

A New History of India

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STANLEY WOLPERT

Emeritus, UCLA

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The Impact of Islam

(ca. 711–1556)

The birth of Islam in the sands of Saudi Arabia in the year 622 was destined to divert fundamentally the course of Indian history. Not since the Aryan dispersion more than two thousand years earlier had any series of invasions had so profound an impact on South Asia as would those that brought the religion of the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) to Indian soil. The historic legacy of that impact may be seen not only in Pakistan and Bangladesh, but also among some one hundred and forty million Muslims still living in India.

It is difficult to imagine two religious ways of life more different than Islam and Hinduism. The central tenet of Islam, which literally means “surrender,” is that there is but one God, Allah. Every Muslim must at all times surrender himself to Allah’s will, revealed to Allah’s most perfect prophet, Muhammad, through the archangel Gabriel, and recorded in the sacred Qur’an (or Koran). When he was about forty, the Prophet started to receive revelations, but his preaching won more ridicule and torment than converts in Mecca, finally leading to his “flight” (*hijrat*) north to Medina, after that city invited him to become its temporal and spiritual leader in 622, which is reckoned as the first year of the Muslim calendar. The unequivocal monotheism of Islam served to unite all Muslims (those who surrendered to Allah’s will) into a brotherhood (*umma*) that was at once a mighty social as well as military force. To become a Muslim, one needed first of all to affirm the credo: “There is but one God, Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet.” For the love of Allah, all Muslims were obliged to give alms (*zakat*) to the poor; to pray five times a day facing Mecca, the center of Arab power, toward whose conquest Muhammad directed his people’s united energies after consolidating his grip over Medina; to fast during the

ninth lunar month (*Ramadan*); and to make at least one pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. “Holy war” (*jihad*) was waged vigorously against those who failed peacefully to submit to God’s will, though Jews and Christians were, from the birth of Islam, given special status as “protected peoples of the book” (*dhimmis*), since their scripture was believed to be based on the “partial revelation” of lesser prophets. As *dhimmis* they could continue to follow their own faiths, providing they paid a special “head tax” (*jizya*), about 6 percent of each individual’s total monetary worth, to their Muslim rulers. Pagans, however, were offered only the options of Islam or death. The conquest of Mecca in the Prophet’s own lifetime gave Muslims a solid core of Arab power around which to expand their brotherhood in the decades following Muhammad’s death. Within a single century, Islam burst explosively across North Africa and Spain and over the Tigris and Euphrates to Persia and India. Never before in world history had an idea proved so contagious and politically potent. Martial fervor, combined with the ethic of social unity that replaced Arab intertribal conflict, made Muslim forces virtually invincible during the first century of their zealous expansion. The last judgment day, when all dead would be raised to hear God’s eternal decisions, was a concept vividly articulated by Muhammad, and none were promised better prospects of residing in the cool, fountain-filled gardens of Allah’s paradise than those valiant warriors who died in righteous battle.

Islamic Arab Conquest of Sind

India remained blissfully oblivious to Islam’s existence during the first two decades of that new faith’s vigorous growth. Arab merchants, however, brought home enough South Asian wealth to whet the appetites of Muslim warriors, soon to be infuriated as well by Sindi attacks upon Muslim shipping. The Arab commander of the first Islamic force to reach India reported from Sind to his caliph in 644 that “water is scarce, the fruits are poor, and the robbers are bold; if a few troops are sent they will be slain, if many, they will starve.”¹ This pessimistic assessment postponed further attempted Muslim conquest until A.D. 711, when the piratic

1. “Futu’hu-l Bulda’n” of al-Bila’duri in H. M. Elliot and John Dowson, eds., *The History of India, As Told By Its Own Historians: The Muhammadan Period: Historians of Sind, I* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta Ltd., first ed. 1867, second ed. 1955), vol. 25, p. 17.

plundering of a richly laden Arab ship as it passed the mouth of the Indus so enraged the Ummayyad governor of Iraq that he launched an expedition of six thousand Syrian horses and an equal number of Iraqi camels against the rajas of Sind. The Arab force swiftly conquered Brahmanabad, and its leader saw to it that "the infidels" (*kaffirs*) he found there either converted to Islam or perished. *Dhimmi* status was, however, soon added to those extreme alternatives, as Muslim scholars learned of Hindu religious books and Muslim monarchs wisely recognized that there were too many Hindus to exterminate. The concept of protected peoples had, in fact, been expanded by now to accommodate Zoroastrians (known as Parsis when they fled Muslim persecution to Western India) during the Islamic penetration of Persia, so it was hardly surprising to find Hindus offered the same option of second-class subjectship in return for special tax payments. What was surprising, however, was how long it took Islam to spread beyond the narrow confines of Sind to other regions of the subcontinent. Nor should we think of Sind as the staging ground for Islam's expansion across South Asia, since it was not from that Arabian Sea backwater, but rather from the Afghan high board of the Khyber Pass that Islam's major invasions would be launched, and then not before the end of the tenth century.

By the tenth century, Islam had changed in many ways, transformed since the founding of the Abbasid caliphate in the mid-eighth century, when it was ruled from Baghdad rather than Damascus or Medina, into an empire embellished by Persian civilization, protected by Turkish armed slaves. Flourishing commerce and industry brought the world's riches to Baghdad, but the empire soon became too vast, too diverse for any one *caliph* ("deputy" of God) to control, and from its fringes, east and west, independent kingdoms emerged under regional rulers, who by the eleventh century assumed the secular royal title, sultan. Central Asian-Turkish slaves (*Mamluks*) had, since the ninth century, been purchased and imported in considerable numbers to bolster the armies of sagging Abbasid caliphs, but by the tenth century entire tribes of Turkish nomads were driven into Afghanistan and Persia by China's expansion to the west. The first independent Turkish Islamic kingdom was founded by a Sāmānid warrior slave named Alptigīn, who seized the Afghan fortress of Ghazni in 962, and from that capital established a dynasty that was to endure almost two hundred years. It was his grandson, Mahmud (971-1030), the "Sword of Islam," who led no fewer than

seventeen bloody annual forays into India from his Ghazni perch, waging his *jihads* at least as much for plunder as for the promise of paradise.

