

Fitna and Patriotism in Late 18th century Madras

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This paper discusses the formation of new Muslim political imaginaries in Madras during the 1780s, and the interesting parallel with similar intellectual-political stirrings among the Armenian diaspora there. The early 1780s marked a turning point in the tangled relationship between the Nawab of Carnatic, Muhammad Ali Wālājāh, and the British East India Company (EIC) in the wake of their formerly close but at times problematic alliance which had been established in the 1740s. On account of the Nawab's growing financial debt to the EIC, which had for decades supported his regime, both military and fiscally, and following the outbreak of the second Anglo-Mysore war (1780-84) between the EIC and the state of Mysore, British officials in Madras forced the Nawab to transfer the most prosperous territories of his domain to the Company. This in turn precipitated piecemeal British erosion of the Nawab's ancestral Islamic sovereignty over the Carnatic. Utilizing two sets of hitherto untapped and overlooked Arabic sources, written at the Wālājāhi court during the 1780s, the paper seeks to disclose a new perspective on elite Muslim political activities in Madras and examine what form such activities took during this time of crisis. The first part of this paper examines certain Arabic letters the Nawab Muhammad Wālājāh wrote to notable Muslims in the Islamic heartlands of the Middle East during this period. In particular, the paper discusses how the Nawab repeatedly deployed the Arabic word *fitna* (i.e., "test," "affliction," "rebellion") to describe the perceived sufferings endured by south Indian Muslims. The use of this word within this international context, the paper argues, came to signal to elite Muslim milieux in these heartlands that British power threatened not only the Nawab and his regime but the Muslim *umma* as a whole. Hence, these letters suggest that the Nawab was actively seeking new, wider Muslim political alliances in an attempt to construct a broader Islamic coalition against this emerging threat. In the second part, the paper discusses how the existential crisis of the 1780s was registered by the appearance of new patriotic sentiments, and a strong sense of attachment towards a regional homeland (*watan*), defined geographically as the Carnatic. Such an innovative understanding, which appeared in response to the perceived *fitna* within the region, was articulated in the form of poetry, rather than as an ordered, logically framed political manifesto. In sum, this paper seeks to show that Madras, rather than being an isolated backwater remote from the broader currents of change accompanying the dissolution of Mughal political power, and the expansion of Company power, was in fact a site in which all of these forces were in active contention.

Bio: *Ayal Amer is a Mellon Humanity Faculty Fellow at the University of California, Irvine. Recently, Ayal earned his Ph.D. from the Department of History at UC Irvine. He is currently working on his first book manuscript, entitled Paths of Resistance: South India in the Age of Revolution, 1780-1810. The book project examines the divergent responses of south Indians to the local and global transformations of the late eighteenth century, seeking to open up a new perspective on how the Indo-Muslim world actually experienced the Age of Revolution. Prior to joining the Department of History at UC Irvine, Ayal earned a Ph.D. in Sanskrit Literature from La Trobe University (Australia) and a B.A. in Indian Studies and Philosophy from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel).*