

Book Review

MuzaffarAlam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Pp. 399. Price HB £55.00. ISBN 978–0–52178041–4.

MuzaffarAlam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, two well-known Indian scholars who are now teaching in US universities, have often collaborated to produce some academic works on Mughal India and particularly on travels of the period. Their erstwhile joint effort has resulted in an edited volume, *The Mughal State, 1526-1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) while individually, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, besides other works, has authored a biography of Portuguese discoverer of India as *Career and Legend of Vasco da Gama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and MuzaffarAlam's seminal works include *Crisis of the Empire* (Delhi, 1986) and *The Language of Political Islam in India, c. 1200-1800* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2004) and with S. Alavi, *A European Experience of the Mughal Orient: The Ijaz-i-Arsalani (Persian Letters, 1773-1779) of Antoine-Louis Henri Polier* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001). However, *Indo-Persian Travels* is one of their most significant works as it raises some important questions and attempts to provide answers to them.

The book under review is mainly about the Persian *Safar-namahs* or travel-narratives written in the Persian language. However, the authors also include the Russian traveller, AfanasiiNikitin, who visited India in the fifteenth century and wrote in the Russian language. The book is divided into eight chapters. The first introductory chapter raises the central question and problem of the book that in the modern academic discourse, the image of travel-writers and travellers as authors has increasingly come to be associated with the West, as if the East did not produce significant corpus of travel-accounts. As the travel writing came to be equated with empirical scientific discourse and travels' liberating and emancipatory role was emphasised, this view-point, according to the authors, reinforced the colonial perceptions that the Orient was traditional and unprogressive. Al-Biruni's scientific study of Indian society in *Kitab al-Hind* did make a major contribution, however, as the critics asserted, it remained an exception which was rarely followed by writers and travellers of the East. The book is, therefore, an attempt to refute this argument that travel-writing is an exclusive western pre-occupation. For this objective, it surveys the genre of travel writing from Beijing to the Bosphorus during the period from fifteenth to eighteen centuries but largely confines itself to Perso-Islamic ecumene. It argues that if Marco Polo proved to be example for the later Western travellers, his near contemporary in the East, Ibn Battuta was no less significant. The authors then make surveys of Ottoman and Chinese traditions of travel writing and attempt to show that both of them were equally noteworthy for their richness of details and perceptions of the writers. They, however, also concede that India, in the classical period and outside of the Perso-Islamic sphere, failed to show any noteworthy

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example of travel writing till the beginning of the modern period. They do not provide reasons for this absence.

They begin by discussing a seventeenth century account, written in verse, by an anonymous female pilgrim to Makkah. Chapter second discusses three travel accounts of fifteenth century. The first travel-narrative is that of a prominent saint, Sayyid Muhammad Gesudaraz, when he went from Delhi to Deccan to escape the atrocities of Amir Timur. The second one is the travel account of AbdurRazzaqSamarqandi who went to Calicut in south-western India and to the Kingdom of Vijayanagara in south India as an ambassador of MirzaShahrukh, son of Amir Timur. While the third account is that of the Russian traveller AfanasiNikitin who visited the Bahmani Sultanate between 1469 and 1472. The next chapter explores the view of India as seen by the two visitors from Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire. It delves into the description of India by the sixteenth century Ottoman admiral Seydi Ali Reis and Central Asian poet MutribiSamarqandi to the court of Emperor Jahangir. The fourth chapter concentrates on the voluminous account of Mahmud WaliBalkhi and it also explores the relationship of travel and *ajaiib* (wonders) by making a comparative analysis of Mahmud Balkhi's text with that of Muhammad Rabi, secretary of the Safavid embassy to the court of Thailand in the 1680s. The fifth chapter is related to those accounts of travellers who migrated from Safavid Iran to Mughal India but did not find the new environment to their tastes. Chapter six reverses this view and examines the account of Mughal traveller, Khwaja Abdul KarimShahristani, who visited Iran, Hijaz and Ottoman Empire. The seventh chapter delves on some other Mughal travellers to the Ottoman Empire. The last chapter ambitiously ventures to compare the experiences of these oriental travellers with the contemporaneous European travel writing.

The authors make a close reading of the travellers' narratives and analyse individual texts by 'listen[ing] to the text, its shifts in tone, rhythm and conception.' (p. 20) They try to decipher the hermeneutical strategies employed by the travellers and 'the delicate interplay between the accumulation of empirical information, and the formation and transformation of the categories of perception themselves.' (p. 19) They attempt to peep into their mental and moral worlds. Thus by discourse analysis, they try to deconstruct the text and its meanings. For this purpose, they have also translated some of the texts which had hitherto remained un-translated. The book is an important contribution to travel literature of the 'early modern' period and enriches our understanding of the Persian literary and cultural sphere, which encompasses not only India but also Central Asia and Iran.

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