Mahmud of Ghazni's Raids

Mahmud of Ghazni began his raids in 997, leaving his frostbitten capital each winter to descend into the Punjab's plains, zealously smashing countless Hindu temple idols, which he viewed with Islamic iconoclastic fervor as abominations to Allah, and looting India's cities of as many of their jewels, specie, and women as he and his horde of Turkish cavalry could carry back across the Afghan passes. Thanesar, Mathura, Kanauj, Nagarkot, and finally even the fabled Kathiawar temple city of Somnath were singled out as targets to be razed by Mahmud, who used their fabled wealth to convert remote Ghazni into one of the world's greatest centers of Islamic culture in the eleventh century. The brilliant physician, astronomer, philosopher, and historian al-Biruni (b. 973), and the great Persian poet Firdawsi, author of the *Shāh Nāma*, were but two of Islam's luminaries lured to Ghazni by Mahmud. Though the court chronicler Utbi clearly exaggerated his sultan's prowess when he claimed that ten thousand Hindu temples were destroyed in Kanauj alone by Mahmud's sword, it is not difficult to appreciate the legacy of bitter Hindu-Muslim antipathy left by raids that may have taken even 1 percent of that toll. In 1025, for example, the Hindu inhabitants of Somnath were reported to have stood calmly watching the advance of Mahmud's fierce army toward their temple city's walls, confident that Shiva, whose "miraculous" iron *lingam* hung suspended within a magnetic field inside Somnath's "womb-house," would surely protect his worshippers from harm. Here, too, the chronicler probably exaggerated, for he wrote that more than fifty thousand Hindus were slain that day and that over two million dinars' worth of gold and jewels were taken from the hollow *lingam* shattered by Mahmud's sword. Yet the bitter shock of such attacks, whatever the factual sum of their deadly impact, was even more painfully amplified in the memories of those who had watched helplessly as friends and family were slain or enslaved by invaders who claimed to kill, rape, and rob in the name of God. Before his death, Mahmud annexed the Punjab as the Easternmost province of his empire.

Ghurid Attacks

The Ghaznavids were but the first in a series of Turko-Afghan Muslims to invade North India and shatter autonomous Hindu power, initially in the Punjab, then further south and east. A century and a half after Mahmud's death, Ghazni itself was seized by rival Turkish Ghurids, also fierce Central Asian nomads in origin. Sultan Muhammad of Ghur and his slave lieutenant Qutb-ud-din Aybak led their first raid into India in 1175, destroying the Ghaznavid garrison at Peshawar in 1179, capturing Lahore in 1186 and Delhi in 1193. Muhammad returned to Ghazni, leaving his lieutenant to consolidate the Ghurid grip over North India from Delhi. For talented Turkish soldiers like Qutb-ud-din, martial slavery proved the highroad to power, and as an institution in eastern Islam, it was an important means for permitting bright, courageous, and loyal young men to rise rapidly above their status at birth. The Turks' Central Asian horses and crossbows fired at the gallop (thanks to the iron stirrups with which Ghurid marksmen could brace themselves as they rode) tipped the martial balance of power in favor of Qutb-ud-din's forces, but Hindu India did not surrender its homeland without a struggle.

Hindu Rajputs

The Rajputs (literally "king's sons") waged the staunchest battle, keeping the Turko-Afghans busy for years seeking in vain to drive these ferocious *kshatriyas* from their desert domain. Though claiming direct descent from either the Aryan sun (*sūrya*) or moon (*chandra*), all four of the major Rajput dynasties (Pratihāra, Paramāra, Chauhān, and Chalukya) probably originated in Central Asia themselves, which may help to explain their success at warfare and their singular tenacity. They stood, at any event, as the vanguard of Hindu India's spirited opposition to the Muslim conquest, and even when defeated in battle or driven from one desert fortress after another, they never completely surrendered. Bengal (including Bihar, Assam, and Orissa) had prospered under a series of independent dynasties, first the Pāla, then the Varman, and finally the Sena, whose capital at Nadia was conquered by Turko-Afghan power in 1202. India's major centers of Buddhism, including the great university at Nalanda, where more than ten thousand monks lived and studied,

were sacked at this time, driving thousands of Buddhists to flee toward Nepal and Tibet and killing uncounted others who weren't swift enough to escape. The severity of Turko-Afghan persecution directed against centers of Buddhist monasticism was so unrelenting that the religion of the Buddha was now sent into exile from the land of its birth, never to return again in any significant numbers until 1954 when B. R. Ambedkar, India's learned leader of Hindu untouchables, publicly converted to Buddhism with some fifty thousand of his followers as a political protest. Though Buddhism flourished in Nepal, Tibet, China, Japan, and most of Southeast Asia after its diaspora, the *sangha* found no sanctuary on Indian soil for some seven and a half centuries. Perhaps Vaishnavite adoption of the Buddha as an avatar, coupled with the growing popularity of the *bhakti* movement, Hindu asceticism, and subsequent Muslim mysticism, sufficed to satisfy the spiritual needs of those Indian Buddhists who survived by conversion.

