

1 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

A king equal in power to Jamshīd, and in virtue like Farīdūn.¹

Ḥasan Niẓāmī, *Tāj al-ma'āshir* or *Crown of Great Affairs*

Persian kingship is a transcultural phenomenon. In the medieval world of South Asia, Persian kingship took the form of a hybridized, translational, and adaptive political expression. The Persian king embodied the values of justice, military heroics, and honor – ideals valorized historically and transculturally. Jamshīd and Farīdūn are two of the great heroes of Persian legend and exemplars of Persian kingship. Yet, the above praise, written by the historian Ḥasan Niẓāmī (fl. 602/1206), refers to Quṭb al-Dīn Aybeg, the first Muslim sovereign of Delhi, a man of Turkic ethnicity and a former slave military officer of the Ghurid sultan Mu'izz al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Sām (r. 569–602/1173–1206). In the abstract, kingship is a concept embodied in specific practices that are culturally and historically determined. In principle, it is the rule of a just sovereign whose power is transmitted through blood, primarily through a son. Kingship in India, as elsewhere, was often tied to a specific set of religious beliefs and a carefully defined religious community. However, Persian kingship, as it was performed in the Islamic world, had no religious identity. It functioned on a set of ethical principles and qualities of leadership considered essential for legitimate rule.

The pre-Islamic Persian past heavily influenced the history of South Asia. In fact, for a period of nearly 800 years, it was the source for the dominant social and cultural paradigms organizing Indian political life. This was particularly true in Ghaznavid and Ghurid polities in the eleventh and twelfth centuries where the legacy of Persianate forms of governance had their first impact in South Asia. Where Persian

¹ Ḥasan Niẓāmī, *Tāj al-ma'āshir*, edited by Mahdī Fāmūrī and 'Alī Rizā Shād'ārām (Yasuj: Dānishgāh-i Āzād-i Īslāmī, 2012), 278 (tr. 72).

2 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

language was used in courtly settings, Persian identity was not limited to an ethnic expression of birth origins. Non-Persians of various backgrounds adopted the Persian language and Persianate culture. The transmission of Persianate culture was achieved through a process of acculturation, in the broad sense. This meant acquiring language skills that encode social behavior, values, and a worldview. Intellectuals of various backgrounds promulgated an idea of Persianness that went beyond ethnicity and molded it into an ethic of royalty and kingship. The Persian king, as we shall see, was the archetype for a mode of social and cultural behavior that was disseminated across India with unprecedented success.

To understand the processes at work that permitted the transmission of Persianate norms of governance from Central to South Asia in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, one must overcome significant areas of neglect in our historical knowledge. For instance, it has been more than forty years since the foremost specialist Clifford Bosworth produced his companion volumes on Ghaznavid history, and no monograph has been produced on that subject since that time.² Even more troubling for scholars of this period is the fact that there is no comparable study of the Ghurid Empire. The celebrated historian of Islamic art and architecture Robert Hillenbrand has noted the general disregard of the Ghaznavid and Ghurid periods of Islamic history. He identified several causes of the lack of knowledge of these two influential dynasties. The paucity of attention given is not due to the insignificance of the achievements of Ghaznavid and Ghurid rulers. In regard to their architectural accomplishments, he pointed out the vast distribution of their monuments, which span the borders of six modern nation states: Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.³ According to Hillenbrand, many of the features of their architecture single it out as “one of the two or three most progressive schools in the Iranian world in the 11th to 13th centuries” and that in

² Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern Iran 994–1040* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1963); Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The Later Ghaznavids: Splendour and Decay: The Dynasty in Afghanistan and Northern India, 1040–1186* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977).

³ Robert Hillenbrand, “The Architecture of the Ghaznavids and the Ghurids,” in *Studies in Honor of Clifford Edmund Bosworth Volume II: The Sultan’s Turret: Studies in Persian and Turkish Culture*, edited by Carole Hillenbrand (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 124.

terms of terracotta and epigraphic ornamentation it reached “a pitch of technical mastery never to be excelled.”⁴ There are, in fact, many reasons to study the history of these two dynasties.

