

The Early Modern in South Asia

Did modernity arrive in South Asia with British colonialism? Or was South Asia already modern by then? What might that modernity have looked like?

The Early Modern in South Asia engages with these questions. It brings together ten chapters, which collectively trace the contours of South Asia's early modernity between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. They do this by examining the nature of historical change in various domains, including philosophy, warfare, law, environment, politics, violence, religion, and society. The chapters argue that in all these fields, there were noticeable developments during this period, marking a shift from the medieval to the early modern. The introductory chapter contextualizes this by analysing the politics of periodization in history-writing across the world. It discusses the meanings of the relatively new concept of early modernity and the implications of its use for how we understand historical change and continuity in South Asia.

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The Early Modern in South Asia

Querying Modernity, Periodization, and History

Edited by

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In memory of
Professor Rajat Datta
1956–2021

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In November 2015, Rajat Datta co-organized a two-day conference titled ‘Configuring Early Modern South Asia’ at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This was probably the first conference held in India to unpack some of the theoretical aspects of the category of early modernity. It initiated conversations that challenged some of the long-established and jealously guarded methodological orthodoxies of South Asian history-writing. The continuation of these conversations eventually precipitated another conference. Titled ‘Debating the Early Modern in South Asian History’, this was held at Ashoka University, Sonipat, in February 2018. Most of the chapters of the present volume were initially presented there. As one of the most vocal advocates of the category of early modernity among academics based in India, Datta delivered the keynote address at this conference. He also agreed to co-edit the proceedings afterwards; however, his busy schedule did not allow that. Nevertheless, he continued to be actively involved in the preparation of this volume. But just as we were about to submit the final manuscript to the press, he suddenly passed away on 30 October 2021. Published in this volume, his keynote address from the conference is one of his last publications. It serves as a constant reminder of his absence in a project that he had helped germinate. This volume is dedicated to his memory.

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Meena Bhargava and Pratyay Nath