Dawn of the Delhi Sultanate

In 1206, Muhammad of Ghur was assassinated in Lahore, following which Qutb-ud-din Aybak proclaimed himself sultan of Delhi, initiating a new phase in Muslim relationships toward India and the dawn of a series of Islamic dynasties in South Asia. The founding of Qutb-ud-din's "Slave" (Mamluk) dynasty transformed North India into *Dar-ul-Islam* ("Land of Submission") from *Dar-ul-Harb* ("Land of War"). The sultanate at Delhi lasted 320 years, including five successive Turko-Afghan dynasties. Qutb-ud-din died when he fell from his polo pony in 1210 and was succeeded by his capable son-in-law, Shams-ud-din Iltutmish (Iltutmish), who reigned from Delhi for a quarter of a century (1211-36). Faced when he took the throne with a number of political challengers in the west, Iltutmish wisely exerted himself first in consolidating his strength around Delhi and over the Gangetic plain, winning support from most of the Turkish military bureaucrats (*iqṭā'dārs*) by confirming grants of revenue from landed areas (*iqṭā'*), which had been assigned by Qutb-ud-din. By diplomacy he kept the armies of Ghengiz Khan from invading Delhi. He assured all Hindus the status of *dhimmis* and left many local Hindu chiefs and petty rajas in control of their domain as long as they paid the requisite revenue to his treasury, which never was

empty. Relatively mild in manner, Iltutmish was hailed by the chroniclers and poets of his reign as a devoutly religious monarch who preferred the tactics of persuasion and tolerance to those of naked power. He could, nonetheless, vigorously suppress opposition, as he did in Bengal, where rebellion flared from 1225 until his victory there in 1229. His campaigns against the Rajputs were less decisive, though he did capture Gwalior in 1231 and Ujjain in 1235. By his death the following year, the Delhi sultanate was clearly the most powerful state in North India, and his vigorous daughter Raziyya succeeded her father to the throne, which she managed to hold for three years. Raziyya was the only Muslim woman ever to rule on Indian soil, but she would not be the last remarkably astute woman in Indian history to succeed her father to the pinnacle of political power in Delhi. Raziyya was murdered in 1240, and her father's palace guard of Mamluks, "the Forty" as they were collectively called, ruled conjointly for the next six years.

The shrewdest and most unscrupulous of the Forty was Balban, who had served as Sultana Raziyya's chief huntsman. He seized effective power in 1246 by becoming grand chamberlain (*amir-i-hajib*) to the puppet king Bahram, and he ruled as such until 1266, when he assumed the title as well as the power of sultan, which he retained for twenty more years. The continuing struggle for power and political intrigue among the Forty at Delhi left provincial Turkish governors, east and west, to develop what were virtually independent regional power bases, several of which, notably Oudh and Sind, sought to challenge Balban's central authority in 1255. Balban's leadership prevailed, however, and he not only defeated his own governors, but he also kept the Mongols at bay by a combination of firmness and diplomatic wooing. While there is good reason to believe that Balban seized his throne by regicide, he assiduously labored to exalt the position of sultan, once he occupied it, to divine status. Always surrounded by his elite corps of palace guards, Balban spoke to none but his leading officials and was as impartially ruthless in disposing of his own relatives as he was in dismissing strangers. He never hesitated to stamp out any opposition in the environs of his court by calling for his elephants, and he used the glittering facade of Persian ritual and royal pomp to overawe his populace, becoming more of a grand monarch in the traditional Hindu mould than the "first among equals" ideal of orthodox Islam. Prostrating and toe kissing were both insisted upon by this slave who became sultan. Employing assassins to poison all

of his former comrades among the Forty, Balban ended his long reign with no friends to remind him of his former status. In his constant dependence upon spies and his enhancement of the espionage arm of the sultanate, Balban was employing traditional Indian techniques, reaching back at least to the *Arthashastra* for prescriptions of how to retain power. He did, however, restrict the highest posts in his service to pure-born Turks, but as his bureaucracy grew, he found it necessary to admit Afghans and Indian-born Muslims to its middle ranks, especially in the army, which was expanded and greatly strengthened. With Balban's death in 1287 his dynasty also expired, though it continued nominally for three years longer, inept and competing grandsons standing as puppets for rival court factions while the bureaucratic machine managed to maintain its own momentum.

Jalāl-ud-dīn Firūz Khaljī used his position as general of Balban's army to catapult himself to the sultan's throne in 1290, launching a coup that inaugurated the second Delhi dynasty. Originally Turkish, the Khaljis had moved to Afghanistan and then settled in India after the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions. Jalal-ud-din was in his seventies when he seized power, and could only retain it for six years, but the transition from Slave to Khalji dynasties marks still another step in the Indianization of the sultanate, which now more freely relied upon the support of indigenous peoples. Jalal-ud-din himself did little more than repress Balban's supporters; the short-lived yet significant dynasty that he began left its mark on Indian history, however, due to the reign of his nephew-successor, Alā-ud-dīn, who had his uncle murdered in 1296. Shortly before usurping the throne, Ala-ud-din Khalji ventured into the Deccan to raid and loot the wealthy capital of Devagiri, home of the Yadavas, and with the gold he carried north from that plundering venture bought the loyalty of those who took his uncle's life. South India thus served involuntarily to bolster the Delhi sultanate, whose fortunes were now linked in some measure with the Deccan and Tamilnad, two regions hitherto oblivious to the impact of the Muslim invasions.

