

India and the Islamic Heartlands

Based on the chance survival of a remarkable cache of documents, *India and the Islamic Heartlands* recaptures a vanished and forgotten world from the eighteenth century spanning much of today's Middle East and South Asia. Gagan Sood focuses on ordinary people – traders, pilgrims, bankers, clerics, brokers, scribes, among others – who were engaged in activities marked by large distances and long silences. By elucidating their everyday lives in a range of settings, from the family household to the polity at large, Sood pieces together the connective tissue of a world that lay beyond the sovereign purview. Recapturing this obscured and neglected world helps us better understand the region during a pivotal moment in its history, and offers new answers to old questions concerning early modern Eurasia and its transition to colonialism.

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India and the Islamic Heartlands

*An Eighteenth-Century World of Circulation
and Exchange*

Gagan D. S. Sood



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Preface and acknowledgements

This book seeks to recapture a world that spanned much of India and the Islamic heartlands in the eighteenth century. That, of course, is easier said than done. Long vanished and largely forgotten by posterity, this world *can* be recaptured. But to do so requires an unorthodox approach. The unorthodoxy of this approach lies in the need to bracket high politics and warfare, as well as the great religious traditions, sciences and belles-lettres. These are matters that have been at the centre of empire and civilisation as traditionally construed. Bracketing them has the invaluable benefit of allowing more mundane parallels and linkages to come into view. These in turn allow us to reconstruct the connective tissue of an obscured and neglected world that was not just significant in its own time and place, but in others too. That significance ultimately derived from the types of individuals who inhabited it and the activities in which they were involved. These individuals formed a sub-elite class that cut across religions, ethnicities and polities. They were collectively mobile and literate, and purposefully engaged in activities marked by large distances and long silences. Prominent among their activities were trade, finance, pilgrimage, study, news-gathering, translation, brokerage and transport, all of which were undertaken for a variety of motives, not least livelihood, piety, status, curiosity and adventure.

The impulse to recapture the world of such individuals has its origins in two magnificent works of historical analysis. One is Kirti N. Chaudhuri's *Asia before Europe*. The other is Marshall Hodgson's *The Venture of Islam*. In different ways, these works have stirred my imagination and moved my spirit. Together, they have led me towards the present book. They also gesture towards the main scholarly traditions to which this book cleaves. Through Chaudhuri, it is joined to the Annales School, even as I forswear any attempt at total history as an unattainable ideal. Through Hodgson, it is joined to the burgeoning field of global history, which has posthumously embraced him as a global historian *avant la lettre*.

Of course, to say this is merely to avow a lineage. That my book is in keeping with that lineage stems from the empirical source at its core.

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Details about this source's nature and provenance are given in the pages to follow. But because of its centrality, a few prefatory words may be in order. The source around which this book is built may be envisaged as a postbag of documents. They consist mainly of letters, receipts, certificates and depositions in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman Turkish that were composed in the 1740s by, and for, an assortment of remarkably unremarkable individuals. It is their very ordinariness that makes them stand out and draws our attention. What is more, while home for these individuals was confined to specific areas of India or the Islamic heartlands, many of their interests were regional in scope. This is amply documented in their correspondence. As January 1748 approached, they entrusted their freshly written correspondence to the care of relatives, friends, colleagues, employees and servants who were taking passage on a ship about to sail from Basra, at the head of the Persian Gulf. The ship's final destination was Bengal, with plans to drop anchor en route at Cochin and Nagapattinam. But owing to an act of piracy on the high seas, those entrusted with this correspondence were never to make their deliveries.

Yet this act of piracy allowed their correspondence to survive down to the present. By studying it carefully in a manner which bears comparison with Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, we are thus able to recapture a regional-scale arena of activities that was populated by a kaleidoscope of inconspicuous, footloose types. This was a vernacular world of broader historical significance which was soon to vanish and be forgotten. It lay mostly beyond the sovereign purview, spanning much of India and the Islamic heartlands. To the extent I succeed in recapturing it, I hope this book will facilitate a better understanding of the region in the middle of the eighteenth century. This was a pivotal moment in the region's history, characterised by an absence of great hegemons and a plethora of 'successor' regimes. It was a fraught moment, a moment of unscripted possibilities. Through this better understanding, I hope this book will also encourage further work that moves us closer to answering several of the big, outstanding questions. Some of these concern India and the Islamic heartlands in the context of early modern times; others concern the impact on the region of later European dominance and imperialism.

The responsibility for any shortcomings in this book lie with me. Its achievements, however, are another matter. Big or small, they would have been inconceivable without the many kinds of help I have received over the years that this book has been in the making.

