

## Introduction

---

The seven chapters of this book offer a new interpretation of the history of India or, as I prefer to call it, the Indo-Islamic world. It is an interpretation that is rooted in the study of historical geography and a world-historical approach.

Historical geography teaches us that India was not a national state with clearly demarcated boundaries but instead a major world region – extending from Afghanistan and the Makran coast across the subcontinent to the Malay-Indonesian archipelago – with open frontiers. From a world-historical perspective, the long-term development of this major world region is best understood as the outcome of a shift in the relationship between the sedentary peasant societies of the Indian river plains on the one hand and the nomads of the world's great arid zone and seafaring populations of the Indian Ocean on the other. The book thus presents the history of the Indo-Islamic world as the outcome of the fusion of these different types of settled and mobile societies.

It is a history with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. The Indo-Islamic world had its beginning in the seventh century CE, then expanded throughout the medieval (seventh to fifteenth) and early modern (sixteenth to eighteenth) centuries, until it fell prey to the superior arms and colonizing ventures of the East India Companies in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As defined here, the Indo-Islamic world is a distinctive historical formation that ceased to exist after about 1800 CE and belongs entirely to the past.

Geography remained of fundamental importance throughout the history of the Indo-Islamic world. It was precisely due to the region's geographical conditions that the pre-Islamic heritage of India was radically different from that of Persia and the Mediterranean world, setting it on a different path from the outset. As is well known, the early Arab Caliphate emerged at the heart of the ancient world and took over its prodigious urban life. What has long been obscured, however, is that the Indo-Islamic world arose in a region without such an ancient imperial heritage and with no such continuous tradition of urban life.

2 Introduction

The ancient past, the heritage of the ancient past, and the transition from the ancient to the medieval past were entirely different here. This “second Islamic world” was disassociated from imperial and urban traditions to a degree not found anywhere in the “first Islamic world.” As this book aims to show, it was largely the geographical factors at work in the unstable environment of monsoon India that thwarted the growth of such traditions.

What is more, significant agricultural expansion and the growth of a settled social order did not gain momentum in India until the beginning of the early medieval centuries. This is true everywhere beyond the Indus borderlands – in the Panjab, Kashmir, Gujarat, the Ganges plain, the Bengal delta, the southern peninsula and the Deccan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam, as well as in Java and the other islands of the Malay-Indonesian archipelago. This is not to deny that Indian agriculture and settled civilization *originated* in an ancient and even prehistoric past. But everywhere to the east of the Indus was a region where agriculture took off late and for long remained inadequate to sustain empires.

There were two major reasons for this exceptionally slow expansion of Indian agricultural settlement. One is the wet, monsoon climate that made forest clearing more difficult and laborious than in the Mediterranean, Persia, and the Indus borderlands. The other is the slow population growth associated with the peculiar situation with regard to disease in the hot and humid alluvial plains. Once it gained momentum in the early medieval centuries, agricultural expansion and settlement gave rise to a fragmented landscape of monarchies of varying size and importance in which monumental Hindu temples emerged as the typical architectural expression of a new vertical and hierarchical social order wherein landed elites exercised political power with the Brahman priesthood. Early medieval India thus emerged as a land of kings, priests, peasant societies, and the earliest Hindu temples in rural surroundings – not ancient cities.

Historical geography also provides the conception of a frontier of settled society. All major settled civilizations in world history have known such a frontier, and, without exception, their spokesmen – be they priests or custodians of the law – described the inhabitants of the frontier as barbarians beyond the pale of their respective settled civilizations. Indian civilization was no exception and had its own derogatory conception of the frontier. This was essentially a twofold frontier: There was the great arid zone with its deserts and steppes, of “Saharasia,” on one side and the equally immense Indian Ocean on the other. These features formed the pastoral nomadic frontier and the

maritime frontier – both with significant extensions into or links with the heartlands of the settled world of India itself. The two frontiers were fundamentally alike and interconnected insofar as both fostered movement outside the control of settled society. Rather than cities, these open and unsettled realms of nomadic and seafaring peoples together represented the frontier of mobile wealth and the major source of change and dynamism in land-based society. Both frontiers gained in importance and flourished simultaneously and in symbiosis with the emerging settled, agricultural world. This book explores the underlying causes of this medieval upsurge of the twofold frontier and finds them in a combination of geographic, climatological, demographic, military, and political-organizational factors that had been absent in ancient India.