The northern Deccan Yadavas (descendants of the Yadu tribe) were feudatories of the later Chalukyas who had been weakened in struggling against neighboring Hindu feudal states to their south, especially the Hoysalas of the Mysore region and the Kākatiyas of Andhra to the east. These medieval Hindu monarchies were essentially feudal in origin, usually starting with the grant of tax-free land to a warrior by his overlord.

The feudatory commonly referred to himself as *sāmanta* ("tributary" or "high feudatory"), until he felt powerful enough to adopt the royal title of *maharaja* instead or in addition to *mahasamanta*, which was at times added to the former. As long as the feudatory acknowledged his overlord's suzerainty, he was obliged to maintain troops for his lord's defense, remit some portion of his revenues, and offer the lord his daughters in marriage. Though Indian feudalism differed significantly from that phenomenon as developed in Western Europe, including neither large-scale demesne farming nor a widespread manorial system, it bore sufficient resemblance to validate use of the term, which primarily connotes political decentralization and local economic self-sufficiency, as well as the conditional holding of land by lords in return for the promise of martial service. The monarchical granting of tax-free estates, most commonly called *jāgirs*, as reward to soldiers would remain a common feature of later imperial as well as feudal systems throughout Indian history until the late nineteenth century, when such alienated revenue was to be reclaimed by the British. Tax-free domains were also often granted to brahmins and their devout followers by Hindu monarchs, but no single church hierarchy ever emerged under Indian feudalism as it did in the West.

Tamil Cholas

Tamilnad also remained fragmented at this time, though Chola attained greater prominence and wealth from its growing trade with and expansion into Southeast Asia. The Chola monarch, Vijayālaya (r. 846–71), managed while still a feudatory of the Pallavas to capture Tanjore in 850, providing his heirs with a rich, temple-city center of power. During the following reign, Kāñchipuram fell under Chola control, and after that Parantaka I (907–55) virtually established a Chola kingdom by ousting the Pandians from their capital at Madura. During the later, vigorously expansionist era of Chola King Rājārāja (r. 985–1016), Kerala was conquered, as was Ceylon. Under Rajaraja's son, Rājendra I (r. 1016–44), Chola armies even marched north of the Tungabhadra to wreck havoc upon the western Chālukyas of Kalyani. The Chola navy was by this time the mightiest in the Indian Ocean; not only did it conquer the Maldives, but in 1025 it defeated the fleet of Sri Vijaya, the great

maritime empire of Southeast Asia that spanned Malaysia and modern Indonesia.

Many Chola bronzes of Buddhist as well as Shaivite divinities have been found in the archipelago dating from this era of South Indian domination. The art of bronze casting reached its peak of perfection in the Chola temple cities of Tanjore, Kāñchipuram, and Chidambaram, where the anonymous tenth-century genius labored who produced Shiva as *Nataraja* ("Lord of the Dance"), casting bronze the way Benvenuto Cellini poured gold, with inspired brilliance. Poised with one foot crushing the back of the demon dwarf Muyalaka, Shiva stands ready to begin his cosmic dance of life, to restore vitality to a world in ashes, raising his mighty left leg high above the burial ground of forgotten dreams, holding the little drum of awakening in the fingers of one hand, the fire of creation as well as destruction in another, and gesturing with one of his two remaining hands to "forget fear" (the *abhaya mudra* of the Buddha). Rarely has an artist achieved such perfect balance and harmony in any medium as in this metal statue, whose patina of green oxide only enriches its beauty, whose symbolism embraces all of Hindu civilization in its mythic power, and whose exquisite form has led to its almost infinite reproduction throughout India, though none of the later versions have ever approached the Chola craftsmen's quality of perfection. Whether their subject was Shiva or the goddess Lakshmi, whether it was Rama or Krishna with his consorts and *vāhana* (Garuda), the workmanship of the imperial Chola artists was flawless in its beauty, magically transmuting metal to fleshlike texture, imparting the breath of life to their subjects. In temple architecture, the Cholas built upon foundations inherited from the Pallavas, and the Shiva temple in Tanjore, completed in about 1000, is a monument worthy of the greatness of Rajaraja. It was the most ambitious and enormous Hindu temple of its time, the forerunner of the giant Dravidian temples that still distinguish the landscape of Tamilnad. A massive pyramid of stone, the *shikhara* ("tower") rises 190 feet above the inner shrine, a pillar of worship visible for miles across the countryside. A second great Chola temple, the Gangaikondacholapuram, erected by Rājendra I in about 1025, was famed for its huge gateway "cow fortresses" (*gopuram*) and is virtually all that remains of the once-flourishing Chola city of Kumbakonam. Chola maritime power continued to exploit the resources of the east coast of India, while Muslim Arab

merchants seized control of almost all Indian trade on the west coast and across the Arabian Sea.

Khalji Sultanate

- During the reign of Ala-ud-din Khalji (1296–1316), the sultanate reached its peak of centralized power and acquired imperial dimensions. Resuming many of the tax-free *jagirs* that had previously been assigned to Muslim nobles, Ala-ud-din paid his officers in cash and kept personal control over his mighty army. To maintain a full treasury, the sultan raised the land tax to 50 percent of each crop and strictly enforced its collection from all Hindu subjects in his realm. He also introduced two new taxes, one on milch cattle, the other on houses. His network of spies and loyal courtiers was efficient enough to make him more feared than hated, and his homosexual relationship with the convert slave, Malik Kafur, the second most powerful figure in the sultanate, perhaps helps account for the singular intrigue at his court. He was a cruel but remarkably capable monarch, the first to introduce a successful system of wage and price controls in Delhi. Private hoarding of gold and silver, common throughout much of Indian history, was temporarily ended during Ala-ud-din's reign. The prices of food, grains, and cloth were kept low enough to permit soldiers and average workers to survive without high salaries. Merchants were licensed, and their profits were kept under strict state control; peasants were obliged to sell their grains only to registered food merchants at fixed prices. Hoarding was forbidden and, if discovered, severely punished.

