

An “Engineer of Social Transformation”?

Bonner Islamstudien

Editor

Stephan Conermann

Band 42

Fabian Falter

An “Engineer of Social Transformation”?

Asghar Ali Engineer’s (1939–2013) Writings
on Liberation Theology: Between Social
Revolution and Communal Harmony



EBVERLAG

**Bibliographic information published
by Die Deutsche Bibliothek**

Die Deutsche Bibliothek lists this publication in the
Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic
data is available in the Internet at [<http://dnb.ddb.de>].

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*Gedruckt mit Unterstützung der
Gerda Henkel Stiftung, Düsseldorf*

Layout: Rainer Kuhl

Copyright: EB-Verlag Dr. Brandt
Berlin 2019

ISBN: 978-3-86893-302-4

Homepage: www.ebverlag.de
E-Mail: post@ebverlag.de

Printed and bound: CPI, Birkach
Printed in Germany

For Anja, Jonathan, and Sophia

Foreword

My interest in South Asia in general and India in particular rose over ten years ago, when I spent almost one year of volunteer work in the small town of Jhabua in western Madhya Pradesh. From there it has been a long – and occasionally stony – path of studying, learning languages, writing papers and theses, spending time in India, working, and starting a family. During my years of B.A. and M.A. studies at the University of Bonn, the writings of Asghar Ali Engineer were a constant companion whenever it came to issues regarding Islam in South Asia or the coexistence of different religious communities there. Nevertheless, my intense examination of his work only started in late 2013, when I was admitted to the *Bonn International Graduate School – Oriental and Asian Studies*. The present study was accepted by the Faculty of Arts of the University of Bonn on 26 January 2018. The *Disputatio* took place on 17 July 2018.

Many people have been involved in one way or another in the development of this study. I am very grateful for all their input, whether large or small. First of all I would like to thank my family and friends for all their support. This is especially true for my wife, Anja, whose own commitment to and endurance in research has always inspired me. Furthermore, our children have not only been a source of energy and inspiration, but also constant companions of this study by entertaining library halls, drawing pictures on copies, assisting me on research trips, or by enabling me to work in the middle of the night. Through them this work has been a very special experience. Furthermore, I owe thanks to my parents, brother, and my inlaws for their constant support over the years.

At the University of Bonn I would like to thank Prof. Stephan Conermann and Prof. Christine Schirrmacher for supervising this study. In addition, I thank Prof. Conermann for all the academic, organisational and financial opportunities I received in the Department of Islamic Studies. As completing a doctoral program while having a family and the need to earn a living is a difficult task, I am extremely grateful to the *Gerda Henkel Foundation* for granting me 2.5 years of funding within the project “Between Islamic Fundamentalism and Islamic Emancipation” (Project leader: Prof. Conermann). During this time I enjoyed discussing and working together with my colleagues Sarah Spiegel and Verena Ricken. Moreover, I would

like to thank Jonas Spitra for sharing my coffee addiction and doing the draft's proofreading, as well as Sinda Kapp-Matsukawa for all organisational support and always having a sympathetic ear. For the final version of this study I owe thanks to Joseph A. Smith.

Finally, I am grateful for many discussions and new input during talks, conferences and research trips. In particular, Irfan Engineer and the team of the *Center for Study of Secularism and Society* in Mumbai have to be highlighted. They were very supportive in the beginning phase of this project.

Formal Notes

This study is written in English and I hope it attracts a wider audience than would have been the case had it been written in German. Nevertheless, I was educated within the German academic system which might be apparent through the approaches and sources used in this study. The text follows the citation style of the *Institute of Oriental and Asian Studies* (Bonn). For Arabic words I use the diacritical transcription of Hans Wehr (1976) and for Hindi the transcription of McGregor (1993).

Names are usually not transcribed with diacritics in this study. A name is only transcribed if there doesn't exist a commonly used English version. If more than one commonly used versions of a name exist, a footnote will refer to this matter. A good example is the name of the community Asghar Ali Engineer was born into: most often one reads it as "Dawoodi Bohra". By contrast, I prefer the spelling "Da'udi Bohra" as it is closer to the spelling in Hindi/Marathi (दाऊदी बोहरा Dāūdī Bohrā) and Arabic (الداودية البهرة, Dā'ūdī Bohrā). To avoid any misapprehensions, the historical excursion of this study (chapter 2.2) incorporates more diacritics.

