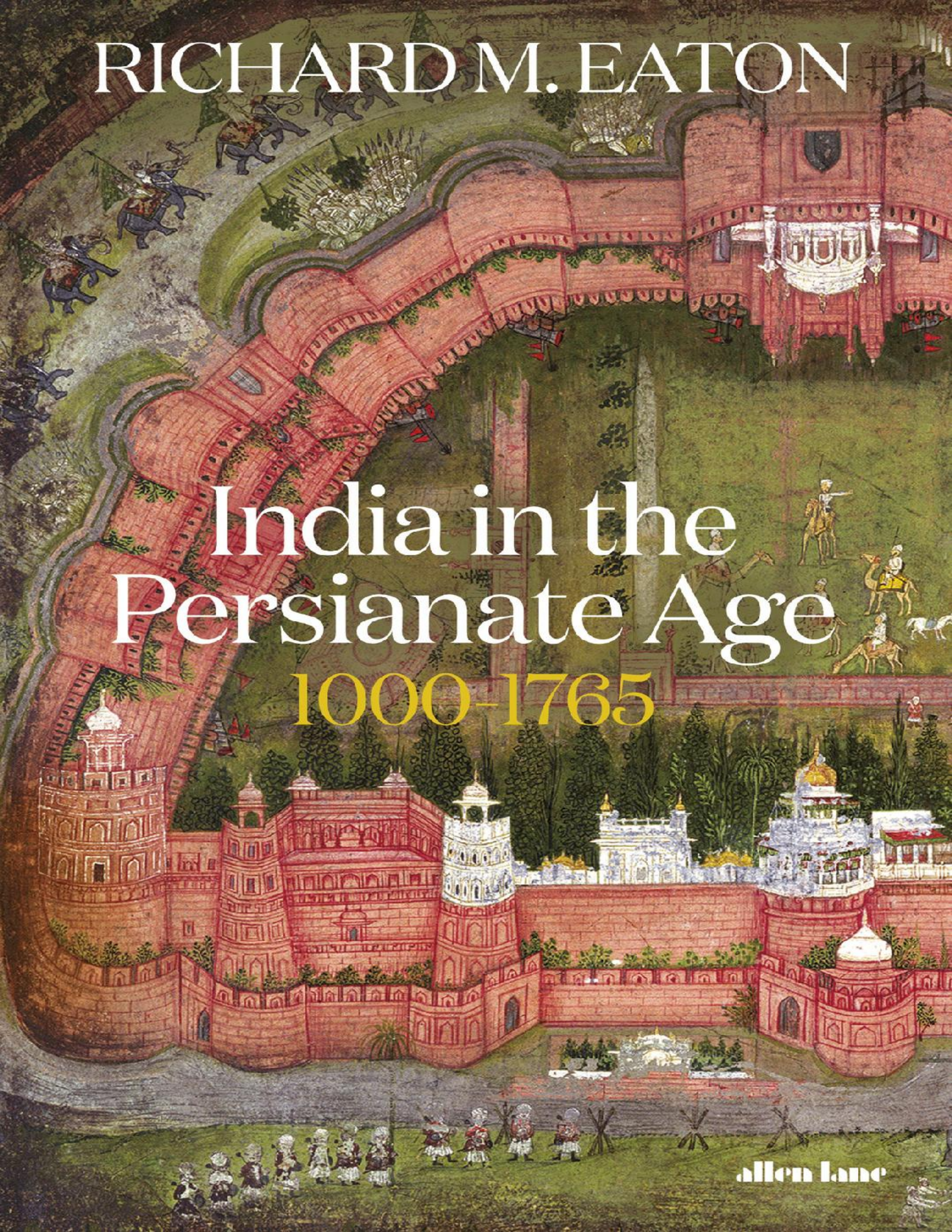
RICHARD M. EATON



India in the Persianate Age

1000–1765

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Richard M. Eaton

INDIA IN THE PERSIANATE AGE

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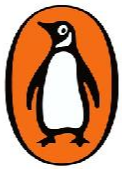

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About the Author

Richard M. Eaton has over a long and varied career published a number of ground-breaking books on India before 1800, including major works on the social roles of Sufis, slavery, Indian biography, the growth of Muslim societies along Bengal's eastern frontiers, the social history of the Deccan, and the place of Islam in the sub-continent's history. *India in the Persianate Age* draws on a lifetime of teaching and research. He is Professor of History at the University of Arizona.

For family, friends old and new, villagers, farm-hands, musicians, and in memory of fields of golden grain, horses, cows, and dogs (Sadie and Cam), at 100 Lovers Lane, Bainbridge

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That might never have happened, however, were it not for the tranquility and the fellowship of my sister Beth's lovely farm in the Appalachian foothills. The following chapters were drafted in the walnut-panelled hallway of her rambling, nineteenth-century farmhouse, surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans. It was a delightful place to work – inscribed on the brick and stone hearth was an old Scottish adage: 'East, West, Hame's Best'. On occasion, I might spot an eagle soaring high in the skies outside, or hear the sound of horses galloping along the pasture fence that lay only a few meters beyond the hallway's big front door. I dedicate this book to those treasured days.

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.[1] 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.'[2] 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'.[3] 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 Sanskritic political imagination'.[4]

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 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.[5]

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'.[6] 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 pigeonholed 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.[7] 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'.[8]

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.[9] 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.[10] 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 *premakhyan*s, 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.[11]

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.[12] 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 and literature that conferred elite status on its users. Both articulated a model of worldly power – specifically, universal dominion. And while both elaborated, discussed and critiqued religious traditions, neither was grounded in a religion, but rather transcended the claims of any of them. Decoupled from particular religious systems, both of these transregional traditions could and did spread over great expanses of territory, and were embraced by peoples of varied ethnic and religious backgrounds. Fundamentally – and this is the underlying theme of this book – much of India's history between 1000 and 1800 can be

understood in terms of the prolonged and multifaceted interaction between the Sanskrit and Persianate worlds.

The Persianate world, 900–1900

But what exactly is the Persianate world, and how did it evolve?[13] Several centuries after the Arab conquest of the Iranian plateau in the seventh century, Persian-speakers gradually recovered a rich but largely submerged pre-Islamic Persian civilization. The linguistic dimension of this movement saw the emergence of New Persian – a hybrid of the indigenous Middle Persian of Iran's Sasanian period (AD 224–651) and the Arabic brought to the Iranian plateau in the course of the Arab conquest. This new language appeared first in spoken form across the Iranian plateau and deep into Central Asia. A written form using a modified Arabic script emerged in the ninth and tenth centuries, when Persian writers in present-day north-eastern Iran, western Afghanistan and Central Asia began appropriating the cultural heritage of both Arab Islam and pre-Islamic Iran.

Initially, at least, these developments were promoted and patronized by the court of the Samanid kings in Central Asia (819–999). Based in Bukhara (in today's southern Uzbekistan), the Samanid domain straddled major trade routes connecting the Iranian plateau with the Mediterranean to the west, India to the south and, via the Silk Road, China to the east. Bukhara thus lay in a commercially vibrant zone. It was also multilingual, as Arabic and

Turkish were both commonly used there, as was, until the eleventh century, Sogdian. But New Persian (henceforth simply 'Persian') was now the lingua franca, having replaced the region's indigenous Iranian languages and dialects.

As with the Sanskrit texts, from the eleventh century onwards a large corpus of imaginative literature in Persian began to circulate widely through West, Central and South Asia. A case in point is the cycle of epics based on the historical Alexander penned by such luminaries as Firdausi (d. 1020) in Iran, Nizami (d. 1209) in Georgia, Amir Khusrau (d. 1325) in India and Jami (d. 1492) in Afghanistan. Although composed a great distance apart, and circulating over an even wider one that spanned many vernacular cultures, these works enabled diverse peoples to imagine and inhabit a single cosmopolitan space enlivened by Alexander's real – or imagined – exploits.[14] Such works of literature helped knit together a 'Persianate world' across West, Central and South Asia. However, like Sanskrit texts, Persian literature had no single geographical or political centre, especially after the thirteenth century when Mongol invaders overran Central Asia and northern Iran, destabilizing their courts. From that point on, peoples in far-flung regions such as the Caucasus or India might retain everyday use of their local languages while cultivating, and even producing, great works of Persian literature.[15] By the fourteenth century Persian had become a vibrant and prestigious literary language, a widely used medium in state bureaucracies, and the principal contact tongue for inter-regional diplomacy along the Silk Road between Anatolia and East Asia. In Mongol-dominated China, it served not only as a lingua franca but as the official foreign language. The Venetian merchant-traveller Marco Polo (d. 1324) mainly used Persian in China, as he did, in fact, throughout his travels on the Silk Road. So did his near-contemporary and even greater globetrotter Ibn Battuta (d. 1377), who travelled many of the same pan-Asian circuits in fourteenth-century Asia.[16]

Of particular relevance for understanding India's changed political order after the late twelfth century is what Persian writers had to say about power and authority. Crucially, the same culturally diverse milieu that had nurtured the literary and bureaucratic use of Persian under Samanid patronage also shaped a particular conception of a universal ruler or 'sultan', the title

preferred by such men throughout the Persianate world. Occupying a political space above all ethnic groups and religious communities, this figure was understood as both universal and supreme: he occupied unlimited sovereign space and commanded the loyalty of all lesser political actors. The crystallization of the idea of the sultan in the tenth and eleventh centuries resulted from two factors in particular: the steady decline of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad, which in theory ruled over the entire eastern Islamic world, including Central Asia; and the infiltration of waves of Turkish-speakers from eastern Asia into urbanized Central Asia and northern Iran. Some came as military recruits, others as pastoral nomadic migrants, others as powerful confederations of warriors. To accommodate these new realities, political thought in South-west Asia underwent drastic revisions. In particular, spiritual and political authority split into separate spheres, with the caliph retaining his religious authority and the sultan exercising effective political power. Making the best of a bad situation, a leading theologian of the time, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111), pronounced that *any* government was lawful so long as its ruler, or sultan, acknowledged the caliph's authority in spiritual matters. Reciprocally, caliphs accepted the secular authority of upstart sultans under the fiction of having appointed them to their office.

Stoking memories of pre-Islamic Iran, poets and chroniclers endowed these sultans with the same pretentions to absolutist rule as pre-Islamic Persian emperors. In the early twelfth century the historian Ibn Balkhi conceived of kingship in that earlier age as based on the supreme principle of justice, for, he wrote, every king had taught his heir apparent the following maxim:

> There is no kingdom without an army, no army without wealth, no wealth without material prosperity, and no material prosperity without justice.[17]

Persian scholars such as Ibn Balkhi made no attempt to yoke state power to Islam or to any other religious tradition; instead, it was justice that bound their world together. Notably, long before Renaissance or Enlightenment thinkers in Europe began theorizing the separation of Church and State, intellectuals in eleventh- and twelfth-century Iran and Central Asia were already doing precisely that. Such a secularist conception of government

would have far-reaching implications for rulers styling themselves sultans in areas as ethnically diverse as India. In fact, by the time it reached India, the term 'sultan' had become so detached from ethnicity or religion that Hindu rulers, aspiring to the most powerful titles then available to them, adopted it. In 1347 Marappa, one of the founders of the Deccan kingdom of Vijayanagara, declared himself 'sultan among Indian kings' (*hindu-raya-suratalah*), a title used also by his earliest successors.[18]

India's eventual inclusion in this expanding Persianate world was thus facilitated by, among other things, a ruling ideology that had co-opted the political authority of a caliph, embraced the principle of universal justice and accommodated cultural diversity. Such an inclusivist political ideology happened to be well suited for governing a north Indian society that was itself extraordinarily diverse religiously, linguistically and socially. Moreover, the elevation of justice, not religion, as the measure of proper governance allowed Persianized states to flourish throughout India, notwithstanding a ruler's own religion. As argued by Ziya al-Din Barani (d. *c*. 1357), a leading historian and theorist of the early Delhi sultanate, whereas any country could flourish under a non-Muslim ruler as long he was just, no country ruled by a Muslim would flourish if he was unjust.[19]

What is perhaps most remarkable about the Persianate world, however, is how readily its core ideas diffused not only within Indian territories governed by Persianized states such as the Delhi sultanate, but also into territories lying *beyond* such states. A distinctively Persianate ideology privileging the notion of justice and connecting economy, morality and politics infiltrated peninsular India even while that region was governed by independent Hindu rulers. At some point in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries the Telugu poet Baddena, writing at the Kakatiya court at Warangal in southern India, penned these striking lines:

> To acquire wealth: make the people prosper. To make the people prosper: justice is the means. O Kirti Narayana! They say that justice is the treasury of kings.[20]

In linking wealth, prosperity and justice, this terse aphorism seems to paraphrase Ibn Balkhi. Moreover, it is clear that the idea of justice, so central to Persian political thought, had been freely borrowed by Baddena

and not imposed from without.[21] Like Mongol rulers on the Iranian plateau, Baddena had assimilated a Persianate vision of political and moral order, even though he lived very far from the Delhi sultanate.

