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The idea of the medieval in the writing of South Asian history: contexts, methods and politics

The concept of the ‘medieval’ in South Asia has been a long and contested one. From its origins among colonial administrators to its present-day habitation in educational institutions, the study of the medieval in South Asia has been vexed by issues of chronological uncertainty, obscurantism, communal distortion and heavy model building. Though introduced to India during the colonial encounter, the idea of the medieval, and the periodization upon which it rests, quickly became essential chronological attributes of the nation and the presupposition of its sovereignty.¹ Recently, after weathering the storms of anthropological civilizationalism, ethno-history and subalternism, South Asia before colonialism has seen renewed interest. This has in part been connected to innovative work in eighteenth-century history and the related assertion of an ‘early modern’ period for South Asia. But the substantive relations between this epoch and the medieval are anything but clear. We find ourselves in the curious position where medieval South Asia for many historians ends some two hundred years after when for others the early modern is thought to have begun!²

It may be useful to begin with the issue of terminology. Because terms like ‘medieval’ came to be used in writing about South Asia as part of the wider adoption of western historical categories during the colonial period, it may seem tempting, following the trend of some recent critique, to question their relevance for understanding the South Asian past. Such anxieties seem to have been in the minds of those who conceived of the first truly comparativist journal of medieval history in New Delhi in the late 1990s, the *Medieval History Journal*. Contributors to its inaugural issue asked whether the category was a ‘tyrannous construct’, or an ‘alien conceptual hegemony’ when applied to non-European societies.³ While critical reflection on the usefulness of particular temporal

¹See, for the European context, K. Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008).

²Personal communication, Dr Sudipta Sen, University of California Davis.

³See T. Reuter, ‘Medieval: another tyrannous construct’, *Medieval History Journal*, 1, 1 (1998), 25–46 and H. Mukhia ‘“Medieval India”: an alien conceptual hegemony?’, *ibid.*, 91–106.

categories for writing history is a necessary and even welcome part of any living field of history, the tenor of recent discussion in South Asia has been altogether different. There has been an uneven but persistent tendency among some to argue that because 'western' historical categories emerged from the development of European history, that their application to the South Asian experience is at best inappropriate and at worst Eurocentric. There are, of course, weaker and stronger versions of this position, with some scholars advancing more or less considered alternatives like 'middle' period South Asia, and others eschewing the terminology altogether.⁴

To date, however, no meaningful alternative temporal framework has been put forward. Too often such arguments have served simply to delegitimize particular forms of analysis without taking the risk of suggesting viable alternatives. At another level, I would suggest that 'external' analytical frameworks are not at all bad in themselves, but in some ways the very life-blood of historical and critical enquiry. Every interpretation is ultimately external to the interpreted object, and in the case of the past our conceptions are perhaps doomed to exteriority of the present – from this perspective, that there can be no 'insider' framework for the past. The relevant question, instead, is how particular temporal maps may serve as more or less useful explanatory devices for understanding the past.

It is notable, however, that the epochal divisions of Indian historical writing – terms like 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern' – have carried burdens that are at once both heavy and light. On the one hand, they remain redolent with association and have served to structure a certain sort of historical discourse – that associated with the 'official' histories written by professional historians and embodied in the state educational system. Yet the ideological content of these categories has generally weakened over time, so that they now largely (and perhaps appropriately) serve merely as temporal place-markers. Moreover, these discourses themselves have had notably superficial consequences, and seem to have little or no connection to wide swathes of perceptions about the past that are current in much of South Asia. For our purposes, it is notable, I believe, that the term *madhyakalin* or 'medieval' has little ideological valence outside the universities.

Recent highly charged public discourses about the persecution and genocide of Hindus under Muslim rule, and the destruction of temples, notwithstanding – and these discourses, it should be noted, do not generally depend on any notion of the 'medieval' – there seems to be little sedimented ideological ballast for the concept in any meaningful capacity. The only exception might be the invocation of terms like 'feudal' and 'semi-feudal' in the rural politics of post-independence India. This is not the case in Europe, where until recently the category of the medieval had arguably formed a 'critical component of modern self-definition' – and even now forms an ideological place of

⁴An extreme version of this position has been put forward by Ashis Nandy who has argued that history itself, in comparison with myth and other ways of knowing the past, has been complicit in the violence and exploitation produced by modernity. See A. Nandy, 'History's forgotten doubles', *History and Theory*, XXXIV, 2 (1995), 44–66. While few

would deny that a historicist framework was introduced in India with the coming of Europeans, and while it is of course true that 'history' as a discipline was linked, and even integral to various 'Orientalist' representational registers connected to forms of social dominance, it would be grossly reductive to assume this was its sole importance.

'escape' in popular culture.⁵ In South Asia, filmic and popular invocations of the past provide no stable referent to the professional historian's 'medieval' period, presenting instead an often romantically infused and generically Islamicate world.⁶ So it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to begin an undergraduate class through an unpacking of what is already known from popular culture or any 'inherited' cultural baggage regarding the medieval as such in South Asia.⁷ This is all to say that the idea of medieval India, perhaps like some aspects of the modern itself, remains confined to very limited institutional spheres in South Asia. Yet the actual 'content' of medieval history has often in South Asia formed part of a wider and more popular cultural imagination which has on occasion become entangled with the subject of this history, academic history writing.

PLACING THE MEDIEVAL

Colonial scholars and administrators in the latter half of the nineteenth century were the first to subject South Asia to modern historicist scrutiny. Using coins, inscriptions and chronicles, they determined the dates and identities of numerous kings and dynasties. From the 1930s, with the rise of nationalist sentiment, South Asian scholars began to write about their own past, in many ways continuing and refining the research agendas they inherited from colonial historians. The particular configurations of colonial and early nationalist historiography of South Asia have proved immensely consequential for subsequent generations of historians.⁸ Not only did this historiography value certain types of evidence, particularly Indic language epigraphy, Persian chronicles and archaeology (while at the same time devaluing others like literature and religious texts), it set some of the enduring thematic and topical parameters which have shaped the course of the field. The initial focus was on the careers and personalities of rulers or the genius of races as the key causative forces in history, but eventually dynastic history became the dominant mode of writing about the past.

To make sense of the myriad dynasties and lineages discovered in the sources, Orientalists, company administrators and historians had divided the past either into civilizational ages, including the concept of the 'golden age', or into the apparently more descriptive categories of 'Hindu', 'Muslim' and 'British'. Monstuart Elphinstone in his 1841 *History of India*, following Mill before him, divided India neatly into 'Hindu' and 'Mahometan' periods, reasoning that India's 'sequestered' ways were for the first time truly disturbed by the coming of Islam to the subcontinent.⁹ By the early decades of the twentieth century, both colonial and nationalist historians had begun to map the tripartite

⁵See J. M. Ganim, *Medievalism and Orientalism: Three Essays on Literature, Architecture and Cultural Identity* (London, 2008), 4–5.

⁶See U. Mukhopadhyay, *The Medieval in Film: Representing a Contested Time on Indian Screen (1920s–1960s)* (Delhi, 2013), 1–5.

⁷A strategy usefully explored in European history by M. Bull, *Thinking Medieval: An Introduction to the Study of the Middle Ages* (London, 2005), 7–41.

⁸Discussed at length in R. Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations* (Delhi, 1978); R. Thapar, *Early India: from Origins to AD 1300* (Harmondsworth, 2002), 1–36; and R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990).

⁹M. Elphinstone, *A History of India*, 2nd edn (London, 1843), 497.

scheme of 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern' on to the latter framework. The rise of nationalist sentiment meant that a number of complex ideological inflections came to bear on this periodization. Among these was a tendency to construct, drawing on earlier Orientalist scholarship, a 'glorious age', which acted as an originary moment in historical narratives. While there were differences among writers as to what empire or sub-period should hold this honour (typically the Mauryan or Gupta empires), an inevitable corollary of this idea was an ensuing period of political, economic and cultural decline, deemed as a 'dark', 'ominous' or, at best, 'difficult', period of national history. For many mainstream and right of centre scholars, the Turkish conquests and establishment of the Delhi Sultanate between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, seen in historiography to herald a 'Muslim' or 'medieval' period, provided a convenient watershed. In his preface to volume five of the twelve-volume avowedly nationalist *History and Culture of the Indian People*, K. M. Munshi proposed an even earlier date for the commencement of medieval India: 'AD 1000 was a fateful year for India. In that year, Mahmud of Ghazni first invaded it. That event, in my opinion, divides Ancient from Medieval India.'¹⁰ Underlying such epochal ruminations was the growing problem of communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims in British India and the consolidation of a geographical imagination of national territorial integrity for pre-modern India which excluded (problematically) the peoples of Central Asia as 'foreigners'. The Turkish campaigns in northern India thus became a violation of Indian territorial sovereignty – an 'invasion' – and Muslim rule inaugurated a 'dark' period from the days of glorious Hindu rule. More secular or inclusive versions of this approach typically attributed medieval decline not to the rise of Muslim power in South Asia, but to the development of a kind of national malaise, which had taken root in India before the Turkish conquests. Describing the situation in India on the eve of the Turkish conquests in his *The Discovery of India*, Nehru says that 'there was decline all along the line – intellectual, philosophical, political, in technique and methods of warfare, in knowledge of and contacts with the outside world, and there was a growth of local sentiments and feudal, small-group feelings at the expense of the larger conception of India as a whole'.¹¹ Among historians there emerged a kind of common sense about the attributes of medieval India, one voiced perhaps most emblematically by Niharranjan Ray in his General President's Address to the Indian History Congress in Patiala in 1967, where he speculated on a 'medieval factor' in Indian history, eventually including a variegated, but well-familiar, list of attributes:

supremacy of the scriptures and religious texts; subordination of reason and spirit of enquiry to faith and acceptance of authority; absolute obedience to priests and preachers; regionalism in territorial vision and in the pattern of political action; regionalism in art, language, literature, and script; relative paucity of secular literature; preponderance of commentarial thinking and writing over the creative; relative disregard for science and technology; proliferation of religious cults and sects; multiplication of gods and goddesses,

¹⁰K. M. Munshi, 'Preface' in R. C. Majumdar (ed.), *The Struggle for Empire*, vol. 5 of *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (Bombay, 1957), viii.

