

1

Sultans, Mughals, and pre-colonial Indian society

Imagine a time traveller standing in Mughal Delhi, amidst the splendor of the emperor Shah Jahan's (r. 1627–58) elegant, riverside city, in the year 1707 (plate 1.1). News had come of the death of Shah Jahan's long-ruling son, Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707) in the distant Deccan, where he had been engaged in arduously extending his vast empire. The traveller, understandably wondering what the death of a mighty monarch would mean, might first have looked back in time a century, say to the death of Shah, Jahan's grandfather, Akbar (r. 1556–1605). Had he done so, he would have seen the key institutions in place that had made the Mughals, in the intervening century, the most powerful empire the subcontinent had ever known. It was far greater in population, wealth, and power than the contemporaneous Turko-Mongol empires with which the Mughals shared so much: the Persian Safavids and the Ottoman Turks. The Mughal population in 1700 may have been 100 million, five times that of the Ottomans, almost twenty that of the Safavids. Given the trajectory of continuity and growth that had taken place in the seventeenth century, our time traveller at the turn of the eighteenth century might legitimately have imagined a Mughal future to match the glorious past.

But if, Janus-faced, the traveller then looked ahead a century, say to 1803, he would have found not continuity but extraordinary change. He would have seen an empire existing only in name amidst a landscape of competing regional powers. Among these regional states was one which, in 1707 only a minor European trading

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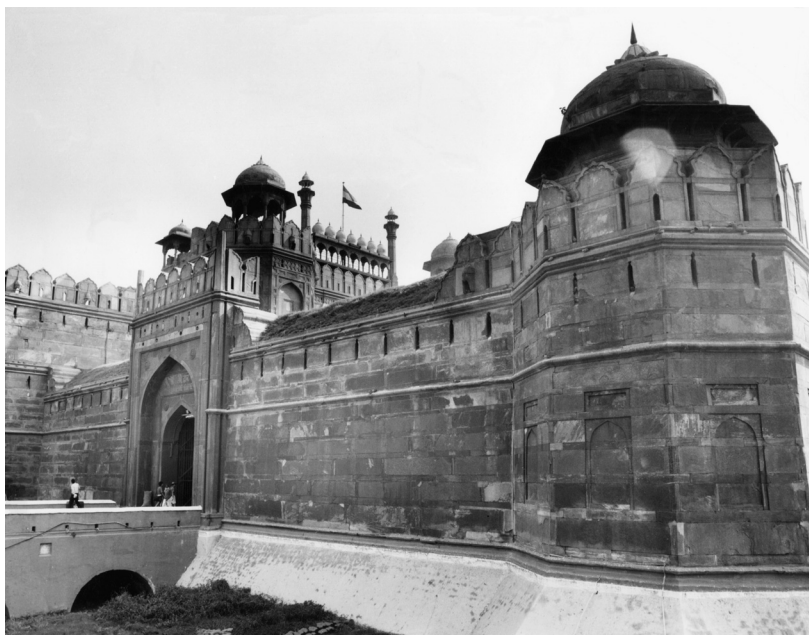
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Plate 1.1 Shah Jahan's Red Fort, Delhi, now flying the flag of the republic of India.

body operating from coastal enclaves, was now transformed into a governing body based in the rich, eastern province of Bengal. The Mughal emperor, though still a symbolic overlord, was now confined to the area around Delhi, himself prey to Afghans, the western Deccan-based Marathas, and, in 1803, placed under the control of that very English Company which, as this new century turned, had lately come to a vision of creating an empire itself.