Technically, the greatest challenge was posed by the languages in which the sources were written and their cultural milieux. Scholars with a masterful command of their subject deepened my understanding

of these issues, steering me away from untold mistakes and misinterpretations. Ensconced in his Pearson sanctum, Adel Allouche patiently revealed to me the mysteries of Middle Arabic, brought to life and rendered meaningful through his stories of the Tunisia in which he had grown up. Abbas Amanat generously shared hours of his time with me as together we pored over Persian documents in *shikastah*, imparting the sensibility required to discern their message and their poetics. My thanks to Muzaffar Alam – Alam sahib – know no bounds for showing me that the Persian of Mughal India has not been totally lost to us, and for his gentle encouragement, suggestions and criticisms, all deriving from his incomparable learning. Hadi Jorati was kind enough to put his encyclopaedic knowledge of Classical Persian at my disposal so as to resolve a number of knotty linguistic conundrums.

The research that I have carried out for this book was only possible because of the goodwill and the resources funnelled my way by myriad institutions and by the individuals who run them. With Suzanne Roberts leading the charge, the staff of Sterling Memorial Library were unstinting in their support of my project, responding to all my needs as and when they arose. The late, much-loved Florence Thomas, who knew everyone and everything, from her office at the pulsating heart of Yale's History Department, kept all of us in order and moving in the right direction, with an abundance of warmth, humour, grace, intelligence and unerring good sense. Fr Delio Mendonça, SJ, opened up for me the Xavier Centre of Historical Research in Alto Porvorim, Goa, making it a home away from home. At the Maharashtra State Archives in Mumbai, Shri Karade was firm but fair in the face of my insistent questioning, granting me special permission to enter the chamber housing the documents and to check its contents for myself. My unorthodox demands received a sympathetic hearing from the wise, elegant and trusting Smt. Malathy, whose authorisation allowed me access to the hidden treasures under her charge at the Tamil Nadu State Archives in Chennai.

For facilitating my research, I am also grateful to the staff of the Asia and Africa Reading Room of the British Library (London); the Caird Library in the National Maritime Museum (London); the Map and Large Document Reading Room of the National Archives (Kew); the Manuscripts Department of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, site Richelieu (Paris); the Archives nationales d'outre-mer (Aix-en-Provence); the Archives de la Chambre de commerce et d'industrie de Marseille; the National Records and Archives Authority of Oman (Masqat); the Oriental Records Division of the National Archives of India (New Delhi); the Asiatic Society (Kolkata); the Historical Archives of Goa (Panjim); and the Government Oriental Manuscripts

Library (Chennai). The research undertaken in these institutions was predicated on the material support, for which I am extremely thankful, provided by the Master and Fellows of Clare College (Cambridge); the Paul Mellon Fellowship Programme; International Security Studies (Yale University); the Master and Fellows of Davenport College (New Haven); the Yale Center for International and Area Studies; the John Perry Miller Fund (Yale University); the John F. Enders Fund (Yale University); the Fox International Fellowship Program (Yale University); the Hugh Fulton Byas Memorial Fund (New Haven); the Beinecke Library Fellowship Program (Yale University); the Economic History Society (UK); the Institute for Historical Research (London); the Master and Fellows of Wolfson College (Cambridge); the Vasco da Gama Chair at the European University Institute (Florence); and the Brady-Johnson Program (Yale University).

By good fortune en route to this book, my life became entwined with the lives of individuals from a range of backgrounds, whose experience has been formative for my scholarship. Hospitable and loyal, with the sharpest and most capacious of minds, John Lewis Gaddis early on took an interest in me, and remained a steadfast supporter, adopting at times the role of a veritable *deus ex machina*. For some of my key concepts and the way in which I relate to historical scholarship, I am beholden to the insights, pointers and above all the inspirational example of the great Chris Bayly, who is sadly no longer with us, but whose exceptional legacy will endure and thrive. Andrew Preston gave me a much needed and sympathetic outsider's perspective at a crucial moment when my overall argument was in flux. A series of focused discussions with Adeel Khan, centring on recent developments in the anthropology of religion, were instrumental for leading me to the mature version of my book's conceptual framework. Mushegh Asatryan cheerfully answered my barrage of questions about Islam, Sufism and Armenian culture. My introduction to Sanskritic India, the history of religion and the marvels of Italian philology had to await the inimitable Federico Squarcini, who gave me at the same time the first hint of what a truly non-centric, non-hegemonic, non-teleological history might actually look like in practice. With the lightest of touches, Stephen Smith was resolute in reminding me about the realities of academic life, in prodding me to reframe my approach and language so as to make my scholarship more visible and appealing, and, though always primed to debate the metaphysical, in never letting me forget the importance of rigour and the nuts-and-bolts of the historian's craft. The force of nature that is the iconoclastic Anthony 'Tony' Hopkins spirited away any doubts I might have had about my larger agenda, convincing me that there are verities which are eternal, that reality need

not crowd out one's ideals. I thank Richard Drayton for his comradeship, honesty and advice, and for our many intellectually zestful exchanges. Toni Dorfman, Cynthia Farrer and Eva Wrightson have my everlasting gratitude for their companionship, understanding and kindness, memories of which I hold very dear.