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1. Introduction

After Asghar Ali Engineer's death on 14 May 2013 at the age of 74 in his flat in Santacruz, Mumbai, he was buried in the nearby cemetery, where some of his friends, who had passed before him, had also been buried. That is nothing unusual, except for the fact that the cemetery belongs to the local Sunni community. His burial there was necessary because he had been "excommunicated" by his own *ismā'īli* Shi'ite Da'udi Bohra¹ community four decades previously.

Despite working for reforms within the Bohra community, Enginner had various other passions: He was a social activist advocating communal harmony between Hindus and Muslims in India; he frequently commented on contemporary Muslim issues from minority rights to gender equality; and he took an interest in topical issues from the Social Sciences and theology. During his lifetime he was quite productive during, publishing an enormous number of books, essays, commentaries, and journal articles. Conducting a study of his works therefore means limiting oneself to one area. His work can roughly be divided into four fields of interest, which overlap to varying degrees: 1) secularism and communal harmony, 2) the Bohra Reform Movement, 3) Muslim issues and liberation theology in Islam, and 4) women's rights. This study focusses on the field of liberation theology in Islam to which he devoted his writing foremost from the late 1970s to the early 1990s – the early phase of his career as a scholar and intellectual after retiring from his work as a civil engineer.

The field of liberation theology is often thought to be an exclusively Christian, and for some even an exclusively Catholic Latin American, phenomenon. But the theme of "liberation" is significant in many religions – take, for example, the concept of *mokṣa* in Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism: the liberation from the circle of rebirth. In Islam "liberation" (*tahrīr* in Arabic) is closely connected to the concept of justice and is therefore used in the context of liberation from a situation of injustice or oppression.

¹ In this study I apply the spelling Da'udi Bohra, as it is closest to the transcription Dā'ūdī Bohrā.

This study uses a biographical approach to analyse the writings of a particular author in a particular period of time, following a trend in German Islamic Studies² by focussing on the writings of one particular individual – and his/her impact on certain discourses, social transformation, or historical processes, etc., – as well as giving space to contextualisation, too. This procedure is based on the assumption that a text must be seen in the light of its sociohistorical context as well as its role in the biography of its author. Therefore, this study consists of three major parts: 1) a biography and intellectual history of Asghar Ali Engineer including its sociopolitical and historical contextualisation where needed; 2) a conceptual history of the term “liberation theology” and a brief overview on the discourse on liberation theology in Islam; 3) an analysis of selected writings of Asghar Ali Engineer on liberation theology written in the 1980s and early 1990s.

1.1. Problem Definition and Research Questions

More than 70 years have passed since the end of World War II and the beginning of formal decolonisation, over 40 years since the oil crisis of 1973, over 25 years since the collapse of the Communist block and the beginning of a new phase of globalisation, and more than 15 years since 9/11. Yet the European and North American societies are still confused about how to deal with predominantly Muslim societies, Muslim immigrants as well as the various tendencies and denominations within Islam. Many societal segments neglect that discourses within the “Muslim world” on terms as modernity, violence, human rights, gender, diversity or freedom even exist. Or they are surprised that intellectuals, theologians and scholars seek to define such terms and concepts as those mentioned above as truly of Western origin. In phases following such decisive events – to which the so-called “refugee crisis” and the terror regime of the “Islamic State” must be added – the Western media and public as well as politics and academia frantically search for Muslim personalities with whom they can converse: liberal intellectuals, progressive theologians, moderate preachers, secular politicians – whomever! Explaining the unexpected

² In this study the term “Islamic Studies” is used in the sense of the German term “Islamwissenschaft,” which is regarded separately from the field of Islamic Theology. The study does not aim at *doing* theology but at *writing about* theology and its social implications.

demands clear (or simple) categories, outlining developments in one's own categories, terms and concepts, and finding someone who is able to assuage fears and make the "other" approachable. These people are invited to round-table talks, conferences and workshops; they tour talk shows and participate in public discussions. However, after a while someone finds an earlier talk, some publication or recording of a discussion that does not fit the person's image: something that is presumed to be radical, fundamentalist, Islamist or Salafist. And so the frantic search begins anew. On the other hand, these personalities are under constant pressure to serve these expectations while at the same time insisting on authentic Islamic values and concepts in order to not lose the backing of at least some of their co-religionists. Finally, if they are unable to persuade their non-Muslim conversation partners that "Islam" is not a threat to other cultures, they risk the demonisation of a whole religious community because of the acts of a few people claiming to be adherents.

