

Issues/Discussion Forum

What Indian Cities Owe to Islam

-Christophe Jaffrelot

The cities created in the Deccan by Muslim leaders introduced the concept of public space to the Indian world.

When India specialists examine what Islam has brought to the country, they often focus on cultural aspects such as language, poetry, music, painting, culinary arts, or spirituality. They rarely consider the urban dimension.

Certainly, historians and geographers readily examine how what the Marçais brothers called “the Islamic city” spread throughout India, but mainly to see it as an exogenous institution, even an enclave sheltering an elite that came from outside and was cut off from society. Pratyush Shankar’s recent book covers this dimension, of course, but goes further.

In *History of Urban Form of India*, a work based on the analysis of 42 Indian cities, the author distinguishes three types of cities – which form the three parts of the book: ancient cities, medieval cities, and cities produced by the modern state.

Ancient cities, apart from those of the Indus civilisation, are mainly epitomised in the “temple cities” of southern India. While medieval cities follow several different patterns, Pratyush Shankar distinguishes above all between merchant cities – typical of Gujarat – those of the Himalayas (whose form is conditioned by the terrain), and those built by Muslims in the Deccan.

Comparing them proves very useful in understanding Islam’s contribution to the Indian civilisation – something Pratyush Shankar helps us to do, without attempting it himself – thanks to his morphological approach to the city: he is interested only in *the form* of the city, not in its local mode of governance or its relationship with the state.

All Indian cities inherited a significant part of their form or structure from the caste system. Pratyush Shankar points out in the introduction that the “Caste system had a huge impact in determining the location and formation of neighbourhood clusters that were inward looking (in cases of Jodhpur and Udaipur) and the possibility to shut off from the city by controlling the gates (Pols of Ahmedabad)”.

The caste logic is naturally at work in the “temple city”:

“The idea of using a Brahmin settlement (with a temple) for creating a surplus economy was central to the birth of cities in South India. This was legitimized through the

Brahminical ideology of the Brahmin-Kshatriya coalition expressed through Vedic and puranic religion”.

And naturally, the “temple city” is “divided into various sectors based on function differentiation that was represented through various caste-based housing. The caste system was strictly observed and manifested itself in the planning of these urban centers”.

The cities built by Muslim leaders from the 14th century onwards in the Deccan did not escape the caste system – especially since distinguishing between Hindu and Islamic cities constitutes “a very simplistic binary” that does not reflect a much more complex reality. But these medieval cities of the Deccan added something new to the urban form that had prevailed in the country until then. This innovation did not take place within the city, but outside – and still, that was a key element of the city dynamics: not far from the city walls, but well outside the city itself, Sufi saints settled in an almost systematic manner. They deliberately distanced themselves from the city to show their detachment from material things and live in peace. At the same time, the inhabitants revered them: “People would leave the material city behind to spend a day at the sacred Sufi sites and return by evening”.

After their death, these saints were buried in the very place where they stood, and a mausoleum called “Dargah” was built around their tomb, the size of which varied according to the popularity of the saint.

What Pratyush Shankar does not say is that throughout society, Sufi saints were attributed with considerable powers, even beyond death: many devotees continued to visit the Dargah centuries after the saint’s death to ask him to grant their wishes (whether it be to have a child, to be cured of an illness, or to pass exams). This votive logic, due to its transactional nature, transcends social barriers of all kinds: Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, etc. worship Sufi saints, people from all walks of life, from the elite to the lower castes, rub shoulders at the Dargah and, finally, even in the Holy of Holies, women and men are admitted on an equal footing. But Pratyush Shankar assumes that the reader what I have mentioned above when he concludes:

“The unique contribution of the Deccan cities was perhaps not so much in any extraordinary formation within, but rather in the development of the prominent district of the Sufi saints and the suburbs. Sufi saints were popular amongst the masses and provided the much-needed counterpoint to the state. If the city represented the material world of trade, commerce, and power, the suburban precincts of Sufi tombs were just the opposite; a sacred and spiritual space with frugal infrastructure which is out there in the lap of nature. Over the centuries, this typology took firm root as these complexes of tombs became public places that were frequented by city dwellers like a pilgrimage out of the city, as they often lay just outside the fort walls of the city”.

The word is out: “public space”!

The cities created in the Deccan by Muslim leaders in the 14th century introduced the concept of public space to the Indian world, which had ignored it until then due to the deep cleavages that divided society along lines of religion, caste, and gender. This is a contribution of Islam to India that some would call paradoxical, given that the image of this religion, today, is often dominated by the idea of segregation, even exclusion. But before Islam entered India, such open spaces did not exist in the country.

Certainly, ascetics established their ashrams out of cities – like Ramana Maharshi’s cave above Tiruvannamalai – but his followers did not disturb him there, and when they did, they interacted with him on the mode of the guru-shishya parampara, whereas around the Dargah, one would find play grounds as well as picnic sites.

In his book, Pratyush Shankar confines this contribution to the Deccan, but it is tempting to argue that the innovation he points to can be found throughout India. In the north too, Sufi saints settled on the outskirts of cities – did Nizamuddin not choose to live far from Delhi? – and their mausoleums still offer the image of a public space open to all. This is even more striking when the Dargah is still surrounded by greenery, even though it has been incorporated into the city, such as Sarkhej Roza in Ahmedabad or Feroz Shah Kotla in Delhi, where Anand Taneja has clearly shown that people from all walks of life still gather today, as befits a public space!

Christophe Jaffrelot is Senior Research Fellow at CERI-Sciences Po/CNRS, Paris, Professor of Indian Politics and Sociology at King’s College London, Non resident Scholar at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Chair of the British Association for South Asian Studies.

(Courtesy: The Wire)