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When discussing Pakistan Studies, many tend to focus on the post-1947 nation-state, national and international politics, and Islam. Rarely do scholars include the deeper past, languages like Sanskrit, perspectives of local non-Muslims, or those located beyond those boundaries of the current nation-state of Pakistan when thinking about Pakistan or Pakistan Studies. Likewise, rarely do scholars who work on Sanskrit or early modern South Asia, especially when under the rubric of “India,” consider Pakistan, its people, society, and politics as significant for understanding their work and how it is shaped and framed.

My paper, “A Pakistani Hero in Sanskrit Sources: ‘Ali Hamadani and Body Politics,” presented at the Sanskrit in Persianate India Pre-conference to the Madison South Asia Conference, challenged participants of the Pre-conference to address how modern social and political frameworks as well as our own positionings and investments as scholars profoundly impact what we consider and how we analyze the past, especially when focusing on a period like early modern South Asia that is regularly deployed in contemporary political debates across South Asia.

In my paper, I begin with an examination of President Zia-ul-Haq’s 1987 public commemoration of ‘Ali Hamadani, a fourteenth-century saint widely popular in Kashmir and elsewhere. Zia-ul-Haq’s commemoration clearly attempts to deploy Hamadani as a model for his own Islamization programs. However, a closer analysis reveals Zia-ul-Haq’s consistent description of Hamadani as an extremely pious saint who preferred isolation to social or political engagement. Such assertions appear to run counter to Zia-ul-Haq’s framework of Islamization. I argue that this seeming contradiction can be resolved if one acknowledges that the lasting legacy and authority of Hamadani are firmly rooted in his being considered an ascetic saint, and if Zia-ul-Haq seeks to successfully reappropriate Hamadani for Islamization, he must acknowledge and incorporate this popular perception. However, through the rest of my paper, I demonstrate that Hamadani’s asceticism and the authority thereof are closely tied to that of non-Muslim ascetics, participating in an early modern shared grammar of asceticism and its power. Thus, Zia-ul-Haq’s reappropriation of Hamadani for Islamization contains the seeds of its own deconstruction, for the authority of Hamadani that Zia-ul-Haq seeks to channel towards Islamization is inextricably linked with non-Muslims.

This analysis contributes to Pakistan Studies both through a nuanced approach to the significance of history for contemporary Pakistani politics, but also a more complex understanding of interreligiosity that runs against the grain of the predominant paradigms of communalism and syncretism in both scholarship and political discourse on Pakistan today.