

Asia and Persia, and frequent dynastic changes in India, trading activities never stopped. The rulers and the ruling class, that is, Mongols and Turks, made sincere efforts to protect and promote the trade and provided security for the traders, and in the trading routes and trading centres. A well organized mode of trade, coupled with caravansarais, postal-services, inspection-houses and check-ports, was ensured. The cities were full of foreign goods, enjoying the patronage of the state and were thronged by the merchants from all over the known world. Regardless of natural calamities, geographical hurdles, fear of highway robbers and scarcity of water, the merchants and their caravans remained on the march.

The book, however, is not without blemishes. There is no uniformity in the size of the chapters: for example, the second chapter is too lengthy and could be divided into two parts—one concerning the Indian cities, and the other Central Asian and Persian. The other shortcoming is that some of the research articles quoted in the footnotes have not made to the bibliography. For example, the author's own article titled 'Fall of Lahore in A.D. 1241 and its impact on trading activities', which has been quoted in footnote 48 at pp. 75-76, stands omitted from the bibliography.

On the positive side of things, it may be mentioned that the overall get-up of the book containing a glossary, select bibliography and a useful index is impressive. Maps showing geographical features of India, Central Asia and Persia and major cities and routes add to the utility of the book which is well researched and provides valuable insight into the state of medieval trade and diaspora across the Asian kingdoms. Students of medieval history in India, Central Asia and Persia are bound to find this book useful.

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M. ATHAR ALI, *Mughal India: Studies in Polity, Ideas, Society and Culture* (OUP, New Delhi, 2006). Pp. xv + 409. Rs 695.00.

The book under review is a collection of essays by Athar Ali on wide-ranging themes covering topics from the realm of ideas, religion, polity, administration, society and culture. These articles reflect not only exhaustive research but also valuable and interesting interpretations. This

project, although initiated by Athar Ali, could not be completed by him for his ill health and his sad demise in 1998. The volume, as we see it now, has been prepared with a preface by Irfan Habib.

Known most famously for his work, *Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* and his second major work, *The Apparatus of Empire* in which he discusses the ranks, offices and titles of the *mansabdars*, this book has a completely different orientation. Apart from the political structure of the Mughal Empire, it focusses largely on culture, religion, ideology and sources of the Empire. He emphasizes the importance of studying elements of social justice in medieval Islamic thought to judge the historical level of each civilization. His discussion, particularly on the status of women, Akbar's objection to the prevailing practice of *sati*, his concern for Muslim women's share in inheritance and several other issues pertaining to women and abolition of slave trade, contribute not only to the understanding of Akbar's humanistic sentiments but also provide a perception of social justice in medieval times.

As one reads through the chapters, Athar Ali comes across as a rational Marxist who recognized Marxism as an important tool in historiography but did not agree with many of its premises in totality. In discussing the political structures—Ottoman, Safavid, Uzbek and the Mughal—of the Islamic Orient in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he rejects Marx's model of Asiatic Despotism to understand medieval Islamic societies and/or is not willing to accept it without heavy qualifications. Athar Ali argues that although Marx's model of the oriental state has an inner logical consistency, it has several factual weaknesses in the theory. For instance, the 'village community' of Marx was largely an ideal adopted by the British administrators even as they ignored the internal stratification within the village and partly overlooked the universality of individual landholding patterns within it. Marx's model of village community could not be applied to the Ottoman Empire and Iran since it had no caste system and consequently no hereditary, fixed division of labour. In India, for example, the peasants usually paid rent in money and only partly or occasionally in grain. So, grain-rent, Athar Ali argues, cannot be understood as a universal basis for the fiscal systems of oriental states as believed by Marx. He observes that Marx wrote too little about state structures, making it difficult to argue with him on this crucial aspect of oriental politics.

In his discussion of the Islamic background to Indian history, Athar Ali argues that the period *c.* 1000 to *c.* 1750 has been conventionally fixed by historians as medieval period, who believed that during this period India culturally belonged to the Islamic world “not on its periphery but close to its core”. To the contrary, however, Athar Ali suggests that such was the uniqueness of India during this period that “it could be said to have been a world on its own right, with Islam only as a peripheral phenomenon”. This succinct and subtle suggestion of Athar Ali indicates that he was perhaps not quite supportive of periodization of history into rigid compartments.

That Athar Ali was a rational and a scientific historian is evident from his discussion on the genesis of medieval civilizations. He observes that history has become a court of appeal for all rival interests and the debate on “the intrusion of Islam” in Indian history has intensified “belittling the greatness of our own civilization”. It is therefore necessary that we interpret our heritage objectively and critically. He stipulates that religious and sectarian sentiments should be kept away from history. In fact he keenly argues that Islamic history too was open to mathematical and logical interpretation.