¹¹Jawaharlal Nehru, *The Discovery of India* (Delhi, repr. 1985), 226.

and increasing conventionalization of iconic representations of them; accentuation of sectarian rivalries and jealousies; proliferation of the administrative machinery and extension and multiplication of bureaucracy; feudalization of land-ownership and fragmentation; relative dependence on land and agriculture in preference to trade, commerce and industry; preponderance of natural economy over what is known to economists as money economy; and a fatalistic and fearful attitude toward life; pre-disposition toward the supernatural and pre-determined destiny.¹²

Here we have in condensed form the entire gamut of stereotypes and associations that one could hope to find on the subject – one implicitly held by the modernizing elites of India's first decades of independence. Yet despite the apparently modern, rationalist and secular presumptions of such elaborations, and the fact that intellectuals and historians alike rejected the reductiveness of the Hindu–Muslim–British periodization, when religiously marked periods were finally abandoned for the terminology of 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern' in post-independence university history departments, chronological divisions ensured not only a persistent identification of 'ancient' with 'Hindu–Buddhist,' and 'medieval' with 'Muslim', but a continued association of ancient India with Hindu glory and medieval India with decline under Afghans and Turks.

Empirically, there were, of course, uncomfortable aspects of this periodization, particularly around its edges. The centuries between the decline of the Gupta empire (325–550 CE) and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth century, for example – a period of almost 700 years – formed an awkward interim, when the proliferation of numerous royal dynasties throughout the subcontinent could hardly be cast as a period of Hindu glory or 'national unity', yet was before the commencement of Sultanate rule – being at once 'post-ancient' but 'pre-medieval'. As early as the 1920s both British and Indian scholars had conceived of a 'Hindu Medieval India' to resolve this problem.¹³ There were geographical problems, as well. The model was seriously biased toward north India, for at the very onset of an apparently Muslim-dominated 'medieval' India (or alternatively, at the nadir of 'Hindu medieval India') south India seemed to witness its day in the sun, with the powerful Hindu empires of the Cholas, Pandyas, Calukyas and Sangamas. The chronological and regional applicability of the idea of medieval India was thus fairly unstable. Yet even as these qualifications and refinements were accounted for, academic departments were consolidated and established in Indian universities around the broad divisions of 'ancient' and 'medieval', implicitly understood as Buddhist/Hindu and Muslim, respectively. Nevertheless, research continued in post-Gupta history using Sanskrit and other Indic language sources, conceiving of itself as distinct from the departments of 'ancient' history where it was institutionally situated.

¹²Niharranjan Ray, 'General President's Address', *Indian History Congress: Proceedings of the Twenty-ninth Session, Patiala 1967* (Patna, 1968), 28.

¹³See, for example, V. Smith, *Oxford History of India* (Clarendon, 1919), which includes a

section on 'Medieval Hindu kingdoms' within the larger division of 'Ancient and Hindu India'; see also C. V. Vaidya, *History of Mediaeval Hindu India: Being a History of India from 600 to 1200 AD*, 3 vols (Poona, 1921–6).

EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA

The history of pre-Sultanate India from the 1930s was dominated by dynastic and regional historians, often of a generically nationalist orientation, who became the 'founding fathers' of the field. The more prominent of these, like R. C. Majumdar and K. A. Nilakanta Sastri, produced both regional and national histories of the period, and led an entire generation of scholarship energized by the 'historical optimism' of national independence.¹⁴ This generation continued the methods introduced by earlier colonial antiquarians and historians, particularly in their heavy reliance on the evidence of Indic language epigraphy. So important was epigraphy for this field that from the outset nearly all of its most prominent historians were also trained epigraphists. Conversely, some of the greatest epigraphists of the era may be equally counted as historians – figures like D. C. Sircar, V. V. Mirashi and H. V. Trivedi. Together, this generation of historians and epigraphers, many active as late as the 1980s, advanced the field immeasurably by bringing new sources to light and erecting reliable chronologies on to which later historians could write more differentiated forms of history.¹⁵

The late 1950s and 1960s, however, saw the rise of social history, as historians turned to new sorts of evidence and new topics of historical research. The legal, documentary and economic aspects of inscriptions, farmans, court chronicles and revenue records were carefully scrutinized for information on state institutions, political structures, revenue systems and agrarian relations, while archaeology and numismatics were used to gauge levels of trade and economic activity. Marxist scholars led the way in this innovation, proposing 'mode of production' and 'social formation' as analytical models for research.¹⁶ Those working on earlier sources elaborated a theory of 'Indian feudalism'. These scholars argued that the alienation of rights to land revenue from higher to lower levels of political authority, through land grants, a process which began in Gupta times and accelerated afterwards, led to a generally 'feudalized' polity.¹⁷ Archaeological evidence of the decline of many major Gangetic cities after 300 CE was interpreted as part of a wider economic transformation that involved the ruralization and isolation of the economy to the autonomous village.¹⁸ Economic exchange was gradually and substantially demonetized, as coins became scarce, and internal and overseas trade declined. In many ways, Marxists developed a historical model of feudalism which was heavily indebted to particular studies of European history like those of Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch. One of the notable effects

¹⁴R. C. Majumdar was the general editor of *The History and Culture of the Indian People* (London, 1951–74), and author of numerous monographs, including *Hindu Colonies in the Far East* (Calcutta, 1963) and *History of Ancient Bengal* (Calcutta, 1971). K. A. Nilakanta Sastri was similarly prolific and wrote numerous works, including *A History of India* (Madras, 1950); *The Colas* (Madras, 1937); and *History of South India from Prehistoric Times til the Fall of Vijayanagara* (Madras, 1955). Dynastic and regional histories of pre-Sultanate India written during this period are simply too numerous to cite.

¹⁵For two notable examples of later works that extend traditional dynastic history into new directions, see D. Devahuti, *Harsha: A Political Study* (Oxford, 1970) and K. Mohan, *Early Medieval Kashmir, with Special Reference to the Loharas AD 1003–1171* (Delhi, 1981).

¹⁶D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Bombay, 1956); R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* (Calcutta, 1965).

¹⁷*ibid.* and Kosambi, *op. cit.*, 295–405.

¹⁸R. S. Sharma, *Urban Decay in India (300–1300)* (Delhi, 1987).

of the turn to social history and the thesis of 'Indian feudalism' was to accentuate an already perceived distinction between pre- and post-Gupta India. The idea of an 'early' or 'incipient' medieval period from the Gupta empire to the Sultanate was slowly gaining ground.

The theory of Indian 'feudalism' was widely discussed, debated and refined in historical monographs and journals throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and produced a literature which continued well into the last decade.¹⁹ By the late 1970s debates over modes of production, partly driven by the moment of high theory in Marxist social science, climaxed in heated discussions regarding the relevance of 'feudalism' to Indian history.²⁰ By the late 1980s, however, some fundamental assumptions of the feudalist model had been undermined on evidentiary grounds. These empirical challenges included a dispute over the interpretation of the land grants and the supposed urban decay and decline in trade and coinage. It was pointed out early on that the numerous land grants which the feudalists took to represent the alienation of state revenues to political subordinates were in fact usually gifts to religious functionaries, and thus did not contribute to a feudalization of political authority, but rather a system of 'landlordism'.²¹ The theory of urban decay was seriously complicated by the suggestion that the decline of ancient urban centres was accompanied by the growth of denser networks of rural settlements.²² Whereas the urban centres of ancient India were linked 'horizontally' in a thin but geographically dispersed network of regular exchange, those of post-Gupta India seem to have been more rooted in regional context and local exchange networks. Trade did not decline, and new research explored trading organizations and overseas trade.²³ This seriously undermined the feudalist notion of a rural world composed of isolated, self-sufficient villages. And finally, economic historians, using methods different from those of numismatists, argued that coinage in post-Gupta India, while not constituting a great variety of types distinguished by issuing authorities, nevertheless increased in numbers, indicating that the volume of exchange in post-Gupta times was comparable to that of other periods in north Indian history.²⁴

¹⁹The literature is voluminous, but for some key studies, see L. Gopal, *The Economic Life of Northern India, c.700–1200* (Delhi, 1965); K. K. Gopal, *Feudalism in Northern India c.700–1200 CE* (London, 1966); B. N. S. Yadava, 'Immobility and subjection of Indian peasantry in early medieval complex', *Indian Historical Review*, 1, 1 (1974), 18–27; B. N. S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century* (Allahabad, 1973); D. N. Jha (ed.), *The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1987); D. N. Jha (ed.), *Studies in Early Indian Economic History* (Delhi, 1980); R. K. Verma, *Feudal Social Formation in Early Medieval India: A Study of the Kalachuris of Tripuri* (Delhi, 2002). For south India, see M. G. S. Narayanan, *Re-interpretations in South Indian History* (Trivandrum, 1977) and Kesavan Veluthat, *Political Structure of Early Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1993).

²⁰See the special issue 'Feudalism in non-European societies' of the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, XII, 2–3 (1985), and the later collection included in H. Mukhia (ed.), *The Feudalism Debate* (Delhi, 1999).

²¹See D. C. Sircar, 'Indian landlordism and European feudalism', *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems of Ancient and Medieval India* (Delhi, 1974), 13–32.

²²B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Urban centres in early medieval India: an overview' in S. Bhattacharyya and Romila Thapar (eds), *Situating Indian History* (Delhi, 1986). For south India, see R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization: South India 300 BC to AD 1300* (Delhi, 1996).