Such economic controls were beneficial to the majority of Delhi's population, but they could not be enforced much beyond its environs, and they aroused opposition from merchants as well as neighboring peasants, who felt discriminated against. More serious than such internal opposition, however, were the fierce Mongol invasions Ala-ud-din faced from 1303–6, threatening to destroy most of Northwest India's cities. Thanks to his economic reforms, however, Ala-ud-din managed to raise sufficiently powerful armed forces to confront the Mongol horsemen, eventually driving them back to Afghanistan. With his northern marches secured, Ala-ud-din turned south once again in search of more gold. The Yadava capital of Devagiri was taken in 1307 and used as a

springboard for still deeper Khalji penetration into the Deccan. Many Rajput chiefs were defeated by Ala-ud-din's army, as were those of Gujarat. In 1309, the South Indian kingdom of Kākatiya was captured, and a year later Khalji armies raided into Pandyan territory in Tamilnad, bringing the Muslim faith to peninsular India's southernmost tip. Ala-ud-din's imperial conquests were never consolidated by his successors, however, for with his death in 1316, his line collapsed. Malik Kafur sought unsuccessfully to retain control of both court and army, but he was murdered by his own soldiers. One of Ala-ud-din's sons, Qutb-ud-din Mubarak, survived his father's death by four years, retaining tenuous hold of the reins at Delhi by abandoning all attempts to keep commodity prices down, lowering revenue demands, and generally relaxing administrative authority while he enjoyed his transvestite pleasures at court.

Tughluqs of Delhi

For most of the fourteenth century, the Tughluqs ruled Delhi. The founder of this third Muslim dynasty in India was Ghiyas-ud-din Tughluq, the son of a court Turkish slave and a Hindu Jat woman, who ruled mildly for five years. In 1325, Ghiyas-ud-din and his favorite son were both killed when a victory pavilion erected by his other son and successor, Muhammad (r. 1325–51), suddenly collapsed. Catapulted to power over the corpses of his father and brother, Muhammad Tughluq's long reign may be read as a search for religious expiation of this guilt by a man of not inconsiderable sensitivity and talent. The Muslim world traveler Ibn Battuta, who journeyed through Asia and Africa from 1325 to 1354, reserved for a while as chief judge (*qazi*) at Muhammad's court and recalled how strict the sultan was about compelling "the people to master the ordinances for ablutions, prayers, and the principles of Islam." He could not, however, succeed in teaching others to do what he personally ignored, and rebellion was widespread throughout this era. In a grandiose attempt to subdue southern resistance to his rule by establishing a second capital in the Deccan, Muhammad Tughluq forced many nobles and officials to abandon their homes in Delhi in 1327 and journey south over five hundred miles, across the Vindhya-Satpura divide to Daulatabad (Devagiri). Many died in that arduous journey. For

those who survived, moreover, Deccan heat and lack of perennial river water made Daulatabad an inhospitable site for the sultanate's secondary capital.

In 1329–30, Muhammad Tughluq attempted another surprising innovation, the issue of new currency. Possibly hoping to emulate the imperial Chinese, whose use of paper currency was quite successful, the sultan issued brass or copper tokens that were proclaimed to be the equivalent of the increasingly rare silver *tanka* (140 grains). The scheme was apparently as well motivated as any paper currency issue and might have worked were it not for the fact that foreign merchants refused to take tokens for their goods, even though they used them readily within India. What is more, Indians were permitted to turn in their coppers at the royal mint for silver or gold, and they did so more vigorously each month. Indeed, most Indians seem to have become kitchen coppersmiths in the wake of this “reform,” and mountains of Tughluq copper tokens were subsequently said to have remained lying for a century outside the sultanate's treasuries. Within three or four years, the sultan was obliged to withdraw his special coins because of the heavy loss of public treasure. From 1335 to 1342, India suffered one of its most severe and prolonged periods of drought and famine. Although all accounts of foreign travelers make note of the plaintive suffering at that time, the sultanate made no concerted effort to assist its subjects by general tax relief or food distribution. Widespread economic discontent led to rebellions throughout the sultanate, which proved most effective in the south. In 1335, an independent Sultanate of Madura was established by the Tughluq governor Ahsan Shah. When Muhammad's army moved south to subdue that fire, others raged in Lahore and Delhi, forcing the sultan to return north. Hindu chiefs, noting the success of Muslim officers in their Tamilnad rebellion, raised similar banners of independence from Delhi. Muslim intrusion into the Deccan had driven many Hindu warriors south of the Tungabhadra River, where a new Hindu kingdom arose in 1336, named for its capital, *Vijāya-nagar*, “City of Victory.”

Hindu Vijayanagar

Harihāra I (r. 1336–57), founder of Vijayanagar, had converted to Islam in order to serve the Tughluqs as a governor in his southern homeland,

but he reconverted to Hinduism and quickly became leading tributary overlord of the southern Deccan. Winning the support and allegiance of the most powerful local landholders (*nāyakas*), Harihara conquered the domain of the Hoysala overlord, Ballāla III, and developed his urban capital as the most “important place” in the region of peninsular India. By 1343 Vijayanagar claimed sovereignty over all lands hitherto tributary to the Hoysalas, but was less successful later in seeking to extend its control north of the Tungabhadra. Rebellion against Muhammad Tughluq's reign broke out in Daulatabad and other Deccan cities in 1345, led by discontented Muslim nobles, among whom was Hāsan Gangu, who proclaimed himself sultan of the Deccan in 1347. Taking as his title-name Ala-ud-din Bahmān Shah, Hasan founded the Bahmāni dynasty, the mightiest and longest-lived Muslim dynasty of the Deccan, which remained united for some two hundred years and survived in fragmented form for a century after that. For the last half of the fourteenth century and all of the fifteenth, the Bahmani dynasty fought a series of ten indecisive but bloody wars against Vijayanagar over the fertile *doab* soil between the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra, which marked their disrupted boundary. South India was thus effectively removed from the control of Delhi's sultanate, which had reached its peak of power and entered a phase of rapid deterioration following the death of Muhammad Tughluq.

