Book Reviews

Burjor Avari. *Islamic Civilization in South Asia: A History of Muslim Power and Presence in the Indian Subcontinent.* London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2013. Pp. xvii+317. Paperback. ISBN 978–0–415–58062–5. Price: £24.99.

A few years ago this reviewer like many others thoroughly benefitted from the invaluable works that Francis Robinson, who is presently Professor of South Asian History at the University of London, and Annemarie Schimmel, who was an Emeritus Professor of Indo-Muslim Culture at Harvard University until she died in 2003, published on South Asian Muslims. Their scholarly treatment and analyses of South Asian Muslims remain informative and insightful, however. This time round the reviewer was pleasantly surprised by Burjor Avari's, who is an Honorary Research Fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University, reasonably sensitive and fairly balanced evaluation of the Muslim contribution towards the developments in the same region. Avari dealt with the social history of the South Asian Muslims in a chronological fashion from 600 CE onwards. Although Avari aptly titled his text *Islamic Civilization in South Asia* one would have preferred the use of "Muslim" instead of the term "Islamic" because of the baggage that it carries with it. A few words on this will be shared later. The text's subtitle, namely *A History of Muslim Power and Presence in the Indian Subcontinent*, captures its main focus and this review reflects upon some of the chapters in the next few paragraphs.

Apart from Avari's thoughtful preface in which he explained how his extensive readings on South Asia opened up new ways of understanding the region's developments and why he made use of English texts rather than the primary sources that appear in Persian and Urdu respectively, he neatly divided his analytically penned text into eleven clearly defined chapters. Avari opens it with an informative "Introduction" (chapter one) in which he provides a guide for this investigation. This guide refers the reader to the "first Muslims" who entered the region, before it zooms in on the context,

comments upon a few popular misconceptions, outlines the phases of Muslim authority, and makes reference to the field of historiography. Being a historical account of Muslim power, Avari begins the Indian subcontinent's story by recording "The Era of Arab Predominance" (chapter two). This was an era that lasted for about four centuries and one during which the Umayyads (ca. 663–750 CE) and Abbasids (ca. 758–1258 CE) eventually came to exert their influence over areas far beyond the traditional Arab territories. One of the areas that was conquered and subsequently administered was the province of Sind that was located at the northwestern geographical sector of the subcontinent. In this chapter Avari presents different theories to understand the reasons for the decline of Buddhism's urban presence as compared to rural "Hindu resilience." Interestingly, Avari puts forward the plausible idea that socioeconomic factors had a hand in Sind Buddhists' slow but eventual conversion to Islam. These factors did not, however, affect the Hindu communities who lived in tightly-knit rural environments and who continued to live their religious lives as a result of the Muslim (Sunni) administrators' liberal religious policies. It was, moreover, the conversion strategies adopted by the Ismā'īlīs—a theological strand within the Shī'ah school—that brought Hindus into Islam's fold. At the end of the chapter, Avari mentions Bayt al-Ḥikmah's contributions towards the translation of significant Greek, Persian, Chinese, and Sanskrit works into Arabic and the discovery in about 1216 CE of the fascinating *Fatḥnāmah,* a historical work that was compiled by an unknown author who discoursed about invaluable aspects of Indo-Muslim history.

When the Abbasids replaced the Arab dominated Umayyads in 750 CE, the Indian subcontinent came under the influence of the Turks who were, in turn, challenged by the dominant Persian cultural elements. Since these ethnically oriented Turk groups became the dominant politico-religious players in the region, Avari discusses their role in the next Chapter "Turkish Power and Persian Culture in the Age of Transition." Under Turkish leadership smaller but formidable dynasties such as the Ghaznavids (977–1186 CE) and Ghurids (1173–1206 CE) carried the flag of Islam from Sind into Gujarat and other geographical areas in the south and north of the vast subcontinent. Whilst these two dynasties' respective interventions over the two centuries from about 1000 CE until 1206 CE were decisive, Avari avers that "Turkish monarchs were not inherently anti-Hindu or anti-Indian" (p. 49). He points out that they were ironically patrons of the Persian rather than the Turkish cultural tradition since many of these monarchs' soldiers were Persian speaking; from among these soldiers a sizeable number acted as missionaries and teachers whilst others were loyal members of emerging Sufi orders

