

# Introduction

## STEREOTYPES AND CHALLENGES

This book focuses on South Asian history from roughly 1000 to the late eighteenth century, one of the most compelling, consequential and controversial periods in India's long history. While providing a broad overview of the subcontinent during this period, the book also seeks to challenge lingering stereotypes that have taken hold in recent decades.

One such stereotype is that India had remained a largely stagnant civilization until stimulated by European rule in the eighteenth century. In contrast, the current volume paints a picture of India's repeated self-transformation during these eight centuries. It was between the eleventh and eighteenth centuries, after all, that India witnessed, among other things, the disappearance of Buddhism, the appearance of the Sikh religion, the growth of the world's largest Muslim society, the transformation of vast tracts of land from jungle to fields of grain and the integration of tribal clans into the Hindu social order as castes. This era also witnessed India's emergence as the world's industrial powerhouse, based on the export of manufactured textiles. The notion that India merely stood still for eight centuries is, to say the least, mistaken.

Another stereotype addressed in this volume is the notion of India as a self-contained and territorially bounded essence, historically isolated from outside. Rather, this book stresses South Asia's contacts with the societies and cultures of Central Asia, Africa, East Asia, South-east Asia and, especially, the Middle East. In fact, most of the historical changes mentioned above cannot be understood without situating India in the context of its relations with neighbouring peoples.

A third and related stereotype is that of India as an essentially

self-generated Hindu and Sanskritic civilization that evolved on its own, rather than a hybridized composite produced from protracted interaction with other peoples and cultures. The present volume affords an excellent opportunity to examine this theme since its chronological scope covers the period of South Asia's intense contact with other regions, particularly with the Iranian plateau, with Persian culture and with Islam. Indeed, the period extending from c.1000 to c.1800 is conventionally referred to as India's 'Muslim period', inaugurated by a 'Muslim conquest' of India. But there is good reason to question such characterizations.

Consider an analogous world-historical encounter. By the early sixteenth century Spanish conquistadors had sailed across the Atlantic Ocean, established large empires in Central and South America, planted new colonies there, forcibly uprooted native American religious and political institutions and conducted a vigorous, state-sponsored programme of Christianizing the continent's native populations, as a result of which the vast majority of the region's peoples are Roman Catholic today. Yet historians never refer to this great historical moment as a 'Christian conquest' of America. Rather, it is conventionally understood as the 'Spanish conquest'. But generations of historians have referred to the equally momentous events that took place in India towards the end of the twelfth century not as a Turkish conquest but as 'the Muslim conquest', even though the Sanskrit term typically used by contemporary Indians to describe the conquerors was not 'Muslim' but 'Turk' (*turushka*). Further complicating the idea of some religion-based 'clash of civilizations' is the fact that Muslims who had already settled in north India – specifically, in early-thirteenth-century Benares – fought with Indian dynasties against these invading Turks.<sup>1</sup> So a key question that should be asked at the start is: what explains the very different ways in which the American and Indian cases are conventionally characterized? Why is religion foregrounded in one, but not in the other? What hidden assumptions lurk behind our continued use of such different categories when we refer to these otherwise comparable encounters?

Much is at stake in these questions. First, the notion of a 'Muslim conquest' may well result from the inappropriate application of present-day understandings of religion to earlier times, as though religions had always been self-contained and closed belief systems, impervious

to change over time and making totalizing claims on people's identities. Then there are political issues. Ever since the end of British imperial rule in 1947, the two largest states in South Asia, India and Pakistan, have remained bitter rivals, with one of them making Islam a state religion and, at least initially, the sole criterion of its national identity. As Pakistan's President Zia-ul-Haq stated in 1981, 'Take Islam out of Pakistan and make it a secular state; it would collapse.'<sup>2</sup> It is, then, hardly surprising that the three wars fought by these now nuclear states have only reinforced the notion of religion as the primary force that had 'always' divided South Asia's inhabitants.

