PHILOSOPHERS, FREEDOM FIGHTERS, PANTOMIMES: SOUTH ASIAN MUSLIMS IN GERMANY

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The Muslim community in Germany seems to be dominated by Turkish Muslims—but almost nothing is known by the German public about the fascinating history of South Asian Muslims in Germany.

This article tries to demonstrate the closeness of Indo-German relations and the importance of South-Asian Muslims in the wider Muslim community in Germany. It further traces the diversity of South Asian Muslims in this country—from scholarly movements to philosophers, actors to freedom fighters.

1. Muslims in Germany Before and During World War I

1.1 Iqbal

Long before the Partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947, a man studied in Germany, who can be considered as the “intellectual father” of Pakistan, namely the philosopher and poet Sir Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938). Iqbal was born in 1877 in Sialkot, Punjab (today Pakistan). From his youth, Iqbal was an admirer of German philosophy and literature, especially of Goethe. After he finished his studies in Arabic and philosophy in Lahore, he decided to travel to Europe. First, he went to England, afterwards he came to Germany. First, Iqbal was a student at the Ruprecht-Karls-University in Heidelberg, afterwards he studied philosophy at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University in Munich. In 1907, he wrote a dissertation on Persian metaphysics in Munich and was awarded the doctoral degree. At this time, Iqbal was deeply influenced by the ideas of the German philosophers Hegel and Nietzsche. In 1923, Iqbal published his Payam-i mashriq (“Message of the East”), which is clearly influenced by Goethe’s West-östlicher Diwan. In this work, Iqbal also wrote some very interesting verses about important German personalities, like Hegel, Karl Marx and Wilhelm II.

Iqbal’s stay in Germany, however left some traces in the country. The city of Heidelberg commemorated the famous student with a “Muhammad
Iqbal professorship” as well as even with naming a street on the banks of the river Neckar after him. This was mainly because Iqbal wrote the famous verses *Ek shaam* (“An Evening”) there. This poem clearly aesthetically resembles Goethe’s poem *Wanderers Nachtlied* and definitely shows Iqbal’s admiration for the German poet.

But the most visible traces of Iqbal’s life and work in Germany can be found in the works of the famous German orientalist Prof. Dr. Annemarie Schimmel (d. 2003). She edited and translated several works of Iqbal into German and English. Although Schimmel being awarded the *Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels* was a controversial decision, the merits in establishing a dialogue between Germany and the Indian Subcontinent are undoubted. Rewarding her activities in translating Iqbal and other famous Pakistani poets, the Pakistani Government named a street in Lahore after her. Recently, the German cultural center in Lahore was named *Annemarie Schimmel Haus* and has become a point of German-Pakistani cultural exchange.

1.2 Indian Freedom fighters

At the beginning of the 20th century, the South Asian Muslims community was concentrated around the Berlin area. Many South Asians came as students, as German universities had a very good reputation in India. Indian students were active in academia as well in their efforts to free India from British rule. World War I changed this situation completely. Germany, Indian freedom fighters thought, would be the fiercest enemy of the British. It was as early as September 1914 that the *India Independence Committee* was founded in Berlin by V. Chattopadhyadhya (brother of the famous Indian poet Sarojini Naidu) and A. Battacharya and supported by German authorities. The German Emperor, Wilhelm II, had a strategic interest in destabilizing the British Empire in India. The idea was to instigate Indian Muslims to a *jihad* against the British colonial power. The two German allies Austria-Hungary as well as the Ottoman Empire supported this plan. The Afghan Amir Habibullah (killed 1919) also cherished his interests in the region. Thus, Wilhelm II and the German Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg (d. 1931) planned to use Afghanistan as a base for *jihad* activities. For this reason, they supported and even financed the activities of two Indian freedom fighters, Raja Mahendra Pratap (d. 1979), and a Muslim, Barkatullah Bhopali (d. 1975).

Barkatullah was born in the Muslim Princely State of Bhopal around 1864 (Preckel 2000). His first trip to Europe was in 1895, when he traveled to London as well as to Liverpool. In 1909, Barkatullah left for Japan,