

Braj Bhūm in Mughal Times: The State, Peasants and Gosā'ins

By Irfan Habib and Tarapada Mukherjee (late). 286 pp. New Delhi, Primus Books, 2020.

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In the 1970s, the late Tarapada Mukherjee (then a faculty member at the School of Oriental and African Studies) began collecting Mughal-era documents that were in the possession of the Chaitanya Goswamis (Gosains in Braj) and their temples in the Vrindavan–Mathura region (also referred to as Braj Bhūm from the early 1700s onwards). These materials mostly fell into two categories: Mughal orders concerning grants to temples and their custodians, and sales deeds of rights to land bought or sold by temple servants or their devotees. The documents were in Persian, although a small number also had accompanying Braj text. Because the Persian documents were in *shikaste*, which is a difficult-to-read cursive script, Prof. Mukherjee invited the great historian of Mughal India, Irfan Habib (now professor emeritus at Aligarh Muslim University), to collaborate with him in the 1980s. What followed were three groundbreaking co-written articles evaluating Mughal relations with the Goswamis during the reigns of Emperors Akbar (d. 1605), Jahangir (d. 1627), and Shah Jahan (d. 1666) as well as the nature of land rights in the latter half of the sixteenth century. More would have likely followed but for Prof. Mukherjee's untimely death in 1990. Over the decades that followed, Prof. Habib worked intermittently on what have become known as the 'Vrindavan Documents' deciphering, transcribing, arranging, numbering, analyzing, and publishing articles and book chapters based on them. Thanks to Prof. Habib's efforts, the Vrindavan Documents are now available in the library of the Center of Advanced Study at Aligarh Muslim University. Prof. Habib's deep historical and geographic knowledge of the period is repeatedly on display, as also is his ability to work with Persian sources: he discerns forgeries from the stroke of the letter 'kaf', incorrect dates, faulty juxtaposition of regnal and Islamic calendars, defective seals (*tughras*), and wrong place names. With the publication of this volume—spanning ten chapters across four sections entitled 'Braj Bhūm', 'The state', 'Peasants', and 'Gosā'ins', Profs. Mukherjee and Habib's diverse engagements with the Vrindavan Documents can now be found in a single invaluable volume.

The Vrindavan Documents are evidence of the Goswamis' desire to record their rights to position, land, money, patronage, and protection in the Mughal period. This was necessary because the Mughal state and its allies placed a special premium on officially validated documentation, especially when dealing with competing political, economic, or social claims. And these, it turns out, flowed fast and furious in a regional context that was experiencing the rapid extension of a money-based economy (especially after the establishment of a new silver-based currency in the 1570s) alongside expanding agriculture, population growth, and the rise of new social classes (all directly linked to an emerging temple–industrial complex across the Mathura–Vrindavan region). Not surprisingly, the Mughal state plays a big role in this book. Mughal involvement with the Goswamis began in the 1560s with the issuance of the first of what, over the decades that followed, would be dozens of land grants to different temples and/or their custodians. Mughal involvement with the Goswamis did not stop there, however. As this book nicely

documents, at various points over the next 150+ years, the Mughals confirmed older grants, issued fresh ones when older documentation was damaged or lost, and protected temple lands from encroachers who wanted to build new homes, extend agricultural cultivation, cut down trees, deny access to temple-owned lands or natural resources, or simply seize temple lands. Against the backdrop of an extensive state presence (certainly in the lives of the Goswamis), this book offers its readers important insights into the way in which the Mughal state operated in the region. We learn, for example, that the state generally depended on input from local notables when making important decisions, that its power to impose its will was sometimes obstructed (as seen in the remarkable case involving a redoubtable widow, Kishan Priya, who refused to give up lands inherited from her deceased husband), that different parts of the Mughal state occasionally worked at cross purposes (best evidenced in a bitter administrative fight that lasted almost 15 years over escheated property and its inclusion in the public treasury), and that imperial power was diffuse and exerted by a wide range of actors (including court-based nobles, Rajput patrons, *jaqir* holders and their agents, local military commanders, news reporters, and high-ranking religious officials), all of whom allowed the Goswamis to engage in forum shopping to gain maximum advantage for themselves. Reading *Braj Bhūm*, one is struck by the symbiotic nature of imperial and local power as each continuously negotiated with, but also reinforced, the other. One is equally impressed by the extent to which local power—whether in the form of the village *panch* (council of headmen), imperial officials, or the temples and their leaders—was circumscribed by local political, economic, and social forces. Village elders, for example, could not simply dispose of village waste or unoccupied land as they wished. The Goswamis had to be similarly mindful of the resentments that their wealth and power engendered among landholders (*zamindars*) and rising groups (such as the Jats). Everyone, it seems, was subject to checks by someone else.