Of course, the idea of cultural alterity, or 'otherness', long predated the creation of the two states. Think of the figures of speech found in two very different literary traditions, the Persian and the Sanskrit. From the mid eleventh century a dynasty of Central Asian Turks, the Ghaznavids, ruled over much of the Punjab from Lahore. However, their Indian rivals identified them in their inscriptions and texts not as Muslims but as the 'Lords of the Horses', an apparent reference to their dependence on cavalry warfare and their control over trade routes leading to Central Asia, a major source of war-horses. That is, these Turks were understood as powerful but familiar rivals in north India's crowded stage of contending lineages. But then in the late twelfth century another Turkish group, the Ghurids, would sweep away both the Ghaznavids and north India's martial clans, later called Rajputs, and put them on a path to eventually establishing the Delhi sultanate (1206–1526), a sultanate being, of course, a kingdom ruled by a sultan. Unlike the Ghaznavids, however, these later Turks had not yet been assimilated as one of north India's many ruling houses: on the contrary, they were wholly alien and unfamiliar, not to mention destructive. Accordingly, a contemporary Sanskrit epic, the *Prthviraj-vijaya*, lustily stigmatized them as outright 'barbarians' (*mlechhas*), 'demon-men' (*nararaksasam*), enemies of cows and 'given to eating foul foods'.<sup>3</sup> Yet, as destructive and alien as they were, the Ghurid Turks – like their Ghaznavid predecessors – were not identified by their religion. As the historian Cynthia Talbot notes, the image of Muslims in contemporary Indian texts 'oscillated depending on the prevailing political conditions: in times of military conflict and radically fluctuating spheres of influence, the rhetoric was often negative

in tone; whereas long-established Muslim rulers were conceptually assimilated into the Sanskrit political imagination'.<sup>4</sup>

That said, the authors of the Persian chronicles, unlike their Indian counterparts, certainly did see the world through the lens of religion: people were either Muslim believers or infidels. But, we must ask, for whom did these writers speak? It is one thing for a pious chronicler to colour an event in ways that conformed to – or violated – his own sense of a properly ordered world. However, how culturally different communities actually interacted with one another, or what sorts of political and social *modi vivendi* they reached, can be another thing altogether. This means that, while Persian chronicles are indispensable in reconstructing India's history in our period, it would be a mistake to rely on that genre alone. Hence the present volume parts company with British-period historians of India, who obsessively adhered to written data to the exclusion of other kinds of evidence and placed excessive trust in Persian chronicles, which for them formed an unshakeable basis for the reconstruction of India's post-eleventh-century past. Not surprisingly, British histories of India written during the Raj tended to reproduce the very believer-vs-infidel mindset of the chroniclers whose Persian texts they used.

Another reason why many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century historians replicated the religiously defined worldview of medieval Persian chroniclers relates to Britain's rationale for occupying India. The British came to justify the Raj on the grounds that they had introduced India to an enlightened era of sound and just government, a position logically requiring that rulers immediately preceding them be construed as despotic and unjust. Perhaps the clearest case of history-writing in service of the Raj is the work of Sir Henry M. Elliot, whose translations of Indo-Persian chronicles, *Bibliographical Index to the Historians of Muhammedan India*, first appeared in 1850. Elliot sought to use such chronicles to show readers how destructive Muslim rulers had been before the arrival of British rule. As he wrote in the Preface:

The few glimpses . . . we have of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions

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and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, show us that this picture is not overcharged.<sup>5</sup>

Elliot presents the advent of European rule, by contrast, as a period ‘when a more stirring and eventful era of India’s History commences; and when the full light of European truth and discernment begins to shed its beams upon the obscurity of the past’. Therefore, he concludes, reading translations of Indo-Persian chronicles – which he characterized as dull, prejudiced, ignorant and superficial – ‘will make our native subjects more sensible of the immense advantages accruing to them under the mildness and equity of our rule’.<sup>6</sup> Within seven years, India would be consumed by the horrific Revolt of 1857 and its brutal suppression by British troops. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of the Raj’s ‘mildness and equity’, in contrast to the ‘Muhammadan’ tyranny said to have preceded it, would prevail throughout Britain’s occupation of India.