Apart from political ideology, other aspects of Persian culture spread throughout South Asia after the thirteenth-century Turkish conquest of north India, including styles of architecture, dress, music, courtly comportment, cuisine and, especially, vocabulary. As the geographical reach of Persian letters expanded, so did the production of dictionaries, whose compilers sought to make literature produced in different parts of the Persophone world mutually comprehensible; by the nineteenth century, many more Persian-language dictionaries had been produced in India than in Iran, suggesting how thoroughly India had been absorbed into that world. Indeed, by the fourteenth century Persian had already become the most widely used language for governance across South Asia, as Indians filled the vast revenue and judicial bureaucracies in the Delhi sultanate and its successor states, and later in the Mughal empire (1526–1858) and its successors. As a result, a wide range of Persian words infiltrated the vocabulary of many of South Asia's major regional languages.

All of which brings us back to the theme of periodization, and the rationale for this book's chronological borders of 1000 and 1765. Recent generations of historians of India have rightly eschewed the old tripartite Hindu–Muslim–British scheme and have reverted to its European predecessor, the ancient-medieval-modern one. But the precise meaning of these timespans, especially the second, has remained elusive. Instead of giving substance to the term 'medieval', historians have produced a host of high-quality regional studies covering the whole or part of the period 1000–1800 – e.g. on Bengal, Gujarat, Malabar, Orissa, the Punjab, the Deccan plateau, the Delhi region, the Tamil country. As a result, the term 'medieval' when applied to India as a whole has become something of an orphan – repeatedly invoked, but lacking meaning. As the historian Daud Ali notes:

> the category of medieval has gradually been evacuated of any definitive substance in most national historiographies, in favour of a sort of cacophony of regional isolates simply holding the fort until the cavalry arrives[22]

By ‘the cavalry’ Ali appears to mean some new conceptual handle or idea that might confer meaning on the term ‘medieval’, other than that of a religiously defined Muslim era.

I argue that there is such a handle. As it happens, the period of India’s history conventionally labelled ‘medieval’ coincides with the eastward diffusion of Persianate culture across almost all the Indian subcontinent and its interaction with its Sanskrit counterpart. The story of this interaction – the encounter between the Persian and Sanskrit worlds – is both rich and complex. It is the subject of this book.

1

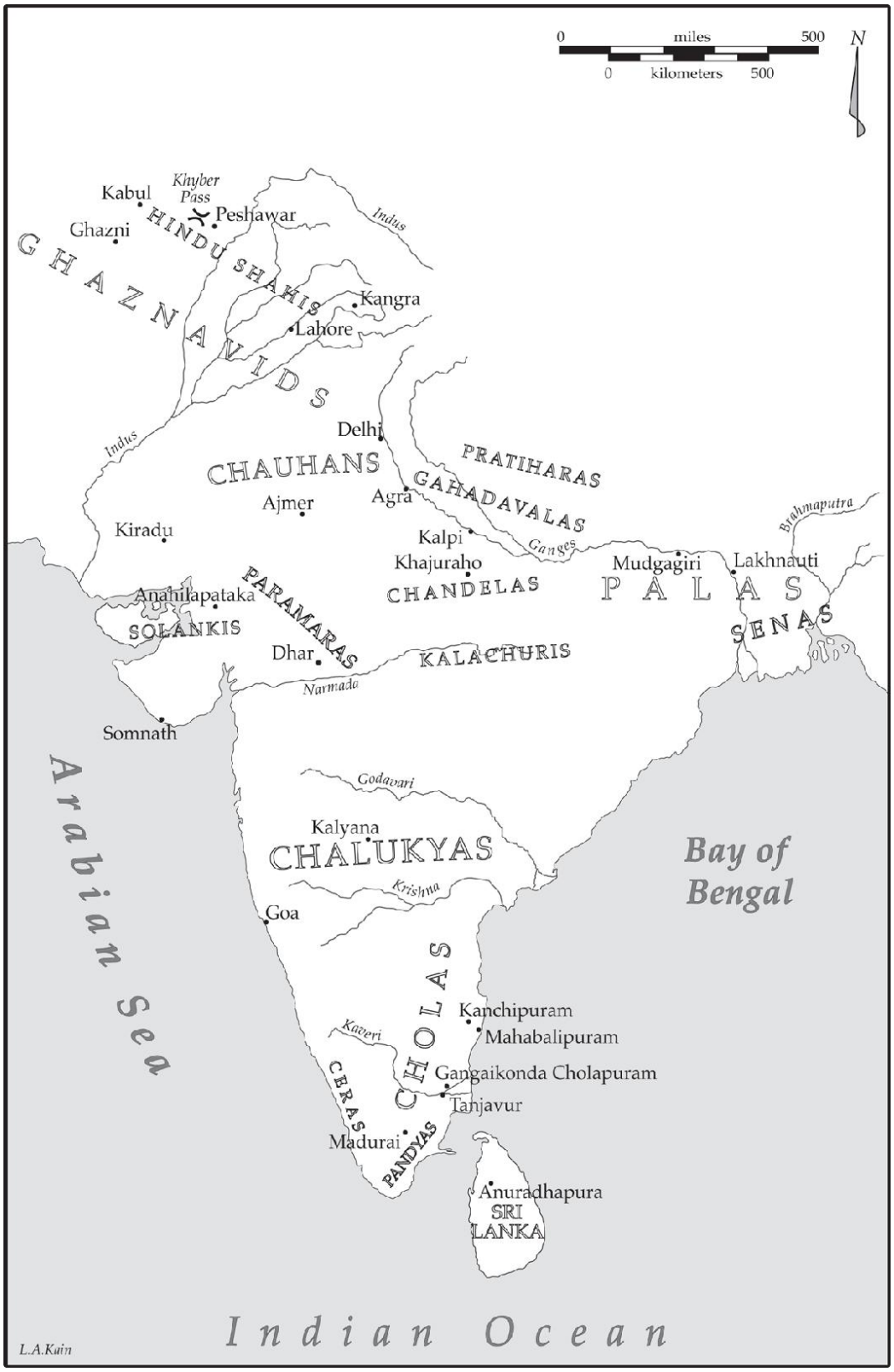
The Growth of Turkic Power, 1000–1300

A TALE OF TWO RAIDS: 1022, 1025

In the early second millennium, within only three years of each other, two armies marching from opposite directions raided north India. Neither would remain to govern or colonize conquered territory. Although both expeditions were successful in their own ways, they harboured different objectives, had different martial traditions and were informed by very different political systems. The two invasions also suggest why the opening of the second millennium marked a major transition in India's long history.

The first of the two raids was led by a general acting on the authority of Rajendra I (r. 1014–44), maharaja of the Chola empire (848–1279) towards the extreme southern end of the Indian peninsula. In 1022 his army marched 1,600 kilometres north from the Cholas' royal and ceremonial capital of Tanjavur, moving along India's eastern coast. After subduing kings in Orissa, Chola warriors defeated rulers in the western and the south-central districts of the Ganges delta. Then, in a fiercely fought pitched battle, they defeated Mahipala, maharaja of the Pala empire (*c*.750–1161), at the time the dominant power in India's easternmost region of Bengal. The southerners crowned their victory by carrying off a bronze image of the deity Śiva, which they seized from a royal temple that Mahipala had presumably patronized [see Fig. 1]. In the course of this long campaign, the invaders also took from

the Kalinga raja of Orissa images of Bhairava, Bhairavi and Kali. These, together with precious gems looted from the Pala king, were taken down to the Chola capital as war booty.[1]



Major Indian dynasties, 975–1200

Before leaving the delta, however, Chola officers directed an operation unusual for military campaigns: they arranged for water from the Ganges River to be collected in pots and carried on the army's long march back to Tanjavur. In the Godavari River delta, midway between Bengal and the Chola heartland, Rajendra, who had been consolidating Chola rule in coastal districts north of his capital, joined the victorious army. From there, the combined forces triumphantly returned to Tanjavur. The Cholas were at this time nearing the zenith of their might and glory; they would soon become the dominant power in the eastern Indian Ocean, their influence stretching across the Bay of Bengal to Sumatra. In their own estimation, they occupied the centre of the earthly and cosmic worlds.

In October 1025, not long after Rajendra Chola's return from his conquests in Bengal, the son of a Turkish-speaking Central Asian slave marched out of Ghazni in eastern Afghanistan with 30,000 cavalry behind him. Heading south-east through the craggy ravines of the Sulaiman Mountains, he and his troops descended from the Afghan plateau into the low, lush Indus valley. Like his Chola contemporaries, Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 997–1030) planned to attack a specific north Indian target – the wealthy temple of Somnath, an important pilgrimage site on the shores of the Arabian Sea on Gujarat's southern coast. Built of stone a hundred years earlier and situated in a fortress that was surrounded by the sea on three sides, the temple of Somnath, like that of Mahipala in Bengal, was dedicated to the god Śiva. In December 1025, having crossed the Indus and marched across western India's forbidding Thar Desert, Mahmud reached the site, successfully besieged the fortress and plundered the famous temple of its riches. He also ordered its Śiva image to be broken up and its pieces taken back to Ghazni, his capital, to be set in a floor and walked upon.[2]

This was not Mahmud's first raid on north India. The sultan had already launched more than a dozen, beginning with an attack in 1001 on Peshawar, at the foot of the strategic Khyber Pass which connects the Afghan highlands with the Indus valley. Almost annually, similar offensives took place against prominent cities of the Punjab and the upper Ganges valley. In each of them, Mahmud's men brought plundered wealth back through the mountain passes leading to Ghazni. What distinguished the Somnath raid from the others, however, was the way in which it captured the imagination of Persian

chroniclers: those contemporary with the raid hailed Mahmud as an arch-iconoclast, piously responding to Islam's prohibition against image-worship. Subsequent chroniclers even lionized him as the founder of Turkish rule and of Islamic sovereignty in South Asia, although in fact he was neither of these.

In striking contrast to Persian chronicles, which made so much of Mahmud's raid on Somnath, Sanskrit inscriptions recorded by local Hindus made no mention of it at all. On the contrary, accounts dating to the months and years after the raid convey a sense of undisturbed business as usual for both the temple and the bustling seaport of Somnath, a major commercial entrepôt that imported war-horses from the Persian Gulf and exported locally produced textiles to markets around the Arabian Sea. Twelve years after the attack, a king from the Goa region recorded performing a pilgrimage to the temple, but he failed to mention Mahmud's raid. Another inscription dated 1169 mentioned repairs made to the temple owing to normal deterioration, but again without mentioning Mahmud's raid. In 1216 Somnath's overlords fortified the temple to protect it not from attacks by invaders from beyond the Khyber Pass, but from those by Hindu rulers in neighbouring Malwa; apparently, such attacks were so frequent as to require precautionary measures.[3] The silence of contemporary Hindu sources regarding Mahmud's raid suggests that in Somnath itself it was either forgotten altogether or viewed as just another unfortunate attack by an outsider, and hence unremarkable.

In fact, the demonization of Mahmud and the portrayal of his raid on Somnath as an assault on Indian religion by Muslim invaders dates only from the early 1840s. In 1842 the British East India Company suffered the annihilation of an entire army of some 16,000 in the First Afghan War (1839–42). Seeking to regain face among their Hindu subjects after this humiliating defeat, the British contrived a bit of self-serving fiction, namely that Mahmud, after sacking the temple of Somnath, carried off a pair of the temple's gates on his way back to Afghanistan. By 'discovering' these fictitious gates in Mahmud's former capital of Ghazni, and by 'restoring' them to their rightful owners in India, British officials hoped to be admired for heroically rectifying what they construed as a heinous wrong that had caused centuries of distress among India's Hindus. Though intended to win the latters' gratitude while distracting all Indians from Britain's catastrophic

defeat just beyond the Khyber, this bit of colonial mischief has stoked Hindus' ill-feeling toward Muslims ever since.[4] From this point on, Mahmud's 1025 sacking of Somnath acquired a distinct notoriety, especially in the early twentieth century when nationalist leaders drew on history to identify clear-cut heroes and villains for the purpose of mobilizing political mass movements. By contrast, Rajendra Chola's raid on Bengal remained largely forgotten outside the Chola country.

On the surface, the military operations of Rajendra Chola and Mahmud of Ghazni would seem to have had much in common: both armies marched some 1,600 kilometres with a view to attacking and plundering specific north Indian sites; neither had any intent of occupation, annexation or permanent government; and both desecrated royal temples, carrying off plundered images to their respective capitals. But the differences between the two invasions are far more important than their similarities, since they highlight radically different political cultures in early-eleventh-century South Asia. The older of these two political cultures, the Chola, was informed by a body of Sanskrit texts that had circulated across India for many centuries before the rise of Chola power in south India. The other culture, informed by an analogous body of Persian texts, had come into being only two centuries before Mahmud's day.

POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE SANSKRIT WORLD

The culture that had informed Rajendra Chola's political actions, including his raid on Bengal, was derived from Sanskrit treatises on power, wealth and rulership. It presumed a political universe crowded with little kings, bigger kings and emperors – that is, kings of kings. It also presumed a world of shifting political sands, where rulers had neither permanent enemies nor permanent allies. In conducting the business of warfare, therefore, classical Indian thought recommended that enemies not be annihilated, but rather co-opted and transformed into loyal subordinates[5] who could be put to use as allies against future enemies. Thus the same inscription that describes the Chola raid on Bengal records that when Rajendra returned from his victorious northern expedition:

> He [then] entered his own [capital] town, which by its prosperity despised all the merits of the abode of the gods – his lotus feet [all along] being worshipped by the kings of high birth who had been subdued [by him].[6]

In reality, of the eight kings that Rajendra or his generals are said to have fought on this expedition, one was killed in battle, two others fled the battlefield and the rest were 'conquered'. These defeated kings – or at least, the five who survived the Chola invasion – were not executed or publicly humiliated. Instead, they became loyal vassals.

Such an outcome conformed to well-defined norms of inter-state politics long canonized in classical Indian thought.[7] According to these norms, territory was imagined as something like a large chessboard on which kings manoeuvred with allies and against rivals with a view to creating an idealized political space called the Circle of States, or *mandala*. The term referred to a series of concentric circles, where one's own capital and heartland was at the centre, surrounded by a second circle of one's allies, and a third circle of one's enemies. Beyond that lay a fourth circle occupied by one's enemies' enemies, understood as potential allies with whom a king endeavoured to ally himself. With all of India's major dynastic houses playing by the same geostrategic rules, the result was not only intense political jockeying and perpetual conflict, but overall stalemate and equilibrium.[8] No single dynastic house could achieve lasting dominance over large tracts of territory within India, much less over South Asia as a whole. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that chess itself originated in India around the sixth century, just when these geopolitical ideas were taking hold.[9]

Rajendra's father Rajaraja (r. 985–1014) is widely acclaimed as the greatest of Chola emperors, as judged by his conquests and the literature and art he patronized, including his building of one of the grandest temples in south India, the Rajarajeśvaram (or Brihadeśwara) Temple in his capital of Tanjavur. The temple was designed to replicate cosmic space and to situate itself at the centre of that space; one of its names is 'Daksinameru', or the southern Mt Meru – that is, the axis of the universe.[10] Much of the wealth necessary for patronizing the king's cultural projects derived from his

successful deployment of the *mandala* strategy on India's geopolitical chessboard. From the Cholas' heartland in the fertile Kaveri delta, Rajaraja had waged a series of victorious military campaigns, defeating in turn the Pandya kings of Madurai to his south and the Cera kings of Kerala to his west. Since these two dynasties had been allied with the Buddhist kings of Sri Lanka, Rajaraja launched a naval expedition to the island kingdom and sacked its ancient capital of Anuradhapura, making him the first Indian king to embark on overseas conquests. Just as importantly, these conquests validated Rajaraja's claims to being a universal emperor (*chakravartin*) since, according to classical Indian political thought, such an emperor had to perform a *digvijaya*, or 'conquest of the quarters' – that is, kingdoms to the south, west, north and east.

In 1014, when Rajaraja died, Rajendra, who had been co-emperor at the end of his father's reign, became Chola emperor in his own right. One of Rajendra's inscriptions records that he soon thereafter 'turned his attention to the conquest of the quarters [*digvijaya*] backed by a powerful army'. In 1017 he launched a fresh invasion of Sri Lanka, conquering the entire island, of which his father had occupied only the northern portion. The next year he reconquered the Pandya king to his south and the raja of Kerala to his west. In 1021 he attacked the Chalukyas of Kalyana, an ascendant dynasty based in the heart of the Deccan plateau. Having defeated that house, Rajendra returned to his capital before moving his army towards Bengal, thereby continuing his clockwise *digvijaya*. But the inscription discloses another rationale for the expedition to Bengal. 'This light of the Solar race [Rajendra],' it says,

> laughing at Bhagiratha who had brought down the Ganga [to the earth from heaven] by the power of [his] austerities, wished to sanctify his own country with the waters of the Ganga [i.e. the Ganges] carried thither through the strength of [his] arm. Accordingly [he] ordered the commander of the army who had powerful battalions [under his control], who was the resort of heroism [and] the foremost of diplomats – to subdue the enemy kings occupying [the country on] the banks of that [river].[11]

This passage refers to a Hindu myth, visually narrated in a stunning seventh-century seaside bas-relief at Mahabalipuram (or Mamallapuram, near modern Chennai), according to which the ascetic Bhagiratha, by performing rigorous austerities, induced the great god Śiva to water the parched earth by bringing the Ganges down from heaven. The parallel between Bhagiratha and Rajendra is clear: if an ascetic had mythically brought the river down from heaven to earth, King Rajendra would ritually bring it down from north India to Tanjavur.

Rajendra attached great importance to his raid on Bengal and the pots of Ganges water that he brought south to his capital. Not only did he assume the title Gangaikonda-Chola ('the Chola who took the Ganges River'), but he built a new capital in the Kaveri delta named Gangaikonda Cholapuram, or 'the city of the Chola who took the Ganges'. This he embellished with a colossal temple to Śiva whose central, nine-storey shrine soars to a height of fifty-six metres. Inside, he had a well dug for the sacred Ganges water into which was placed a statue of a lion, a Chola dynastic symbol. Completed in 1035, the temple served to publicize Rajendra's military successes in conquering not just neighbouring kingdoms, but – symbolically – all India. Standing on either side of the main temple are two shrines, called Northern and Southern Kailash, which refer to the sacred Himalayan mountain in which dwells Śiva himself, the Lord of the Universe. By, as it were, bringing this mountain into the heart of the temple precincts, the Chola monarch architecturally asserted both his affinity with the great god and his claim to universal sovereignty. Ritually, the Ganges, too, was relocated to the heart of Rajendra's empire – a striking instance of how India's sacred landscape could be metaphorically manipulated to serve a political purpose.

The invasions of Sri Lanka by Rajendra Chola and his father also led to the extension of Indian influence across the Bay of Bengal and on to the mainland and islands of South-east Asia. In fact, with their maritime contacts stretching as far as the South China Sea, the Cholas were the most outward-looking Indian state in their day, joining Arabs, Persians, Malays and Chinese in a transregional commercial system. Around 1025 Rajendra Chola embarked on a grand naval campaign against the kingdom of Śrivijaya, which ruled over much of the Malay peninsula and Sumatra. Since the Cholas had maintained diplomatic contact with China since 1015, their subsequent control of the Straits of Malacca, together with the tributary suzerainty they

exercised over Śrivijaya, enabled direct Indo-Chinese maritime trade, unmediated by Śrivijaya authorities. In effect, the territories under Śrivijaya's rule became incorporated within the Chola kingdom's *mandala*, or circle of tributary states, the legacy of which survives today in the ordinary term for the Tamil coast: Coromandel, a corruption of 'Chola mandala'.

The *mandala* theory not only informed inter-state relations, however. Its logic also sowed the seeds of decline for its participant states. Since bestowing land on vassals was understood as a mark of royal dignity, the greater a king's pretensions to imperial grandeur or universal dominion, the more land and authority he was obliged to bestow on courtiers or vassals. But this was ultimately a self-defeating enterprise, as is seen in the case of the Chalukya kings of Kalyana (974–1190), the Cholas' principal rivals for control of the Deccan plateau. From the mid twelfth century on, that dynasty's subordinate rulers increasingly appear in inscriptions bearing exalted titles and enjoying powers to grant land, dispose of local revenues, wage war and administer civil and criminal justice. Mere generals were given the most prestigious insignia of royalty, such as the white umbrella, the great drum and the fly-whisk. Although in theory the Chalukya emperor remained the supreme bestower of such honours, over time even this prerogative was delegated to feudal lords in his confidence.[12] Ultimately, ceding so much authority only encouraged larger feudatory lineages to assert their autonomy from their imperial overlords, a process that effectively hollowed out the Chalukya crown to an empty shell. By the end of the twelfth century the dynasty's most prominent vassal states – the Hoysalas in southern Karnataka, the Kakatiyas in Andhra, the Yadavas in upland Maharashtra – had all emerged as independent kingdoms. The pattern was repeated across the subcontinent.[13] By the eleventh century not only was India as a whole divided into many dynastic houses, but those houses were further internally divided, as vassals and smaller chieftains built up their own courts, replicating in miniaturized form the rituals and retinues of their overlords.

These political ideas were closely intertwined with religion, inasmuch as sovereign rule over royal territory was formally invested in a patron deity – usually a form of Śiva or Vishnu – in relation to whom a king was conceived as a mere servant. The king honoured his Cosmic Overlord by patronizing

Brahmin priests to interact with the deity and by sponsoring the construction of monumental temples in which that deity's image was housed. Such ideas radically transformed India's built landscape, which by the tenth century had become dotted with royal temples. Situated in a king's capital city, these structures were typically richly endowed, elaborately carved and often covered with gold. But such magnificent monuments carried risks for their royal patrons. Since they visually expressed a king's claims to legitimate authority, royal temples were also highly charged political institutions, and as such were subject to attack by enemy kings who, wanting to expand their own circle of tributary rulers, sought to desecrate the most visible sign of a king's sovereignty – his temple. Someśvara III (r. 1127–39), an emperor of the Deccan plateau's Chalukya dynasty, bluntly made the case for such action: 'The enemy's capital city should be burned – the palace of the king, beautiful buildings, palaces of princes, ministers and high-ranking officers, temples, streets with shops, horse and elephant stables.'[14]

Gujarat's temple of Somnath, as noted above, had been fortified in 1216 to protect it from attacks by Hindu rulers in neighbouring Malwa. Recorded instances of Indian kings attacking the temples of their political rivals date from at least the eighth century, when Bengali troops destroyed what they thought was the image of Vishnu Vaikuntha, Kashmir's state deity under King Lalitaditya (r. 724–60). In the early ninth century Govinda III, a king of the Deccan's Rashtrakuta dynasty (753–982), invaded and occupied Kanchipuram in the Tamil country. Intimidated by this action, the king of nearby Sri Lanka sent Govinda several (probably Buddhist) images that the Rashtrakuta king then installed in a Śiva temple in his capital. At about the same time the Pandya King Śrimara Śrivallabha (r. 815–62) also invaded Sri Lanka and took back to his capital at Madurai, in India's extreme south, a golden Buddha image – a symbol of the integrity of the Sinhalese state – that had been installed in the island kingdom's Jewel Palace. In the early tenth century, King Herambapala of north India's Pratihara dynasty (*c*.750–1036) seized a solid-gold image of Vishnu Vaikuntha when he defeated the king of Kangra, in the Himalayan foothills. By mid-century the same image had been seized from the Pratiharas by the Chandela King Yasovarman (r. 925–45), who installed it in the Lakshmana Temple of Khajuraho, the Chandelas' capital in north-central India. In the mid eleventh century the Chola King

Rajadhiraja (r. 1044–52), Rajendra's son, defeated the Chalukyas and raided their capital, Kalyana, in the central Deccan plateau, taking a large black stone door guardian to his capital in Tanjavur, where it was displayed as a trophy of war.[15] In the late eleventh century, the Kashmiri King Harsha (r. 1089–1111) raised the plundering of enemy temples to an institutionalized activity. In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, kings of the Paramara dynasty (800–1327) attacked and plundered Jain temples in Gujarat.[16] Although the dominant pattern here was one of looting and carrying off the images of state deities, we also hear of Hindu kings destroying their enemies' temples. In the early tenth century, the Rashtrakuta monarch Indra III (r. 914–29) not only demolished the temple of Kalapriya (at Kalpi near the Jamuna River), patronized by the Rashtrakutas' deadly enemies the Pratiharas, but took special delight in recording the fact.[17]

Rajendra Chola's seizure of the Śiva image from the Palas of Bengal in 1022, then, was hardly unique. In order to sever the links between a defeated king and the visible manifestation of his divine patron, it was necessary to carry off images or in other ways desecrate his royal temples. Consequently, a high level of inter-state violence between the ninth and thirteenth centuries inevitably accompanied efforts to create idealized *mandala*s and to transform neighbouring enemies into subordinate vassals. Conquest of the quarters was built into the politics of the day.

POLITICAL CULTURE IN THE PERSIANATE WORLD

If Rajendra Chola's raid on Bengal had operated within the world of the *mandala*, the *digvijaya* and South Asia's sacred geography, Mahmud of Ghazni's 1025 raid on Somnath – like his sixteen previous raids on northern India – was driven by very different ideas. The core of Mahmud's forces was composed of Turkish slaves or *mamluk*s, who, as young men typically captured in war and separated from their kin groups, had been recruited to eastern Afghanistan from Central Asia on account of their exceptional military skills. They were 'Turks' inasmuch as their native language was Turkish, dialects of which in the eleventh century were spoken from the western frontiers of China across Central Asia to the Oxus River (Turkish-speakers would not occupy Anatolia – that is, most of present-day Turkey – until several centuries later). And they were slaves inasmuch as they were

attached neither to their natal kin nor to land, but to their masters, who were typically state officials. But, because they were entrusted with weapons and lived in close quarters with their masters, this type of 'elite' or 'military' slavery differed fundamentally from the plantation slavery typical of the early modern Atlantic world.