In addition to the relative dearth of studies on Ghaznavid and Ghurid history, much of the scholarship treating their reigns is the tale of a clash between a monolithic Islamic civilization and an equally uniform Indian one. The history of the encounters between Muslims and the host of various communities they confronted is frequently viewed through a distinctly Islamic lens of “holy war” or *jihād* and “infidelity” or *kufr*. For instance, consider Clifford Bosworth’s depiction of the military expeditions of Maḥmūd of Ghazna (r. 388–421/998–1030). He wrote, “Most significant, however, for the future history of the Ghaznavids were the beginnings of expansion towards the plains of India. The *dār al-kufr*, land of unbelief, began not far to the east of Ghazna.”⁵ Not much further on, Bosworth continued in a different vein, “Since financial considerations seem to have been uppermost in the sultan’s mind, it is difficult to see Mahmud as a Muslim fanatic, eager to implant the faith in India by the sword.”⁶ Scholars have pointed out in a more substantial way that *jihād* does not mean “holy war” and that it is a significantly much more nuanced subject than the spread of Islam by the sword.⁷ Nevertheless, in these opposing quotes, Bosworth vacillated between two seemingly incongruous interpretations, a contradiction evident in much of the writings on this period. Either Maḥmūd was a religious zealot set on the destruction of the infidels, or he was unscrupulously raiding religious establishments to harvest their economic wealth. In either scenario, scholars have struggled to neatly separate Maḥmūd’s religious ideology from his political policy.

This is only part of the story. From the perspective of writing “Indian” history, a similar approach that emphasizes religious conflict has also been dominant. Many scholars of medieval India have viewed

⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵ Clifford Edmund Bosworth, “The Early Ghaznavids,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 4, edited by R. N. Frye (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 166.

⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁷ For a problematization of the translation of *jihād* as holy war, see Michael Bonner, *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 1–14.

4 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

the impact of Muslim communities in South Asia as an apocalyptic watershed in history. Muslims are said to have brought an end to the “classical” age of India and instigated a period of conflict and decline for Indian communities. Shahid Amin has criticized this outlook, noting that “the politics of the imagination of ‘Hindu India’ has depended crucially on the particular reading of the oppression of the disunited denizens of the subcontinent by Muslim conquerors and rulers from the eleventh century till the establishment of British rule in the mid-eighteenth century.”⁸

Of course, some of the problem relates to perspective and approach. Narratives about the “Hindu–Muslim” conflict derive from an emphasis on political and military history. They also seek to explain historical developments as the outcome of religion, which is depicted as unchanging. In a way, this perspective is inevitable, as the sources are bent in that direction. Maḥmūd was in no way unique in his use of the language of *jihād* and *kufr* in the rhetoric of conquest. Muslim historians were naturally concerned with the victories and defeats of their rulers and devoted the largest portion of their histories to document the dates of battles and the events of conflict. They used an Islamic vocabulary of war that reflects the ideologies employed in conquest. This is, nevertheless, only one element of the complex political history. When one reads various types of sources, not just histories, and takes into consideration the role of genre in the reading of literary texts, a different picture emerges. The study of material culture in the Ghurid and Ghaznavid periods has provided a more nuanced version of the political encounters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This approach is exemplified by Finbarr Flood’s study, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter*.⁹ In his view, the continuities between Indian and Perso-Islamic kingship become evident through a critical reading of textual, architectural, and other material sources that provide information on forms of kingship and not just religion. In a positive development, what was once solely and simplistically

⁸ Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community: The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 1. For other particularities and problematics in narrating the conquests of Maḥmūd, see Richard Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 88–112.

⁹ Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu-Muslim” Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

framed as a stark “Hindu-Muslim” contrast is now also described in terms of accommodation, adaptation, and pragmatic relations of mutually comprehensible systems.