(pp. 51–53). Here again Avari refers to the literary outputs of individuals such as al-Bīrūnī (973–1048 CE) who was the author of, inter alia, *Kitāb fi Taḥqīq mā li 'l-Hind.* Avari notes that al-Bīrūnī was even-handed in his assessments of the Turkish rulers in that he not only praised them for their contributions but also criticised them for their cruel actions against the Hindus whenever this occurred (p. 52).

This chapter and the previous one offered an important sociohistorical backdrop for the chapters that followed because from this juncture onwards the focus is no more on Arab or Turk sultans but on Indian sultans that steered the sociopolitical and religious developments in the subcontinent and that formally established "Muslim civilisation in South Asia." Before browsing through chapter four the reviewer wishes to take a brief detour by commenting on the use of the word "Islamic" as stated earlier. The term "Islamic" is somewhat problematic to employ because it conveys the notion that the civlisation was "purely" Islamic in character and that the rulers' actions were in accordance with *Sharī'ah* (i.e. Islamic Law). A close look at how events unfolded and narrated by Avari as well as other social historians such as Francis Robinson it was demonstrated that the various dynasties and their respective rulers implemented Islam in the manner they understood it within their sociohistorical and political contexts and for all intents and purposes their activities did not necessarily conform to Islamic Law. While going through Avari's readable text, one often observes the degree to which Muslim civilisation was studded with intrigues, conspiracies and murders; acts that took place within and among the various Muslim dynasties. One does not have to have detailed knowledge to reach the conclusion that these actions were all basically un-Islamic and out of sync with the basic principles of Islam and by implication "Islamic Law." In the light of these comments and observations, it might be best to have used the word "Muslim," a term that is less loaded than the one used in this publication's title.

That aside and moving on, Avari describes "The Delhi Sultanate at Its Zenith (1206–1351)" (chapter four) and thereafter discusses the "New Centres of Muslim Power and Culture (1351–1556)" (chapter five). One of the key characteristics of the Delhi sultanate is that from 1206 CE onwards it gradually transformed the polity from a Turkish type to an indigenous Indian one. This sultanate, despite being an authoritarian monarchy, pursued a realistic policy that "charted out a balanced strategy of survival and domination in an alien religio-political landscape. . . ." (p. 57). According to Avari, this unbiased policy was implemented to such an extent that they never publicly proclaimed the Hindus as disbelievers (i.e., the Arabic theological term is: *kāfir*). In spite of this positive note, it may be argued that some of the Muslim theologians of

whom the book does not say a great deal must have vehemently and intensely disagreed with the rulers on this theological issue. In this regard one would have liked to have read where these theologians fitted into the sociopolitical and religious hierarchies since they possessed religious power, a type of power that they frequently used to their advantage or on occasions to arbitrate dynastic disputes and communal conflicts whenever the need arose.

Notwithstanding the status and influence of the theologians and besides the various internal sociopolitical challenges that the Muslims generally encountered, the Tughlug sultans did not neglect the arts and sciences. In these spheres they became known for their open support for the construction of beautiful architecture that reinforced their unique identity on Indian soil. On the external front the Delhi Sultanate encountered political challenges that it could not ignore. It was forced to counter these challenges before it was able to successfully lay the foundations for the Mughal dynasty. One of these challenges was the onslaught of the Mongel hordes; the latter expanded their sphere of influence militarily from the transoxania region into the Arab and Eastern European worlds. After ransacking these areas, the Mongel hordes cast their sights on the subcontinent with the intention of extending their tentacles, widening their military might and pursuing its expanding economic interests. Fortunately for the Delhi Sultanates, the Mongols were unsuccessful in making headway into India since they were stopped by the Khiljīs. By then the Delhi Sultanates' control was on the wane and slowly disappeared, and in their wake others, such as the Timurids, Lodhis, and others came onto the scene to rule until 1556 CE when the Mughals stepped in to take over political power on the subcontinent.