²³See the later articles in R. Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India* (Delhi, 2001).

²⁴See J. Deyell, *Living without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India* (Delhi, 1990).

The effect of these criticisms was partly to discredit a kind of 'checklist' approach to feudalism adopted by some Marxist historians, where the Indian evidence was simply slotted into received models of historical development from Europe. These debates, however, did not discredit Marxist or social scientific approaches as such. By the end of the 1980s, however, the dominant interpretation of the state in medieval historiography, led by B. D. Chattopadhyaya and Hermann Kulke, came to be known as the 'integrative' or 'processural' model.²⁵ It stressed agrarian expansion, urban transformation, localization and regional state formation as *productive* rather than regressive or fragmenting developments during the putative period of 'Indian feudalism'. The medieval state in these formulations was seen neither as a pre-given entity, as in nationalist scholarship, nor the result of political fragmentation, as in feudalist historiography, but instead as having developed in a 'continuous process from below'. More generally, Chattopadhyaya argued that the transition to 'early medieval' India should not be seen primarily as a 'cessation', 'fragmentation' or 'decline' of existing structures, but instead as positive development of new social phenomena.²⁶ The purported political fragmentation of post-Gupta India was explained as a *proliferation* rather than a devolution of 'state structures'. Integral to such a perspective was the re-evaluation of the early or classical 'state' which had been inherited intact from nationalist historians, who had seen the Mauryan and Gupta empires as strong centralized polities with great territorial reach. These supposedly centralized bureaucratic entities had formed the backdrop against which feudalism was theorized by nationalist and Marxist historiography, as a fragmentation of authority. But revisionist work on the Mauryan empire argued it to be a more nodal and loosely structured entity than earlier scholarship had assumed.²⁷ This meant that the emergence of polities in the peripheral zones of former Mauryan polity, for example, could be seen as new and onward developments 'catalysed' by the Mauryan state rather than the devolving fragments of an earlier central authority. The nationalist claims of a centralized Gupta empire stood on much less firm ground from the outset, and with the statist image of the Mauryas called into question, the Gupta empire came increasingly to be seen as the inauguration of a new political dispensation rather than the final stage of an earlier one. Preoccupations with a golden age of political unity and economic prosperity, usually associated with the ancient empires, were largely abandoned.²⁸

In a series of influential articles Chattopadhyaya argued that early medieval society from Gupta times saw several important socio-economic and political changes – including the increased clearing and settlement of uncultivated lands (often through the deployment of land grants to Brahmins), the growth of networks of nucleated rural settlements, the growth of new political lineages and the transformation of non-state

²⁵B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1994); H. Kulke, 'The early and imperial kingdom: a processural model of integrative state formation in early medieval India' in H. Kulke (ed.), *The State in India 1000–1700* (Delhi, 1995), 233–62.

²⁶Chattopadhyaya, *Making*, *op. cit.*, 34–6.

²⁷R. Thapar, *The Mauryas Revisited* (Calcutta, 1987). See also G. Fussman, 'Control and

provincial administration in ancient India: the problem of the Mauryan empire', *Indian Historical Review*, XIV, 1–2 (1987–8), 43–72.

²⁸Thapar, *Mauryas Revisited*, and D. Lorenzen, 'Historians and the Gupta empire' in B. C. Chhabra (ed.), *Reappraising Gupta History: For S. R. Goyal* (Delhi, 1992), 47–60.

societies to 'state-society', the peasantization of cultivators and hunter-gatherers as a part of this process, and the concomitant incorporation of non-caste peoples into the varna hierarchy.²⁹ The publication of Chattopadhyaya's book *The Making of Early Medieval India* enunciated what had been long in the making, that of a refined periodization of 'early medieval' India that was here to stay. Notably, unlike earlier applications of the 'medieval' applied to India's past, this idea emerged after sustained consideration and debate around specific social, economic and political developments.

By the 1980s, historians had begun to introduce new methodologies and theories inspired by anthropology and sociology as much as Marxist or processualist frameworks. While the central concern of this literature remained an analysis of the state, it sought to explain the particular features of Indian states outside traditional explanatory frameworks. The insights of anthropology were brought to bear on questions of state, caste and kingship. Ronald Inden, drawing on the work of A. M. Hocart, proposed the notion of the state as a hierarchy of human and divine lordships which incorporated caste as an integral element of polity.³⁰ In south India, Burton Stein drew on Aidan Southall's study of acephalous societies in Africa to propose a 'segmentary' model of the Chola state, while Nicholas Dirks explored the changing role of kingship and caste as the 'little kingdom' of the *ancien régime* was gradually hollowed out by the colonial policy.³¹ Interestingly, this literature and its categories, whether as segmentary polity, ethno-history or imperial formation, generally did *not* articulate clearly with the trends and camps of medieval historiography well established in India and were largely ignored or refuted, though their contributions have arguably been just as formative for later developments in the field. Important too has been the work of Inden and others on medieval kingship, theorizing specific forms of kingship that were closely articulated with Hindu theistic and Jain religious orders.³²

The lion's share of early medieval historiography was focused on state, society and economy. The study of culture was given far less attention by historians. Nationalist and dynastic historians, when they were not mining cultural materials for historical facts, framed literature and plastic art as expressions of the spirit of the age, patronized by beneficent monarchs. Literature, art and religion were entombed safely in dynastic histories as ancillary chapters alongside administration, taxes and municipal affairs, almost

²⁹See B. D. Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India* (Calcutta, 1990); B. D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Political processes and the structure of polity in early medieval India' in Chattopadhyaya, *Making, op. cit.*, 195–232. These theories were not without criticism. See the extended critique of Chattopadhyaya's theory of rural expansion in V. Jha, 'Settlement, society and polity in early medieval rural India', *Indian Historical Review*, XX, 1–2 (1993–4), 34–65.

³⁰R. Inden, 'Lordship and caste in Hindu discourse', reprinted, with several other essays, in R. Inden, *Text and Practice: Essays in South Asian History* (Delhi, 2006).

³¹B. Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (Delhi, 1980); N. Dirks, *The Hollow Crown: Ethno-history of an Indian Kingdom* (Cambridge, 1987).

³²R. Inden, 'Hierarchies of kings in medieval India' and 'Hindu temple and chain of being', reprinted, with several other essays, in Ronald Inden, *Text and Practice, op. cit.*; T. Arai, 'Jain kinship in the *Prabandhacintamani*' in J. F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Delhi, repr. 1998), 92–132; J. Cort, 'Who is a king? Jain narratives of kinship in medieval western India' in J. Cort (ed.), *Open Boundaries: Jain Communities and Cultures in Indian History* (New York, 1998), 85–110.

as if they were reports on governmental or academic departments. There were of course exceptions to this kind of treatment. A handful of historically minded critics of literature, art and religion made richly textured contributions to the evolution of culture and religion in this period.³³ These scholars were pioneers in the field of cultural history, but little attempt was made to incorporate such findings into the action of historical narratives.

Historians of the 1960s and 1970s, heavily influenced by Marxian analysis, took more creative approaches to art and literature. Martial and erotic themes were taken to reflect the aggressive and lascivious tendencies of an exploitative feudal class, or read against the backdrop of feudal economic and social relations.³⁴ Processualist approaches to the state tended to read literary representations of royalty and imperially patronized art rather blandly as the 'legitimation' of authority. Their interpretations of religion, however, were more nuanced. R. Champakalakshmi, for example, interpreted the long development of south Indian Tamil Saiva and Vaisnava bhakti cult from its early stages as a popular movement of wandering saints to its canonization and codification under the Chola state as undergoing a gradual shift from dissent to dominance.³⁵ Other scholars, borrowing heavily from anthropological theories of cultural interaction, combined Marxist and processualist concerns over the peasantization and the proliferation of agriculture in early medieval India with theories of the spread of temple Hinduism through the incorporation of tribal deities into the Brahmanical Puranic pantheon.³⁶ Brahmanical and Puranic localization, negotiation and incorporation of tribal, regional and vernacular religions throughout the medieval period became powerful templates for the historical understanding of the development of Hinduism in medieval India.³⁷

³³See R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems* (Strasbourg, 1913); C. Sivaramamurti, *Royal Conquests and Cultural Migrations in South India and the Deccan* (Calcutta, 1955); V. S. Agrawala, *The Deeds of Harsha [Being a Cultural Study of Bana's Harshacarita]* (Varanasi, 1969); V. S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India: A Study in Historical Biographies* (New York, 1966).

³⁴See, for example, the articles of D. D. Kosambi in B. D. Chattopadhyaya (ed.), *D. D. Kosambi: Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings* (Delhi, 2002); D. Desai, 'Art under feudalism in India (c. AD 500–1300)' in D. N. Jha (ed.), *Feudal Social Formation in Early India* (Delhi, 1987), 391–401; and the very important B. N. S. Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century* (Allahabad, 1973). For a recent restatement of this line of argument in relation to Indian religion, at once more comprehensive than earlier Marxist interpretations but at the same time with little of the understanding of the social and economic analyses put forward by this tradition, see R. Davidson, *Indian Esoteric*

Buddhism: A History of the Tantric Movement (New York, 2002).

³⁵R. Champakalakshmi, 'From devotion and dissent to dominance' in R. Champakalakshmi and S. Gopal (eds), *Tradition, Dissent and Ideology: Essays in Honour of Romila Thapar* (Delhi, 1996), 135–63.

³⁶See the landmark study by A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and G. Tripathi (eds), *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa* (Delhi, 1986). See also H. Kulke, *Kings and Cults: State Formation and Legitimation in India and Southeast Asia* (Delhi, 2001). For a learned discussion of the anthropological context of these ideas, see K. Chakrabarti, 'Anthropological models of cultural interaction and the study of religious process', *Studies in History*, VIII, 1 (1992), 123–49.