Bengal declared its independence from Delhi in 1338. Following a deadly struggle among the region's leading *māliks* (“nobles”), Mālik Hājī Ilyās emerged victorious, assuming the title of Sultan Shāms-ud-din (r. 1339–59) and founding the Ilyās Shāhi dynasty, which ruled over Bengal from its capital at Lakhnawati for almost a century. Bengali independence from West Indian Muslim rule was thus asserted early and maintained until the sixteenth-century Mughal conquest. Nor was it language and political independence alone that differentiated the region of Bengal from the rest of North India in this era, for even the form of Islam predominantly practiced there was peculiarly attuned to its cultural character and ancient heritage. Sufism, Islam's mystic thread, which evolved primarily as a legacy of Persian influence upon Islamic orthodoxy, struck a responsive chord in the mass of Bengal's population, especially among the lowest class of Hindu outcastes and former Buddhists, who were left without a priesthood to turn to for spiritual guidance after 1202; it appealed as well to many Muslims, for whom it revitalized the message of Islam.

Islamic Sufism

Three orders of Sufi saints had appeared in India by the thirteenth century: the *Chishti*, *Suhrawardi*, and *Firdawsi*, all of which appealed to the same mystical yearning for union with God, experienced by so many Hindus as well as Muslims and other "God-intoxicated" seekers the world over. The fervent love of God, which played so important a role in the passionate yearnings for "the mother goddess" that had characterized Bengali religious consciousness from time immemorial, may well have its roots in the same lush alluvium, fed by torrential monsoons which gave birth to "golden" jute, the premier crop of Bangladesh. The ineffable blend of love and sorrow, of human frailty and poverty amid the awesome forces of nature's lush wealth, helped fashion the uniquely sensitive, passionate, and mercurial temperament characteristic of Bengal; it seems also to have predisposed millions of Bengalis to the ardent appeal of Islamic mysticism. The wandering *pirs* (Sufi preachers), who went into Bengal's remote villages to bring their message of divine love to impoverished peasants, sounded much the same as Hindu *bhakti* ("devotional") saints offering salvation through worship of the mother goddess, or Mahayanist Buddhists bearing the promise of divine salvation by grace of a Bodhisattva's blessing. Bengali translations of epic Sanskrit literature were encouraged by court patronage during this era of independent Muslim rule, serving at once both to weaken the grip of Brahman pundits over the people and to provide the national mortar of a literary vernacular language to this culturally fecund region. Under a succession of independent Muslim dynasties, Bengal was to retain its sovereign status, free of interference from Delhi, till the peak of great Mughal power and Akbar's conquest in 1576.

When Muhammad Tughluq was killed fighting rebellion in Sind in 1351, his orthodox cousin, Firuz, ascended the throne of Delhi, from which he reigned for thirty-seven years (1351–88). Famed for his abolition of torture, his passion for building, and his lifelong adherence to the tenets of Islamic orthodoxy, Firuz was blessed with a reign of good monsoons and abundant harvests. He sought in vain to reconquer Bengal, but soon contented himself with building a new capital instead of carrying on futile wars. The new Delhi constructed in his name, Firuzabad, was replete with gardens as well as mosques and colleges. His generous patronage of the *ulama* gave Firuz the best "historic press" of all the

sultans of Delhi, and he is credited with having constructed no fewer than forty mosques, thirty colleges, a hundred hospitals, and two hundred new towns in the environs of the capital. He was also attracted by various irrigation schemes, supporting the construction of some fifty dams and reservoirs and bringing hitherto barren land into productive use. Less suspicious, perhaps, than his predecessors, Firuz cut down on the royal spy corps, investing more heavily in productive enterprises. He seems to have been one of the most intelligent, if not enlightened, monarchs of the sultanate, although his orthodoxy led him to a number of hostile actions against the Hindus, which ultimately alienated the majority of his subjects. Brahmans felt particularly persecuted, since they had hitherto generally been exempt from paying the *jizya* (as they were from the payment of all taxes) but were now obliged to do so. Many nonbrahmans converted to Islam during Firuz's reign, thus escaping the poll tax entirely, though they were still faced with the obligation of paying the less onerous Muslim *zakat* (alms).

Timur's Sack of Delhi

Firuz was the last of the strong sultans of Delhi. Within a decade of his death, half a dozen transient monarchs held tenuous sway over the precarious fortunes of that fast-declining kingdom. While rival factions fought among themselves in Delhi, the Central Asian armies of Timur the Lame (Tamerlane), waiting beyond India's northwestern gates, swooped down through the passes to plunder the Punjab and in 1398 entered Delhi itself. The death and plunder of Old Delhi by Timur's forces left "towers built high" with the heads and ravaged bodies of Hindus. Tens of thousands of slaves were dragged away as living booty, and the great mosque at Samarkand was later to be rebuilt by the stonemasons of Delhi. Timur abandoned the Indian plains before the hot weather in 1399, leaving a trail of blood and torture behind him as he moved north to his homeland; Delhi was so spent in the wake of his orgiastic attack that for months the city lay in the death throes of famine and pestilence, "not a bird moving." Slightly more than a century later, Timur's great grandson, Babur, would return to found the Mughal dynasty on that same site.