After a moderately remarkable treatment of the early Indian Sultanates, Avari goes on to, on the one hand, evaluate "The Mughal Ascendancy: Akbar and His Successors (1556–1689)" (chapter six) and, on the other, assess "The Age of Mughal Disintegration (1689–1765)" (chapter seven). The reader notes that in the sixth chapter Avari gives special attention to Akbar (r. 1556–1605) the son of Humāyūn (r. 1530–1540, 1555–1556), one of the first of two founders of the Mughal dynasty that was referred to in the previous chapter. Avari understandably reflects much on Akbar's forty-nine-year reign because of the socio political and religious influence that he wielded over the South Asian society and the powerful legacy that he left behind. He was succeeded first by his son, Jahāngīr (r. 1605–1627), and then by his grandson, Shāh Jahān (r. 1628–1658), and finally by his great-grandson, Aurangzaib (r. 1658–1707). Now this clearly illustrates that besides having made substantial personal contributions, Akbar's offspring continued to do so in their own ways. By the time Akbar reigned as the fourth Mughal ruler in 1561 it had grown into a

commanding and dynamic "multi-regional power." But despite the Mughals' powerful position, it was challenged by Muslim Sultanates and Hindu Marathas that were in charge of different parts of the Deccan plateau. It, however, took Akbar's leadership and that of his offspring more than a century—by 1689—to eventually bring them under Mughal control.

Whilst Avari affirms that from the beginning of Akbar's reign until Aurangzaib's rule the Mughal rulers wielded the necessary political power on the subcontinent, he underscores that the Mughals' major success was exercising economic power with various political powers across the Indian Ocean. One of the trading partners was the East India Company (EIC), a company that contributed towards the gradual downfall of the Mughals between 1689 and 1765. However, prior to discoursing about the Mughals' disintegration, Avari first compared the theological stance of Akbar with that of Aurangzaib. He demonstrates to what extent the *Dīn-i Ilāhī* religious policy was subsequently undermined and replaced by Aurangzaib's purist religious policies, policies that were rooted in Shāh Walī Allāh's (1703–1762) theology. The latter, Avari mentions, supported Aḥmad Sirhindī's (1564–1624) *Waḥdat al-Shuhūdī* theological views but attempted to strike a compromise of sorts with Ibn 'Arabī's (1165–1240 CE) *Waḥdat al-Wujūdī* ideas. Though these teachings filtered down into Indian Muslim thought, they were not enough to halt the disintegration that was encountered at different levels. Avari highlights that during the heyday of the Mughal rule and amidst the decades that witnessed its collapse those dynasties and groups that were left behind continued to patronise the art, architecture and literature. And one of the significant literary developments was the emergence and development of the Urdu language that eventually became the national language of Pakistan when it was established in 1947.

By the time the Mughals' power had waned and almost disappeared from the political scene Avari turns the focus to the "Muslims under the East India Company (1765–1858)" (chapter eight) and then informs the reader about the "Stirrings of a Muslim Modernity under the Raj (1858–1924)" (chapter nine). He lists various reasons why the EIC managed to outwit the Mughals through various strategies e.g. subsidiary alliance and annexation policies. These policies along with other motives finally caused the subcontinent to fall into the colonial hands of the "British Raj." During this period the general Muslim community demonstrated its resentment towards the EIC and the British Raj, whilst some of Bengal's Hindus admired the EIC. Avari narrates the Faraidi movement's struggle against the discrimination practiced by the EIC and its manipulation of the different religious communities against one another. The

EIC's policies culminated in the revolt of 1857, a revolt that was led by, among others, Sufi shaykhs and theologians (pp. 160–162).

