

Afghanistan in Asian Studies II: A Roundtable

Sponsored by: AAS South Asia Council

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Session Abstract:

This Roundtable interrogates the chronologic, geographic and cultural parameters of Afghanistan. A small set of rhetorical questions introduce and organize the discussion: where is Afghanistan, when did it come into being and who does it include historically and culturally? The participants include prominent historians and anthropologists of South Asia and the Persianate world. David Ludden will revisit his AAS Presidential Essay on mobility and civilizational history by positioning the territory of Afghanistan and proto-Afghanistan as a network hub of intertwined global historical migrations. Ludden's synoptic contribution describes geographic Afghanistan as central connective space where global cultures, ideologies, technologies and commodities have historically intersected. To further illustrate the disparate geographies that congeal in territorial Afghanistan, Magnus Marsden will outline the commercial networking infrastructure of the contemporary global diaspora of Afghan merchants. Marsden will describe marriage and commodity exchanges within and between Afghan communities found in Europe, Saudi Arabia and China, particularly insofar as those transactions are routed through locations in the modern territorial nation-state of Afghanistan. For specification of the trans-local dimensions of the Afghan historical experience Shekhar Krishnan will use municipal archives to outline the twentieth century history of the Afghan community in Bombay. Krishnan takes us beneath stereotypes of the "Pathan Menace" in urban India to illuminate examples of complicity and dependency, duplicity and circumvention which destabilize singular static treatments of Afghan society and Pashto-speaking populations, both in situ and ex situ. Mikhail Pelevin addresses patterns of conflict resolution among Pashtun tribes in the eighteenth century. Using Pashto and Persian documents, Pelevin combines attention to the dynamics and tensions in Pashtun tribal society with a consideration of the historic diglossia between Persian as a literary language embedded in imperial state structures and Pashto as a language with less literary and more oral use-values calibrated for deployment in sub-imperial domains of power relations. Nile Green provides an historical stratigraphy of Islam's manifold articulations in geographic Afghanistan en route to consideration of the Afghan state's changing engagement of the pre-Islamic historical chronology upon which the modern polity is territorially predicated.

Area of Study: South Asia

Discipline(s): History Anthropology