The most familiar ways of understanding the Mughal era in Indian history were forged in a framework created by the British as they themselves devised a national history for their own emerging nation. Central to their image of themselves, as well as to their image of what they came to see as a backward but incipient nation, was what the historian David Arnold has called the Orientalist 'triptych' of Indian history. In this vision, ancient 'Hindus' had once created a great civilization. With the advent of Islamic rulers in the early thirteenth century, Indian culture rigidified, political life gave way to despotism, and the gap between foreign 'Muslim' rulers and a native 'Hindu' populace of necessity made for a fragile

Sultans, Mughals, and pre-colonial Indian society 3

structure. Moral arguments, particularly a focus on what became a caricature of Aurangzeb's 'intolerance', were central in explaining 'decline'. Stage three brought modern British colonial rule with its enlightened leadership, scientific progress, and professed tutelage to independence. This tripartite schema was explicit in much British writing, and it often underlay even anti-colonial Indian nationalist historiography. Even today it has been tenaciously persistent as unrecognized 'common sense' in historical writing; and, as we shall see in chapter 9, this periodization is today treated as fact in Hindu nationalist ideologies.

Today historians of the centuries preceding the British period reject the earlier characterizations of the period of the Muslim dynasties. They also argue, perhaps surprisingly, in relation to the eighteenth century, that it was the culmination of long-term transitions in trade, finance, culture, and society that offered the English the very resources they needed to exercise their own remarkable innovations in finance, organization, and military and naval technology. This chapter introduces the middle frame of the 'triptych', covering roughly 1206 to 1707, when patterns were set that help explain our traveller's view both back in time and ahead.

THE DELHI SULTANATE

The common image of India's past has been profoundly influenced by two interrelated misperceptions: one that the classical texts of the Brahmans described an existing society; and, second, that, because India was 'timeless', the village and caste organization of colonial or even contemporary India was a guide to its historical past. In fact, the periods of the Sultanate and Mughal rule accelerated already existing patterns of change. These centuries saw the expansion of the agricultural frontier, extensive commercial networks, gradual technological change, and development of political and religious institutions. These changes, not some stagnant society, form the prelude to the colonial era. Nor, one might add, did Muslim rulers fit the caricature assigned them. It is, for instance, misleading to speak of them as 'foreign', for, in patterns set by the earliest Sultanates, Muslim and non-Muslim polities and cultures changed in interaction with each other. It is also misleading to speak of this era as the period

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of 'Muslim' rule. Such an expression exaggerates the differences between states ruled by Muslims and those ruled by non-Muslims. It also obscures the participation of non-Muslims in the Muslim-led polities. It may further suggest that there were religious practices, like mass conversion, that did not exist.

Successive Turko-Afghan regimes, collectively known as the Delhi Sultanate, dominated political life in the north, with periodic incursions into the south, during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These Turks and Afghans, like invaders before them stretching back two millennia, originally entered the subcontinent through the mountain passages of the north-west. One immediate corrective to much scholarship is to emphasize how much their kingdom had in common with other Indic polities of the day. Like these other states, including that of the celebrated Rajput Prithviraj Chauhan, the Turks and Afghans sought above all military successes in order to secure access to the agricultural surplus of the countryside. Like them, they possessed a fragmented political authority, with rights to a share of the land revenue of a specific area assigned to their subordinates as a form of compensation. Also like them, the Delhi Sultans offered scope to individual achievement, above all through military prowess. Any periodization predicated simply on the religion of the rulers would miss such fundamental similarities. The Turks and Afghans were invaders, but they behaved in ways that were familiar to their enemies. The 'Turks', as these rulers were conventionally called, were assimilated to such familiar categories as *yavana*, 'Ionian', the term used to describe the Greek invaders who followed Alexander the Great a millennium before, or *mlecca*, 'barbarians', a term for those outside the area of settled Indic civilization whether from distant areas or nearby jungles.

The core military and economic institutions of these dynasties were thus not specifically 'Islamic'. The sultans themselves were not religious leaders. Like non-Muslim rulers, they did not gain their authority through their own holiness or sacred learning but through their military and governing skill. They were expected, however, to patronize those who were holy and learned. The historian Peter Hardy has called the sultans 'pious policemen' collaborating with 'pious lawyers'. Muslim rulers patronized not only the learned legal scholars, or *ulama*, who had mastered the sacred Arabic texts, but also the moral guides and spiritual intermediaries, the *sufi shaikhs*.