³⁷See the exemplary work by K. Chakrabarti, *Religious Process: The Puraṇas and the Making of a Regional Tradition* (Delhi, 2001). For an historically authoritative south Indian perspective, see R. Champakalakshmi, *Religion, Tradition and Ideology in Pre-colonial South India* (Delhi, 2011).

SULTANATE AND MUGHAL INDIA

The period of so-called 'Islamic rule' – from the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate at the beginning of the thirteenth century to the fall of the Mughal empire at the beginning of the eighteenth – had from colonial times formed the proper and indisputable referent of India's 'medieval' history. The Mughal empire and the Rajput states that grew up with it held an intrinsic interest for the British. For a variety of reasons, partly because Persian chronicles provided a historical sensibility more familiar to colonial administrators, but also because the recent imperial past was a heritage the British sought variously to patronize, romanticize, contest and even symbolically appropriate, the Mughal empire formed one of the most researched fields in India's past before independence. The study of the Mughal empire, and the Islamic polities before it, was built on the foundation of Persian texts that were collected, edited and translated by colonial scholars in substantial numbers. Perhaps the most influential translation project, one that has been formative for the interpretation of medieval India more generally, was the publication of an extensive collection of selected excerpts from a great number of Persian chronicles arranged in chronological fashion, by H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson, known as *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*.³⁸ Though this multi-volume work has been criticized both methodologically and empirically for its decontextualized, misleading and even inaccurate presentation of passages from Persian chronicles as well as its underlying imperial agenda and preconceptions regarding Islamic polity, it continues to be drawn upon by scholars.³⁹

Though the 'Sultanate Period' has usually been referred to as an era commencing with the emergence of Delhi as the centre of an independent polity under the manumitted Ghurid slave, Qutb-uddin Aibak in 1209 CE, and ending with the defeat of the last Lodi Sultan of Delhi by the Mughal Babur at the battle of Panipat in 1526, colonial and nationalist historians often extended its beginnings as far back as the beginning of the eighth century, when the Umayyad general Muhammad bin Qasim created an Arab military outpost in Sindh, or the beginning of the eleventh century, when the Ghaznavid emperor Mahmud sent military expeditions into north-western India. These events were regarded as the first depredations of Muslim conquerors in India, inaugurating what would become a historiography fraught with the burden of modern communal identity and conflict.⁴⁰

³⁸H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson, *The History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, 8 vols (London, 1871).

³⁹For an excellent discussion of the limitations of this work and the overall use of Persian sources, with special focus on the Deccan, see G. T. Kulkarni, 'Persian texts, documents, epigraphs and Deccan history' in R. Seshan (ed.), *Medieval India: Problems and Possibilities* (Mumbai, 2006), 36–53. See also S. H. Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History: A Critical Commentary on Elliot and Dowson's History of India as Told by its Own Historians*, 2 vols (Bombay, 1939–57).

⁴⁰See W. Haig (ed.), *The Cambridge History of India*, vol. 3, *Turks and Afghans* (Cambridge,

1928), and after independence, A. L. Srivastava, *The Sultanate of Delhi (711–1526) including the Arab Invasion of Sindh, Hindu Rule in Afghanistan, and the Causes of Hindu Defeat in the Early Medieval Age* (Agra, 1959). The 1970s and 1980s saw the publication of more avowedly communal works like K. A. Srivastava, *The Position of Hindus under the Delhi Sultanate, 1206–1526* (Delhi, 1980), and the later works of K. S. Lal, including *Growth of Muslim Population in Medieval India AD 1000–1800* (Delhi, 1973) and *Indian Muslims: Who Are They?* (Delhi, 1990). I do not include here works clogging the book market and internet by self-styled historians associated with contemporary Hindutva.

Most of this historical writing followed colonial historiography in its positivist and sometimes even naïve readings of Persian court chronicles. Because the Delhi Sultanate itself was not a single polity but a succession of several dynastic lineages that ruled Delhi between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, as more serious scholarship evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, it tended to divide into distinctive historiographies around lineages and periods.⁴¹ Despite its potential for controversy and an extensive body of source material in Persian and vernacular languages, the Sultanate period has remained comparatively understudied.⁴²

As the last great political formation before the establishment of Company rule, the Mughal empire (1526–1707) has long received special attention, first from British administrators and writers, and later from nationalist historians. Even today the Mughal empire continues to elicit a very lively historiography. Colonial historians sought variously to emphasize its majesty and beneficence or its despotism, depending on whether they wished to cast themselves as inheritors of its mantle of authority or harbingers of change. In the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a richer historiography around the Mughals than any earlier dynasty in South Asian history. Much of this historiography centred on the policies and personalities of the Mughal emperors – particularly those of Babur, Akbar and Aurangzeb.⁴³ The Mughal empire continued to play a role in debates in the first decades of the twentieth century, spurred by the rise of nationalism in India, particularly in the economic sphere. To counteract theories of British exploitation and the 'drain of wealth' from India put forward by nationalist economists like Dadhabai Naoroji and Romesh Chander Dutt, W. H. Moreland argued in an evaluation of the economic history of the Mughal empire that key economic problems attributed to British policy, including low standards of living and widespread poverty, actually had deeper roots in the Mughal past, and were thus long-standing elements of Indian political economy.⁴⁴

Given this legacy, it is not surprising that early Indian writers on the pre-colonial past should turn to the Mughals and take up similar themes. Jadunath Sarkar, the first historian of pre-British India to gain eminence, began his career with a five-volume study of the last great Mughal emperor, Aurangzeb (r. 1658–1707), using Persian and Marathi sources, and later wrote four further volumes, *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, which treated Aurangzeb's successors in the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Sarkar's mastery of the sources was at the time unparalleled and set the standard for historical scholarship for many decades. His focus, however, remained on the Mughal emperors and their personalities. While the character of Aurangzeb was vilified as bigoted and narrow,

⁴¹See, for example, M. Habib, *Some Aspects of the Foundation of the Delhi Sultanate* (Delhi, 1968); the early work of K. S. Lal, *History of the Khaljis, 1290–1320* (Bombay, 1967); and K. A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in the Thirteenth Century* (Bombay, 1961).

⁴²For a recent attempt to rewrite the political history of the Sultanate along more considered and scrupulous empirical lines, see P. Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge, 1999).

⁴³These three, along with Asoka and various British governors general and viceroys formed the subjects of historical biographies, in the *Men Who Ruled India* series, begun in 1899.

⁴⁴W. H. Moreland, *India at the Death of Akbar* (London, 1920); and W. H. Moreland, *From Akbar to Aurangzeb* (London, 1923).

⁴⁵J. Sarkar, *History of Aurangzeb, Based on Original Sources*, 5 vols (Calcutta, 1924–30) and *Fall of the Mughal Empire*, 4 vols (Calcutta, 1932–50).

Akbar was celebrated as a tolerant and benevolent despot. Sarkar attributed the decline of the Mughal empire (and their latter-day rivals, the Marathas) to a moral degeneration and the stoking of communal tensions, particularly under Aurangzeb.

Such explanations, however, were challenged by historians writing from Aligarh Muslim University in the 1960s from a largely Marxist perspective like Irfan Habib, Athar Ali and Nurul Hasan. These scholars presented a penetrating analysis of the dynamics of the Mughal state and offered very different accounts of its decline. For Habib, the decline of the Mughal empire had its origins in the ever increasing land revenues demanded by the imperial centre to fund its wars, causing large-scale rural exploitation and an agrarian crisis which led to migration, rebellion and a weakening of the state's hold on its provinces – a breakdown between the imperial estate holders and the peasantry.⁴⁶ Athar Ali argued that the causes of the political crisis of the empire were rooted in a shortage of prebends and military estates to distribute to the imperial nobility, thereby fuelling an administrative crisis, while Nurul Hasan pointed to tensions between the state and the rural gentry, or zamindars.⁴⁷ All these scholars, however, emphasized socio-economic factors for Mughal decline instead of the personality-based explanations.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, historians associated with Aligarh, much like their counterparts in early medieval history, sought to understand the power of the Mughal state through a combination of various factors: its agrarian base, its revenue system and its political structure. A substantial amount of research was conducted under this Marxist framework, which was also extended back to Sultanate times.⁴⁸ Overall, there was a broad consensus that the power of the Mughal empire lay in a highly rationalized system of military estates, a cohesive imperial elite and an effective cash revenue-collecting apparatus backed up by military power.⁴⁹ The main spokesman of what came to be known as the Aligarh school, Irfan Habib, did not conceive of this as 'feudalism' but a unique 'medieval Indian system', a vast agrarian landscape overlaid by a prebendal system supporting an imperial centre with a fiscalist outlook.⁵⁰ In contrast to feudal polity, the Mughal state maintained a powerful hold on its subordinates through the *mansabdari* system. The accumulation of over four decades of research from Aligarh has produced a substantial historiographical tradition carefully grounded in the sources. While other

⁴⁶I. Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India (1556–1707)*, 2nd edn (Delhi, 1999), 364–405.

⁴⁷M. A. Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay, 1966); N. Hasan, 'Zamindars under the Mughals' in R. Frykenberg (ed.), *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History* (Madison, 1969).

⁴⁸See S. B. P. Nigam, *Nobility under the Sultans of Delhi* (Delhi, 1968); I. Habib, 'The formation of the Sultanate ruling class of the thirteenth century' in I. Habib (ed.), *Medieval India 1: Researches in the History of India 1250–1700* (Delhi, 1992); H. K. Naqvi, *Agricultural, Industrial and Urban Dynamism under the Sultans of Delhi 1206–1255* (Delhi, 1986).

⁴⁹See I. Habib, *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (Delhi, 1986). See also I. Habib (ed.), *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (London, 2002); Habib, *Medieval India 1, op. cit.*; T. Rayachaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History* (Delhi, 1966), and Rayachaudhuri and Habib's *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1982). M. A. Ali, *The Apparatus of Empire: Awards of Ranks, Offices and Titles to the Mughal Nobility 1574–1658* (Delhi, 1985); and N. A. Siddiqi, *Land Revenue Administration under the Mughals, 1700–1750* (Bombay, 1970).

