

Burjor Avari. *Islamic Civilization in South Asia: A History of Muslim Power and Presence in the Indian Subcontinent*. London: Routledge, 2013. xviii+317 pp. ISBN : 978-0-415-58062-5 (pbk)

South Asia is undoubtedly home to one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. The region has such a complex historical, ethnic, geopolitical, and economic dynamics that the fact that religion has been an essential element of South Asian cultures remains overlooked. Muslims are overwhelmingly linked with violence and terrorism, particularly in the West, in the post-9/11 scenario. Various nationalistic and religious standpoints have installed many ambiguities and misapprehensions about Muslims within and outside South Asia. Some of them are taken for granted without factual accuracy and pave the way to misleading interpretations of the history of Muslims in South Asia, the character of historical Muslims rulers, and the Pakistan Movement. *Islamic Civilization in South Asia* by Burjor Avari of Manchester Metropolitan University is particularly welcome to prompt an exploration of Muslims' history in South Asia and to find answers to some of the most intriguing and complicated questions. After Avari's previous book, *India: The Ancient Past*, which focuses on the history of the Indian Subcontinent in general, this volume offers a concise but comprehensive overview of Muslims' "presence" and their political power in South Asia from a historical perspective. The book focuses on the dynamics of Islamic civilization in South Asia from the eighth century to now in chronological order. The author's treatment of the subject and his focus on the most controversial aspects of South Asian history are evidently innovative, comprehensive, and unique in style. It is worth mentioning here that the book deals with only three states of South Asia: Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. This geographically demarcated analysis of Muslims in these three states is justifiable on the basis of their shared history, specifically when it comes to Muslims' presence and rule on the Indian Subcontinent.

To begin this eleven chapters' long volume, Avari mentions in the introduction (chap. 1) that *Islamic Civilization in South Asia* not only provides a chronological account of Muslims' history in South Asia, but offers an alternative perspective to some of the major misconceptions about Muslims there. Today, it is (mis)perceived by many that

the local Indian population was forcibly converted to Islam by Muslim rulers through the use of violence and coercive force. On the contrary, Avari argues that non-Muslims were converted to Islam for various reasons; for example, the exploitation of lower castes by Brahmins and others led the poor to convert to Islam. Furthermore, Muslim Sufis also played a vital role in preaching Islam in the region. Their shrines are venerated by Muslims and non-Muslims even today. Another common (mis)apprehension about imposing taxes on non-Muslims by Muslim rulers, particularly Mughals, is also questioned in the book. Avari regards it to be an exaggeration because conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was more “rewarding” for Muslim rulers than imposing taxes on them. Moreover, he asserts that many non-Muslim elites converted to Islam in order to attain privileges under Muslim rule. He notes that the myth of a homogenous Muslim population or “nation” in the Indian Subcontinent has its roots in the Pakistan Movement. Muslims always belonged to, and still have, a diverse ethnic, regional, and linguistic background on the Indian Subcontinent. Throughout history, many Muslim rulers had more tensions among themselves than they had with non-Muslim rulers.

In order to substantiate his arguments, Avari uses various historical sources. In his note on the historiography of the book, he highlights the weaknesses of the sources of South Asian history; for example, biases of early Muslim scholars toward their own religious ideologies, the anti-Muslim views of the Anglicist school and, later, religious and nationalistic biases of Indian and Pakistani historiographies. However, he does acknowledge that these are the only sources available to rely on, and that the recent developments in historical research to draw out reliable information have made it necessary to revisit some of the taken-for-granted views.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide an account of the background and arrival of Arab Muslims and, later, of Persians and Turks, in South Asia. The main focus of these sections is to highlight that Islam was introduced by the Arabs and Persians long before the arrival of Turks in South Asia, particularly the southwestern areas now included in Pakistan. The author’s description of many theological aspects of Islam which predominate Muslim culture, such as *zakat* (alms or charity) and *fatwa* (religious ruling), in order to explain how these have played a vital role in shaping Islamic civilization in South Asia is unusual for such history books that cover a long span of time. Chapters 4 and

5 describe how Muslim rulers had established the Delhi Sultanate by the twelfth century, which remained the center of power in the following centuries. Later, the Mughal Empire included a majority of today's South Asia, along with a smaller part of Central Asia. In three dedicated chapters on the Empire, the author provides information about the arrival of Mughals, their strategies of making alliances with local states, and the fall of their rule at the hands of the British. The majority of the iconic depictions of Islamic art, Sufism, and architectural monuments in South Asia belong to the Mughal era, such as the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort, the Lahore Fort, and the Badshahi Mosque. The author highlights various reasons for the fall of the Mughals; for instance, the rebellion of various tribes against the policies of Mughals in their later period, and the power struggle between Mughal princes after Aurangzeb (pp. 128–133). During the British Raj, some of the princely states ruled by Muslims came to an agreement with the British in order to maintain their partial or full autonomy. This crucial period for Muslims in general and their rule in particular is the theme of chapters 8–10 in the book. As the Muslims' rule started to decline, poverty and illiteracy spread across the Muslim population. Various educational and political movements, such as Aligarh University, started raising awareness among Muslims during this time. Due to convoluted relationships between Hindus and Muslims on socio-political levels, many Muslim thinkers and leaders raised questions regarding the future of a Muslim minority in a Hindu-dominant India as the British Raj seemed to be ended soon after the Second World War. The Muslim League, working for the empowerment of Muslims and effectively communicating the problems faced by Muslims to the British Raj, eventually demanded a separate Muslim state in South Asia. Chapter 11 is an epilogue raising questions about the future of Muslim culture, identity, and status in a global context and within what the author calls a “fractured” subcontinent (p. 27), with respect to the problems such as the Kashmir dispute, religious extremism, and regional identities in the post-9/11 scenario.

Islamic Civilization in South Asia provides several historical maps to help understand political boundaries and locations of various states and dynasties. Twenty-two black and white plates with sketches of Muslim kings and buildings, as well as photographs of some historical monuments and Muslims leaders, all taken from public and private sources, are also included in a separate section. A very useful and unusual characteristic of the book is the inclusion of select excerpts from different history

books, letters, and public addresses at the end of each chapter. On the one hand, these excerpts show the variety of sources used in writing the book. On the other hand, readers will find them useful and stimulating for further research and analysis. The book also showcases a few personal archives and collections, though it does not explicitly discuss how instrumental these sources have been in constructing and shaping the author's arguments. Although it is not a conventional history book with detailed accounts of various historical events, *Islamic Civilization in South Asia* will be of interest to many South Asianists as well as students and scholars of Islamic studies, Bangladesh Studies, Indology, and Pakistan Studies. For a general reader, the book sheds light on the peace-loving and multicultural aspect of South Asian Muslim, and particularly Pakistani Muslim, culture, aspects which are often overlooked due to political rhetoric, and will thus be a motivation for considering some alternative perspectives on the religion of the region.

References

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