The kingdom that Mahmud inherited, the Ghaznavid sultanate (975–1187), had arisen from its declining parent Samanid kingdom in Central Asia (819–999) at a time when this sort of military slavery was already a well-established institution. In 962 the Samanid commander-in-chief, Alptigin, abandoned the court in Bukhara and carved out a semi-independent state with its capital in Ghazni, in eastern Afghanistan. He was succeeded in 975 by his slave Sabuktigin, who, after consolidating his rule as an independent sovereign, launched a number of raids on the ruler of Peshawar in the north-western corner of the Indus valley. On his death in 997, Sabuktigin was succeeded not by another slave but by his own son, Mahmud, thereby launching a new dynasty at Ghazni.

Like their Samanid predecessors, the Ghaznavid sultans continued to recruit Turkish slaves and freemen from Central Asia, where cavalry warfare, together with the breeding and herding of horses, had been woven into the fabric of pastoral life. Even young boys acquired exceptional riding skills, including shooting arrows at full gallop. Writing in the ninth century, the Arab historian al-Jahiz captured the awe with which outsiders viewed these fighters:

> If a thousand of their [Turks'] horse join battle and let off a single shower of arrows, they can mow down a thousand [Arabs'] horse. No army can withstand this kind of assault. The Kharajites and the Bedouin have no skill worth mentioning in shooting from horseback, but the Turk can shoot at beasts, birds, hoops, men, sitting quarry, dummies and birds on the wing, and do so at full gallop to fore or to rear, to left or to right, upwards or downwards, loosing ten arrows before the Kharajite can nock one … and if they do turn their back, they are to be feared as much as deadly poison and sudden death; for their arrows hit the mark as much when they are retreating as when they are advancing.[18]

By contrast, Indian archers in Mahmud's day were for the most part infantrymen, mounted archery not being widespread. Additionally, a shortage of extensive pastures and competition from sedentary agriculture in India drastically reduced the supply of war-horses.[19] This was never an issue in Central Asia. Moreover, by inhabiting the heart of the vast, intercommunicating zone between China and the Mediterranean basin, the peoples of Central Asia readily adopted both offensive and defensive military technologies that passed along the trade routes connecting the two ends of Eurasia. These included not only the most efficient technologies associated with horsemanship, such as iron stirrups or heavy saddles, but also siege equipment such as the trebuchet, which was used for hurling large missiles, or mortar for cementing masonry in the bastions and curtain walls of forts.

Central Asian Turks and north Indian warrior clans also inherited very different conceptions of political territory. North Indian ruling lineages were organized in large, patrilineal kin groups which were dispersed on to ancestral lands and controlled the peasant society that produced the land's surplus wealth. This link between land and kin inclined such clans to identify strongly with particular, ancestral territories. As pastoralists in Central Asia, Turks had also been organized into lineage groups, but their kin ties had been distorted by the institution of military slavery, which detached them from their clans and took them into unfamiliar households in eastern Afghanistan or Khurasan – that is, the Persian-speaking region embracing today's north-eastern Iran, western Afghanistan and the territory up to the Oxus. Whether as mobile pastoral nomads in Central Asia or as uprooted slaves serving sultanates in Khurasan or Afghanistan, Turks had little or no attachments to ancestral lands. This inclined them to envision political space as open and unbounded, which helps explain the elastic, expansive nature of sultanates, in India or elsewhere. By contrast, states of eleventh-century north India, such as Rajendra Chola's empire in the south, were rooted in the ideology of the *mandala*, with its fixed centre based on a maharaja's palace or royal temple, surrounded by concentric circles populated by allies and enemies.

What gave the Ghaznavid Turks their special character, and perhaps their clearest contrast with contemporary Indian states, were the geostrategic forces driving their continued raids on north India in the early eleventh

century. Those raids aimed not at appropriating territory but at plundering wealthy cities and their temples, especially for gold or silver. Taken back to Ghazni, this bullion was typically melted down into coins to finance campaigns in Central Asia and Iran, where the annexation of land was very much the objective. Cash was also needed for purchasing war-horses, slaves and manufactured goods, and for paying the salaries of Mahmud's army and administrative hierarchy. As this hierarchy was elaborated, and as the size of the army grew with the addition of more mercenaries or slaves, ever more cash was needed to pay them. This in turn required still more raw treasure, readily acquired by launching more raids, for which still more troops were needed. The result was a self-catalysing cycle that was inherently expansive and predatory, based above all on mobile wealth. The raids also reversed historic patterns in the transregional flow of precious metals.[20] Whereas for centuries such metals had poured into India, mainly in payment for textiles and spices, after the early eleventh century the bulk of precious metals began flowing from India to Central Asia and the Middle East, both for trade and for maintaining Ghaznavid armies in those regions. In 1009 alone Mahmud seized seventy million minted coins, amounting to 136 metric tons of silver, from the mountain fortress of Kangra in modern Himachal Pradesh.[21]

The transregional circulation of wealth through Central Asia, the Iranian plateau and north India was the material counterpart to a growing canon of Persian texts that spread through those same regions. By elaborating distinctive norms of kingship, governance, courtly etiquette, social comportment, Sufi piety, poetry, art, architecture and so on, these texts provided the ideological scaffolding that sustained an emerging Persianate world. At the same time, royal courts, regional political centres, the lodges or shrines of Sufi shaikhs (venerated religious leaders) and schools (*madrasa*s or *maktab*s) provided the institutional bases from and through which such texts circulated. From the days of Mahmud of Ghazni on, these networks spread across ever greater stretches of territory. And, as this happened, an urbane, literate and transregional Persianate culture defined by an evolving literary canon was superimposed over a number of vernacular ones.[22] The prestige associated with this culture also attracted non-Persian-speaking peoples into its field of influence. In particular, from the ninth century confederations of Turkish-speaking pastoralists migrated westwards

from the fringes of western China into Central Asia and the eastern rim of the Iranian plateau, which included Khurasan and Afghanistan. As these nomadic or semi-nomadic peoples encountered Persian-speaking peoples of Central Asian oasis towns and their rural hinterlands, they rapidly assimilated both the Persian language and the broader Persianate culture associated with that region's agrarian and urban classes. Whenever they achieved positions of power – thanks to their equestrian and fighting skills – these Persianized Turks lavishly patronized the entire gamut of Persian culture, not least in order to earn political legitimacy for themselves in an expanding Persianate world.

It was the Ghaznavid sultans, successors to Mahmud, who initiated the diffusion of Persian culture into north India. In 1040 Mahmud's son Mas'ud (r. 1030–40) launched an expedition to recover the city of Merv (in modern Turkmenistan) from another confederation of Persianized Turks that would soon dominate the Middle East – the Seljuqs (1037–1194). He failed to do so, and the defeated sultan was forced to flee across the Indus before being assassinated by one of his own men. Having lost their realm in Iran and Central Asia to Seljuq power, Mas'ud's successors then focused their energies on south-eastern Afghanistan and north-west India, with Lahore serving as their base in the Punjab. After several decades of instability, the second half of the eleventh century saw the relatively steady reign of Sultan Ibrahim (r. 1059–99), who resumed the dynasty's earlier policy of raiding deep in the Gangetic plain, even capturing Agra in the late 1080s.[23] But eighteen years after his death his dynasty's old nemesis, the Seljuqs, struck from the west, sacking Ghazni in 1117 and reducing the Ghaznavid sultan, Bahram Shah (r. 1117–57), to a tributary vassal. In 1135 the Seljuks struck again, forcing Bahram Shah to take temporary refuge in Lahore. The final blow to the Ghaznavids' splendid capital came in 1150, when a deadly feud broke out between Bahram Shah and one of the Ghaznavids' former vassals – the ruler of Ghur, in mountainous central Afghanistan – who burned the city to the ground. For seven days Ghazni was plundered, with a reported 60,000 slain and many splendid palaces, schools and mosques destroyed, justly giving the Ghurid chieftain the sobriquet *Jahan-suz*, 'one who sets the world ablaze'. Also lost in that attack was the library of the great philosopher and polymath Ibn Sina (Avicenna, d. 1037), which had been brought to Ghazni

from Isfahan in 1034.[24] The city never regained its former glory. A severely weakened Ghaznavid state now fell back on Lahore, which became the dynasty's capital until 1186, when it too was overrun by the rulers of Ghur.

Deprived of their direct ties with Central Asia – and with it their access to Turkish slaves, mercenaries and war-horses – the later Ghaznavids lost their wider, imperial vision and acquired the character of a regional, north Indian state. They were certainly not seen as menacing aliens who might have posed a civilizational threat to Indian culture. Contemporary Sanskrit inscriptions refer to the Ghaznavids not as Muslims but as *turushka*s (Turks), an ethnic term, or as *hammira*s, a Sanskritized rendering of *amir* (Arabic for commander), an official title.[25] For their part, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries Ghaznavid rulers in India issued coins from Lahore bearing the same legends that had appeared on those of their Indian predecessors, the Hindu Shahi dynasty (*c*.850–1002). These included Śiva's bull Nandi and the Sanskrit phrase *śri samanta deva* (Honourable Chief Commander) inscribed in Devanagari script.[26] Such measures point to the later Ghaznavids' investment in establishing cultural and monetary continuity with north Indian kingdoms. Moreover, despite the dynasty's rhetoric about defending Sunni Islam, religion posed no bar to military recruitment, as Indians had always been prominent in Ghaznavid armies. In 1033 Mahmud of Ghazni gave the command of his army stationed in Lahore to a Hindu general, and in Ghazni itself Indian military contingents had their own commanders, inhabited their own quarter of the city, and were generally considered more reliable soldiers than the Turks.[27]

Crucially, the Ghaznavids brought to the Punjab the entire gamut of Persianate institutions and practices that would define the political economy of much of India for centuries to come. Inherited from the creative ferment of tenth-century Khurasan and Central Asia under the Samanid rulers of Bukhara, these included: the elaboration of a ranked and salaried bureaucracy tied to the state's land revenue and military systems; the institution of elite, or military, slavery; an elaboration of the office of 'sultan'; the courtly patronage of Persian arts, crafts and literature; and a tradition of spiritually powerful holy men, or Sufis, whose relations with royal power were ambivalent, to say the least.

The first of these, the institution of a salaried bureaucracy, was based on the principle of state-run revenue assignments known as *iqta'*s, which were defined units of land whose revenues were collected by the assignee, or *iqta'dar*. From these revenues the *iqta'dar* was required to recruit, train, equip and command a stipulated number of troops who would be available to the sultan on demand. The state's revenue and military systems were thus tightly integrated. *Iqta'* lands were assigned to free nobles as well as to high-ranking slaves who enjoyed the special confidence of the sultan. Although the *iqta'* system had evolved in Iraq and western Iran in the ninth and tenth centuries, Ghaznavid rulers do not appear to have used it until the late eleventh century, when they could no longer rely on war booty to finance government operations, as they had done in the dynasty's early days.[28]

The institution of military slavery was also inherited from earlier practice in Iraq. From the ninth century, rulers in Baghdad had recruited Turks in Central Asia to serve the Abbasid caliphate (750–1258), entrusting them with both military and administrative responsibilities. As young men uprooted from their natal communities and recruited for service in a distant court, military slaves embodied a deep paradox. Having no traceable genealogy in a Persian-ordered universe where purity of blood translated into high status, they were lowly non-persons. But as well-trained elite soldiers given arms and close proximity to a ruling dynasty, they possessed power, wealth and the opportunity for advancement. For courts plagued with internal factionalism, it made strategic sense to stabilize central authority by recruiting powerful outsiders from Central Asia's vast military labour market, and to place them under the tutelage of trusted state officers. These masters trained, equipped, fed and socialized their slave charges into a sultanate's culture. As kinless aliens, they were rendered totally dependent on their masters, enhancing their presumed loyalty to the state. As the institution matured, ties of mutual trust and affection evolved; slaves close to a royal household were understood as fictive sons who might be praised even above biological sons for their loyalty and dedication.[29] For these reasons, from the tenth century to the fourteenth, thousands of Central Asian Turks were recruited to serve not only the Arab Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad but, in far greater numbers, native Persian dynasties such as the Samanids in Bukhara, and later the Ghaznavids and their client chieftains.