The medieval period of India is fraught with other historiographical and methodological challenges that still have to be addressed.¹⁰ Though India was not a unified entity in the medieval period, and neither was the Muslim community, they are both often depicted that way. This is evident in the study of Indian kingdoms. Politically, North India was divided into a number of different dynasties: Chauhan, Chandella, Gurjara-Pratihāra, Chalukya, Sena, Gāhaḍavāla. Historians writing on Indian kingdoms have depicted Islamic history as a sustained and single-minded effort of Muslims to conquer India. Take, for instance, the otherwise laudable and meticulous study, *Chaulukyas of Gujarat*, by the eminent historian Asoke Kumar Majumdar. He painted the picture of a contiguous history that he traced from the eighth-century Arab conquests of Sind to eleventh-century raids of Maḥmūd. He wrote that after the conquests of Maḥmūd, “there was a chance for the Hindus to recover their lost territory, but a fresh invasion under the Ghuris carried the day . . . each of these raids left the Hindus a little more disorganized, the morale of the soldiers a little worse than what it had been before they failed to stop the raid.”¹¹ Which Hindus and whose soldiers are not specified. Even rival Indian kingdoms are put under the same umbrella. Yet, Muslim authors writing in geographical and historical treatises of the medieval period did not treat India as a unified whole but rather as composed of distinctive regions viewed independently. Technically, “India” does not exist in the sources, as it does in our time. India, or Hind of medieval geography, was understood in the limited sense of the region of northern India, spanning Punjab in the west and Bihar in the east. In 602/1206, at the time of the death of the Ghurid Sultan Mu‘izz al-Dīn, Fakhr-i Mudabbir (c. 552–626/1157–1236), an influential courtier who served under

¹⁰ These are summarized in Hermann Kulke, “Medieval Regional Hindu Kingdoms,” *EH*. Also see Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1–37. Daud Ali, “The Idea of the Medieval in the Writing of South Asian History: Contexts, Methods and Politics,” *Social History* 39, no. 3 (2014): 382–407.

¹¹ Asoke Kumar Majumdar, *Chaulukyas of Gujarat: A Survey of the History and Culture of Gujarat from the Middle of the Tenth to the End of the Thirteenth Century* (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1956), 187.

6 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

Ghurid and Shamsid sultans, considered Lahore to be the “center of Islam in India” (*markaz-i Islām-i Hind*) and second capital of the Ghurid realm after Firuzkuh (modern Jām).¹² Sind, the other major geographical region, is the southern Indus river valley, ranging from Multan in the north to the Indian Ocean port town of Daybul in the south. Bengal, Gujarat, and Kashmir were described independently of Sind and Hind. Therefore, the India of today did not exist, either historically or geographically, in the Arabic and Persian sources of the medieval period.

When Indian history is viewed uniquely through the lens of political events and wars, one forgets the diverse networks of exchange that were created and maintained through trade and migration. From a socioeconomic perspective of history, trade and migration were the earliest drivers of intercultural exchange in South Asia. And this preceded the expansion of Islamic political hegemony in different regions.¹³ There is also the distinguishing fact that “India” in a medieval Islamic geographical sense, at least the part known as Sind, had already been populated by Muslims as early as the beginning of the eighth century. The Arab military expedition that was carried out in Sind by Muḥammad b. Qāsim in 93/711 was, at least nominally, intended to protect the sea trade routes between the Middle East and the western coast of India from pirates.¹⁴ The early Arab presence in Sind can be thought of as belonging to the larger “mercantile cosmopolis” developing in this period.¹⁵ The economic routes established by land and sea linking the Middle East, Central and South Asia significantly predate the political conflicts of the twelfth century, but they are

¹² Fakhr-i Mudabbir, *Ta’rīkh-i Fakhrū’-d-Dīn Mubārakshāh Being the Historical Introduction to the Book of Genealogies of Fakhrū’-d-Dīn Mubārakshāh Marvar-rūdī [sic] Completed in A.D. 1206* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1927), 30. For the background and literary achievements of Fakhr-i Mudabbir, see M. S. Khan, “The Life and Works of Fakhr-i Mudabbir,” *Islamic Culture* 51, no. 2 (1977), 127–40.

¹³ For an overview of the exchanges forged through trade and migration in the *longue durée*, see André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1, *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 25–108.

¹⁴ Francesco Gabrieli, “Muḥammad ibn Qāsim ath-Thaqafī and the Arab Conquest of Sind,” *East and West* 15, no. 3/4 (1965), 283.