It is this conception of a frontier that provides the key to understanding the rise of Islam in India. In the medieval period, the mobile populations on the margins of the settled world of India moved center stage, to a position of dominance under the aegis of Islam. From the outset, Islam had universal aspirations, aiming to supersede what went before, and it soon gave rise to a religious civilization that recognized no boundaries and fostered the unrestrained mobility of men and goods. From the late tenth and eleventh centuries onward, nomadic populations that had converted to Islam conquered much of the Indian subcontinent. They aligned their rule with an idealized and universal history of Islam, which they interpreted as a religion of empire, and extolled the Islamic ideals of religious and political authority of the early Arab Caliphate. But the conquests did not involve the migration of nomads as such. The geographical conditions of the subcontinent did not allow such migration, at least not on a major scale. They did not promote nomadism as a mode of production and did not cause the widespread destruction of settled agriculture. Instead, they were instrumental in expanding the latter. This resulted in post-nomadic states in which horse-riding military elites established their dominance over a largely Hindu population of peasants and integrated them into a wider world.

The resulting fusion of nomadic frontier and settled society that set the parameters of the medieval Indo-Islamic world was successful up to a point. The heritage of horsemanship and mounted warfare on the steppes of the post-nomadic, poly-ethnic military elites among the Turks, Mongols, and Afghans gave their population a decisive military advantage over the settled peasant population, but they were as yet unable to turn their nomadic legacy into a durable institutional framework of political domination. Throughout the medieval centuries, they continued to suffer from rapid turnover, and institutional

4 Introduction

weakness remained their hallmark, while dynastic succession was in constant jeopardy. As conquest states, they also failed to accommodate the leadership of the majority Hindu population, in particular the great Rajput lineages. The constantly shifting capitals of the conquerors were not historically durable cities but instead mobile camps or garrison towns pitched on the violent and ever-shifting interface of arid zone and settled agriculture. If there were urban elites in the medieval Indo-Islamic world, they consisted largely of fugitives from territories overrun by the nomadic Mongols. The post-nomadic elites themselves were mostly “military converts,” recent and often nominal converts to Islam, so-called “new Muslims,” and did not see it as their mission to convert the Hindu population to Islam but merely to extend the military frontier ever farther eastward and southward.

The situation was similar on the medieval maritime frontier. In conjunction with the rise to power of pastoral nomads, seafaring populations and sea nomads spread out across the medieval Indian Ocean and established maritime empires in their own right. The open and mobile conditions on the maritime frontier brought about an ever more intimate association between sea power and Islam. But the coastal and seafaring populations that converted were as small in numbers as the pastoral nomads. Here again Islam remained the religion of a small minority, and the Indo-Islamic states of the seaboard remained volatile throughout the medieval centuries.

A great transformation followed in the early modern centuries. The sixteenth to eighteenth centuries present themselves as a time of institutional consolidation, further economic expansion and integration, and substantial political change throughout the Indo-Islamic world. The most consequential single factor in this transformation was the rise to power of the Great Mughals (1526–1540, 1556–1707). Among the most powerful and wealthy imperial dynasties of the early modern centuries, the Great Mughals brought Indo-Islamic culture to a brilliant zenith. In much of the subcontinent, the Great Mughals had the advantage of being able to build on the achievements of their medieval predecessors, including the Afghans. But this was not the only reason for the Great Mughals’ unprecedented success. Nor can it plausibly be argued that the success of the Great Mughals was due to their adoption of artillery and gunpowder weapons. If in Europe infantry replaced cavalry from the sixteenth century onward in conjunction with new developments in gunpowder warfare, horsemanship and the heritage of the nomadic steppe lands – not artillery or infantry – remained the chief military asset of the Great Mughals. A culture of a horse-riding nobility continued to prevail in the Mughal empire until the age of European

colonialism and the closing of the nomadic frontier. The key to the Great Mughals' imperial success, then, was not gunpowder weaponry but rather their successful assumption of leadership of a horse-riding, largely post-nomadic nobility under the conditions of economic growth and monetization that accompanied the early modern expansion of world trade and the influx of American and Japanese silver through sea trade.

The Great Mughals achieved this position of leadership through the successful adaptation of their medieval nomadic heritage to the changing conditions and economic expansion of early modern India. They inherited an entire institutional framework of imperial rule associated with the corporate Turko-Mongol clan and based on the customary practices of rule, dynastic succession, and princely feuding that went back, over many centuries, to Chingiz Khan, Timur, and the early medieval nomadic Turks. This allowed the Great Mughals to consolidate power in ways their medieval predecessors could not. They did so, most importantly, by making critical changes in their dynastic succession practices. The sharing arrangements of the corporate dynastic clan were replaced by a new system of open-ended succession and alliance building. Princely feuding and sedition became the key mechanism that allowed the empire to succeed as a distributive enterprise and increased the power and longevity of the dynasty. Yet another key adaptation of Turko-Mongol customary law was the apparatus of imperial ranks, developed for the imperial service nobility, that accommodated the leadership of the Hindu majority population of the empire and gave it a stake in the continuity and prosperity of their empire along with the Muslim nobility. Within this framework, the Great Mughals developed an extraordinarily sophisticated imperial version of a nomadic band of horse warriors that could successfully operate in an expanding settled society. More than anything else, it is this adaptation of the nomadic heritage that accounts for the success of the dynasty.