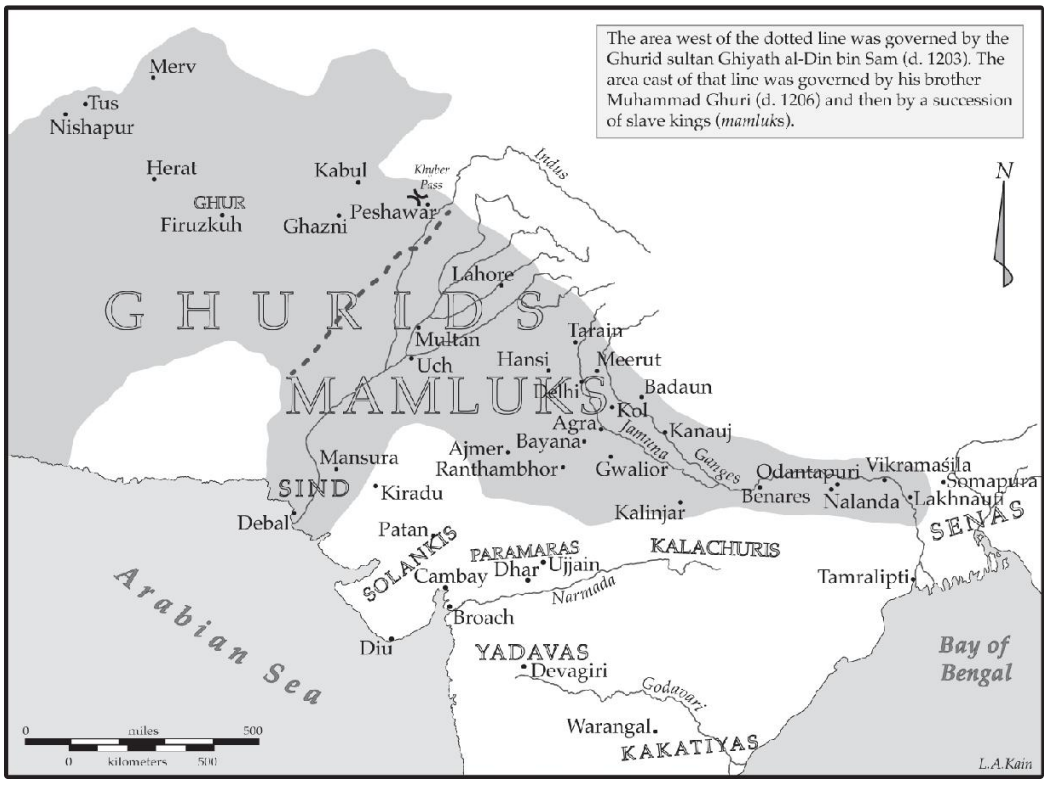
Overarching the entire political system loomed the sultan, an absolute sovereign whose political authority in the ninth and tenth centuries grew in tandem with the decline of that of the caliph in Baghdad. By the dawn of the eleventh century, sultanates evolved a de facto separation of religion and state. As the successor to the Prophet of Islam, the caliph still possessed religious authority, but sultans – or *amir*s or *malik*s, as they were called before 1002[30] – now held effective political authority. Moreover, since these political developments coincided with the revival of Persian culture in the Samanid court, Persian writers and theorists in Bukhara and elsewhere on the Iranian plateau endowed the office of sultan with the absolutist trappings of the ancient pre-Islamic Persian *shahanshah*, or 'king of kings', a title revived in western Iran by rulers of the Buyid dynasty (934–1062). In courtly discourse, the sultan *was* the state, while the world, as the political theorist Fakhr al-Din Razi (d. 1209) metaphorically put it, 'is a garden, whose gardener is the state'.[31]

But the sultan was not the only claimant to worldly authority. Also emerging amidst a declining caliphal state in Baghdad and the florescence of Persian culture in Samanid Central Asia was a substantial body of literature that had grown up around vivid and charismatic spiritual personalities, Sufi shaikhs, who had played a key role in assimilating Turkish groups to Sunni Islam as the latter migrated through Central Asia into Khurasan and Iran. Sufis sought a direct experience of divine reality and postulated a vision of authority that sometimes complemented and sometimes opposed that of royal courts. Sultans certainly possessed power, reinforced by all the pomp and glory inherited from pre-Islamic Persian imperial traditions. But, in a discourse challenging such claims, Sufi texts suggested that rulers were entrusted with only a temporary lease of earthly authority, granted to them through the grace of some spiritually powerful shaikh. Possessing a special nearness to God, it was shaikhs, not princes or kings, who had the better claim to being God's true representatives on earth. From this perspective, all things in God's creation were understood as dependent on a hierarchy of spiritually powerful Sufis, or 'God's unruly friends', as they have been characterized.[32] Such a view, needless to say, was difficult to reconcile with the courtly vision of an all-powerful sultan and his flock of tax-paying subjects.

Whether arriving as invaders or immigrants, then, Persianized Turks brought to India two competing visions of legitimate authority and power: a Sufi discourse that circulated mainly among Muslims, and a courtly discourse that claimed validity across all communities. Both of them, however, sharply contrasted with India's chessboard-world of the *mandala* and the *digvijaya*, which so preoccupied north India's warrior clans as to blind them to the storm clouds that, by the end of the twelfth century, were gathering beyond the Khyber Pass.

THE GHURID CONQUEST OF NORTH INDIA, 1192–1206

For most of the twelfth century, the Seljuqs and Ghaznavids ruled over Khurasan and Afghanistan respectively. But this changed in the latter part of that century when the Ghaznavids' steady decline created a power vacuum in eastern Afghanistan and the Punjab. That vacuum would be filled not by the Ghaznavids' historic rivals, the Seljuqs, but by one of their own former client states – Ghur, a kingdom centred in the remote and rugged heart of Afghanistan's Hindu Kush Mountains. Rising from obscurity in the mid twelfth century, chieftains of this kingdom would soon roll over the Ghaznavids on their way to defeating the dominant martial lineage of northern Rajasthan, the Chauhans, thereby paving the way for the establishment of the Delhi sultanate (1206–1526).



Ghurids and Mamluks, 1175–1290

Whereas the Ghaznavid ruling family had originated as Turkish slaves who cultivated and patronized cosmopolitan Persian culture, the Ghurids were free, pastoral chieftains in a culturally marginalized and geographically remote backwater of Afghanistan. They had been converted to Islam only a few generations before they abruptly broke out of their mountain strongholds on to the plains of India, adhering until the late twelfth century to an obscure but zealous sect, the Karramiya, considered deviant by mainline Sunni Muslims. Ethnically they were of eastern Iranian origin, but their dialect of Persian was so distinct from that of contemporary Iran or Khurasan that the Ghaznavid sultan Mas'ud needed the help of interpreters when he campaigned in their territory.[33]

The chiefs of Ghur would not remain obscure for long, however. In the mid twelfth century they burst on to the world stage, building with astonishing speed a multicultural empire that straddled both sides of the Hindu Kush range. To the east, their capture of Ghazni in 1148 marked their first toehold on the north-western rim of the subcontinent. To the west, in Khurasan, they seized from the Seljuqs the cosmopolitan city of Herat in 1175, and in 1201 the oasis cities of Merv, Tus and Nishapur. Two brothers co-governed the

sultanate during its rapid expansion in the last quarter of the twelfth century. The senior partner, Sultan Ghiyath al-Din bin Sam (r. 1163–1203), ruled from the Ghurid capital of Firuzkuh in west-central Afghanistan and focused on first conquering and then governing the great Khurasani cities long associated with urban Persian culture: Herat, Nishapur, Tus and Merv. His aspirations to appropriate this culture are seen in his renovation of Herat's congregational mosque, next to which lies his own mausoleum. A culturally rich and cosmopolitan city, Herat at this time was reported to have had 12,000 shops, 6,000 baths and 444,000 households[34] – figures that, though probably inflated, would have far surpassed contemporary Paris's estimated population of 110,000.

Ghiyath al-Din's younger brother and junior partner in this diarchy was Shihab al-Din bin Sam, or Mu'izz al-Din, commonly known as Muhammad of Ghur, or simply Muhammad Ghuri (r. 1173–1206). He governed Ghazni in eastern Afghanistan and for more than three decades used that city as a base for launching military and political operations in north India. These began in 1175, when he marched through the Kurram Pass to the middle Indus valley and attacked the Isma'ili Muslim community in Multan. Three years later he advanced into Gujarat, sacking the Śiva temple at Kiradu. Up to this point, the sultan was following Mahmud of Ghazni's policy of a century and a half earlier, raiding Indian sites for plunder in order to finance his dynasty's imperial ambitions to the west. But his intentions soon turned to seizing and holding territory in upper India. In 1176 he captured Peshawar and secured the Khyber Pass, giving him direct access to the Indian plains from his base in Ghazni. In 1181 he attacked but failed to capture Lahore, capital of the last Ghaznavid sultan, Khusrau Malik (r. 1160–86). The next year he secured his southern flank to India by seizing the Sindi port of Debal. In 1186 he successfully took Lahore, finally extinguishing the Ghaznavid dynasty. Then in 1191 he engaged the Chauhan maharaja, Prithviraj III, at Tarain, 120 kilometres north of Delhi. Here the sultan suffered his first defeat, as well as a wound to his arm caused by an Indian spear.

Muhammad Ghuri spent the next year regrouping in Ghazni. There he prepared for a return engagement with Prithviraj, training his cavalrymen and their horses to combat the Chauhans by having them attack mock elephants made of mud and wood.[35] In 1192 the two armies fought a rematch, again at

Tarain, where the sultan carried the day and Prithviraj was captured.[36] Over the next ten years Muhammad Ghuri's armies attacked and annexed political centres across the whole of north India – Meerut, Hansi, Delhi, Kol (modern Aligarh), Benares, Ajmer, Bayana, Ujjain, Badaun, Kanauj, Gwalior and Kalinjar.[37] Meanwhile, having evolved so quickly from a remote mountain chiefdom to a sprawling sultanate spanning north India, Afghanistan and Khurasan, the Ghurid leaders shed their former provincial identity and adopted a more cosmopolitan posture, embracing both the substance and the trappings of the Persianate bureaucratic and centralized state. This included proclaiming their sovereignty at the Friday prayer and using the imperial umbrella (*chatr*) and kettle-drums (*naubat*), both of them Persianate symbols of political authority. They also discarded the modest title of *malik al-jabal*, 'king of the mountains'. Ghiyath al-Din now grandly styled himself 'the most exalted sultan' (*sultan al-a'zam*) and Muhammad Ghuri 'the great sultan' (*sultan al-mu'azzam*). Finally, in 1199 they embraced Sunni Islam, abandoning their earlier adherence to a provincial Islamic sect.[38]

What motivated the Ghurids to appear so suddenly in this manner, and what explains their remarkable success? An obvious factor was the power vacuum created by the decline of their two powerful neighbours: to the west, the Seljuq Turks of Khurasan, and to the east their former overlords, the Ghaznavids. Later Indo-Muslim chroniclers – and in their turn, British colonial historians – construed Ghurid operations in north India as motivated by the ideals of Islamic holy war (*ghaza*). But no contemporary inscription, coin or chronicle identified Muhammd Ghuri or other Ghurids as holy warriors.[39] Moreover, the sultan's raids in India were initially targeted not at Hindu states but at Muslim ones – Isma'ilis in Multan and the Ghaznavids in Lahore. Yet the sultan's armies clearly aimed at overthrowing ruling Hindu houses and annexing their territory following raids on Delhi and regional capitals in the modern districts of Ajmer, Patiala, Karnal, Aligarh and Benares – all of them seized in 1193–94. To this end, their armies destroyed Hindu temples patronized by defeated rulers, which followed the traditional Indian practice of desecrating royal temples of defeated monarchs, thereby detaching enemy rulers from the most visible sign of their former sovereignty.[40] On the other hand, the construction of large congregational

mosques on some of these same sites signalled an intention to replace the authority of a defeated enemy with a new tradition of governance.

The governing structure that Muhammad Ghuri established in north India suggests yet another motivation for the conquest. Although he and his brother Ghiyath al-Din shared their kingdom's sovereignty, they governed their respective domains very differently. To the west, in newly conquered territories in Khurasan, Ghiyath al-Din planted members of the Ghurid clan as his governors. By contrast, Muhammad Ghuri excluded his clan members from administering the annexed territories in India, preferring instead Turkish slaves personally loyal to him, together with reinstated Indian rulers under the authority of those slaves. As men uprooted from their native lands and kinfolk, these slaves had entered the sultan's household as fictive sons utterly dependent on their master-sovereign. Although Ghiyath al-Din also held slaves, they were not placed in responsible administrative or military positions. It seems likely, then, that Muhammad Ghuri's momentous invasions in India were driven, at least in part, by a desire to carve out a semi-autonomous domain for himself, where he would not have to share rulership with collateral branches of his own clan.[41] Shortly after defeating Prithviraj III Chauhan in 1192, Muhammad Ghuri ordered his slave Qutb al-Din Aibek to push further east. This resulted in the conquest of Delhi, with both that city and the old Ghaznavid capital of Lahore placed under Aibek's governorship. The sultan's other most trusted slaves continued to expand and consolidate Ghurid authority across the Indo-Gangetic plain from their respective bases – Taj al-Din Yildiz in the strategic zone between Ghazni and the Indus valley, Baha al-Din Tughril in Bayana (in eastern Rajasthan) and Nasir al-Din Qubacha in Sind.

