Burjor Avari


Burjor Avari provides an excellent chronological overview of the political, socio-economic, and cultural history of Islam in South Asia from the late seventh century to the present. The book covers four distinct historical periods: the beginning of Islam in South Asia (c. 632 to 1000 CE); the formation of Muslim polities in various parts of the Indian subcontinent (1000 to 1765); the advent and intensification of British colonialism (1765 to 1947); and, Islam in post-colonial South Asia (1947 to the present). The social history of Indo-Muslim civilization in these historical frameworks is daunting. South Asian Muslims appropriated Arab-Persian, Turkic, Hindu, and Buddhist values and social practices in ways that often problematized distinctions between local and foreign norms. Avari manages this vast history with exquisite use of narrative devices, sizable chapters, and accessible prose.

The book chronicles Indo-Muslim civilization from the formation of Islam in Arabia to the resilience of Hindu civilization amidst the Muslim conquests. Avari contends that the study of “Indo-Islamic civilization is...as vital in our understanding of Indian and South Asian history as that of the ancient Hindu-Buddhist culture or the colonial period” (xvii). While Avari does not promise to break new ground in the study of South Asian Islam, he provides an engaging historical narrative of Islamicate South Asia. With his sharp eye for political and socio-economic dynamics, Avari’s narrative supplements the existing intellectual histories of South Asian Islam: Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980); Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008); M. Reza Pirbhai, *Reconsidering Islam in a South Asian Context* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009).

In the introduction, Avari provides a concise account of his historical narrative, explains his terms, corrects popular misconceptions about Islamicate South Asia, throws light on key thematic issues, and explains his selective but judicious use of historiographical sources. Two terms—power and presence—allude to Avari’s range of thematic concerns. By “power,” he implies “the rule exercised by Muslim monarchs and their governors over numerous regions of South Asia for many centuries” (5). The history of Muslim power yields portals into the material realities of Muslim “presence,” which Avari defines as “the condition of Muslims in South Asia in general, the challenge of religious and social tensions from within and without that they faced, and how some of them reached the heights of cultural or intellectual achievements” (6).
The notion of “inter-cultural understanding” informs Avari’s examination of all phases of Indo-Islamic politics and culture. Muslim power and presence endured in South Asia due to the ability of Muslim rulers “to empathize with the followers of the predominant Hindu faith, to engage in dialogue with them and to seek reconciliation between religious ideas” (11). Other sources of Muslim political success included: “the personality and charisma of the individual ruler; the army and its commanders, efficient bureaucracy, and sound finance” (10). In contrast, the decline of Muslim power and presence was largely due to the intolerance of rulers toward subject cultures and customs, territorial over-reach, injudicious management of financial resources and state revenues, and intra-dynastic succession battles.

Relying entirely on Anglophone scholarship, Avari synthesizes varying scholarly paradigms. His analyses are dispassionate and take on troubling historical episodes and their vexed historiographical treatments. At the same time, Avari’s reliance on secondary sources alone means that some sections are more nuanced than others. In general, his discussion of the political and economic aspects is especially solid; however, the reader should expect reductive, and at times unsubstantiated, musings on Indo-Muslim theology, mysticism, and legalism. The book also fails to mention several crucial studies including Carl W. Ernst’s *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (1992); Jamal Maliks *Islam in South Asia* (2008); and Raziuddin Aquil’s *Sufism, Culture, and Politics: Afghans and Islam in Medieval North India* (2007).

After the introduction, the material is arranged into ten chapters. Each begins with a summary of Muslim power in that era, followed by thematic sections that cast light on social, economic, and cultural aspects of Muslim politics and society. Avari’s analyses are informative, balanced, and for the most part grounded in historical evidence. The book is supplemented with several helpful features: numerous maps, pertinent excerpts from primary sources, around two-dozen images, lists of landmark dates and royal dynasties, a short glossary, a significant bibliography, and a thorough index.

In Chapter Two, Avari draws heavily from the first volume of André Wink’s *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World* (1991) in order to summarize the 400-year period that spans the beginnings of Islam in South Asia to the establishment of the Ghaznavid dynasty in the eleventh century. In this section, we read about Muslim mariners who settled on the western shores of India as early as the seventh century and the Umayyad invasion of Sind in the eighth century. In Chapter Three, Avari discusses the Ghaznavids and the Ghurids and “the Persian style that triumphed in India in the areas of government, literature and art” (38). During this time, Sufism also began to take root in India, especially through the activity of Ali Hujwiri and Muin ud-Din Chishhti. The fourth chapter examines the Delhi Sultanate in terms of territorial expansion,