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These two bodies of specialists had emerged as the foci of community life among Muslims from the eleventh century on. Non-Muslim rulers, whether warrior rajas or lesser lords, in similar fashion patronized Brahmans. The Brahmans both cultivated ritual and legal learning as recorded in the sacred Sanskrit texts, and played roles in the temple cults where devotional piety (*bhakti*) flourished in the centuries of Sultanate rule.

For all these institutional similarities between Muslim and non-Muslim states, Muslim dynasties did chart new directions. For over 600 years following the establishment of the first Turkic dynasty in Delhi by the Mamluk or Slave ruler. Qutbu'd-din Aibak, in 1206, the language of the Muslim ruling elite was Persian. As participants in a Persian-speaking culture that stretched into central and south-west Asia, these dynasties were a conduit for introducing innovations in ruling institutions, as well as distinctive cultural traditions in law, political theory, and literary and religious styles. They also brought practical innovations in mounted warfare, cropping patterns, and irrigation techniques, like the widespread 'Persian' wheel. They fostered urban growth and road networks that encouraged trade within the region and beyond. Arabic-speaking Muslims had been present much earlier in the subcontinent, establishing a kingdom in Sind in the lower Indus valley in 711 as part of the expansion of the Umayyad dynasty based in Damascus. They were also found by the eighth century as traders along the Malabar coast of the south-west, where they settled, intermarried, and sustained distinctive cultural forms forged from their Arab ties and local setting, and in so doing helped link 'al-Hind' to seaborne trade routes. In the years from roughly 1200 to 1500, the movement of goods and peoples through Indian Ocean ports, as well as overland through the Persian-speaking lands, was such that Janet Abu-Lughod has characterized this period as an 'Islamic world system' of economic and political interaction. In this system, the Indian subcontinent played a significant part. Participation in these ruling and trading networks did not require that individuals be Muslims, but Muslim political expansion facilitated the success of the whole.

Another pattern set early in the Sultanate period was the enduring ethnic and linguistic pluralism of both the ruling elites and those ruled. The rulers comprised not only those of Turkic heritage but also Afghan, Persian, and native-born as well as immigrants from

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afar. Of these the best known was the great Moroccan traveller and memoir writer, Ibn Batuta (d. 1368–9), for whom Arabic legal knowledge was a passport to travel and employment. Ibn Batuta served the Tughluq dynasty of the fourteenth century as chief judge of Delhi; and his memoirs are testimony to the cosmopolitan vitality and variety he encountered. His first encounter with the sultan recorded the court's enthusiasm for travellers:

I approached the sultan, who took my hand and shook it, and continuing to hold it addressed me most affably, saying in Persian, 'This is a blessing; your arrival is blessed; be at ease; I shall be compassionate to you and give you such favors that your fellow-countrymen will hear of it and come to join you.' Then he asked me where I came from and I said to him, 'From the land of the Maghrib.' . . . Every time he said any encouraging word to me I kissed his hand, until I had kissed it seven times, and after he had given me a robe of honor I withdrew.

The subjects of the dynasties were primarily non-Muslim, designated as *zimmi*, 'protected people', left to their own law and customs. They were, in principle, liable to a capitation tax (*jizya*) but not subject to military conscription. Law, generally, was administered according to the law of the parties or, if they differed, that of the defendant. For most Muslims, that meant Hanafi law shared with central and south-west Asia, while for those of the south, with their Indian Ocean ties to Arabia, law was Maliki. It was accepted here as elsewhere in Muslim polities that administrative law on such matters as taxes would have its own codes apart from the divinely sanctioned *shari'a* norms based on classical Arabic texts. The creativity and vigour of cultural life on all sides was shaped by this pluralism.

For the Sultanate rulers, as for the Mughals who succeeded them, Islamic ambitions focused on extending Muslim power, not on conversion. One clue to the lack of any systematic programme of conversion is that India's Muslim populations were not primarily found in the core areas of Muslim rule. Historians have long asserted that converts flocked to the sufi message of equality to escape the hierarchic discriminations of a Brahman-dominated 'caste' society. There is, however, no correlation between areas of Brahmanical influence and those of substantial conversion to Islam – and the extent of Brahmanical influence in the pre-colonial period, in any case, is increasingly contested. Nor, perhaps surprisingly, did the sufis

Sultans, Mughals, and pre-colonial Indian society

7

themselves ever teach that Islam offered social equality. Indeed, however much they may have preached equality before Allah, Muslims have always lived in hierarchic societies.