Having violently annexed so much north Indian territory, Muhammad Ghuri sought to minimize the disruption of the conquest by establishing continuities with the pre-conquest order. At the local level of political authority, landed elites appear to have remained in office, since no contemporary inscriptions suggest that they had been displaced.[42] At the upper level, leading political figures were also maintained in power. Whereas the Chauhan raja Prithviraj III had been captured in 1192 and soon thereafter put to death, his son was installed as a tributary king to the Ghurids, ruling over both Ajmer and the formidable hill fort of Ranthambhor. Although Prithviraj's brother revolted

shortly after the conquest, his nephew Govindaraja remained loyal to the Ghurids, for which he was rewarded with a robe of honour. The Chauhan prince reciprocated by sending Muhammad Ghuri a series of exotic golden sculptures, which were forwarded first to Ghazni and then to the Ghurids' court in Firuzkuh in the Afghan highlands.[43] By such measures the Chauhan line was allowed to continue, albeit subordinate to the Ghurid victors. Similarly, in 1196 the Ghurids redefined the Parihara raja of Gwalior as a subordinate ruler at that strategic fort. In Benares, leaders of the Gahadavala dynasty (late eleventh to mid thirteenth centuries) were reinstated in power, also as tributary kings. And in 1201–02, when the sultan's armies stormed Anahilapataka (Patan) in Gujarat, the defeated raja of the Solanki dynasty (mid tenth to late thirteenth centuries) was restored to power, again as a tributary king to the Ghurids.[44] In short, the sultan positioned himself as an overlord reigning over a circle of Indian authorities identified in the Persian sources by such royal titles as *rai*s, *rana*s *or thakur*s. Symbolizing his new political status in India, Muhammad Ghuri seems to have sent to his subordinate Indian rulers signet rings with his name engraved in Sanskrit.[45] Members of the former Indian ruling classes would thereby have been folded into a larger imperial order that adhered to Persianate ideologies and institutions. Yet, viewed from below, India's first sultan effectively established a classical Indian *mandala*, or circle of sovereignty, with himself at its centre.

Circulating through many hands, the words and images stamped on Ghurid coins served as one of the few ways the new rulers could communicate their political ideology to their subjects. Significantly, the sprawling new state adopted a Janus-faced policy of projecting two different self-images to its different constituencies. Coins issued from Ghazni and circulating in the western, Muslim districts of the Ghurid empire conformed to the numismatic standards of the Islamic world. These carried no images, only Arabic calligraphy, with Muhammad Ghuri bearing the title *sultan al-mu'azzam*, 'the great sultan'. By contrast, coins issued from India followed north Indian standards of weight and metallic purity while maintaining the same iconographic programme used by the defeated Chauhan lineage. These coins depict a bull on one side and a horseman carrying a spear on the other, features that had appeared on the coins of north Indian dynasties for

centuries. On the coins' reverse side Muhammad Ghuri's name appeared in Devanagari script, prefaced with the Sanskrit honorific title *śri*. Some of his coins even included an image of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi, while on the reverse side the sultan's name, again in Devanagari script, was preceded by either *śri* or *hammira*, a Sanskritized form of the Arabic *amir* [see Fig. 2]. Apart from projecting an image of political continuity with north India's defeated dynasties, the new government was also aware of the conservative instincts of India's merchant classes, which resisted new coinage types. Issuing coins with familiar metallic purity, weight, script and images was therefore vital for avoiding disruptions in commerce.[46]

In 1196 Muhammad Ghuri ceased directing operations in India and joined his elder brother in campaigns in Afghanistan and Khurasan, succeeding him as supreme sultan when Ghiyath al-Din died in 1203. Events beyond the Khyber, however, soon threw north India into a crisis of authority. In 1204 Muhammad Ghuri suffered a crushing military defeat at the hands of Turkish rivals in Khurasan, as a result of which Ghurid power there, and then in Afghanistan itself, all but vanished. In 1206 the sultan was assassinated while offering evening prayers. With the Ghurid state now in disarray, his senior slaves in India, cut adrift from Firuzkuh after their master's death, asserted separate claims to sovereign authority. Yet, as former slaves of Muhammad Ghuri with no blood connection with the Ghurid dynastic house, none of them had any legal right to rule over the others. Moreover, during the last ten years of Muhammad Ghuri's reign while he was absent from India, his slaves had conducted military campaigns without their master's direct supervision. In doing so, they acquired a host of local clients and dependants, while becoming fiercely competitive with each other.

Although the launching of the Delhi sultanate as a unified state is customarily dated from 1206, when Muhammad Ghuri died, what actually occurred in that year was the outbreak of protracted civil wars among the late sultan's principal slave commanders. Aibek, Tughril, Qubacha and Yildiz all became legally manumitted on their master's death; moreover, their mutual rivalries, dormant as long as their master was alive, now broke out into the open. Nobody at the time could have predicted that Delhi, under Aibek, would ultimately emerge as north India's pre-eminent capital, or that the Delhi sultanate would become India's pre-eminent state. Even when

Aibek died in 1210, north India remained fragmented by these civil wars: Sind and Multan were held by Qubacha, Lahore by Yildiz and Bengal by the political descendants of its conqueror, Bakhtiyar Khalaji.[47] Especially intense was the struggle between Qubacha and Yildiz over Multan and Lahore, and, after 1216, between Qubacha and the rulers in Delhi for control of the whole of north India. Indeed, between 1206 and 1228 an outside observer might well have concluded that the flourishing court of Nasir al-Din Qubacha at Uch, and not that at Delhi, would most likely become the prime centre of Turkish power in north India. During his long reign, Qubacha sought to create an Indus valley–Arabian Sea maritime circuit, centred on his court at Uch. His port of Mansura, in the Indus delta, was connected commercially with the Gujarati ports of Diu, Broach and Cambay, and with Arabian ports in Aden and Muscat, while to the north he maintained overland commercial ties with Lahore and Kabul. And, like his rivals and fellow slaves, Qubacha adorned his court with the brightest luminaries he could find: Sufi shaikhs, artisans of all sorts and historians commissioned to place his reign in larger geographical and chronological frameworks.[48]

In Delhi itself, meanwhile, just four years after the succession crisis precipitated by Muhammad Ghuri's death, another one broke out when Aibek was killed in a freak polo accident. If the crisis of 1206 had arisen over which one of Sultan Muhammad Ghuri's slave commanders would succeed their master, that of 1210 centred on whether Aibek would be succeeded by his natural son or by one of his own slaves. The deeper issue was the very nature of kingship in north India. Would the throne of Delhi follow the Persian model of hereditary monarchy, in which a single royal family was sovereign, generation after generation? Or would it follow the early Ghaznavid tradition, in which kingship devolved to a sovereign's slave, and then to the slave of that slave? And if the latter, then which of the master's slaves would inherit the master's patrimony?

THE DELHI SULTANATE UNDER THE MAMLUKS, OR SLAVE KINGS

In Delhi, these issues were settled when Aibek's favourite slave, Iltutmish, defeated both his fellow slave cohorts and his former master's son, Aram Shah, after which he claimed the throne. However, a contradiction lies at the heart of Iltutmish's momentous reign, which lasted from 1210 to 1236.

Though himself a slave – indeed, a slave of a slave – Iltutmish assiduously endeavoured to establish the Delhi sultanate as a hereditary monarchy, endowed with all the trappings of Persian imperial symbolism and rituals. This effort began immediately on the death of Aibek, whose own son, Aram Shah, had staked a claim to the throne. But Iltutmish confronted and defeated the party of Turks loyal to Aram Shah, who died in the conflict. Then, in an attempt to defuse the bad press surrounding his usurpation of power and his killing of Aibek's son, Iltutmish married Aibek's daughter. This made him the son-in-law of his deceased master – not quite the same as a direct descendant of Aibek, but a close approximation thereof.[49]

Although doubts about the legality of Iltutmish's rise to power lingered for at least another century, in the short run a string of military victories over his rivals in north India quelled such grumbling. Five years after Aibek's death a bitter dispute broke out between Iltutmish and Yildiz over who had the better claim to royal authority. Not only had Yildiz been a favourite slave of Sultan Muhammad Ghuri, but that sultan had manumitted him and given him the throne of Ghazni and was even said to have adopted him as his son. So in 1215, when he marched from his base in Lahore down to Delhi to challenge Iltutmish, Yildiz confronted the latter with the words, 'You know that I am fitter than you to rule the kingdom of Hindustan … for I am in the position of a son to the late king … I am as good as a descendant of the kings of Iran … As for you, you are but a slave of the slaves of the king.' To which Iltutmish retorted:

> O reputed king and son of kings. You know that today the dominion of the world is enjoyed by him who possesses greater strength. The principle of hereditary succession is now extinct; long ago Destiny abolished the custom … You cannot take the world through inheritance and boasting; you can take it only by wielding the sword in battle.[50]

In their own battle, Yildiz was defeated and killed. In 1217 Iltutmish then seized Lahore from Qubacha, and in 1225 Bengal from its independent Khalaji rulers. In 1226 he reconquered from recalcitrant Indian rajas the fortress of Ranthambhor, claimed at the time to be so impregnable as to have defied attacks by some seventy kings through the ages. Finally, a year later he

defeated and killed Qubacha, bringing both Sind and the southern Punjab under his control. In sum, by 1227 Iltutmish had brought the northern and southern Punjab, Sind, Bengal and eastern Rajasthan under Delhi's sway.

In addition to these stunning military victories, three developments originating beyond India further contributed to Iltutmish's consolidation of power, and to the Delhi sultanate's growing prestige and authority. First, in 1215 Ghurid influence in Afghanistan, already greatly diminished for nearly a decade, was altogether extinguished by a rival Central Asian sultanate, that of Khwarazm (1077–1231). Thus ended the novel experiment of a wider, Perso-Indian empire that, based in the remote mountain fastness of central Afghanistan, had briefly straddled the Iranian plateau and north India. With the Ghurids eliminated from the political scene, the fiction of north India's slave sultanates being part of a larger, Afghan-based empire had ended; Iltutmish now governed his kingdom from within India, as an Indian sovereign. An autonomous Delhi sultanate had become realized.

Second, during the years 1219–21 Genghis Khan, the founder of the Mongol empire in eastern Asia, burst into western Asia. Offended by the insolent behaviour of the same ruler of Khwarazm who a few years earlier had annihilated the Ghurids, the Mongol leader personally marched across Asia to punish the impudent monarch. In the course of this expedition, Mongol cavalry inflicted fire and fury throughout Central Asia and Khurasan, driving many thousands of terrified town-dwellers and semi-nomadic peoples into India, where they sought and found refuge. It was a propitious moment both for them and for Iltutmish, who needed men skilled in civil and military affairs in order to govern his fledgling kingdom. The influx of a host of refugees in search of a stable state with a successful and generous Muslim ruler boosted the sultan's claims to being precisely that sort of sovereign. For Iltutmish and the youthful Delhi sultanate, then, the Mongol holocaust in Central Asia proved a timely boon, unlike the catastrophe it represented for millions in Asia and the Middle East.

And third, in 1229 the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad, still technically the supreme sovereign over the various sultanates of the eastern Islamic world, sent a robe of investiture to Iltutmish, confirming his position as India's only legitimate Muslim monarch. This deed of recognition carried much symbolic weight for the throngs of refugees who had fled from the pagan Mongols and sought a secure state ruled by a Muslim. The period 1215–29, then, marked

the emergence of the Delhi sultanate as the dominant power in north India. At the same time, Delhi itself swelled to become one of the world's major cities. A contemporary traveller estimated that it contained twenty-one neighbourhoods, gardens stretching some twenty kilometres, 1,000 *madrasa*s, seventy hospitals, 2,000 inns, extensive bazaars, numerous public baths and reservoirs.[51] The city also claimed one of the most stunning minarets on earth – the Qutb Minar, begun by Aibek around 1195.

What did the contours of the Delhi sultanate's society in the thirteenth century look like? Contemporary Persian chronicles present a simple picture of a monolithic ruling class of 'Muslims' superimposed over an equally monolithic subject class of 'Hindus'. But a closer reading of these same sources, together with Sanskrit ones and material culture, suggests a more textured picture. First, the ruling class was far from monolithic. The ethnicity of Turkish slaves, the earliest generation of whom dated to the Ghurid invasions of India, survived well into the thirteenth century. For a time, even Persian-speaking secretaries had to master Turkish in order to function.[52] There persisted, moreover, deep cultural tensions between native Persian-speakers – whether from Iran, Khurasan or Central Asia – and ethnic Turks. Nizam al-Din Auliya (d. 1325), Delhi's renowned Sufi shaikh, characterized Turks as rude, bellicose and vain, reflecting a view, prevalent among many native Persians of the day, that Turks were uncultured boors who had illegitimately monopolized power and privilege.[53] Such animosities were amplified by the asymmetrical power relations between ethnic Turks and Persians, often depicted in the literature as 'men of the sword' and 'men of the pen' respectively. The latter had inherited a deep attachment to the nobility of blood and hereditary authority, whether in the form of landed aristocracies or dynastic kingship. And yet, as writers employed in the sultanate's secretarial establishment, Persians found themselves having to serve powerful Turkish commanders who, as slaves, were anything but high-born. Legally, in fact, they were only commodities.