According to Avari's readings, the Queen's announcement of the EIC's dissolution was generally welcomed by the Muslims but the main actors of revolt among the Muslims were not saved from the British Raj's harsh punishment, a retribution that was, however, rather measured in the aftermath of this tragic event. He, moreover, records the rapproachment role played by individuals such as Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khān (1817–1898) who was the founder of Aligarh University, an institution that was challenged by the Deoband's Dār al-'Ulūm during the same period. Amidst these educational changes and challenges Urdu, as a dynamic developing language, too began to flourish. This language was obviously employed by the Muslim intellectuals at the mentioned institutions. Furthermore, these Muslim intellectuals demonstrated their preparedness to work with their Hindu counterparts politically against the British Raj. They thus did so when various political associations particulary the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885.

But as always Muslims, as Avari eloquently narrates, were divided as to whether they should opt for "Unity or Separatism? Muslim Dilemma at the End of the Raj (1924–1947/8)" (chapter ten). This political predicament, that had its noticeable religious overtones, had undoubtedly a deep impact upon the ordinary Muslims who were led by leaders who were uncertain whether to unite and support the Congress or whether they should split and separate to establish an independent Muslim nation state. Since the Ottoman Caliphate was abruptly brought to an end in 1924 when the Republic of Turkey was fathered by Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), the ardent secularist, it seems to have ignited an interest among some of the Indian Muslim leaders to work towards the formation of an independent Muslim state. Even though this idea was articulated by Iqbal, the renowned Indian poet, it was Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1876–1948), who was bent on realising this goal despite the arguments against it by respected leaders such as Maulānā Abū'l-Kalām Āzād (1888–1958) and a host of others. Unfortunately, no united agreement was reached by the Muslim leaders and, as fate would have it, India and Pakistan were born in extremely painful and traumatic circumstances; it is a birth that many of Pakistan's Muslim leaders did not bargain for when they proposed the idea. Be that as it may, Avari evaluates in his "Epilogue: New Challenges in a Fractured Subcontinent (1947–2011)" (chapter eleven) the following issues: the status of India's Muslim minority, the Kashmir question, Pakistan's problems, and the eventual split between East and West Pakistan that gave birth to Bangladesh in 1971–1972.

Whilst one finds this book an interesting and indeed an important read, one would like to have read the history of this Muslim civilisation from the subaltern perspective; as it appears it is basically a narrative of the political—and occasionally religious—elites. Certainly, Avari has the ability to provide an interesting take if he is given the chance to write about the subcontinent's non-elites; nonetheless, a few questions came to mind as the reviewer was going through this text; they are: How did the ordinary citizen perceive the power that was wielded by the elites? As ordinary Muslim/Hindu citizens of a Muslim empire were they generally in full agreement with Akbar's *Dīn-i Ilāhī* policy? To what extent did the ordinary folk feel comfortable with Muslim-Hindu relations in general and Muslim-Hindu marriages? To what degree did these run-of-the-mill citizens object to Aurangzaib's purist policies bearing in mind that he was not incharge of an "Islamic state"? Of course this text did not set itself the task of answering these questions but one would like them to have been tackled in certain sections so that one have had a glimpse into how the non-elite understood and interpreted issues in this vibrant Muslim empire.

In conclusion, any student of Asian studies in general and South Asian studies in particular will appreciate the measured manner in which Avari analysed, discussed and explained the presence of "Muslim Civilization in South Asia." Avari's reasonable and perceptive approach helped a great deal in gaining different insights and fresh understandings of the socio-political and religious developments that took place over the centuries in the subcontinent. And even though the main focus was on how Muslim power unfolded, at the end of each chapter Avari intelligently added the artistic outputs and intellectual developments that accompanied Muslim political power; by doing so Avari drove home the point that intellectual interventions and artistic production went hand in glove with political developments and control.

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George Joffé, ed. *Islamist Radicalisation in Europe and the Middle East: Reassessing the Causes of Terrorism*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013. Pp. x+354. Hardbound. ISBN 978-1-84885-480-2. Price: Not listed.

A year or so back when I received this book for review, the public optimism in the Middle East about the Arab Spring was intact and the 'revolt' against