In areas undergoing agrarian settlement, sufis did nevertheless play a key role as agents of gradual incorporation into the larger cultural and civilizational structures of the day. They received grants of forested land whose clearing they oversaw, and they served as mediators to both worldly and divine powers. Richard Eaton has shown the importance of this process for the two main areas that were to emerge with largely Muslim populations, western Punjab and eastern Bengal. In other areas Hindu religious specialists performed much the same role. In the Telugu region of south-east India, for example, as Cynthia Talbot has shown, the establishment of new temples was associated with agricultural expansion in the contemporaneous Kakatiya kingdom (1175–1324). A second force driving conversion, for individuals or clusters of artisanal or other families, was, according to Susan Bayly, not a desire to escape hierarchy, but rather a desire to seize a strategic opportunity to move upwards within the existing social hierarchy. Inter-marriage also contributed to the growth of the Muslim population, as did the choice of individuals or families to follow charismatic teachers. When the first censuses were taken in the late nineteenth century, the Muslim population of British India was roughly one-quarter of the whole.

Historians now discredit not only accounts of forced mass conversion, but also accounts of systematic destruction of temples and other non-Muslim holy places. As in the case of accounts of conversions, reading the Muslim court histories as matters of fact, rather than as literary convention, has misled many scholars. There was, to be sure, destruction of non-Muslim temples and places of worship under specific circumstances, for example while raiding areas outside one's own territories for plunder. The most famous of such forays, perhaps, are those of Mahmud Ghaznawi (d. 1030) into Sind and Gujarat. Mahmud was drawn to the riches of India to secure booty for his cosmopolitan court at Ghazna (in contemporary Afghanistan), in a manner not unlike the raids of Indic rulers who carried away vanquished idols as symbols of their victory along with their booty. The sultans who established permanent courts in north India also destroyed temples during the initial phase of conquest

to mark their triumph. The complex of the early twelfth-century Quwwatu'l-Islam mosque, adjoining the great minaret of Delhi, the Qutb Minar, was built on the site of destroyed temples and utilized elements of the earlier structures. The use of 'recycled' elements from earlier structures – as true around the Mediterranean, for example, as for India – was sometimes a declaration of power, sometimes simply expedient use of abandoned debris. Firoz Shah Tughluq (r. 1351–88) chose to adorn his fort built in the mid-fourteenth century, for example, with a column from a millennium and a half earlier, whose builder had long been forgotten, as a way perhaps to assert a link to some ill-defined earlier glory (plate 1.2).

Muslim spiritual and philosophical life in India evolved together with the religious life of non-Muslims. Each was responding to a shared context and, at the same time, interacting with the other's expressions of their respective traditions. No cultural pattern of the Sultanate period was more enduring for the Muslim population than that of sufi devotionism. Indeed, one of the defining characteristics of Islam in the Indic context throughout its long history is the pervasiveness in discourse and institutions of the sufi tradition. Like the 'ulama associated with the courts, the sufi holy men typically adhered to the shari'a, but they also stressed inner realization of the divine presence, the practice of moral and physical disciplines, and the need to submit to the authority of charismatic chains of saintly authority. They served the rulers, yet, to a varying degree, sought to present themselves as distant from the corruption of worldly rule. The founders of the most important sufi lineages, Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri, and Naqshbandi, were central and west Asian in origin, but they flourished in the subcontinent. Sufi teachings were enriched and stimulated by the presence and competition of similar holy men of the Indic bhakti traditions of devotion, spiritual disciplines, and sophisticated monistic philosophies. Bhakti devotion and worship, in turn, flowered as well.