⁵⁰See the remarks in I. Habib, 'Classifying pre-colonial India', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, XIII, 2–3 (1985), 44–53.

theories of the Mughal state have been put forward, most begin from the premise central to the Aligarh school, that the *mansabdari* system created a kind of 'steel frame' for a centralized state.⁵¹

Historians, including some trained partially at Aligarh, began to challenge various elements of this model from the 1980s – a development largely contemporaneous with criticism of feudalist models in early medieval historiography.⁵² One vector of critique was an attack on the claim for a centralized political and fiscal structure of the Mughal empire. It was argued that an over-reliance on and highly literalist reading of Persian chronicles and other key sources, most notably Abu'l Fazl's *Ain-i Akbari*, allowed historians to present a distorted picture of the Mughal state as a kind of highly centralized revenue-gathering machine, one ultimately driven by fiscal concerns.⁵³ This was accompanied by a critique of the Aligarh school's dependence on state-sponsored documents at the expense of local sources in vernacular languages, particularly in provincial regions of the empire. By a close attention to either Persian or vernacular sources from the outlying regions and provinces of the empire, historians argued that local elites were often able to pursue their own agendas within the framework of Mughal power, and that local considerations constrained imperial appointments and policy to a considerable extent.⁵⁴ Cumulatively, such studies had the effect of throwing into question the presumed immutability of the *mansabdari* system itself as the centrally administered 'steel frame' of the Mughal state. In their magisterial survey of Mughal historiography, Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have suggested a move away from an approach to the state as a kind of pre-constituted (and hence ahistorical) object towards one that recognizes its historically situated and highly contingent nature. By showing how imperial policy had to make adjustments for local contexts as new domains were incorporated into its control, Alam and Subrahmanyam show how the Mughal state was 'fashioned and refashioned' as it expanded. The Mughal empire in the end thus resembled a "patchwork quilt" rather than a "wall to wall carpet" – a topography of contingent and shifting relationships which evolved over time and in which imperial control was uneven rather than uniform across space.⁵⁵

Cultural production during Sultanate and Mughal times was for the most part treated much the same as its early medieval counterpart, in that literature, religion, architecture, and now painting, were generally seen as realms to be mined for facts or deemed simply as the accessories of the subject of 'real' historical writing – the state. The histories of a number of these fields, particularly architecture, painting and literature, were to a lesser

⁵¹For other formulations, see S. Blake, 'The patrimonial bureaucratic empire of the Mughals', *Journal of Asian Studies*, xxxix, 1 (1979), 77–94; more recently see J. F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge, 1993).

⁵²For an overview of this scholarship, see M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, 'Introduction' in *The Mughal State, 1526–1750* (Delhi, 1998), 1–70.

⁵³M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, 'L'Etat moghol et sa fiscalité', *Annales: Histoire Sciences Sociales*, 1 (1994), 189–217.

⁵⁴For a general argument and evidence relating to Punjab, see C. Singh, 'Centre and periphery in the Mughal state: the case of seventeenth-century Punjab', *Modern Asian Studies*, xxii, 2 (1988), 299–318; for Gujarat more recently, see F. Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India 1579–1730* (Cambridge, 2004).

⁵⁵Alam and Subrahmanyam, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, 57.

or greater extent treated from within the separate disciplines appropriate to them (art history, literature, etc.) but most often with little connection with historical context beyond rulers and courts for chronology. These separate histories, as foundational as they have been for establishing the chronology of texts, paintings and built environments, will not concern us here.

The study of religion in Sultanate and Mughal times has had a somewhat different complexity and urgency for historians in post-independence South Asia, driven in part by the aftershock of partition and the spectre of communalism. The response to older nationalist and lingering right of centre claims of Muslim depredations against Hinduism generated an occasional response, but was generally 'answered' by a firm disavowal of religion in favour of other categories of analysis.⁵⁶ As we have seen, throughout the 1960s and 1970s the main concerns of medieval historiography focused on state and society. When religion was treated at all, it was generally seen as either a generic legitimation of power, or as a kind of instrument of manipulation used by elites. This left much of the historical establishment largely unprepared for the precipitous rise of the Hindu right in India through the 1980s, culminating in the destruction in Ayodhya on 6 December 1992 of the Babri Masjid, a mosque built by the Mughal emperor Babur on the purported site of a temple marking the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram, and the terrible communal riots that followed. These events gave rise to a renewed interest in the problem of Hindu–Muslim relations in medieval India and led in a general sense to more historically oriented and analytically nuanced treatments of religion during Sultanate and Mughal times. Scholars from the US and Europe often took the lead here, focusing on issues of state policy toward religious communities, inter-religious dynamics, religious conflict, conversion, and identity and otherness.⁵⁷ This historiography is too vast to discuss in the limited space available here, but the general trend of much of it was to revisit certain events and practices with greater sensitivity to context, and to question and complicate the received boundaries between 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. Temple desecration, for example, was seen less as the expression of quintessentially 'Muslim' mentality than as a historically contingent practice performed by both Hindu and Muslim kings, often in response to a variety of factors including prestige, wealth and authority. Historians also emphasized shared political and material cultures that crossed religious and regional boundaries. The study of Sufism, which had formed a somewhat older concern among a handful of historians,

⁵⁶See A. Ahmed, 'Epic and counter-epic in medieval India', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXXXIII (1963); and R. Thapar, H. Mukhia and B. Chandra, *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* (Delhi, 1969).

⁵⁷The literature is too vast to present here, but see these key studies: S. Pollock, 'Ramayana and political imagination in India', *Journal of Asian Studies*, LII, 2 (1993), 261–97; C. Talbot, 'Inscribing the other, inscribing the self: Hindu–Muslim identities in pre-colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, XXXVII, 4 (1995), 692–722;

P. Wagoner ' "Sultan among Hindu Kings": Dress, titles, and the Islamicization of Hindu culture at Vijayanagara', *Journal of Asian Studies*, LV, 4 (1996), 851–80; B. D. Chattopadhyay, *Representing the Other?: Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims (Eighth to Fourteenth Century)* (Delhi, 1998); D. Gilmartin and B. Lawrence (eds), *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville, Florida, 2000); S. Mittal (ed.), *Surprising Bedfellows: Hindus and Muslims in Medieval and Early Modern India* (Lanham, MD, 2003).

became increasingly important in many of these debates, particularly in thinking about the interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims, the relationship between spiritual and royal authority, and religious conversion.⁵⁸

A NEW MEDIEVAL INDIA AND THE RISE OF THE EARLY MODERN

In the final part of this article I will take stock of some of the more important changes in the field of medieval history in the last fifteen years, particularly in relation to thinking about the state, literature and material culture. I will then put some of this literature into the context of debates about the 'end' of the medieval and the recent rise to fashion of the category of 'early modern' India.

The changes discussed above in the historiography of the Mughal empire were part of a more widespread shift in thinking about states in medieval India, a shift whose origin lay in the first wave of historians who moved away from the images of both the centralized bureaucratic state or its opposite, the fragmented, splintered polity of Indian feudalism. The first generation of these scholars understood the state as comprising either 'segmentary' elements or as an integrative 'process'. Earlier formulations stressed the patterned nature of state formation, the modular structure of the state, or sought ways to combine older Marxist concepts like mode of production with more flexible notions of state formation and symbolic lordship.⁵⁹ Others, like Ronald Inden's 'imperial formation', combined the theory of the 'circle of kings' (*rajamandala*) set out in the Sanskrit manuals on polity with R. G. Collingwood's 'scale of forms' to see 'states' as complex and entangled hierarchies of lordship.⁶⁰

Yet other historians increasingly came to eschew models altogether, arguing instead that 'state-building' was a highly contingent and often localized process undertaken by either aspiring groups or factions and segments within a putative ruling elite. These new studies were often by 'non-Mughalists' and focused not only on the local dynamics of

⁵⁸The literature on Sufism and the state is voluminous. For an early study, see K. A. Nizami, 'Early Indo-Muslim mystics and their attitude towards the state', *Islamic Culture*, 23–4 (1949–50), 13–21, 60–71. Other works include R. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur: 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, 1978); R. Eaton, 'The political and religious authority of the shrine of Baba Farid' in B. Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984), 333–56; S. Digby, 'The Sufi Shaykh and the Sultan: a conflict of claims to authority in medieval India', *Iran*, 28 (1990), 71–81; Y. Friedmann, 'The Naqshbandis and Awrangzeb: a reconsideration' in M. Gaborieau, A. Popovic and T. Zarcone (eds), *Naqshbandis: Chiminements et situation actuelle d'un ordre mystique musulman* (Istanbul, 1990), 209–20. Sunil Kumar, 'Assertions of

authority: a study of two discursive statements of two sultans of Delhi' in M. Alam, F. Delvoye and M. Gaborieau (eds), *The Making of Indo-Persian Culture: Indian and French Studies* (Delhi, 2000), 37–66.

⁵⁹Stein, *Peasant State*, *op. cit.*; B. Stein, 'State formation and economy reconsidered', *Modern Asian Studies*, XIX, 3 (1985), 387–413; H. Kulke, 'The early and imperial kingdom: a processual model of integrative state formation in early medieval India' and F. Perlin, 'Concepts of order and comparison, with a diversion on counter-ideologies and corporate institutions in late pre-colonial India' in T. J. Byres and H. Mukhia (eds), *Feudalism in Non-European Societies* (London, 1985), 87–165; J. Heitzman, *Gifts of Power: Lordship in an Early Indian State* (Delhi, 1998).