The immediate aftermath of Timur's invasion was accelerated fragmentation of the sultanate, with Gujarat declaring its independence

under Zafar Khan in 1401. Gujarat flourished on its trade from the West, and its capital at Ahmadabad came to be known as the "Venice of India" by the mid-fifteenth century. The magnificent mosques and sumptuous palaces constructed in that era remain to this day in the midst of modern cotton mills, Jain palaces, and British "bungalows" as ample testimony of the wealth that trade and political independence poured into this most enterprising region of India. The Hindu Gujarati merchant caste, called *bania*, soon aroused the envy of other Indians and foreigners alike, thanks to their singular good fortune. To the east of Gujarat, a separate Sultanate of Malwa was established in 1401 by Dilavar Khan, an Afghan noble, who also found himself liberated from monarchic control in Delhi. Though barren Malwa lacked the affluence and power enjoyed by Gujarat, its strategic position between Gujarat and the Gangetic plain gave it access to the rich caravans obliged to traverse its domain. Through their plunder, and ultimately by the imposition of transit tolls on all merchandise, Malwa's sultanate managed to amass both a fortune and a power base of its own.

Delhi Sayyids and Lodis

Two dynasties claimed the mantle of Delhi's tattered sultanate after the searing wounds inflicted by Timur began to heal. The first, whose surname, Sayyid, should indicate descent from the Prophet, was founded by the Turkish Khizr Khan in 1414 and retained control over Delhi until 1450. The Sayyids were deposed by the Lodis, a clan of Afghans, who were raised to "noble" status for their success at horse breeding and given control over much of the Punjab by their predecessors in Delhi. Bahlul Lodi reigned over Delhi and the Punjab for nearly forty years (1451-89), during which time significant numbers of Afghan peasant-herdsmen settled in North India. Bahlul Lodi's son, Sikāndār (r. 1489-1517), has been hailed by the historians of his court as the wisest and most dedicated, hard-working, and far-sighted sultan ever to sit upon Delhi's throne. He wrote poetry himself and invited scholars of every sort to his side, encouraging the compilation of books on medicine (*Ma'dan-ul-Shifa*) as well as music (*Lahjat-i-Sikāndār Shāhi*). The stimulus to learning and cultural creativity provided by Sikāndār's patronage seem, moreover, to have helped several important syncretisms of Islam and Hinduism to emerge

at this time, though Sikandar himself was surprisingly orthodox. Perhaps the fact that his mother was Hindu and that he had early fallen in love with a Hindu princess drove him to seek by periodic displays of temple-raiding and iconoclastic fervor to prove himself more orthodox than the *pirs* and *mullas* of his realm. At any rate, several new sects of mystic toleration, blending the best of both great schools of religious thought, came to life before Sikāndār expired.

Birth of Sikhism

Before the end of the fourteenth century, the wave of *bhakti* Hinduism, born in South India, had reached the Ganges, along whose banks at Banaras Ramanuja's greatest disciple, Rāmānanda, settled to preach his doctrine of divine love. Among the many disciples of Ramananda was an illiterate Muslim weaver named Kābir (1440-1518), whose devotional poems and dedicated life inspired millions of followers to abandon their sectarian perceptions of Islam and Hinduism in favor of his syncretic path of simple love of God. In the Punjab, Nānak (1469-1538), born a Hindu but reared on the democratic doctrines of Islam, rejected caste and became the first *Guru Dev* ("divine teacher") of the *Sikh* ("disciple") faith, which he founded. Conceived by Nanak as a doctrine of loving devotion to the "one God, the Creator," whose name was Truth—*Sat*—this religion only later became a martial one, with subsequent Gurus driven to take up the sword by Mughal persecution. In Bengal, the most popular of all *bhakti* Hindu preachers was the teacher Chaitānya (1485-1533), whose intoxicated devotional frenzy was such that his disciples believed him to be a reincarnation in one body of the divine lovers, Krishna and Radha. The syncretic sect founded by Chaitanya was centered around *Satya-Pir* ("Truth-Saint") worship, which proved singularly successful in attracting Bengalis to its fold.

By the dawn of the sixteenth century, India was thus not only fragmented politically, but divided spiritually into many religio-philosophic camps. The last of the Lodis, Ibrāhim (1517-26), was unable to command the allegiance of those who had served his father, and soon found himself confronted with rebellion in Bihar, then Lahore, and finally from the Hindu Rajput confederacy, led by Rānā Sāngā of Mewar. So desperate was the political struggle for power in the north that Western Europe's vanguard, the Portuguese, who had reached the Malabar coast

in 1498 and since then returned in ever-greater force to secure a toehold of trade, went unnoticed, undiscussed in Delhi. For Ibrahim, the mortal and immediate threat came not a thousand miles away by sea, but galloping over the flat plain from nearby Lahore, whose city gates had been flung wide in welcome to the king of Kabul, Babur (1483–1530), the “Tiger,” descended from Timur the Barlas Turk on his father’s side and Ghengiz Khan the great Mongol on his mother’s. Daulat Khan, the governor of Lahore, had invited Babur to “save” him from Ibrāhim, and the Tiger, who wrote in his *Memoirs*,² that for the past twenty years he had “never ceased to think of the conquest of Hindustan,” readily accepted the invitation. He came to India, however, not as an ally of the viceroy of the Punjab, but as founder of the greatest Muslim dynasty in Indian history, as first *pādishāh* (“emperor”) of the Mughals.