While most of his chapters gel thematically, there are some odd and disparate ones like ‘Nobility under Muhammad Tughluq’ and the growth and development of Delhi and Punjab in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries. However, one can interpret their inclusion into the volume as an attempt by Athar Ali to reinforce his arguments on accommodation and exchange, composite culture, cultural efflorescence and economic changes. Notwithstanding the monotonous discussion on the nobility under Muhammad Tughluq, Athar Ali observes that the Sultan appointed Hindus to administrative posts, interacted with the *jogis* and played *holi*. For all this he may have incurred the displeasure of the *ulema* but he was genuinely interested in Hinduism. None the less, irrespective of the Sultan’s ideological liberalism, it cannot be overlooked that he may have appointed Hindus to achieve political objectives. Discussing the evolution of the perception of India from thirteenth century onwards, Athar Ali points towards the culmination of *sulh-i kul*, that is, absolute peace under Akbar, which was a means of relief for individuals like Abul Fazl himself as well as all people. Abul Fazl thus reached a conclusion justifying Akbar’s promotion of both rationalism and social reform in order to construct a ‘Hindustan’ that would stand out in the world.

Interpreting the Mughal Empire, Athar Ali talks about the process of centralization and systematization under Akbar and a theory of semi-divine sovereignty that governed the relations between the king and the nobles, which was almost like the unwritten 'constitution' of the Mughal Empire. Despite this observation, Athar Ali does not appear quite comfortable with this hypothesis. It seems that he doubted centralization or the extent of centralization in the Mughal Empire. He suggests that India, although a quasi-modern state during the Mughal period, had failed to develop a sense of nationhood; secondly, if the term 'Hindustan', often used during this period, was more than a geographical expression, it was not due to any popular consciousness but because it covered the same area of pilgrimage as in Hindu mythology. It was for these reasons, Athar Ali argues, that the Mughal Empire could not overcome caste and community divisions and remained vulnerable to the challenges from the Marathas, Jats, Sikhs and Afghan 'peasant-soldiers'. However, unlike Irfan Habib, he rejects agrarian crisis as the cause of the rebellion of these groups. Further, he insinuates that if these revolts could not be curbed, it was an indication that the people were largely indifferent to whether they were under an imperial rule or a regional regime. Having made these contentious arguments, he dilutes and dismisses his hypothesis as speculation. But the issue of regionalization versus centralization once again assumes importance in his discussion of the pre-colonial structure and the Mughal polity. He raises significant questions like: "Are we not assuming a unity or uniformity where none existed"? In this context, he speaks of different patterns of rainfall in regions, which had implications for the organization of agrarian life and added to these were divergent and cultural specificities. Athar Ali thus says, "the variations must be immense".

The author makes yet another significant observation, namely that there was no crisis in the economy on the eve of the British conquest although there was crisis in the political apparatus. Exemplifying his point, he suggests that there was a high share of revenue from gross agricultural product, which provided enormous fiscal claims to the British that they drained to Britain. It is at this point that he criticizes C.A. Bayly, Muzaffar Alam and the rest for their theses of continuity and growth. Viewed in the context of Athar Ali's interpretation (some of which has been mentioned above), this criticism appears rather irrational. The drain required resources and if the drain continued, resources also must have continued to grow, and the resources in the absence of the powerful

Mughal Empire could grow only as a result of regionalization and commercialization and the endeavours of the corporate groups and social classes.

Written clearly and cogently, the issues raised in this volume are rich and varied. However, Athar Ali leaves some of these as speculations and others as hypothesis to be worked upon later. None the less, these speculations and hypothesis offer new, compulsive insights and often inspire the reader to reinterpret Athar Ali.

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SOM PRAKASH VERMA, *Painting the Mughal Experience* (OUP, New Delhi, 2005). Pp. xii + 185. Rs 2250.00.

The historical writings of Professor Som Prakash Verma constitute some of the most critical interpretations of Mughal art historical material. He is one historian who has consistently worked on themes and areas that have aided in filling some baffling blank spaces in medieval Indian history. One can see the care he takes to bring to surface various details of the Mughal cultural and social milieu through his analysis of medieval documents and more especially the painted folios.

Mughal miniature painting is an art form that was expanded by the Mughals both in format and content. The Mughals encouraged themes that went beyond being mere illustrations of popular narratives. The themes, while retaining religious and historical references, were vital organs that assimilated and propagated rich secular literature and ethos. The Mughal painter and his patron were certainly interested in articulating the contemporary values in all spheres of culture and socio-political life of the people. Babar, the first Mughal, was a great connoisseur of art apart from nurturing concern in literature and poetry. But no work of any significance has as yet surfaced from his court. The next Mughal, Emperor Humayun, is now acknowledged to have established a highly regulated and consistently dynamic studio where calligraphers, painters and book-binders worked together to create volumes and magnificent albums that were cherished by him. When these manuscripts and albums were inherited by Akbar, the Great Mughal had each object recorded, sealed, preserved and made them esteemed reference and archival