Moreover, not all ethnic Turks were military slaves, as streams of free-born Turks also flowed into India following repeated Mongol devastations of their Central Asian homelands. Nor were all the commanders, whether slave or free-born, ethnic Turks. Some had come from the interior of Iran, others from the oasis towns of Khurasan and Central Asia. And others were Khalaji

tribesmen, humble pastoralists from southern Afghanistan. We also hear of remnants of north India's old military aristocracy – men described as *thakur*s and *rana*s – who served in the sultanate's armed forces, and of other Indians promoted even to the rank of senior slaves of the sultan. Muslims of the early sultanate were also divided along religious lines. While patronizing clerics of both the Shafi'i and Hanafi legal traditions, Iltutmish marginalized charismatic Sufi shaikhs whose popularity among commoners might have posed a threat to the court's authority. This was because many rural Muslims felt a closer bond to Sufi shaikhs who had no formal connection with the court than they did to state-appointed clerics who held high offices, much less to ethnically alien slave commanders posted in their regions.[54]

In addition, Sultan Iltutmish, for all his rhetoric of being India's sole legitimate Muslim ruler, continued to issue coins with the old bull-and-horseman motif and a Sanskritized form of his name and title: *Suratana Śri Samsadina*, the latter referring to his given name, Shams al-Din. He also enlarged Delhi's Qutb mosque by three times in order to accommodate the many immigrants from beyond the Khyber who had flocked to Delhi during his reign. And he added three storeys to the city's famous minaret, the Qutb Minar. Notably, he placed a seven-metre iron pillar in the centre of the mosque's oldest courtyard, on a direct axis with its main prayer chamber. Originally installed in a Vishnu temple to announce the military victories of a fourth- or fifth-century Indian king, the pillar was now associated with Iltutmish and his own victories. In transplanting the pillar in this way, the sultan broke with Islamic architectural conventions while conforming to Indian political traditions. For in 1164, within living memory of Iltutmish's installation of the Vishnu pillar in Delhi's great mosque, Vigraharaja IV Chauhan (r. 1150–64) recorded his own conquests on the same stone pillar on which the emperor Ashoka had published an edict back in the third century BC.[55]

Iltutmish's death in 1236 plunged the sultanate into another crisis of governance. The issue, again, was whether the state would continue to be run by slaves (or former slaves), as had been the case in the days of Muhammad Ghuri, Aibek and Iltutmish himself, or whether it would become a hereditary monarchy on the Persian model, with Iltutmish the dynastic founder. The sultan clearly intended the latter outcome, and in fact four of his children did

succeed to the throne. However, whereas most of Iltutmish's senior slaves remained loyal to the late sultan's offspring owing to their long association with the court, the loyalty of his junior slaves – younger men more recently recruited for royal service – was more dubious. Several months after Iltutmish's eldest son, Rukn al-Din, acceded to the throne, junior slaves deposed him and replaced him with his sister, Raziyya. Much admired by modern historians as the only Indian woman to rule over Delhi until Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (d. 1984), Sultana Raziyya (r. 1236–40), despite adopting the dress and persona of a male, failed to overcome the same opposition that her elder brother had faced. In 1240 her father's junior slaves deposed and replaced her with another brother, Bahram Shah, who lasted several years before being replaced by Rukn al-Din's son, 'Ala al-Din Mas'ud Shah. He, too, reigned two years before being replaced in 1246 by yet another of Iltutmish's sons, Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (r. 1246–66). By this time most of Iltutmish's senior slaves had died off, and a new cohort of slaves had emerged who were loyal only to their own patrons, whether slave or free, and not necessarily to the family of Iltutmish.[56]

As a mode of governance, then, the institution of hereditary monarchy, launched so hopefully by Iltutmish, fared little better than had that of elite slavery. In fact, what preserved Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud on the throne for two decades was not his strength of character, but dissensions among the remaining corps of military slaves and, more importantly, the growing influence of one exceptionally powerful slave, Ulugh Khan. A Central Asian Turk who had been purchased and brought to India towards the end of Iltutmish's reign, Ulugh Khan would eventually rise to the throne himself as Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban. But first, during the twenty years of Nasir al-Din's reign, he served as the sultan's deputy, or 'viceroy' (*na'ib*), the virtual power behind the throne.[57] In order to enhance his personal clout, Ulugh Khan recruited his own corps of Turkish slaves, supplemented by a large body of free Afghans. This further complicated an already socially complex ruling class, as high-born Persian-speaking 'men-of-the-pen' tended to stereotype Afghans as fierce, uncultured brutes, much as they had earlier stereotyped ethnic Turks. Yet Ulugh Khan's policy of creating a personal support base composed of uprooted outsiders was hardly unique in the history of the Delhi sultanate. Empowering people of humble origins and

placing them in contexts alien to their social background ensured their dependence on their masters. As a Central Asian Turk who himself had experienced the life of a deracinated outsider in the court of Delhi, Ulugh Khan clearly understood the merits of this strategy.

In 1266 Nasir al-Din died, and Ulugh Khan, who may well have had a hand in his master's demise, rose to power as Sultan Balban (r. 1266–87). Many themes from Iltutmish's reign were now repeated: a high-ranking slave would manoeuvre himself into a position to seize supreme power; more Mongol invasions would drive streams of traumatized and uprooted Khurasani and Central Asian refugees into India; such invasions would justify keeping the state on a nearly permanent war footing; and Sultan Balban, once secure on the throne in 1266, would endeavour to shake off his slave identity and establish a dynasty. But in this he proved no more successful than his former master. His first son and chosen successor predeceased the sultan by several years, having died fighting the Mongols. Balban then selected as his successor his second son, Bughra Khan, whom he had appointed governor of Bengal. But on the sultan's demise in 1287, Bughra Khan preferred to rule that distant and ever-rebellious province as an independent king rather than involve himself in Delhi's affairs. In the end, Balban was succeeded by Bughra Khan's son and grandson, but the two together lasted only three years before a clan of outsiders, the Khalajis, swept aside the short-lived house of Balban and established a new dynasty that would rule the sultanate from 1290 to 1320.

Balban's reign saw the perennial tension between elite slavery and hereditary monarchy come to a head. He continued to recruit elite slaves, whom he appointed as governors and military commanders, but this only perpetuated an institution that he otherwise sought to replace by grooming his sons to succeed him. Even though he preferred to have his own bloodline continue in royal succession, he could not relinquish the strategic advantage of having a body of kinless outsiders wholly dependent upon his patronage. But in the end, it was the slave institution that ultimately disappeared, and here, too, Balban's actions played a role. With the dying-off of the senior slaves who, like himself, had formerly served Iltutmish, Balban allowed the children of those slaves to inherit the offices of their fathers. They did so, moreover, as free men. Despite their 'low' social origins, some even took on the pretensions of high-born aristocrats. But by this time the core rationale of

the slave system had become irredeemably eroded. By default, after Balban's reign the Delhi sultanate would be ruled as a hereditary monarchy under a succession of dynastic houses.

Balban's most lasting legacy was to extend the sultanate's authority not only to urban centres beyond Delhi, but into the north Indian countryside too. As regional commanders sought to consolidate their individual power bases in the provinces – either as agents of Delhi's authority, or as independent actors seeking protection *from* that authority – they inevitably made alliances with local chieftains and other remnants of India's old ruling aristocracy, including the latter's dependants. This had the effect of simultaneously indigenizing and deepening the roots of Delhi's authority in rural areas. Balban also enlisted woodcutters to accompany his military campaigns, in order to clear the thick forests between the Jamuna and the Ganges. In this he aimed both to remove the physical cover of suspected rebels and to open up new lands for arable agriculture, which in turn expanded the agrarian economy and the state's revenue base. Finally, the sultan recruited Afghans from beyond the Khyber and resettled them on the newly reclaimed forest lands. These policies encouraged the emergence of rural networks of commercial exchange that linked the countryside more tightly with urban centres. Such market towns, or *qasbah*s, would provide the true foundation of the sultanate, firmly rooting it in India's economy, society and culture. By the early fourteenth century, the areas most directly affected by Balban's forest-clearing operations had become so prosperous that their revenues were reserved for the state, and not entrusted to nobles.[58]

Further deepening the sultanate's moral authority were the activities of Sufi shaikhs who comprised the informal ranks of Muslim piety in thirteenth-century north India. Many such men had joined the tide of migrants who, dislodged from their homelands in Khurasan or Central Asia, arrived in India from the 1220s on. By mid-century, mystical fraternities centred on the lodges of charismatic shaikhs had begun to appear throughout north India, especially in areas distant from Delhi. Among the more illustrious names were Jalal al-Din Tabrizi (d. 1244/5) in Bengal, Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakar (d. 1265) in the western Punjab, Baha al-Haq Zakaria (d. 1267) in the southern Punjab and Khwaja Gurg (d. 1301) in eastern Uttar Pradesh. Such figures espoused open disdain for the glitter and corruption of this world,

which they viewed as a moral disaster zone to be transcended by arduous austerities and mystical practices. Furthermore, members of Delhi's court and conservative clerics harboured suspicions about men who claimed esoteric knowledge and a special relationship with God, both of which were denied to ordinary humans. Conflicting political positions also divided the court and such Sufis. Despite their possession of worldly might, sultans could only envy the popularity of charismatic shaikhs who were widely believed to possess miraculous powers such as the ability to predict the future, cure the sick or provide physical protection to travellers in certain regions. Especially after 1258, when Mongol troops razed Baghdad and abolished the Abbasid caliphate, such shaikhs seemed to offer religious direction in a world that otherwise lacked a moral centre. In effect, they provided a spiritual counterpart to the political safe haven that the Delhi sultanate had given uprooted refugees arriving from beyond the Khyber.

At the centre of power in Delhi, meanwhile, conservative thinkers such as Ziya al-Din Barani (d. *c*.1357) complained that Hindus of that city enjoyed a social status as high as or even higher than Muslims:

> And in their Capital [Delhi], Muslim kings not only allow but are pleased with the fact that infidels, polytheists, idol-worshippers and cow-dung [*sargin*] worshippers build houses like palaces, wear clothes of brocade and ride Arab horses caparisoned with gold and silver ornaments … They take Musalmans into their service and make them run before their horses; the poor Musalmans beg of them at their doors; and in the capital of Islam … they are called *rai*s [great rulers], *rana*s [minor rulers], *thakur*s [warriors], *saha*s [bankers], *mehta*s [clerks], and *pandit*s [priests].

He then considered non-Muslim religious practices under sultanate rule:

> In their capital [Delhi] and in the cities of the Musalmans the customs of infidelity are openly practiced, idols are publicly worshipped … they also adorn their idols and celebrate their rejoicings during their festivals with the beat of drums and *dhol*s [a two-sided drum] and with singing and dancing. By merely paying a few *tanka*s and the poll-tax [*jizya*] they are able to continue the traditions of infidelity[59]

Barani's pointed remarks allow several inferences. First, under the sultanate's rule high-status Indians continued to enjoy their traditional social privileges, and Hindu religious practices flourished. Second, conservative members of Delhi's Muslim intelligentsia were appalled at such things. And third, by adopting a pragmatic live-and-let-live policy regarding religious pluralism, rulers prioritized socio-political stability over narrowly interpreted religious dictates. That is to say, sultans ignored the rantings of conservative intellectuals such as Barani.

It is more difficult to know how the sultanate's non-Muslim subjects assessed their rulers and their claims to legitimate authority. But clues can be found in contemporary inscriptions that were *not* patronized by the sultanate, or even known to its officers. A striking example is in Sanskrit and is dated 1276, in the middle of Balban's reign, recording the construction of a well in Palam, not far from Delhi. The state took no part in authorizing or financing the well, which had been patronized by a Hindu landholder, Thakur Udadhara, to benefit local villagers and to accumulate religious merit for himself. He and the inscription's Brahmin author, Pandit Yogishvara, therefore had no discernible motive for flattering ruling authorities. In any event, since the inscription was composed in Sanskrit and not in the court language of Persian, it was presumably not intended to be read by government officials. It is therefore likely that its references to ruling authorities reflected the candid views of the patron and the village community for which the well had been built.