I have been blessed by the presence of guides within (and without) academia, who have stayed the course with me, through all the ups and downs. It starts with PK – Paul M. Kennedy – who told me to follow my star, and gave me the wherewithal to do that through his patronage, his conviviality, his humanity, his countryside walks, his story-telling, his love of literature, and his earthy, warm, Anglo-Saxon prose. Keith Wrightson's profound sensitivity for his subject, dedication to his field and quiet authority taught me about the stuff of life, the art of recapturing vernacular worlds lost in the mists of time, the power of simplicity and a perfectly weighted judgement. I find it impossible to imagine a finer tutor and interlocutor than Scott A. Boorman, whose beautiful mind, polymathic learning, generosity towards students and colleagues alike, and commitment to his vocation are the embodiment of a scholarly vision that is a marvel to behold. Patrick K. O'Brien is a phenomenon, a leader par excellence, a fount of wisdom, a guru of divine-like proportions, who, possessed of a steely determination, is resolved through history to make our world a better place, and who has transformed my lot in our here-and-now. I shall forever remain indebted to William Gervase Clarence-Smith for championing my cause and for his indefatigable critical engagement, buttressed by a peerless command of historical detail, a voracious intellectual appetite and a knowledge of what is happening in today's academic history that is second to none.

Finally, there are those who have intimately lived this book with me, and with me experienced its pains and joys, offering succour and giving meaning to a life in the humanities. My *amico-fratello* Brooks Prouty is a fellow wayfarer, philosophically and aesthetically, forgiving, compassionate and elevating, teasing out the best in those who are drawn into his universe. With Raphaël Taylor, I have journeyed far and wide, coming to appreciate, and cherish, his musical and artistic sensibilities, from which I have gained so much. My loving, big-hearted family – my father, my mother and my two brothers – have always been there for me, through thick and thin, an unbreakable, constant bedrock amidst the vagaries of fate. And then there is the one who intuitively comprehends those populating the pages to come, who gave their world visible form by painting the wheel-map which adorns the cover, who truly knows what it is I am doing and why: my wife, Natasha, to whom I dedicate this book.

Note on spelling and transliteration

Given the differences between the languages of the sources on which this book is based – Arabic, Persian, French and Portuguese, among others – there is no single or obvious approach to their spelling and transliteration. The approach crafted for this book thus represents a pragmatic compromise between the ideals of accuracy, consistency and readability. Originally foreign words that have been absorbed into today's English lexicon are given in their standard English spelling (so Sufi not *Ṣūfī*, rupee not *rūpayā*). This extends to names of places that are familiar to us in English (so Aleppo not Ḥalab, Karbala not Karbalā', Bengal not Bangālah or Bangla). Otherwise, directly quoted words from the sources are written in one of the established transliteration systems for the language most closely associated with them. Specialists interested in such matters will be able to identify these systems without difficulty. The complicating factor is that many of the words in question were present in multiple languages (e.g., *davlat*, *ṭā'ifa*, *vakīl*). Fortunately, they tended to figure more prominently in one language compared with the others found in the sources. That is ultimately what determines the choice of the transliteration system for such words in this book.

Abbreviations

ADM	Admiralty Records
ANOM	Archives nationales d'outre-mer
BL	British Library
BnF	Bibliothèque nationale de France
CdI	Fonds Ancien ou de la Compagnie des Indes
EI2	Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd edn
FC	Fonds ministériels, Premier empire colonial
HAG	Historical Archives of Goa
HCA	High Court of Admiralty and Colonial Vice-Admiralty Courts
HCR	High Court Records
IOL	India Office Library
IOR	India Office Records
MHR	Mhamai House Records
Misc	Miscellaneous Records
MRC	Mayor's Court and Recorder's Court
MSA	Maharashtra State Archives
Mss Eur	India Office Private Papers
MssOcc	Collections du département des manuscrits, Division occidentale
NA	National Archives
NAF	Nouvelles acquisitions françaises
TNSA	Tamil Nadu State Archives
XCHR	Xavier Centre of Historical Research