



INTRODUCTION

For Francis Robinson

Dr Masuma Hasan

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Francis Robinson's academic romance with the subcontinent began when he was doing research for his doctoral thesis at Trinity College Cambridge. He has often reminded me that we were contemporaries—or near contemporaries—at Cambridge, but I do not remember having met him then. I do recall that his supervisor was my friend, the historian Anil Seal, who was a fellow of Trinity College.

Francis is recognised and acclaimed throughout the world as a superb scholar. His numerous publications are based on thorough and meticulous research. Admirably, they are built on a masterly combination of various sources: official records, private archives, diaries, personal interviews, and, above all, his own incisive observations.

No matter how profound a scholar, it is difficult to relate to, understand, and imbibe the currents and cross-currents of a completely different society and culture. The British may have been associated with and ruled India for two centuries, but they cannot be credited with having completely understood the complexity that was pre-independence India. When they left India in 1947, only 12 per cent of its population was literate. So much for their civilising mission. But, on the other hand, all of Francis's work displays the cultural and political empathy of a truly great historian.

I have read most of Francis's books, and my favourite is *The Mughal Emperors and the Islamic Dynasties of India, Iran and Central Asia*, not least because of my admiration for Emperor Akbar, who is my hero in history. I have often pondered on who was the greater ruler: Asoka or Akbar, and my vote goes to Akbar. Asoka inherited a functioning empire and sent the message of Buddhism far beyond the frontiers of his kingdom. But Akbar had to start from scratch as a young boy, aged just 14. He was separated from his parents as a child and was raised by unfriendly relatives. Whatever his other passions may have been, he was a great patron of learning, culture, and the arts. Unlettered though he was, he encouraged scholarship and it is said that in his library there were more than 24,000 books in languages ranging from Arabic and Persian to Sanskrit and Latin. He tried to raise the age of marriage; discouraged *sati*, the Hindu practice of women burning themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres; and abolished the sectarian tax on his non-Muslim subjects. He was devoted to his mother, Hamida Banu Begum, who had left him behind as a child, and persuaded his aunt, Gulbadan Begum, to write *Humayun Nama*, an account of the reign of his father, Emperor Humayun. The women of his family, the Mughal princesses, were accomplished and educated, speaking many languages. Some of them were writers, poets, and builders of monuments and gardens. That his empire was truly multicultural is reflected in the contours of Agra Fort and Fatehpur Sikri. I wonder if Francis would agree. The book is a feast, a fascinating narrative combined with stunning illustrations, which bring the Mughals to life.

In the journey of Francis's scholarship, the Farangi Mahall in Lucknow holds a unique place. His association with the Farangi Mahalli family and its holy men spread over many decades. The family consolidated the rationalist tradition of scholarship, which was derived from Iran, and they created a syllabus that became the standard system of Islamic education throughout India. Francis reveals this in his book *The Ulama of Farangi Mahall and Islamic Culture in South Asia*. The essays in this volume are a kind of prelude to his definitive biography of Jamal Mian Farangi Mahalli based on the latter's private papers, notebooks, personal diaries, and library entries. As Francis himself writes, he found an extraordinary family archive, beginning with Mughal documents, and his research, which took place for over 50 years, contributed to this biography. For many years, he tracked down material in different cities of India and, in doing so, he made many lasting contacts. Jamal Mian's papers were translated for Francis from Urdu by his son, Mahmood Jamal, as Francis read them, day after day, in his room at the Sind Club, Karachi. They were backed up by his discussions with Jamal Mian over several years.

In the acknowledgements to the book he has thanked me, although my only contribution seems to be my ancestry. Like the Farangi Mahallis, I claim descent from Abu Ayub Ansari through the renowned Sufi master Abdullah Ansari Pir of Herat. Jamal Mian was an important figure in the Pakistan movement and a great orator, but, like many others, he ended up by siding with and receiving patronage from the dictator General Ayub Khan. However, one can condone this folly because Jamal Mian did not favour bringing religion into the Constitution of Pakistan.

There is a remarkable continuity in Francis's work. Although he has written on many other subjects, much of his scholarship relates to the United Provinces, in whose Muslim culture he has steeped himself. There were three main centres of Muslim culture in India: Delhi, Lucknow, and Hyderabad Deccan. Francis's work was focused on Lucknow in the United Provinces, but by birth and background I am a *Dilli wali*. Francis can well understand the nostalgia of my generation for the pristine Ganga-Jamni culture of northern India which was transformed after 1947 into a hybrid and indiginised culture, partly because of the settlement of refugees on both sides of the border between Pakistan and India. When I visited my ancestral home, or what remained of it, in Panipat, India, a few years ago, I was surprised at how the bazaar had been completely taken over by refugees from the Sikh community.

I turn now to my personal friendship with Francis for over two decades. Whenever I travelled to London in the summer, Francis invited me to lunch at the prestigious Athenaeum Club on Pall Mall in London. It is a private members' club founded as early as 1824 for persons who have attained distinction in the sciences, literature, and the arts. It offers a setting for 'productive leisure', a niche for a gathering of great minds. A statue of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, stands above the entrance. There is a truly grand carpeted staircase leading upstairs which, thankfully, I didn't have to climb because a lift is available. In the glistening high-roofed 'coffee room' where lunch is served, Francis was a gracious and attentive host. After lunch was over, we would move upstairs for a cup of coffee and Francis sometimes accompanied me to Waterstone's down the road. These meetings gave me the opportunity to learn about recent scholarship in the history of the subcontinent, especially Indian scholarship to which we have scant access, introducing me to the work of younger historians. I was particularly struck by the pride with which he spoke about the students whose research he had supervised. He was generous in his praise.

Whenever Francis visited Karachi, I hosted a dinner for him and my guests showered him with questions, but he was also quick to glean information, particularly on the problems facing the city of Karachi. On one particular occasion, he was put on the mat by one of my guests for the chaotic withdrawal of the British from India in 1947, and the ensuing

bloodbath in the country. Francis met these questions patiently and said finally, 'All right old chap, how would you have done it?' In Karachi, as indeed in other cities in Pakistan, he was much sought after as a speaker. In February 2014, he spoke at The Pakistan Institute of International Affairs to a packed audience on 'Iranian Influences on South Asia'.

As I have acknowledged in my memoir, *Pakistan in an Age of Turbulence*, which was released recently, my greatest debt in its publication is to Francis Robinson. Many years ago, I first started writing the memoir in a rather tentative manner. When I sent Francis the first chapter, his remarks were so encouraging: 'Is there more?,' he asked. And so I sent him all the chapters and waited for his comments. He found the time to read all of them, busy as he was, and send his comments. Also, he helped me to find a publisher. 'Your memoir must happen,' he said. And so it did.