Dawn of the Mughal Empire

“I placed my foot in the stirrup of resolution and my hands on the reins of confidence in God,” wrote Babur, “and marched against Sultan Ibrahim . . . whose army in the field was said to amount to a hundred thousand men and who . . . had nearly a thousand elephants.” They met on the field of Panipat, just north and to the west of Delhi. Babur had some ten thousand of his own Chagatai Turks and Afghans at his command, including Central Asia’s finest horsemen, and brought matchlock *feringi* (“foreign”) cannon, which he lashed together with rawhide and positioned in front of Ibrahim’s advancing wall of elephants. “The sun had mounted spear-high when the onset began,” Babur recorded in his *Memoirs*, “and the battle lasted till mid-day, when the enemy were completely broken and routed. By the grace and mercy of Almighty God this difficult affair was made easy to me, and that mighty army, in the space of half a day, was laid in the dust.”

The date was April 21, 1526, dawn of the Mughal Empire, Babur seized the treasure stored in Delhi and distributed it liberally among his troops, who advanced without rest to Agra, some one hundred miles

south along the river Yamuna (Jumna), conquering that city, which was to become the twin capital of the Mughals, the next day. All resistance to Mughal power was not as yet defeated, however, for Ibrāhim’s brother Mahmud escaped from the carnage at Panipat to raise an army in Bengal, and the Rajput Confederacy was marshaling its formidable forces round the banner of Rana Sanga (r. 1509–28). Worshipped by his people as heir to Rama’s throne and “child of the sun,” the Rana of Mewar stood first among the thirty-six royal tribes of the Rajputs.³ Almost alone among the confederacy, Mewar’s dynasty had survived the centuries of Muslim invasions and rule, thus enhancing its primacy and sacrosanct status, and Sanga was the greatest Rana of his noble line. Bearing scars from eighty wounds won in battle, the one-eyed, one-armed leader of Hindu India’s united stand against Mughal power almost won his claim to divine descent on the field at Khānuā, less than forty miles west of Agra, in March 1527. His much larger force had Babur’s army surrounded. To bolster the demoralized spirits of his besieged men, Babur shattered his golden wine goblets and distributed their fragments among the poor. Then he ordered all of his supply of wine poured into the ground, vowing never to drink prohibited liquor again. Rana Sanga waited too long. By the time he attacked the Mughals, his own confederacy, undermined by caste rivalries, had lost its cohesion, and some of his allies deserted him. Babur’s victory at Khanua on March 15, 1527, forced Mewar to flee, mortally wounded, shattering Rajput hopes of ever recapturing Agra or Delhi. The third and final attempt to stem the tide of Mughal might was crushed by Babur when he led his army east across the river Gogra in what is now Uttar Pradesh to defeat the joint Afghan and Bengali force raised by Mahmud Lodi on May 6, 1529, the sultanate’s last stand.

In three martial victories, the Tiger thus secured all of North India as his household domain, but little more than a year following the last of his battles, on December 26, 1530, he died in Agra, after calling upon God to take his life in exchange for the recovery of his son, Humāyūn (1508–56), who was deathly ill at the time. Though his dynastic line survived on Indian soil, Babur had never ceased to long for the cool air and

2. *Memoirs of Zahir-ed-Din Muhammed Babur*, trans. J. Leyden and W. Erskine, rev. by L. King (London: Oxford University Press, 1921), 2 vols.

3. For a history of Mewar, see James Tod, *Annals and Antiquities of Rajast’han*, new impression (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, first pub. 1829, reprinted in 2 vols. 1957), vol. 1, pp. 173–401.



fine muskmelons of his Central Asian homeland. And Humayun almost lost the empire his father fought so hard to bequeath him. More interested in opium and astrology than power, Humayun was challenged by his younger brothers and by Afghan generals who had served under Babur. The most powerful of these Afghans was Sher Khan Sur, who established himself as independent ruler in Bihar and claimed Bengal as

well after 1536. Humayun managed to oust him from Bengal's capital, but then he was trapped by the monsoon and lost part of his army to treacherous weather before facing defeat by Sher Khan's shrewdly deployed force at Chausa in 1539. Following Chausa, Sher Khan had himself crowned *shah* and chased Humayun west, defeating him again at Kanauj in April 1540. The second Mughal emperor was then forced to flee across Sind into Persia, where he spent his fortune seeking support from Shah Tamasp to recapture Delhi.

For five years Sher Shah Sur ruled North India from Delhi, reorganizing the revenue system to ensure greater equity to individual cultivators and a more reliable flow of funds to his treasury. He revitalized every aspect of administration by taking personal interest in all appointments to positions of power, consolidating central authority over outlying districts, and designing a blueprint for more efficient imperial rule, which would serve to inspire many subsequent reforms. He was the most talented Afghan sultan, and he might have established a dynasty of almost Mughal dimensions had he not been killed in battle in May 1545. Even with only five years to consolidate his power, Sher Shah managed to bequeath his kingdom to son and grandson, but neither had his wisdom or energy. The last of his line, a mere boy who was killed by his own uncle in 1554, vacated the throne of Delhi to rival claimants on the eve of Humayun's return to India. With a Persian army at his command, Babur's son recaptured the Punjab, Delhi, and Agra early in 1555. Within a year of his return, however, he tripped, light headed from a pipe or two of opium, cracking his head on the stone stairs of his private astronomical observatory, and as one chronicler put it, "stumbled out of life as he had stumbled through it" in January 1556. The legacy of Babur now passed to his thirteen-year-old grandson Akbar, who would soon prove himself fully worthy of a name that meant "Great."