If their imperial constitution was founded in Turko-Mongol customary law, the entire system of governance and the administration of justice of the empire of the Great Mughals broadly evolved within the same matrix of customary law, not the canonical or prescriptive matrix of the Sharia, or "Islamic law." Although the Mughal dynasty ostensibly drew closer to Islamic scriptural ideals of justice and legitimation in the course of its extraordinary imperial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, much of the law and the practice of jurisprudence that prevailed in the empire did not follow religion. In the towns and cities of the Mughal empire, the reach of the Sharia was mostly felt in the religious sphere and in the realms of Muslim marriage and

6 Introduction

divorce. Here Islam informed an entire way of life, a religious belief system, and a set of ritual practices, as well as dietary and dress codes, not to mention art, literature, and architectural styles. But the towns and cities of Mughal India were mostly tiny and only weakly differentiated enclaves in an immense and largely unconverted countryside. Even the largest cities of Mughal India were highly unstable and dependent on the presence of the peripatetic court. In the countryside, conditions were quite different. Everywhere the joint or extended family household was the basic institution of rural society and the characteristic form of property enjoyment and hereditary rights in land. The beneficiaries of hereditary rights in land were “sharers” of these rights – in effect, the political community in any given locality that collectively held landed estates and was able to defend them by force of arms. They, too, were guided by customary rights that had the force of law and by political considerations – not by religious law, be it Islamic or Hindu. At all levels, the arbitration of justice was really politics by other means. Customary law codes associated with some degree of divine justice provided the legal framework for the conduct of a broad range of clan, tribal, ethnic, caste, and religious feuds and conflicts, just as they did for royal dynastic feuds. Thus, these judicial codes were embedded in a negotiated, not a modern, state. Negotiation and compromise rather than “communalism” were the hallmarks of this society, which systematically blurred its religious contours.

Similarly, the age of the Estado da India and the East India Companies brought major changes in trading and navigation patterns in the Indian Ocean as well as concurrent shifts of political power in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. But it did not change the fundamental nature of political power. The new developments in naval warfare associated with artillery and other innovations introduced by the Portuguese and the Dutch, British, and French East India Companies notwithstanding, the maritime frontier remained an open frontier. Even though incorporated in more powerful states, it did not close until the eighteenth century. What happened in these centuries is by no means a simple story of Indo-Islamic trade not being able to compete with European trade or being overwhelmed by superior European naval force. For two more centuries Indian Ocean trade flourished, and expanded significantly. New ports emerged and old ones disappeared, trading patterns realigned, and Islam continued to spread on the Malabar coast and elsewhere in the peninsula. New Indo-Islamic states with unprecedented naval power arose in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago: Aceh, Johore, Bantam, Demak, and other pasisir or “coastal” states in Java, later Makassar, and, turning inland, Mataram. The patterns of

domination in these new states in the archipelago were very similar to those of Mughal India. They were Islamic states operating on Indic soil, and the urban element was even less significant here than in the subcontinent. They were not founded on the scriptural law of Islam but instead on customary law – the local *adat*. Thus, the law codes of Mataram and the Javanese *pasisir*, as well as Makassar, owed almost nothing to Islam. What these states took from Islam was the tradition of kingship we also encounter in Mughal India and other features of Islam that had to do with the exercise of political power. They largely confined Islamic law to the religious sphere. When Islam spread beyond the ports in the archipelago, as in the subcontinent, it was mostly as a kind of “holy-man Islam” of the rural hinterlands and still virtually untouched by scriptural religion. The ultimate closing of the maritime frontier in the eighteenth century, and as early as the final two decades of the seventeenth in Java, resulted from the interplay of many different factors. Among these were the inexorable rise to territorial power of the British and Dutch East India Companies; the Anglo-French competition for power and world hegemony; the decline of Safawid Persia; the emergence of a new Indo-Afghan empire on the ruins of the old Mughal dispensation; the expansion of multiple Mughal successor states; and, in the deep south, the rise of Mysore and Travancore. In the archipelago, it was the rise of agrarian Mataran and its willful destruction of the *pasisir* of Java. The complexities of these developments of the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are such that aspects of some of them remain unclear. What is not in doubt is the outcome: the medieval and early modern patterns of movement and free trade on the maritime frontier came to an end in this century and made way for European colonialism. Without its open frontiers, the Indo-Islamic world was no more. A millennium of history had come to an end.