

## Book Review

### **Finbarr B Flood : *Objects of Translation—Material Culture and Medieval “Hindu –Muslim” Encounter***

**Publisher: Permanent Black, D-28 Oxford Apartment, 11 IP Extension, Delhi-110092 and Himalayana, Mall Road, Ranikhet Cantt, Ranikhet-26364 ; pp. XV + 366**

The book offers a subtle approach to understand the engagements between medieval elites of the regions that today comprise Afghanistan, Pakistan and North India. While the traditional approaches depend on the narratives of territorial conflict for their understanding of past, in contrast this book considers the role of material culture and highlights how objects such as coins, dress, monuments, paintings and sculptures mediated the diverse mode of encounters. The chronological scope of the book stretches from the conquest of Sind by Arab armies in the early eighth century to the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in the thirteenth. The problem in this short of study involves not only the paucity of materials to craft the cultural history of these centuries but difficulty entailed in the fact that such a project cut across national and disciplinary boundaries. In order to understand the cultural histories of these centuries the book traces dynamic patterns of engagements between South Asia and Islamic world over several centuries emphasising relations rather than essence, “routes rather than roots”.

Among the subjects discussed are rendering of sacred Arabic texts in Sanskrit on Indian coins, adaptation of Turko-Persian dress by Buddhist rulers, the work of Indian stone masons in Afghanistan and incorporation of carvings from Hindu and Jain temples in early Indian mosques. It focuses on practices of circulation, displacement and translation and aims

to demonstrate unstable nature of pre-modern identity. Among the earliest and most remarkable routes of encounter is exemplified in the Arabic writings of al- Bīrūnī in his substantial work on Indian culture and religion *Kitāb fi taḥqīq ma li’l-Hind* (Book of Inquiry into India). This is the most remarkable testimonies to the encounter between the premodern Indic and Persianate elite focusing on intercultural dialogue. The route of translation is central to the content and context of popular story cycles of medieval Islam. One important example mentioned in the book is *Kalīla wa Dimma* (a series of animal fables) whose origin lies in *Pañcatantra*, a Sanskrit work on statecraft of around 300 AD. The fables reached Iran in the sixth century through the medium of Pahlavi and were translated into Arabic by eighth. The production of the Persian translation reflects internal developments that were reshaping the cultural and political geography of the eastern Islamic lands during the 11-12<sup>th</sup> centuries and which were to have significant implications for South Asia. The Persian emerged as a court language leading to contemporaneous shift in linguistic usage in South Asia. It has been observed that contact between cultures always brings us back to the geographical transfer of makers, objects or images. This draws our attention to the relationship between strategies of translation associated with the circulation of objects and processes of transculturation. It is a process of transformation unfolding through extended contacts between cultures.

The dynamic aspect of translation does not permit us to draw hard and fast boundaries between cultural formulations. Though the book acknowledges the value of texts as historical document it gives equal emphasis on things i.e. the material culture which includes coins, frescos, modes of dress, manuscripts, monumental architecture, royal titulature and ritual practices. The book tries to highlight the ability of artifacts to provide fresh insight and novel perspectives when treated as complementary rather than supplementary source of information. In the recent past there has been attempts to combine textual and material evidence in order to develop more complex paradigms of understanding the interrelationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in South Asia. However these studies have focussed primarily on Architecture. The book provides a first-hand experience of crucial formative period of Indo-Islamic culture with northern Indian context of this formation, to consider material culture in all its manifestations and to take a transregional approach to premodern transcultural encounters.

The Chapter one begins on the eastern frontier of Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad during ninth and tenth centuries. It focuses on two of the dynasties Saffarids of Sistan (now southern Afghanistan) and Arab amirs of Sind (now southern Pakistan). Both Saffarids and Sindi amirs used gifts of Indian exotica including looted Buddhist and Hindu icons to negotiate their own factious relationships with caliphate at Baghdad. Artifactual and textual evidence suggests that Abbasind Sind was a major centre of ivory and metalworking whose importance has been overlooked until now. Probable reason as explained by the author is hybrid nature of the products of Sindi artisans difficult to be categorised as Indic or Islamic. This poses a significant challenge to the categorical structures on which modern understandings of the past are invariably based.