¹⁵ Mercantile cosmopolis is a phrase used by Finbarr Flood to describe the cultural and economic exchanges of this period. See Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 15–59.

harder to trace. Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar al-Narshakhī, the tenth-century historian and author of *Taʾrīkh al-Bukhārā* or *The History of Bukhara*, says that cloth from Bukhara was exported to India and Iraq noting that

the specialty of the place is Zandanījī, which is a kind of cloth made in Zandana. It is fine cloth and is made in large quantities. Much of that cloth is woven in other villages of Bukhara, but it is also called Zandanījī because it first appeared in this village. That cloth is exported to all countries such as ʿIrāq, Fārs, Kirmān, Hindūstān and elsewhere. All the nobles and rulers make garments of it, and they buy it at the same price as brocade.¹⁶

Also in the tenth century, the geographer and historian Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī tells us in *Murūj al-dhahab wa maʿādin al-jawhar* or *Meadows of Gold and Mines of Gems* that the sandals of Khambhat in Gujarat were famous across the Middle East.¹⁷ Many other commodities circulated in the Indian Ocean world connecting the Middle East with coastal India.¹⁸ These commercial networks imply the exchange of cultural commodities, and as al-Masʿūdī’s various travels to Gujarat testify, to the exchange of ideas and goods. The trade in high-quality fabrics and other luxury goods indicates that elites valued similar styles of opulence and traded in a show of wealth that was recognized across cultures.

The Persianate and the Cosmopolitan in India

In spite of certain methodological challenges present in the study of medieval “Indian” history, scholars have made fruitful gains in developing a conceptual framework for the transmission of Persianate culture across Asia in such a way that enables us to break fresh ground and shed new light on the history of Persian kingship and Persianization in South Asia. In his acclaimed magnum opus to Islamic civilization, *The Venture of Islam*, Marshall Hodgson proposed a

¹⁶ Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn Jaʿfar Narshakhī, *The History of Bukhara*, translated by Richard N. Frye (Cambridge, MA: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1954), 15–16.

¹⁷ ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, *Les prairies d’or*, translated by Charles A. C. Barbier de Meynard and Abel J. B. M. M. Pavet de Courteille (Beirut: Publication de l’université libanaise, 1966), 1:253.

¹⁸ For examples of the kinds of commodities exchanged, see Anya King, *Scent from the Garden of Paradise: Musk and the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017), 59–70.

8 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

revision of scholarly terminology and coined the term “Islamicate.”¹⁹ This was his effort to carve out a space for cultural studies within Islamic studies that were historically weighted toward the Quran, law, theology, and religious history, with a heavy Middle Eastern and Arabic language focus. Islamicate was meant to capture the entire “social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims.”²⁰ Following the same line of thought, Hodgson applied the term “Persianate” to his vision of Islamicate history. Persian, after all, as a language and ethos, encompassed not only Iran but the Caucasus, Central and South Asia. According to Hodgson, the spread of Persianate culture had dramatic and lasting effects as it progressed with speed in the twelfth century. As he wrote, “It served to carry a new overall cultural orientation within Islamdom.”²¹ Some of these advances toward a cultural understanding of Islam were certainly aided by Clifford Geertz, who had declared more than ten years earlier that religion is a “cultural system.”²²

The scholarly advances made by Hodgson have led to a whole new domain of research on the “Persianate world.” The value of his achievement has been to expose the overdue recognition that “Persian functioned from Hamadan to Kashghar and beyond in the east, and eventually Hyderābād in the south and the Ottoman Balkans in the northwest.”²³ The study of the Persianate has certainly grown in recent years. It is particularly visible in two recent collections of essays, incidentally published with the same title: *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* and *The Persianate World: The Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca*.²⁴ Two other valuable contributions to

¹⁹ For a critical appreciation of Marshall Hodgson’s contributions to theory and method in Islamic studies, see Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 157–75.

²⁰ Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 1:59.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 2:293.

²² Clifford Geertz, “Religion As a Cultural System,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, edited by M. Banton (London: Tavistock Publications Ltd., 1966), 1–46.

²³ William Hanaway, “Persian As *koine*: Written Persian in World-Historical Perspective,” in *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order*, edited by William Hanaway and Brian Spooner (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 13.