Significantly, Hindu–Muslim religious tensions were not a significant feature of Mughal-era Braj Bhum. Even in the reign of Emperor Alamgir (d. 1707), who is often blithely accused of religious intolerance, the dynasty’s longstanding patronage of the Goswamis continued apace. In 1704, for example, Mukhtar Khan, then governor of Agra, ordered an annual payment of one rupee from every village across 18 *parganas* totalling roughly Rs. 2,000 (‘a tidy sum for those days’, p. 116) to Brajanand, the presumed head of the Govind-dev temple in Vrindavan. The presence of Muslim mendicants in the Vrindavan–Mathura region, the willingness of the Goswamis to feed Hindu and Muslim beggars alike, the reality of conversion to as well as from Islam (the latter with no official comment by Muslim religious authorities), the dependence by non-Muslims on the *qazi* courts to register and authenticate documents, the use of Islamic expressions such as ‘Allahu Akbar’ (‘God is great’) and ‘Jazak Allah’ (‘May God reward you’) by non-Muslim correspondents, the existence of Muslims among *panch* notables, and evidence that Muslims acted as sellers to non-Muslims and witnesses for non-Muslims all point to relatively amiable everyday religious relations. Tensions, when they do appear, generally pitted different Goswami lineages against each other or Goswamis against Vaishnavite competitors such as the Radha-vallabhis, Haridasis, and Ramanandis. And each sought to deploy alliances with local Mughal officials, the Rajas of Amber, or even Jat rebels to strengthen their hand vis-à-vis their co-religionist competitors.

Other important insights are scattered across this richly documented volume. For example, caste affiliation was largely unaffected by conversion to Islam, non-peasant castes and long-distance investors actively purchased land across Braj Bhum as demand for various temple-related products (such as flowers) increased, literacy rates were extremely low, smallpox was on the rise across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the Goswamis grew rich as they collected income from their landholdings, rented

property, interest from loans, and shares in collected taxes, among other things. This book is strengthened by its extraordinary attention to local detail, four maps by Faiz Habib (a noted cartographer at Aligarh Muslim University), and tables that invariably clarify everything from revenue details to competing lines of Goswamis. This book might be fruitfully read in conjunction with others that are focused on the region in the Mughal period—including Farhat Hasan’s *State and Locality in Mughal India* (2004), Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj’s *Contestations and Accommodations* (2016), Sugata Ray’s *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion* (2019), and Nandini Chatterjee’s *Negotiating Mughal Law* (2020).

doi:10.1017/S135618632300055X

Transwar Asia: Ideology, Practices, and Institutions

Edited by Reto Hofmann and Max Ward. SOAS Studies in Modern and Contemporary Japan. 227 pp. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

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‘Periods,’ Prasenjit Duara writes, ‘are shaped by structures emerging from centres of power that tend to dominate historical life. Like all hegemonic formations, such structures tend to channel and restrict the imagination of the social, the political, and selfhood, but these structures also have wildly uneven effects and there are many zones of life that are quite untouched by them.’ As Duara urges, one ought to ‘attend to the emergent differences, counter-movements, and resistances that crack, weaken, or sometimes strengthen the hegemonic order’. In seeking to acknowledge these contrasts, features, and challenges against the grain of a ‘hegemonic order’ of periodisation, Reto Hofmann (University of Western Australia) and Max Ward (Middlebury College) have assembled a range of contributors in their volume, *Transwar Asia*. Each contributor sheds important light on the concept of the namesake of this volume—an analytical category that purportedly allows one to trace continuities, ruptures, and ruptures *with* continuities between the interwar years and first decade onwards after World War Two.

It is no surprise that Hofmann and Ward have collaborated on such an ambitious volume. Hofmann broke new ground in tracing interwar fascist ideological links between Italy and Imperial Japan with his first book, *The Fascist Effect* (Ithaca, NY, 2020), whereas Ward’s *Thought Crime* (Durham, NC, 2019) is an exemplary study of an ‘emperor system’ ideology that crystallised during that same epoch (the focus of his contribution in this volume). In *Transwar Asia*, the editors bring together their collective expertise to highlight three important aspects, or more accurately ‘afterlives’, of their concept of ‘transwar Asia’—an intersection of cultural studies with scholarship on Japan’s shift away from empire; a concept that places primacy on Asian agentic reception of, and engagement with, so-called ‘transwar elements in the postwar settlement’ (p. 8); and a model that