Other factors also inclined the British to see Indian history through the lens of religion. Students of South Asian history are aware of the charge that European rulers had deployed classic ‘divide-and-rule’ measures as a strategy for governing India. Already in the late eighteenth century, as the East India Company was gaining a political toehold on parts of South Asia, Governor General Warren Hastings established a legal system in which Muslims and non-Muslims were tried by separate law codes; henceforth, Muslims and non-Muslims would constitute juridically separate communities. The British then went on to establish a formidable array of publications – decennial census reports, district gazetteers, ethnographic surveys, etc. – that pigeon-holed Indians into separate, watertight compartments using religion as a principal category. All this, so the argument goes, had the insidious effect of enhancing – some would even say creating – cultural divisions in an otherwise relatively harmonious Indian society.

Consider, too, how religion dominated European notions of Indian time. Comprehensive histories of India published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were typically divided into three periods: ancient, medieval and modern. The scheme dates at least to the 1817 publication of James Mill’s *The History of British India*, which

divided India's history into Hindu, 'Mahomedan' and British eras.<sup>7</sup> This tidy, tripartite scheme was actually a transposition on to India of the same ancient–medieval–modern scheme by which, ever since the Renaissance, Europeans had periodized their own history. In the South Asian case, however, those three temporal units were made to correspond to three culturally defined and supposedly homogeneous communities that had successively ruled most of the subcontinent. Formulated in this way, the system posited two great ruptures in Indian time. The first, which defined the transition from 'ancient' to 'medieval', implied a descent from an earlier Hindu 'golden' age to one of 'Mahomedan' tyranny. To India's British rulers, this decline corresponded to Europe's fall from an earlier age of Greco-Roman splendour to its own medieval period, initiated by the so-called 'Dark Ages'. Implicitly, then, the appearance of Muslim Turks in India was analogous to that of the Visigoths or Vandals in Rome: all were construed as alien outsiders whose armed intrusions had violated a sacred realm. Such a formulation allowed British imperialists to imagine India's second great historical rupture – the transition from 'medieval' times (i.e. Muslim rule) to modernity (i.e. British rule) – as having validated the coming of European governance as a blessing for a benighted land. By this self-serving formulation, Britain had liberated India from eight centuries of 'Muhammadan' stagnation.

While Indian Muslims in the modern period certainly did not share this view of India's middle period, many did see the advent of Islam as a transformative moment in India's history. Early leaders of the Pakistan movement, seeking a historical basis for justifying the creation of a separate Muslim state in post-British South Asia, propounded the so-called 'two-nation' theory. According to this understanding, India's Muslims had comprised a homogeneous and self-aware community objectively distinct from India's non-Muslims ever since the eighth century, when the earliest known Muslim community had appeared in the region. Therefore, the creation of an Islamic state merely acknowledged constitutionally what was held to have been a social reality for over a thousand years. In this way, too, Muhammad bin Qasim, the eighth-century Arab conqueror of Sind, in today's Pakistan, could be conjured up as a proto-nationalist figure, even as Pakistan's 'first citizen'.<sup>8</sup>

Conversely, in their efforts to locate their own moments of glory in India's past, many Hindu nationalists of the first half of the twentieth century imagined rebels against pre-colonial 'Muslim' states as heroes who were, in some small or inchoate way, struggling on behalf of an India-wide, pan-Hindu collectivity. Thus in the early twentieth century, during the twilight years of the Raj, two opposing nationalist narratives emerged, both driven by religion. And since any form of nationalism selectively picks and chooses from its past in order to endow the present with meaning, if not inevitability, both Hindus and Muslims politicized South Asia's history, in particular the eight centuries prior to the British arrival. One community's heroes became the other's villains, and vice versa, while both narratives interpreted the past in order to explain the present and justify an imagined future. India's 'medieval' history, in short, became a political football.

Although British rulers, Indian nationalists and Muslim separatists were motivated by very different agendas, each understood India's middle period as one in which religion comprised the fundamental building block of community identity, with the Muslim presence in India looming especially large in South Asia's collective consciousness. This is clearly reflected in the tradition of history-writing since the nineteenth century. In book after book, the tendency has been to list events, kings, battles and literary and religious texts in chronological order, each of them neatly divided into separate Hindu and Muslim compartments.<sup>9</sup> India was thus given two Procrustean beds, one Muslim and one Hindu, into one or the other of which nearly everything had to fit – architecture, dress, art, literature, language, and so on.<sup>10</sup> The British art historian Percy Brown, for example, could publish a two-volume study on Indian architecture, one volume covering the 'Buddhist and Hindu periods' and another the 'Muslim period.'

