INTRODUCTION

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1. Culture and Circulation

The idea of a timeless traditional India, its people locked in place in unchanging, quaint villages until modernity roused them from their somnolence—once a staple of Western representations of the Subcontinent—is so patently at odds with the historical record that one wonders how such imagining could ever have carried force.1 Indian narratives are filled with the peregrinations of kings and military personnel, poets, scholars, merchants, and adventurers. Religious itinerants in particular were ubiquitous in a culture where many aspirants to spiritual attainment wandered constantly, with only a begging bowl and life’s basic necessities at their disposal. The Virashaivas, a militant devotional community in South India that produced some of the finest medieval Kannada poetry, fervently advocated being jaṅgama, mobile, as opposed to sthāvara, stationary (and thus overly wedded to the establishment).2 Indian love poetry is unthinkable without the iconic motif of the pathika, the traveler, and the virahīṇī or forlorn beloved anxiously awaiting his safe return.

If centuries of texts are populated by Indians on the move, premodern South Asia itself was also a place one traveled to, a magnet for visitors from virtually all of Eurasia. Examples of this type of mobility abound and cover the entire known history of the region beginning with the people who

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1 This notion cannot be traced to a single source. The idea of the Indian village as a static, self-contained world can be found as early as Charles Metcalfe’s minute of 1830: “The village communities are little republics, having nearly everything they can want within themselves, and almost independent of any foreign relations” (1832: 331–32). Another observation is recorded a century later by Charlotte and William Wiser, missionaries who took up residence in the Indian village of Karimpur during the 1920s, returning periodically. Although they did grudgingly acknowledge change over a period of decades in response to the intrusions of modern life, they observed that “When life has followed the same pattern for generations, the grooves made by that pattern go deep. To alter the design is difficult.” (2000[1930]: 160).

2 Ramanujan 1973: 20–22. In a related vein, Catharina Kiehnle notes that one derivation of saurī, a character that figures in the jiṅāndev Gāthā that is the subject of her essay in this volume, is from Sanskrit svairī (< svair, sva-īra, “going where one likes”).
brought new, Indo-European, languages and composed the Vedas, Hinduism’s Ur-texts. “Traditional India” was founded not by locals but by migrants from the northwest. Buddhism—an ancient Indian religion whose adherents were profoundly peripatetic—was periodically revitalized through migrant scholars. When in the fourth century Buddhist communities from China needed access to scriptures, they sent Fa-Hsien on a long mission to collect the important source texts. Islam brought its own migrations. The religion reached India early—via Arab traders to Sind during its very first century—and multiple dynasties of Turkic rulers from Central Asia pulled India into the greater Islamic world. This linkage stimulated additional opportunities for travel, as when the fourteenth-century Moroccan judge Ibn Battuta spent a long period in residence at the court of Muhammad bin Tughlak (r. 1325–51) or when, during the time of the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605), India became, with spectacular creative consequences, a haven for Persian literati. The same century witnessed unprecedented levels of mercantile exchange in textiles and spices between Europe, South Asia, and destinations further east, following trade routes dating back to at least the third or fourth century. Henceforth India would become a hub for Western expansionist politics. Internal circulation and exchange with the world outside, in short, are defining features of South Asia throughout history.

This unassailable fact has been far from self-evident to generations of scholars, a situation that is only recently changing. A 2003 collection of essays by Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, whose title, Society and Circulation, we admiringly echo, was one important model for the present book. Principally working in the period from 1750 to 1950, they take as their starting point the mobility of people, goods, and culture in recent South Asian history. Often a by-product of mobility is the adaptation of ideas, which spurs cultural change. The art historian Barry Flood has made encounters between communities the very premise of a ground-breaking study of frontier regions from a much earlier period, noting that “people and things have been mixed up for a very long time, rarely conforming to the boundaries imposed on them by

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3 Or such is the general scholarly consensus. The grounds for this consensus (and opposing views) are outlined in Trautmann, ed., 2005.

4 Fa-Hsien was just one in a series of Chinese travelers to India. See Singh (2009: 33).

5 On Ibn Battuta, see Gibb 1958; on the circulation of Persian literati in Mughal India, see Lefèvre, this volume.