One of these "liberal" Muslims touring the Western world and preaching his reform agenda was Asghar Ali Engineer. According to his autobiography, he appreciated being on international stages and receiving invitations to various conferences (Engineer 2011: 111–336). Yet it largely went unnoticed that his writings and talks must be seen in the context of postindependent India, his own biography as well as the developments that took place in his thinking and their adaptation to certain audiences. The sheer broadness of his interests allowed him to serve the expectations of different audiences, but it also makes it difficult today to judge his whole work and put it into any single category – which of course is not the aim of this study. In addition to the many fields in which he gave his profound opinions, over time he also developed personally from an orthodox adherent to an "insurgent," from a writer seeking liberation to an intellectual regarded as a liberal; from a civic engineer engaged in social issues in his free time to a full-time social activist. This study looks behind (and beyond) the image of the "moderate" intellectual and analyses his earlier writings on liberation theology – mostly from the 1980s. It emphasises Engineer's contributions to liberation theology in light of other eminent intellectuals and theologians in this field. Further, it looks at how his biography influenced the developments in his writing. Focussing on one particular key figure of 20th-century discourses on the broad fields of Islam and modernity, its relations to other religions, the social and ethical responsibilities of Mus-

lims, or the question of religious authority allows us to interpret historical incidents and developments within discourses in a new light.

The following research questions are pursued:

- Where in his biography do we find reference points for Engineer's engagement with liberation theology?
- What is Engineer's societal idea for Indian Muslims and for Muslim societies in general?
- How can his imagined society be integrated into the model of a democratic and secular state?
- Where are Engineer's essays on liberation theology situated between fundamentalism and emancipation?

1.2. Framework

We begin by defining the theoretical and methodological framework of this study. The core of this study constitutes an analysis of some of Asghar Ali Engineer's writings on liberation theology, defined in the text corpus according to the above-mentioned research questions. In addition to this core task, there are three further steps, making a total of four steps: (1) I follow the presumption that the author himself and his intellectual life history is part of the context. This makes an overview on the life of the author as well as an analysis of (auto-)biographical narratives and of other texts describing the person – in this case, foremost a collection of obituaries – crucial to the interpretation of the text corpus. (2) As a further contextualisation of the writings, I describe the historical, sociopolitical and discursive contexts of the texts. This concerns above all the term "liberation." (3) The third point marks the actual textual work, with the research questions being applied to the text corpus. Apart from the historical and biographical context, I put great emphasis on theological references and a hermeneutical approach as well as text-immanent factors as text type, verbal arrangement and codes, repeating patterns, etc., (4) Finally, I interpret the analysed text corpus according to the context, the discourse on liberation theology and their respective perception.

This study largely follows the pattern of context → analysis → interpretation. To this end, I use some theoretical frames. This necessitates some remarks on the study of biographical narratives, on postcolonial and

subaltern studies as well as on the difficulties that arise when studying a laymen's theology and subjective exegesis.

1.2.1. Biographical Research

Recently, the book market, especially the German book market, was flooded with biographies on Martin Luther (1483–1546), reflecting the year 2017 as the 500th anniversary of Luther's famous posting of his 95 theses. Luther's example fits in well here, seeing that vivid discussions are being held whether Islam needs a reformation similar to Christianity as well. Furthermore, it fits regarding Asghar Ali Engineer, who was celebrated in certain Western intellectual circles³ as just such a possible "Reformer". Some biographies on Luther focus on gender issues, on his toasts, on his individuality, largely from a first-person perspective – biographies for Catholics or those that question the transmission of his teachings. Some are descriptive, some analytical, some funny and some highly normative – as if the 21st-century biographer had somehow met him personally. Common to them is solely the subject: Martin Luther. The example of Luther biographies illustrates very well "the many lives of biography," which is how Fetz (2009: 3–66) entitled his introductory chapter to a volume on biography and life writing. Fetz (2009: 8) claims that because many academic disciplines (and the entertainment sector in general) contribute to the field of biographical writing, there is no, and maybe can never be, consistent theory on this genre of literature, whether in academic literature or elsewhere. Biography – and Fetz uses the more narrowly defined German term in his statement – is situated at the intersection of Literary, Historical and Cultural Studies; it comprises sociological and ethnographic research on individuals as well as of literary life writing (thus including also fictional biographies). Fetz (2009: 7–8), quoting a dictum by Virginia Woolf, refers to the "bastard character" of the genre. On the other hand, biography is also considered to be the "supreme discipline" (*Königsdisziplin*) of Humanities as it combines academic research and art (Fetz 2009: 9). So, what actually defines "biography" and "life writing," what are the theoretical approaches, and how can a biographical approach be fruitful for studying Engineer's writings?

³ For example, on a broadcast of German radio station SWR2 in 2009 he was introduced as "India's most prominent reform-theologian" (Klas 2009: 2).