Chapter two focus on the circulation of items and modes of dress and its implications in cross cultural societies. The Arab elites of Sind were well informed of the dresses of their Indian neighbours. This trend was no less apparent amongst the Indian Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim elites. The Muslim elites were inspired by the powerful Hindu neighbours and Buddhist and Hindu elites adopted Turko-Persian modes of dress. Apart from the dress the exchanges during the eleventh and twelfth centuries included gifting of robes of honour by the Turkish Sultans of Ghazni to Hindu rulers. The exchanges involved both objects and acts raising interesting questions about translatability of sartorial codes and ritual practices.

Chapter three deals with decades after 1150, when the rule of Ghaznavid sultans was an eclipsed obscure Persian dynasty based in remote mountainous region of Ghur in central Afghanistan. Under the Ghurids, the trade with northern India was facilitated by reintroduction to Afghanistan of bull-and horseman coin which enabled mercantile contact. The texts and inscriptions also suggests that diplomatic and military engagements between the elites of Ghaznavid and Ghurid sultanates and Rajput polities of north-western India increased in volume and tenor during the second half of twelfth century. The Ghurid conquest of north –western India led to adaptive reception of Islamic administration and economic institutions like bringing the lands under the system of *iqṭā'*. The Ghurid coins issued from India continued to the existing iconographic types and conformed to the indigenous measures of weights and metallic purity.

Chapter four explores the ways in which the seizure and recontextualization of artifacts taken as loot and booty, given as gifts and tribute or appropriated from earlier Indian monuments served to articulate the political reconfiguration of northern India after the Ghurid victories of late twelfth century. Most of the loots included royal insignia like banners, fly whisks, parasols, crown,

thrones, musical instruments and certain architectural elements. The chapter tries to focus on the ways in which both objects and practices associated with them were translated and transfigured in the process. The looting display of certain Indian objects served to articulate the Ghurids' political relationships with conquered Indian rulers. Far from being symptomatic of cultural rupture, these practices provide early instances of transculturation in Indo-Muslim royal ritual.

Chapter five is concerned with the architecture, coinage, ceremonial practices, and political structures of Ghurid sultanate and their often complex relationships with their northern Indian counterparts. Though Ghurid monuments in Afghanistan and Indus Valley conform to Persianate norms and are marked by use of baked burnt brick, terra-cotta and blue glazed elements characterizing dryness and rigidity, their Indian counterparts make use of carved stone medium, post and lintel forms and deeply ornamental design. The Ghurid patronage of mosque and shrines in northern India is evident from extant remains, inscriptions and texts. Some of the leading mosques are Qutb Mosque at Delhi built by Qutb al-Din Aybek on the orders of Ghurid sultan and Arhai-din-ka-Jhompra at Ajmer. Opinions differ on whether the mosque is constructed upon the platform of an earlier temple or newly built.

The final chapter of book focus on Delhi Sultanate that emerged in after three decades after

the collapse of Ghurid sultanate around 1206 AD. Consequent to this collapse India was riven by competition between the Turkic military slaves of Ghurid sultan. Finally Delhi emerged as major cultural and political centre under the patronage of Iltutmish. Under Iltutmish, the Qutb Mosque at Delhi became the locus to project the authority of the sultanate while shaping the identity of Muslim community of northern India.

The book in a nut shell provides fashionable encounters between artisans, merchants, political elites of Arab, Persian, Turkic and Indians during ninth and thirteenth centuries. The exchange of tangible and intangibles between the ruling elites and masses throws light on established cultural values and choices made by medieval elites. The different cultural borderlands provided possibilities of emergence of new cultural practices characterised by improvisation and recombination, by juxtaposition, syncretism and translation. The juxtaposition of different languages and scripts on the coins of Arab and Sind illustrates one aspect of this phenomena. Though the book provides an interesting account of transmission and diffusion of different ideas and cultural practices between premodern South Asia and Islamic world, it lacks the lucidity and ease of language. It could have been presented in a more succinct manner.

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