of Hajj. This transformation also made the pilgrimage more visible to colonial powers, who began to regulate, surveil, and sometimes restrict Muslim mobility—especially in the wake of pandemics like the cholera outbreaks linked to the pilgrimage in the 19th century. Works like **Michael Christopher Low's** *Imperial Mecca: Ottoman Arabia and the Indian Ocean Hajj* provide a detailed analysis of how health concerns and imperial surveillance reshaped the experience and politics of Hajj. To sum up, the Hajj has been an enduring symbol of faith, but also a dynamic institution shaped by the cultural, technological, and political shifts of each era. It has connected diverse Muslim communities, served as a platform for reform and resistance, and reflected the broader historical forces that have shaped Islamic civilization across time.

Colonial Invasion and the Condition of Muslims in South Asia

The advent of British colonial rule in South Asia brought about significant upheavals in the political, social, and religious life of its Muslim population. Following the decline of the Mughal Empire, Muslims, who had once held influential positions, found themselves increasingly marginalized under British administration. The **1857**

Revolt, also known as the First War of Independence, marked a turning point, as the British brutally suppressed the uprising—blaming Muslims as its primary instigators. In the aftermath, thousands of Muslims were executed, imprisoned, or dispossessed, and their educational and religious institutions were dismantled or placed under tight surveillance. The **destruction of Delhi's cultural centers**, including the famed madrasa networks, symbolized the broader attempt to erase Islamic intellectual heritage. Moreover, colonial policies such as the **Criminal Tribes Act (1871)** and **restrictions on public religious gatherings** disproportionately affected Muslims, restricting their religious expression and mobility. These developments encouraged a sense of alienation and crisis within the Muslim community, which in turn shaped how they approached institutions like the Hajj—as spaces of resistance, renewal, and global belonging.

Rishad Choudhury's *Hajj Across Empires*: Pilgrimage in a Transimperial World

Rishad Choudhury's *Hajj Across Empires: Pilgrimage and the Politics of Space in Colonial South Asia* presents an innovative exploration of the Hajj as both a religious ritual and a political act shaped by the interplay of competing imperial powers. Choudhury shifts the traditional focus from a purely devotional perspective to a more complex analysis that situates the pilgrimage within the broader geopolitical, social, and administrative networks of the 19th and early 20th centuries. He frames the Hajj not simply as a journey of faith, but as a transimperial phenomenon—affected by both British colonial policies in India and the waning authority of the Ottoman Empire, which still maintained formal control over the Hijaz region.

In his work, Choudhury meticulously examines how British authorities in India attempted to regulate and monitor the Hajj, citing concerns over disease, political dissent, and transnational religious solidarity. At the same time, the Ottoman Empire used the pilgrimage to assert its spiritual legitimacy and foster pan-Islamic unity. Caught between these empires, South Asian Muslim pilgrims navigated a complex web of surveillance, bureaucracy, and diplomatic tension. Choudhury also explores how the infrastructure of pilgrimage—such as travel arrangements, passports, quarantine regulations, and communication—was deeply affected by imperial rivalries and modern technologies.

Importantly, the book underscores the agency of the pilgrims themselves, portraying them not as passive subjects but as active participants who resisted, adapted to, and sometimes manipulated imperial systems for their own religious and political purposes. The Hajj during this period thus became a potent symbol of both subjection and sovereignty, making it a critical lens through which to understand the colonial experience of South Asian Muslims.

The Ezhimala Tragedy: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Hajj Pilgrimage

Ezhimala—historically known by various names such as Heeli, Mount Eeli, or Eelmala—holds a prominent place in the Islamic history of Kerala. Located along the Malabar Coast, this region was not only a cultural and trading hub but also a significant center of Muslim settlement and religious life during the early modern

period. Historical accounts suggest that as many as five distinct religious communities coexisted in Ezhimala during the colonial era, contributing to its pluralistic character.

A deeply tragic and often overlooked event occurred near this historic region on **October 2, 1502**, when a fleet of returning Hajj pilgrims was attacked by **Vasco da Gama** and his armada of 20 Portuguese ships in the Arabian Sea. These pilgrims, who had completed their sacred journey to Mecca, were ambushed off the coast near Ezhimala. Over a period of eight days, the Portuguese forces mercilessly burned the pilgrim ship and killed nearly all onboard—men, women, and children alike. Only about 20 men were spared, reportedly sent back to Portugal to be paraded as offerings to the Christian Church.

Among the key figures aboard the ill-fated ship were **Qaja Qasim**, a wealthy merchant and the ship's owner, and, according to some sources, **Javed Bagh**, the Egyptian Sultan's crown prince. This brutal act of maritime violence not only represented one of the earliest and most horrific assaults on Hajj pilgrims by European colonial powers but also served as a chilling prelude to the centuries of imperial aggression that would follow.

The massacre was documented in "**Commentários do Grande Afonso de Albuquerque**", written by **Brás de Albuquerque**, the son of the Portuguese Viceroy of India, Afonso de Albuquerque. This source provides rare and disturbing details of the event, revealing the religious and political motivations behind the attack. The Ezhimala incident, though less remembered in mainstream colonial narratives, emphasizes the vulnerability of Muslim pilgrims in the face of emerging European maritime dominance and marks a significant moment in the intersection of faith, empire, and violence in the Indian Ocean world.

CONCLUSSION

The history of the Hajj pilgrimage, especially within the colonial context of South Asia, reveals far more than a journey of faith—it unveils a complexity of spiritual devotion, political resistance, imperial control, and transregional connectivity. As in this paper, Hajj has always played a vital role in shaping Islamic society and culture across centuries, connecting diverse Muslim communities while also serving as a powerful expression of religious identity and collective memory.

Rishad Choudhury's *Hajj Across Empires* offers a critical lens through which to understand the colonial entanglements surrounding the pilgrimage. His work highlights the agency of South Asian Muslims in navigating the dual pressures of British and Ottoman imperialism, turning the Hajj into a site of negotiation, resistance, and reform. By situating pilgrimage within a transimperial framework, Choudhury deepens our understanding of how colonial power structures extended even into sacred religious practices.

The tragic Ezhimala incident of 1502—where hundreds of returning Hajj pilgrims were brutally massacred by Vasco da Gama's fleet—stands as a stark reminder of the long-standing threats Muslim pilgrims have faced in the name of empire and religious hostility. This forgotten episode not only explains on early

European aggression in the Indian Ocean but also emphasizes the vulnerability and resilience of those who undertook the sacred journey under perilous circumstances.

In connecting these historical layers—from medieval piety to colonial politics and imperial violence—this study reaffirms the significance of Hajj as more than a ritual. It is a living symbol of the Muslim world's spiritual endurance and its ongoing struggle for dignity, movement, and meaning within the broader currents of global history.

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