²⁴ Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf, eds. *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere* (Leiden: Brill, 2019); Nile Green, ed. *The Persianate World: The*

Persianate studies, published not much earlier, are *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order Medieval Central Asia* and *Medieval Central Asia and the Persianate World: Iranian Tradition and Islamic Civilisation*.²⁵ Notably, three of these studies view the Persianate through the lens of the Persian language and literature. What I hope distinguishes my study from these and others is the focus on power in the transmission of Persianate culture and in the creation and dissemination of Persianate forms of kingship. It is also unique in that I try to demonstrate the historical development of the Persianate heritage in the context of India, a subject that is otherwise more often treated from the perspective of Iran.

The newest addition to the scholarly lexicon that relates to India and further refines the terminology employed by Hodgson is “Persian cosmopolis.” Richard Eaton and Philip Wagoner use this terminology in *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India’s Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600*, their study of the Deccan kingdoms of Gulbarga, Bidar, Bijapur, Ahmadnagar, and Golconda, where Persian language and culture played such a prominent role. Here the idea of cosmopolitanism or “world citizenship” is employed in recognition of the urban character of the cultural expressions that dominate the Persianate culture of South Asia. Persian speakers were frequently educated elites that circulated in the major city centers of western, central, and southern Asia, transmitting knowledge of Persian through the production of texts and through participating in the cultural life of courts where the Persian language was dominant. The move to understand South Asian history through Persianate culture expands the historical perspective, which tends to “interpret Indian history mainly through the prism of religion.”²⁶

Eaton and Wagoner drew inspiration from Sheldon Pollock, who coined the phrase “Sanskrit cosmopolis” to describe the vast cultural

Frontiers of a Eurasian Lingua Franca (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

²⁵ A. C. S. Peacock and D. G. Tor, eds. *Medieval Central Asia and the Persianate World: Iranian Tradition and Islamic Civilisation* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015); William Hanaway and Brian Spooner, eds. *Literacy in the Persianate World: Writing and the Social Order* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 2012).

²⁶ Richard Eaton and Phillip B. Wagoner, *Power, Memory, Architecture: Contested Sites on India’s Deccan Plateau, 1300–1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 19.

10 *The History of Persian Kingship and Persianization in South Asia*

networks that were created through the use of the Sanskrit language in premodern South and Southeast Asia in urban and political contexts.²⁷ This approach guided Ronit Ricci's exploration of the spread of Islam into Southeast Asia, which she described in *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion, and the Arabic Cosmopolis of South and Southeast Asia*. Overall, these scholars have attempted to understand the processes of cultural transmission and political hegemony in the context of urban life. The measure of the Persian cosmopolis is the degree to which the power of the pen and the eloquence of the tongue influenced political and cultural history. There may be some limits to this approach and comparison. It may have been the case, as Richard Eaton has argued, that the "[Sanskrit cosmopolis] expanded over much of Asia not by force of arms, but by emulation, and without any governing center that enforced 'orthodoxy.'"²⁸ It is much more difficult to make this argument for the "Persian cosmopolis," where one can hardly imagine the spread of the Persian language in India without the conquests of Muslim rulers.

Studies such as those mentioned above have opened the door to new perspectives in history and South Asian studies and have helped stimulate different approaches to Persianate cultures. At the same time, some have questioned the ability of scholars to apply a universal idea of cosmopolitanism to different historical and social contexts. There are conflicting measures of cosmopolitanism and "no two cosmopolitanisms are identical."²⁹ Tamara Chin has noted that the term "cosmopolitanism" is a modern concept in Chinese that has to be "translated back, in a performative mode, to characterize an array of ancient

²⁷ Sheldon Pollock, "The Sanskrit Cosmopolis, 300–1300: Transculturation, Vernacularization, and the Question of Ideology," in *Ideology and the Status of Sanskrit: Contributions to the History of the Sanskrit Language*, edited by Jan Houben (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 198–247.

²⁸ Richard Eaton, "The Persian Cosmopolis (900–1900) and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis (400–1400)," in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*, edited by Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 65.

²⁹ This is the provocative conclusion of Myles Lavan, Richard Payne, and John Weisweiler, "Cosmopolitan Politics: The Assimilation and Subordination of Elite Cultures," in *Cosmopolitanism and Empire: Universal Rulers, Local Elites, and Cultural Integration in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, edited by Myles Lavan, Richard Payne, and John Weisweiler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 3.