The reading of history in terms of mutually exclusive religions has, however, come at enormous cost. For one thing it has made it difficult to account for, or even to see, larger cultural processes. Consider the earliest genre of Hindi literature – the so-called *premakhyans*, or Sufi romances – which appeared in the eastern Gangetic plain between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. This literature was composed originally in the Persian script by Sufis who narrated the seeker's mystical quest for union with God, but it did so using characters

who were ostensibly Hindu in name and cultural/religious practice, in a landscape saturated with Indian deities, mythology, flora and fauna. Failing to fall neatly into either Hindu or Muslim categories, this literary genre baffled Ramchandra Shukla and other early-twentieth-century nationalist writers, who engaged in long and fruitless debates over whether or not this literature was truly Indian.<sup>11</sup>

The convention of seeing India only in terms of religion, and of dividing its history into three religiously defined units of time, is thus well entrenched. Although the present volume covers what historians in the tradition of James Mill labelled the ‘Muslim’ age, the aim is nonetheless to narrate this period on its own terms, and not to project on to it today’s values or biases. For not only did India’s socio-cultural landscape differ vastly from that of today: the conceptual categories by which peoples of earlier times understood that landscape did too. We might start, then, by rethinking the notion of a ‘Muslim’ conquest and, indeed, the proper place of religion in India’s history during this period. But if religion is not to serve as the key to India’s past, what might?

## TWO TRANSREGIONAL WORLDS: SANSKRIT AND PERSIANATE

Western Civilization, Dar al-Islam (‘the abode of Islam’), Christendom, the Motherland, the Free World, the Promised Land, the Third World, the Middle Kingdom – these are just some of the terms in which people have imagined geographical space, attempting in each instance to impose culture or ideology on to territory. It can be a vexed enterprise. In recent years the Sanskritist and historian Sheldon Pollock, suggesting a very different way of thinking about cultural space, coined the term ‘Sanskrit cosmopolis’, referring to the diffusion of Indian culture across a vast swathe of Southern Asia between the fourth century and the fourteenth.<sup>12</sup> Sanskrit place names alone attest to the geographical sweep of a culturally connected zone between Afghanistan’s Kandahar (Skt Gandhara) and the South-east Asian city state of Singapore (Skt Singhapura).

For Pollock, what characterized this Sanskrit world was not religion



but the ideas elaborated in the entire corpus of Sanskrit texts that, between the fourth and fourteenth centuries, circulated above and across the world of vernacular, regional tongues. Sanskrit, like only a few others, was a language that travelled: it was not a 'language of place'. Not being identified with a particular ethnic or linguistic group or with a particular region, Sanskrit was transregional by nature, or, as Pollock puts it, 'a language of the gods in the world of men'. Texts composed in Sanskrit embraced everything from rules of grammar to styles of kingship, architecture, proper comportment, the goals of life, the regulation of society, the acquisition of power and wealth, and much more. The circulation of these texts and of the people who carried them created a network of shared idioms and styles that made similar claims about aesthetics, polity, kingly virtue, learning and the universality of dominion. Fundamentally, the Sanskrit world – that is, the vast sweep of territory in which such texts circulated and were considered normative – was concerned with defining and preserving moral and social order.

Moreover, this cultural formation expanded over much of Asia not by force of arms but by emulation, and without any governing centre or fortified frontiers. It was thus comparable to the Hellenized world that embraced the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East after Alexander the Great. For that world, too, was a cultural zone without political borders, in which people of many ethnic or religious backgrounds readily subscribed to the prestige of Greek language, sculpture, drama, cuisine, architecture and so on, but without paying taxes to a Greek official or submitting to the might of Greek soldiers. We may contrast this 'cosmopolis' idea with any classical empire, such as the Roman, with its centralized governing structure, sharp distinction between citizens and non-citizens, fortified frontiers and reliance on the hard power of coercive force as opposed to the soft power of models that encourage emulation.

The Sanskrit world that Pollock describes was, however, only one such formation to have appeared in South Asian history. From about the eleventh to the nineteenth centuries a similar, Persianate world embraced much of West, Central and South Asia. Both expanded and flourished well beyond the land of their origin, giving them a transregional, 'placeless' quality. Both were grounded in a prestige language