⁶⁰R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), 213–62.

imperial polities, but often on the constitution of power in sub-imperial and even entirely local contexts, far below the apparatus of the imperial state. Dirk Kolff, in a landmark study, showed how local warlords and a tradition of peasant soldiering created the space for local polity formation and peasant assertion across north India under the umbrella of the 'rajput' affiliation.⁶¹ Simon Digby argued for the role of immigrant settlers as the localized seeds of political assertion in the emergence of the regional sultanates of fourteenth-century north India.⁶² If polities arose from largely local dynamics and aspiring groups, they also comprised a largely fractured and unstable ruling elite, congeries of diverse political players rather than a homogenous ruling class. Cynthia Talbot presented the Kakatiya state as a 'fluctuating political network composed in large part of a multitude of personal ties between lords and underlings'.⁶³ Sunil Kumar, in a penetrating and meticulous prosopographical analysis of a Persian chronicle, argued that Ghurid polity in India was best understood not as a pre-given structure but a highly contingent set of slave and lineage relations among Ghurid appanages.⁶⁴ Finally, Norbert Peabody, in his analysis of kingship in Kotah, Rajasthan, has shown how royal rituals and the discourse of authority often had very immediate and practical 'purposes' and specific consequences for the constitution of power.⁶⁵ Not only do these present a new approach to the study of polity – one without the *a priori* assumption of the state – but most do so through either the opening of new archives or the development of new strategies of reading traditional sources.

Much of this historiography, though at one level concerned with the formation of polity, has focused on social relationships and processes that transpired 'below' the state. A number of historians have demonstrated how local social dynamics usually assumed to be 'below' the state (as part of 'society'), are better conceived as linked along a single commensurable continuum.⁶⁶ If local dynamics and actors formed important 'players' in the constitution of political power, they also have been used by more recent scholarship to approach 'regional history' through new frames. While feudalists and processualists emphasized regional social and political developments, and the structure, organization and formation of 'regional states', more recent scholarship, less concerned with state formation and more with diverse historical actors 'below' the state, has tended to see regions as 'places in the making'. The reliance on local and vernacular sources has also enabled these

⁶¹D. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput Sepoy: The Ethno-history of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, 1990).

⁶²S. Digby, 'Before Timur came: provincialization of the Delhi Sultanate through the fourteenth century', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, XLVII, 3 (2004), 298–356.

⁶³C. Talbot, *Pre-Colonial India in Practice* (New York, 2001), 172.

⁶⁴S. Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate 1192–1286* (Delhi, 2007).

⁶⁵N. Peabody, *Hindu Kingship and Polity in Pre-colonial India* (Cambridge, 2003).

⁶⁶Among others mentioned above, see particularly Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput Sepoy*, *op. cit.*, and more recently N. Sahai, *Patronage and Protest: The State, Society and Artisans in Early Modern India* (Delhi, 2006). This approach has relied on earlier scholarship which has rethought the relationship between the state and caste. For two very different formulations along these lines, see R. Inden, *Imagining India*, *op. cit.*, 217ff., and H. Fukuzawa *The Medieval Deccan: Peasants, Social Systems and States* (Delhi, 1991), 91–113.

historians to cross the chronological boundaries that had divided earlier generations of historians.⁶⁷

Cultural history since the 1990s has been heavily influenced by the wider 'textual turn' in the humanities, leading to much interchange between the fields of cultural history and literary interpretation. Historians on the one hand have increasingly been inclined to view traditional historical 'sources' as 'texts' while a handful of scholars of art and literature, on the other, have moved away from formalist and 'new critical' approaches to read texts in more historically 'embedded' ways.⁶⁸ V. Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have collaborated on a number of publications on cultural history, the most influential of which has brought to light new historical accounts from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century south India.⁶⁹ Other important works of historians have included the analysis of Sanskrit sources for the study of court dynamics, as well as studies of gender, the city and agriculture through textual representations.⁷⁰

On the side of literature, Sheldon Pollock in a number of seminal articles culminating in his *Language of the Gods in the World of Men*, in 2006, has virtually inaugurated a new approach to literary history in South Asia that has sought to theorize literary representation as a kind of mode aesthetic social and political power.⁷¹ Explicitly critical of older models of legitimation and ideology, Pollock put forward the paradigm of a 'Sanskrit cosmopolis' to describe the cultural formation that aestheticized power through the medium of courtly poetry in the period roughly approximating the rise of 'feudal' or 'early medieval' India. This was followed, according to Pollock, by a 'vernacular millennium', in which regional languages came into their own as localized literary idioms. Pollock's interpretations have generated lively debate and invigorated the field of literature with a sense of historical purpose.⁷² Several scholars have tried to extend Pollock's 'cosmopolis' both linguistically and geographically, most notably the publication by Barry Flood, who has argued for a

⁶⁷See the important monographs of N. Sinha-Kapur, *State Formation in Rajasthan: Mewar during the Seventh–Fifteenth Centuries* (Delhi, 2002) and S. Sheikh, *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders and Pilgrims in Gujarat, c.1200–1500* (Delhi, 2010).

⁶⁸Important early studies in this vein include P. Wagoner, *Tidings of the King: A Translation and Ethno-historical Analysis of the Rayavacakamu* (Honolulu, 1993); R. Inden, D. Ali and J. Walters, *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practice in South Asia* (New York, 2000).

⁶⁹V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India 1600–1800* (Delhi, 2001). The work has generated lively debate, and is the subject of a special issue in *History and Theory*, XLVI (2007).

⁷⁰D. Ali, *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* (Cambridge, 2004);

K. Roy, *The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power* (Delhi, 2010); S. Shah, *Love, Eroticism, and Female Sexuality in Classical Sanskrit Literature, 7th–13th Centuries* (Delhi, 2010); R. Furui, 'The rural world of an agricultural text', *Studies in History*, XXI, 2 (2005), 149–71; S. Kaul, *Imagining the Urban: Sanskrit and the City in Early India* (Delhi, 2010).

⁷¹S. Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Pre-modern India* (Berkeley, 2006).

⁷²See, for example, S. Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley, 2003), and Y. Bronner, W. Cox and L. McCrea (eds), *South Asian Texts in History: Critical Engagements with Sheldon Pollock* (Ann Arbor, 2011). For a slightly earlier anticipation of this orientation, see V. Narayana Rao and D. Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment: Remembered Verses from Pre-modern South India* (Berkeley, 1998).

cosmopolitan language of objects that served to translate cultures across northern India during Sultanate times.⁷³

A major development in the field of medieval history – one which evolved from the 1980s but which has gained increasing momentum over the last decade, giving rise to a number of onward developments and debates of considerable consequence for historians both of medieval and modern India – has turned on interpretations and debates relating to the eighteenth century in Indian history. This century saw at its start the collapse of the Mughal empire and by its end the rise of the British East India Company. As we saw above, the end of the Mughal empire in the eighteenth century had always formed an important ‘hinge’ in historical narratives, bridging not only the gap between India’s last great *ancien régime* and the rise of the colonial state, but between the end of the ‘medieval’ and the commencement of the ‘modern’. For this reason, the eighteenth century has been a key arena of debate from the outset of the discipline of Indian history.⁷⁴

For our purposes, the historiography of the eighteenth century may be divided into two distinct but closely related debates – one regarding the fall of the Mughal empire, and the other the rise of the East India Company. The former debate, which we shall be concerned with here, revolves around the specific causes of the collapse of the Mughal empire and the state of the north Indian economy and society leading up to, during, and immediately after this collapse. The second concerns the specific conditions under which the British East India Company came to play a greater role in the economy and politics of the subcontinent, and whether this transition should be conceived as a ‘rupture’ or gradual continuity. The answers to the second debate, one that has wide implications for the understanding of the colonial period of Indian history more generally, turn quite significantly on how one answers the questions of the first debate – how, that is, one characterizes the end of the Mughal empire and the social and economic life of South Asia on the eve of the rise of Company rule. The single question which links both debates, in the words of Peter J. Marshall, is whether the eighteenth century should be conceived of as a ‘revolution or evolution’.⁷⁵

Following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Mughal imperial system went into precipitous decline. The throne in Delhi saw a depleted treasury, rapid succession of rulers, local and provincial rebellions, and an invasion and defeat at the hands of Nadir Shah in 1739. Erstwhile Mughal governors and administrators in Hyderabad, Awadh and Bengal became effectively autonomous, while various other provinces fell into the hands of Maratha generals. By the latter half of the eighteenth century the Mughal throne was under the protection of the Marathas, and from 1802, the British. As we saw above, for both nationalist historians and those writing from the Aligarh school, Mughal decline, whether fuelled by religious intolerance, imperial wars, rural exploitation or a shortage of prebendal estates, was a crisis of unmitigated political fragmentation and economic decline that set the

⁷³F. B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval ‘Hindu–Muslim’ Encounter* (Princeton, 2009). See also R. Ricci, *Islam Translated: Literature, Conversion and the Arabic Cosmopolis in South and Southeast Asia* (Chicago, 2011).

⁷⁴For two recently published anthologies of essays on the eighteenth century, both with

extended, useful and synthetic introductions, see S. Alavi (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century in India* (Delhi, 2002) and P. J. Marshall (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* (Delhi, 2003).

⁷⁵Marshall, ‘Introduction’ in *ibid.*, 1–3.

scene for British expansion. Politically, the collapse of central power gave birth to a medley of smaller 'statelets', which gradually fell prey from the end of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century, one after another, to the expansive designs of the British East India Company. In a logic that was as time-worn in South Asian historiography as it was untested, nationalist historians reasoned that the weakening of centralized political control on the part of the Mughal empire, centred in Delhi, hastened the fissiparous tendencies of the Indian body politic, leading to general disunity, political weakness and vulnerability to external interference. The political weakness of the centre, particularly in the interpretations of the Aligarh school, was partly explained by and partly set against the backdrop of a general economic malaise, precipitated most fundamentally by an agrarian crisis. From these vantage points, the political developments between the weakened Mughal throne and the British East India Company at the end of the eighteenth century ushered in a new dispensation of political and economic despotism that could be characterized as a 'drain of wealth' from the subcontinent. As has been pointed out by various critics, this analysis of the eighteenth century was animated by a strong dose of economic nationalism, with Mughal India being conceived as a kind of 'proto-national' empire and economy.