THE EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL KINGDOMS

By the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Sultanate in the north had given way to a series of regional kingdoms, Gujarat, Malwa, Jaunpur, Delhi itself, and Bengal. In the Deccan and

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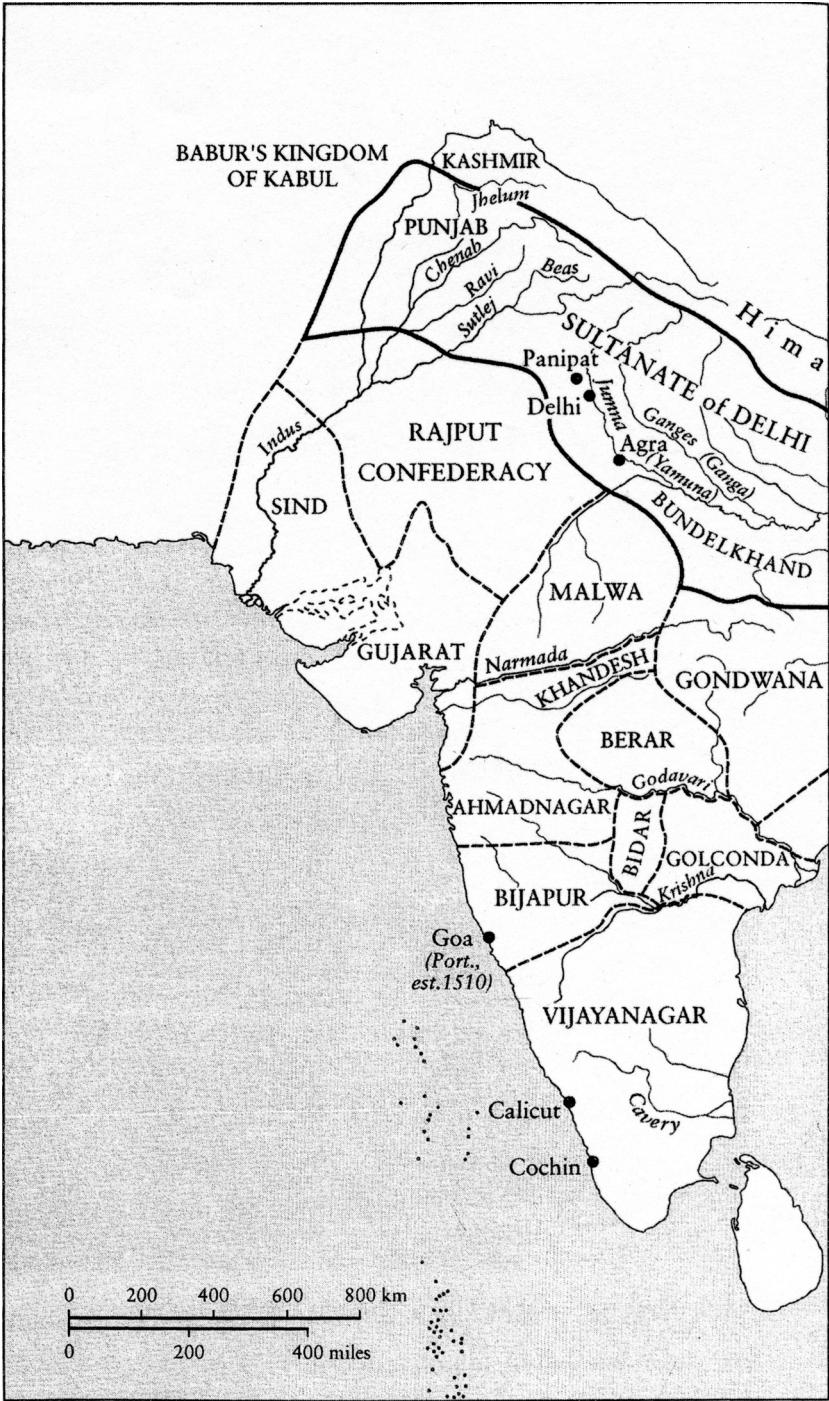
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9



Plate 1.2 Asoka Pillar, Ferozshah Kotla, Delhi.



Map 1 India c. 1500.