The text conformed to a format found in inscriptions sponsored by Hindu courts throughout India. Pandit Yogishvara preceded the particulars regarding the well with a flowery panegyric to the reigning monarch identical to those that Brahmins had for centuries been using for their Hindu royal patrons. He mentions not only the reigning sovereign, Sultan Balban, but the entire line of rulers, both Turkish and Indian, who had reigned over the Delhi region in the preceding several centuries:

> Salutation to Ganapati. Om. Salutation to Śiva …
>
> The land of Hariyanaka [upper India] was first enjoyed by the Tomaras and then by the Cauhanas. It is now ruled by the Shaka ['Scythian', or Central Asian] kings. First came Shahabadina [Shihab

al-Din (i.e. Muhammad) Ghuri], then Khudavadina [Qutb al-Din Aibek], master of the earth …

In his [Sultan Balban's] kingdom, abounding in benign rule, extending from Gauda [Bengal] to Gajjana [Ghazni], from the Dravida region [south India] and from the Setubandha [to the north] where the entire region was filled with inner content, the earth bore vernal floral charms produced by the rays of the innumerable precious stones and corals which dropped on it from the crowns of the bent heads of the rulers who came from every direction for his service. He, whose legions daily traversed for a bath the earth both eastward to the confluence of the Ganges with the [Bay of Bengal] and westward to the confluence of the Indus with the sea … The dust raised by the hooves of whose cavalry marching ahead of his army stops the enemies in front.

He, the central gem in the pearl necklace of the seven-sea-girt earth, Nayaka Śri Hammira Gayasidina [Ghiyath al-Din Balban], the king and the emperor reigns supreme … When he went forth on a military expedition, the Gaudas [Bengalis] abdicated their glory; the Andhras through fear sought the shelter of holes, the Keralas forsook their pleasures; the Karnatas hid themselves in caves; the Maharashtras gave up their places; the Gurjjaras resigned their vigour …

The earth being now supported by this sovereign, Śesha, altogether forsaking his duty of supporting the weight of the globe, has betaken himself to the great bed of Vishnu; and Vishnu himself, for the sake of protection, taking Lakshmi on his breast, and relinquishing all worries, sleeps in peace on the ocean of milk.[60]

By 1276, Hindu subjects living near Delhi had evidently integrated the sultanate's ruling authority into their historical memory and their understanding of political legitimacy. As masters of north India, the Tomara dynasty (early eleventh century to 1152) was followed by the Chauhans (late tenth century to 1192), who were seamlessly followed by the Turks (Scythians), namely Muhammad Ghuri, Aibek and their successors. Balban himself is entitled 'Nayaka Śri Hammira' – *nayaka* being Sanskrit for a powerful lord. The author sees no sharp break, much less a civilizational rupture, between Indian and Turkish rule. One dynasty simply succeeds

another, as Balban's reign is smoothly accommodated within conventional Sanskrit tropes of powerful and worthy rulers. The author's hyperbole regarding the sultan's success in smashing his rivals could have been applied to any number of Indian monarchs of that day or earlier, while the sultan's sovereign domain is generously (though inaccurately) said to have extended from Bengal to eastern Afghanistan, and deep into south India. Most poignant is the statement that under Balban's benign rule India enjoyed such stability and contentment that even Vishnu – the great god who appears periodically in various incarnations to rescue human affairs in times of distress – could sleep peacefully on an ocean of milk, without a care in the world.

The inscription's bombastic rhetoric praising Sultan Balban takes us full-circle to the beginning of this chapter, which discussed Rajendra Chola's 1022 attack on Bengal. Two and a half centuries before Pandit Yogishvara spoke of 'the crowns of the bent heads of the rulers who came from every direction for his service' when referring to Balban, a Tamil poet had described Rajendra's victories in terms of 'his lotus feet [all along] being worshipped by the kings of high birth who had been subdued [by him].' Rhetorically, the two statements are virtually interchangeable. Their only notable difference is that, whereas the Tamil poet was a paid servant of the Chola court, Pandit Yogishvara had no official connection with the Delhi sultanate. From this 'worm's-eye' perspective of Delhi's ruling class, it meant nothing that the sultan was Muslim and Yogishvara a Hindu; what mattered was that the people who produced this text viewed their rulers in Delhi as legitimate and protective.

From the vantage point of a more distant, bird's-eye perspective, however, the inscription suggests how far the Persian and the Sanskrit worlds had already begun to overlap and even penetrate each other. Even though Balban's chroniclers might clothe his regime in a Persianate discourse of worldly power or in an Islamic one of pious rectitude, unbeknownst to the court, and located only twelve kilometres from his palace, the sultan and his regime were perceived – literally inscribed – within a Sanskrit discourse of worldly power and moral authority.

CONCLUSION

In assessing the impact of the conquest on north India's subject population, one must distinguish the rhetoric of conquest from the practices of conquerors and rulers. Many contemporary chroniclers were themselves immigrants or their near-descendants, who had been traumatized by the destructive invasions of their native Central Asia by pagan Mongols. They consequently looked to Delhi as a safe haven for themselves and for Islam.[61] They also trumpeted a narrative of Muslim invaders triumphantly vanquishing a mass of Indian infidels. But such rhetoric stood at odds with the practice of the Delhi sultanate's rulers, who needed to govern a huge population accustomed to their own ways of managing affairs. Overruling objections from their more conservative Muslim advisers, they followed the policies of their Ghaznavid and Ghurid predecessors by integrating defeated Indian elites into their political systems and aligning their coinage with indigenous numismatic traditions. Although Brahmins who had been attached to the courts or temples of north India's defeated ruling houses lost their institutional bases, the many who were not so affiliated continued their traditional vocation as local priests. As long as sultanate officials were seen as preserving the social order, Brahmins such as Pandit Yogishvara appear to have given their assent to Delhi's rule.

The most immediate consequence of the conquest was that the larger dynastic houses of northern India, together with their courts and the temples that housed their patron deities, were either annihilated or assimilated to the new order, depending on the extent to which they resisted the new dispensation. Second, attacks by Bakhtiyar Khalaji on large monastic establishments in present-day Bihar (i.e. Odantapuri, Vikramaśila and Nalanda) hastened a long-term decline of Buddhism in eastern India, a decline that had already taken place in the rest of South Asia.[62] As early as the seventh century Chinese pilgrims had noted a drop in the number of monasteries in Bihar and Bengal, the centre of India's once-vibrant Buddhist tradition and home of the historic Buddha (d. *c*.400 BC).[63] From the seventh to the twelfth centuries these monasteries continued to shrink in number, and became increasingly scholastic in nature, some of them accommodating thousands of monks. Whereas Indian monasteries had originally relied on the Buddhist lay population for material support, over many centuries the laity had become progressively absorbed in Hindu society, while the Buddha

himself became popularly transformed into an incarnation of Vishnu. Detached, then, from lay support, the great academic monasteries of Bihar and Bengal grew increasingly dependent on royal patronage and on income from large, accumulated land holdings.[64] In the early thirteenth century these remaining Buddhist institutions received a crippling blow from invading Turks, who probably viewed them simply as big landowners with no significant lay constituency. Within several hundred years they would be largely abandoned.[65]

Third, the Turkish conquest and the advent of the Delhi sultanate opened up new opportunities for north India's merchant communities. The sultanate's commercial integration with the Middle East greatly augmented international trade, thereby expanding the reach of merchants at every level, from long-distance brokers to local retailers in *qasbah*s. Such trade certainly existed before the Turkish conquest, as is suggested by the image of Śiva's trident on Ghurid coins struck in Firuzkuh during the 1160s.[66] But from the end of the twelfth century, when the Ghurids integrated north India, Afghanistan and Khurasan under a single political umbrella, India's trade with the lands beyond the Khyber increased exponentially. Most importantly, with the consolidation of the Delhi sultanate in Iltutmish's reign, silver no longer left India as plunder, as had been the case in early Ghaznavid times. Since Delhi's rulers now had a stake in enriching their realm, they eagerly resumed normal trade with Central Asia and the Middle East, as a result of which precious metals once again flowed in from those lands. This allowed the sultanate to mint and circulate unprecedented levels of silver-based coinage, most notably under Iltutmish, who established a stable currency based on the silver *tanka*, to which the modern rupee can be traced.[67] The increased amount of circulating cash not only facilitated the pace and volume of commercial transactions, but enabled the state to elaborate a ranked political hierarchy.

Fourth, the establishment of the Delhi sultanate opened up India to a rapid influx of Persian culture, with far-reaching consequences. By a coincidence of some note, the period of Ghaznavid and Ghurid contact with India, stretching from *c*.1000 to 1206, synchronized with what the British Orientalist E. G. Browne calls the 'Persian Renaissance'. By that he refers to the flowering of Persian literary activity seen first in Central Asia and

Khurasan from the tenth century, and then across the entire Persian-speaking world, reaching its zenith in eleventh-century Ghazni, in eastern Afghanistan.[68] It was in tenth-century Central Asia under the patronage of the Ghaznavids' parent dynasty, the Samanid rulers of Bukhara, that modern Persian first achieved literary status. Under them the poet Rudaki (d. 940/41), celebrated as the father of modern Persian literature, penned thousands of verses. The Samanids also patronized the historian Bal'ami (d. 974), who adapted for the Persian-speaking world an abridged version of the *Universal History* of Tabari (d. 923), who had previously chronicled the early Muslim centuries in Arabic. And in the dynasty's twilight years, the epic poet Firdausi began writing the *Shah-nama* ('Book of Kings'). Completed in 1010 under Mahmud of Ghazni's patronage, this vast literary canvas glorified pre-Islamic Iranian history and mythology, even giving Alexander the Great Persian descent. If, then, Bal'ami had appropriated for the Persianate world the legacy of early Islam, Firdausi did the same for the legacies of both pre-Islamic Iran and Greek imperialism.[69] He also limited the *Shah-nama*'s Arabic vocabulary to just 4 per cent or 5 per cent of the total, a move that, given the epic poem's immense popularity for generations of Persian-speakers, contributed greatly to consolidating the modern Persian language.[70] Finally, the *Shah-nama* helped define political and cultural ideals across the Persophone world. In India, the epic would be foundational for newly independent sultans, who commissioned royal editions of the text or reworked imitations of it for their libraries.

What enabled this Persian Renaissance was the political economy of courtly patronage. Across Central Asia and the Iranian plateau, artists and literati from the tenth century on circulated from court to court along well-travelled networks that over time expanded in reach and increased in density, giving the Persian world its institutional infrastructure. Just as these ambitious and talented men sought livelihoods from courtly patronage, rulers desired the prestige and cultural capital that patronizing gifted literary or artistic luminaries could bring to their courts. By the early eleventh century Mahmud of Ghazni, awash with silver plundered from India, was attracting to his court the brightest stars in the galaxy of Persian literati. These included, in addition to Firdausi, such celebrated poets as 'Unsuri (d. 1040), Farrukhi Sistani (d. 1037), Manuchehri (d. 1040), and the first Persianized

intellectual to engage with Indian culture in all its dimensions, the polymath al-Biruni (d. 1048). Slightly later Sana'i (d. 1131), the first of the great mystical poets in Persian literature, was patronized by one of Mahmud's royal successors in Ghazni, Bahram Shah.[71] Mahmud also brought back to Ghazni entire libraries of Persian literature plundered from his conquests in Iran. Importantly, he created the position of official court poet laureate (*amir al-shu'ara*).[72] Continued by his successors, this office helped secure the nexus between Persian literature and court culture.

Although the Ghaznavids' last capital and centre of Persian patronage had shifted from eastern Afghanistan to Lahore in the later twelfth century, by the early thirteenth century Delhi was India's pre-eminent magnet, attracting Persianate literati, artists and artisans. This resulted, in part, from Iltutmish's defeat of Muhammad of Ghur's former slaves in the bitter struggle over hegemony in north India. Soon thereafter, and continuing throughout the middle decades of the thirteenth century, the Mongol catastrophe in Central Asia and Khurasan drove thousands of uprooted scholars, soldiers, administrators, Sufis and artisans into the welcoming arms of the fledgling Delhi sultanate. By then a substantial canon of Persian literary works had already emerged[73] that would now spread throughout South Asia, which soon became a major centre in its own right for the production, and not just the reception, of Persianate culture. Over the course of the next six centuries, India – not Iran – would become the world's principal centre for the production of Persian dictionaries.[74] The first major anthology of Persian poetry would be compiled not in Central Asia or the Iranian plateau, but in southern Punjab at the court of Muhammad of Ghur's former slave, Nasir al-Din Qubacha.[75]

In its earliest encounter with South Asia and the Sanskrit world, then, Persianate learning was brought to India in the vessel of courtly patronage. This would soon change, however, as Persianate culture engaged more closely with that of Sanskrit and with India's vernacular communities. At the same time, even if the Delhi sultanate was never the unified monolith that its chroniclers might have imagined, the state established by Aibek and consolidated by Iltutmish planted in India the *idea* of the sultanate as a new and powerful system of governance. This idea would prove to be contagious,

as various actors sought to replicate it in regions very far from Delhi. It is that story to which we now turn.