The most important criticisms of this account of Mughal decline have coalesced around the two interrelated themes of polity and economy. As noted above, historians from the 1980s began to dissent from the image of the Mughal state presented by this scholarship. There were criticisms of a supposed over-reliance upon and literalist reading of certain types of imperially generated sources at the expense of local, often vernacular, ones. Critics argued that these sources and interpretations gave a somewhat distorted impression of the empire as a highly centralized state. Revisionist scholarship portrayed the Mughal state instead as a highly contingent structure with numerous provincial and localized articulations of power which preserved considerable agency for local elites. Using a variety of different types of records, historians showed how in this more variegated topography of power, resistance to Mughal designs and authority was hardly confined to Aurangzeb's reign or to the outlying provinces, but was widespread through much of the Mughal empire, both chronologically and geographically. Jat peasants just south of Delhi, for example, regularly refused to pay taxes, revolted and disrupted Mughal communication lines throughout the seventeenth century, and by the eighteenth century had carved out a small state for themselves under the nose of Mughal authority.⁷⁶ By a close attention to these local sources, the outlying regions and provinces of the empire came alive as arenas of regional political assertion and dynamism.

From this perspective, the breakdown of imperial authority at the beginning of the eighteenth century appears quite differently. To wit, if the Mughal state in the seventeenth century had been more of a 'patchwork quilt' than a uniformly centralized state, then the growing autonomy of the provinces in the eighteenth century need not be viewed as political 'fragmentation'. From this perspective, the end of the Mughal empire could be seen not just as a 'negative' collapse of central authority, but as the 'positive' growth of provincial power and assertion – 'political decentralization went hand in hand with

⁷⁶See R. P. Rana, 'Agrarian revolts in northern India during the late 17th and early 18th century', *Indian Economic and Social History*

Review, XVIII, 3–4 (1981), 287–324, esp. 307–10.

broader processes of localization in the distribution and organization of power'.⁷⁷ Crucial to this perspective was the role of the economy. If the emphasis on local and regional sources revealed hitherto unaccounted for political dynamics at the periphery and interstices of empire, they also provided a window into the local economies that formed the bases for such power. Muzaffar Alam, through a careful examination of both Persian and Urdu local documents relating to Awadh and Bihar in the first half of the eighteenth century, demonstrated how increased commercialization and monetization inaugurated during the heyday of Mughal rule produced local forms of growth and prosperity which eventually led to political assertion at the provincial and local levels challenging the authority of the centre.⁷⁸ The contraction of Mughal power after the death of Aurangzeb and the dispersal of regional and sub-regional lordly courts at the beginning of the eighteenth century only hastened processes of local resource accumulation being linked to an increasing 'density' of economic life, or what Frank Perlin called a 'rurbanization' of the landscape.⁷⁹

If revisionist historians tended to see the erosion of Mughal authority in the first half of the eighteenth century as fuelled largely by the economic dynamism of provincial centres, the eighteenth century more generally came to be the focus of a new economic and social history. The publication of Chris Bayly's *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars* in 1983 formed a landmark, setting out the eighteenth century as a discrete field of study.⁸⁰ Bayly argued that in the small towns, or *qasbahs*, across north India, new hybrid mercantile organizations of traders and moneylenders emerged as a result of the mingling of mercantile and agrarian investments through practices like revenue farming.⁸¹ These men formed key agents – 'entrepreneurs', 'portfolio capitalists' – in a new 'intermediate economy' that transformed the landscape across northern India.⁸² They moved between the economic and political spheres, adopted the accoutrements of Mughal courtly culture, and engaged and bankrolled the widespread use of private mercenary armies to collect revenues. These changes also saw the rise of a hugely important new class of service groups, mostly scribes and accountants – men with specialized skills – who became important 'knowledge brokers' in this world, and who were later employed by the British East India Company.⁸³

⁷⁷F. Perlin, 'The problem of the eighteenth century' in Marshall (ed.), *op. cit.*, 55.

⁷⁸M. Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707–1748* (Delhi, 1986); M. Alam, 'Eastern India in the early eighteenth-century "crisis": some evidence from Bihar', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXVIII, 1 (1991), 43–71.

⁷⁹Perlin, 'Problem of the Eighteenth Century', 56–7.

⁸⁰See C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Delhi, 1983).

⁸¹*ibid.*, 164–96. The practice of 'revenue farming' refers to the state's sale of licences to collect revenue for specific durations of time.

⁸²See also S. Subrahmanyam and C. A. Bayly, 'Portfolio capitalists and the political economy

of early modern India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XXV, 4 (1988), 401–23.

⁸³This, in addition to a further publication on the British East India Company's employment of such 'information' experts from the latter half of the eighteenth century, inaugurated a notable historiographical interest in the history and dynamics of such service groups, both before and since the eighteenth century. See C. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1996). For other important studies, see M. Alam, 'The making of a munshi', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, XXIV, 2 (2004), 61–72 and R. O'Hanlon and D. Washbrook (eds), 'Munshis, pandits and record-keepers: scribal communities and historical change in

The general thrust of this scholarship envisioned the eighteenth century not as a period of political disarray and economic crisis, but instead as one of regional assertion, economic dynamism and social mobility. If revisionist scholarship had challenged the received interpretations regarding the end of the Mughal empire, their work has had equally important implications for understanding the rise of the British East India Company and colonial rule in India. According to the revisionists, the rise of the Company in the eighteenth century did not at first mark a significant transformation of economic, political and productive relations in India. Rather, they argued, the Company simply continued trends that had already been emerging among the Mughal successor states from the end of the seventeenth century – more efficient revenue extraction, military fiscalism, increasing volume in overseas trade, and the increased commercialization of agricultural production.⁸⁴ The emphasis was placed on continuity rather than rupture and on the world of intermediaries who facilitated economic opportunity rather than on the peasant and the state. The work of these historians made the eighteenth century one of the most lively fields of historical enquiry in Indian history through much of the 1990s. Their arguments, perhaps predictably, elicited strong reactions from certain corners, most especially Marxist historians, who have challenged their interpretations of the evidence and coherence of their analyses, both in terms of the economic trends of the first half of the century as well as the supposedly 'minimal impact' that the British East India Company had in its latter half.⁸⁵

The effect of this interpretive foment on medieval historiography has been considerable. Many of the changes in medieval history since the 1980s discussed above were either extensions of or greatly enabled by the debates in eighteenth-century history. This work implicitly encouraged the study of a large body of non-Persian, non-state sources, as well as diverse, non-elite, 'intermediate' and 'service groups' and just as importantly, the economic and social worlds particular to them. A perhaps unforeseen but generally positive outcome of the eighteenth-century debate was to bridge what had been a widening gap between the increasingly presentist trends of modern history and a kind of enervated exhaustion that had overtaken medieval historiography following the state-formation debates of the 1970s and 1980s. Modern Indian history was at a turning point by the end of the 1990s. Much modern history, hostile to what it deemed to be the neo-imperialist apologetics of the revisionist school, was decidedly indifferent to all but the Marxist staging of pre-colonial history, and, under the influence of post-colonial studies, was increasingly eschewing archival work altogether.⁸⁶ One of the indirect effects

India', special issue, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, XLVII, 4 (2010).

⁸⁴Marshall, 'Introduction', *op. cit.*, 34.

⁸⁵See M. A. Ali, 'Recent theories of the eighteenth century' and I. Habib, 'The eighteenth century in Indian economic history' in Marshall (ed.), *The Eighteenth Century*, *op. cit.*, 90–9, 100–19. Particularly significant is the very different interpretation of revenue farming. As far as the Company is concerned, see N. Dirks *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*

(Cambridge, Mass, 2008) for a somewhat shrill, and not entirely convincing, polemic against Bayly. For a more substantive critique, see S. Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia, 1998), who shows how the brutal conquest of marketplaces in the eighteenth century disrupted traditional economic relationships and prepared the way for British territorial expansion.

⁸⁶See, for example, S. Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997), 1–107.

of eighteenth-century historiography was to revive interest in archival research. This was a healthy pill for medieval historians as well, who seem to have become almost entirely desensitized to other interpretive possibilities of their archives. Indeed, to the extent that eighteenth-century historiography sought both political and economic dynamism in the 'intermediate' realms, it effectively loosened the model-driven theories of polity that imagined the state as a kind of abstract 'object'. This orientation coalesced with already forthcoming critiques of the state in medieval historiography discussed above to create the space for historians to take Mughal political culture more seriously, exploring a wide array of themes, from domesticity and gender to military organization and warfare.⁸⁷

The most significant effect of the eighteenth-century debates, however, has been the erosion of the long-standing chronological divide between a Mughal or 'late medieval' era and an early 'colonial' or 'modern' one – opening the space for a new periodization of both. This was, of course, not an entirely accidental state of affairs, for one of the implicit arguments of much revisionist historiography was that the origins of South Asian modernity were not generated exclusively through the anvil of colonial exploitation, but to a great extent had indigenous roots. Neither were such stakes entirely new, as earlier generations of economic historians dating back to Moreland himself approached the Mughal economy with one eye on its relation to the early colonial economy (and its critics!) that followed it. While Aligarh historians had from the outset seen the Mughal economy as incapable of generating capitalist development⁸⁸ and debates about the eighteenth century continue, by the 1990s enough empirical work had accumulated to establish, at the very least, new chronological horizons for ongoing research.

