

In this pioneering study of the Twelver Shii branch of Islam prevalent in Iraq and Iran, J. R. I. Cole traces the influence of Shii rule on the development of religious communalism and conflict in the North Indian State of Awadh (Oudh). He also examines the relationship of the Shii clergy to the state and the clerical reaction to British imperialism and capitalism. Based on research in rare manuscripts and in archives, the book reveals that the Shii clergy advocated policies that caused resentment among Sunnis and Hindus, thereby promoting religious communalism and setting the stage for modern communal conflict. The Shii learned men took government posts in support of Awadh's Shii nawabs and shahs; Awadh state support, in turn, helped transform Shiism from a persecuted sect to a dominant, if still minority, religious establishment. Sociologically, the book draws attention to the specific role of the state in defining sect and church. It also argues the importance of class divisions within the Shii community, showing that the dominant clerical ideology was often not accepted by the laboring strata. Cole's study supports the view that Muslim communalism in Northern India had genuine historical roots and was not simply an elite strategy of modern Muslim politicians. Contrary to the arguments of some writers and to the image projected by Iran's current ayatollahs, he claims that most Shii clergy did not play a role of opposition to the state.

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