These new horizons, partly inspired by eighteenth-century and new Mughal historiography but also, crucially, by largely parallel developments in the historiography of Portuguese and Dutch South India, the Indian Ocean and Eurasia, together conspired to create what has now been widely accepted as a distinct period of South Asian history – the 'early modern'.⁸⁹ In some ways, this development simply gave voice to already existing trends in the field, but it is also true that 'the early modern' has taken on a logic of its own. For while the category of 'medieval' in India, as in most national historiographies, has gradually come to be evacuated of uniform features in favour of a sort of cacophony of regional isolates, the 'early modern', by contrast, has tended to be

⁸⁷See M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, *Writing the Mughal World: Studies in Political Culture* (Delhi, 2011). On gender, see R. Lal, *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World* (Cambridge, 2005); R. O'Hanlon, 'Kingdom, household and body: history, gender and imperial service under Akbar', *Modern Asian Studies*, xli, 5 (2007), 889–923; R. O'Hanlon, 'Manliness and imperial service in Mughal north India', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, xlii, 1 (1999), 47–93. On warfare, see W. Pinch, *Warrior Ascetics and Indian Empires* (Cambridge, 2006) and J. Gommans, *Mughal Warfare* (New York, 2002).

⁸⁸See I. Habib, 'Potentialities of capitalistic development in the economy of Mughal India', *Journal of Economic History*, xxix, 1 (1969), 32–78.

⁸⁹Of crucial importance here are the early works of Sanjay Subrahmanyam: see S. Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990) and S. Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire: Portuguese Trade and Settlement in the Bay of Bengal* (Oxford, 1990). For an early collection of essays dealing with the subject through the eighteenth century, see R. Barnett, *Rethinking Early Modern India* (Delhi, 2003).

an epoch of bold attributes, with its well-known characteristics including the rising importance of global trade markets, the ascent to power of merchant capitalists, partly bureaucratized and centralized monarchic states with large armies making use of firearms and, finally, a series of cultural developments anticipating 'modernity'. These elements formed part of an older paradigm of early modern history that was explicitly comparativist and 'global' in its scope, a framework that itself had by the 1990s come under sustained criticism, and in the South Asian context largely rejected in favour of a more contextualized and contingent approach to the early modern world – one which sought to write what Sanjay Subrahmanyam, perhaps the most outspoken proponent of the early modern in South Asia, has called 'connected' rather than 'comparative' histories.⁹⁰ Politically, there has been an emphasis on the dynamism and resilience of smaller states in a period traditionally regarded as one of fragmentation and decline.⁹¹ There have been related calls to place the Mughal, Safavid and Ottoman empires in a single field and to trace the interactions and convergences between them. Travel, itinerancy, boundary-crossing and the mobility of individuals within this world have been repeatedly emphasized.⁹²

Intellectual, literary and religious trends in 'early modern' South Asia have also received growing attention. In 1992 Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam broke important ground with the publication of the first book to attempt to correlate 'new' economic and institutional forms with the culture, kingship and indigenous 'anthropology' of Nayaka-period (sixteenth- to eighteenth-century) Tamilnadu.⁹³ Though the term 'early modern' was not yet used as such, this work was to become foundational for later studies of the period, both for opening the door to cultural interpretations of what was then an incipient field, but also for placing south India firmly into a historiographical field that had largely been focused on the north. As cultural approaches to the early modern have evolved, there have generally been two thrusts to the scholarship. First, there has been a tendency to identify a new class of intellectuals, *literati* or religious specialists, who moved through far-reaching networks, often acting as 'knowledge brokers' between traditional realms of knowledge and new social

⁹⁰For criticism of the concept of the early modern in its bold attributional mode more generally, see J. Goldstone, 'The problem of the "early modern" world', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, xli, 3 (1998), 249–84. For a perceptive critique of the treatment of South Asia in the model-driven writings of Victor Lieberman's work, see R. Sreenivasan, 'A South Asianist's response to Lieberman's *Strange Parallels*', *Journal of Asian Studies*, lxx, 4 (2011), 983–93. For 'connected history', see S. Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies*, xxxi, 3 (1997), 735–62. See also S. Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Delhi, 2005); and S. Subrahmanyam,

Explorations in Connected History: Mughals and Franks (Delhi, 2005).

⁹¹S. Subrahmanyam, *Penumbral Visions: Making Politics in Early Modern South India* (Ann Arbor, 2001).

⁹²M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge, 2007); M. Alam and S. Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways to be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, Mass, 2011); N. Green, *Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India* (Delhi, 2012).

⁹³V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka-period Tamil Nadu* (Delhi, 1992).

institutions. Second, scholars have pointed to various forms of self-perceived and self-conscious 'newness' and innovation on the part of these intellectuals in relation to received or 'traditional' knowledges and doctrines.⁹⁴ These intellectuals often worked with vernacular languages and horizons rather than classical ones, and with structures of authority that were new, and 'beyond the state'.

Literary and cultural historians have discerned intellectual and literary formations indicative of distinctive regional cultural dynamism that in some way can be described as distinctively 'modern' or prefiguring the modern. They have identified distinctive traditions of knowledge, from vernacular and empiricist historical writing and early modern public spheres, to the first glimmers of the modern novel or the modern individual in sources from the period.⁹⁵ In some cases these developments have been seen as the precursors to vernacular forms of culture that persisted well into the nineteenth century and beyond, becoming deeply entangled with the emergence of colonial modernity in South Asia.⁹⁶ In other cases, they have been interpreted as the more or less developed seeds of modernity in South Asia that were parallel but distinct from those of early modern Europe.⁹⁷ Such interpretations, predictably, have elicited lively debate in a number of circles.⁹⁸

CLOSING REMARKS

Even as the use of the terminology of the 'early modern' has become accepted in the field, debates around its relevance and implications are far from resolved. This is because the term is relatively laden with assumptions – assumptions that are particularly consequential in relation to the use of the term 'medieval'. More than earlier periodizations, the idea of early modern, at least for the time being, remains deeply entwined with claims about the evolution of modernity in South Asia. These claims are in turn deeply at odds with the dominant received narratives. So for Marxists, subalternists and many nationalists, the arrival of the British East Indian Company and the evolution of the colonial state marked a profound change in the organization of the economy, the

⁹⁴Sheldon Pollock, 'New intellectuals in seventeenth-century India', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xxxviii, 3 (2001), 3–31; Sheldon Pollock, *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800* (Durham, NC, 2011); R. O'Hanlon and D. Washbrook (eds), *Religious Cultures in Early Modern India: New Perspectives* (London, 2011).

⁹⁵For conceptions of the past, see Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, *op. cit.*; K. Chatterjee, *The Cultures of History in Early Modern India: Persianization and Mughal Culture in Bengal* (Delhi, 2009). For early modern communicative idioms and publics, see Narayana Rao and Shulman, *A Poem at the Right Moment*, *op. cit.*, 135–200; for the early novel, see V. Narayana Rao and

D. Shulman, *The Sound of the Kiss, or the Story that Must Never be Told* (New York, 2002).

⁹⁶For an interesting uptake of the idea of vernacular histories into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to interrupt narratives of modernity, see R. Aquil and P. Chatterjee (eds), *History in the Vernacular* (Delhi, 2008).

⁹⁷D. Shulman, *More than Real: A History of the Imagination in South India* (Cambridge, Mass, 2012).

⁹⁸See the special issue of *History and Theory*, XLVI(2007), on Narayan Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time*, *op. cit.*, esp. S. Pollock, 'Pretextures of time', *ibid.*, 364–81. For a more recent disagreement, see D. Chakrabarty, 'The muddle of modernity', *American Historical Review*, CXVI, 3 (2011), 663–75.

relation of state to society, and the orientation of 'culture' in South Asia – all of which have been understood as a peculiar entity known as colonial modernity. For Marxists, Utilitarians and rationalists, the diverse regions of the globe before the rise of imperialism and capitalism shared certain universal, basic features but were otherwise largely fragmented and heterogeneous. The arrival of modernity for the first time ensured a universal integration of peoples and cultures under 'the sign of man' and markets into a global economy. But modernity was also the time when the very periodization of medieval and modern was imagined in the first place – indeed, the entire periodization is predicated upon modernity as its presupposed temporal culmination. For India, this periodization was experienced through colonialism. The early modern thesis has tended to suggest that elements of modernity have in fact evolved indigenously, or were at least incipient on the 'eve' of colonialism. This position may be consonant with the reassertion of various forms of nationalism.

Yet, in the rush to bestow upon India its own 'early modern' period, there has often been, it would seem, a tendency to accept as universal and even reify the 'modern' as a set of stable attributes. Despite the profound critiques of modernist triumphalism by scholars and intellectuals since the 1960s, South Asianists often seem to take modernist discourses at their face value. At this level, early modern historiography has not so much complicated the narratives of the rise of modernity, as the eighteenth-century debate has suggested, but merely changed its protagonists and shifted its chronological boundaries. Looking at these arguments from further back in time, from the vantage point of the medieval, the whole story has a rather familiar ring to it. To wit, if early modern South Asia was a world characterized by mobility, dynamism, change, boundary-crossing, and the criticism of tradition and individualism, then the 'medieval', as its pretext, was once again to be associated with stasis, lethargy, solidity, acceptance of tradition, and collectivity and kinship. I say 'once again' because these are the traditional characteristics that have been associated with the medieval in South Asia, as elsewhere. The arguments for 'early modernity' in South Asia, in other words, have often relied on the very tropes of the 'medieval' that were once used to consign the Mughal empire to a backward 'medieval period'. While the eighteenth-century debate has invigorated the field of South Asian history as a whole, opening up immense possibilities for more nuanced and textured social histories of both medieval and early modern India, some of its protagonists, particularly those arguing strongly for an 'early modern' break, have sometimes unwittingly breathed new ideological life into our received temporal categories. Until we problematize the modern in South Asia not simply as a set of historical developments but a set of 'claims' about reality that were inextricably tied to the discursive entities that they sought to defeat, like the 'medieval', the 'feudal', we are doomed to reinvent the 'break' which casts the medieval into darkness.