

The Wonder that is India

A Farewell Seminar for Dirk Kolff

Professor Dirk Kolff has left his mark most emphatically on the social history of medieval and early modern South Asia. In due respect of his interest in the genesis of pre-modern social and ethnical groups, the speakers at the 'Social Dynamics in Mughal India' seminar re-examined and discussed the changing role and status of four social categories: Sufis, warriors, merchants, and peasants. All speakers agreed that one of Kolff's most significant contributions to the field of South Asian Studies has been his insistence on the open, fluid, and highly conscriptive nature of such categories, which today appear rather closed, rigid, and ascriptive.

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By Jos Gommans

Several historians of South Asia who have been influenced by Kolff's scholarship were invited by convenor Jos Gommans. Simon Digby, a leading figure in Indo-Islamic studies, praised the remarkable continuity of medieval Indian studies at Leiden, a field becoming exceedingly rare in present-day academics. Digby proposed using Sufi hagiographical works and eastern Hindi *premakhyans* to demonstrate and illustrate the fourteenth-century provincialization of the Delhi Sultanate. Sufis were highly instrumental in bolstering the Muslim diaspora radiating from Delhi, eastward into Awadh and southward into the Deccan, not only in their religious capacity but also as peasants, landholders, craftsmen, and soldiers. Linguistic evidence of the southern branch of this diaspora is provided by the spread of 'proto-Urdu' or 'coarse Hindustani' dialects, which closely reflected the form of speech then current in Delhi. By contrast, the eastern provinces developed a distinct dialect of 'eastern Hindi', which appears to have been purged of Persian and Arabic loan-words.

Digby's lecture clearly underlined the importance of studying and re-evaluating the much-neglected hagiographical and literary Sufi sources of the fourteenth and fifteenth century, not only to gain a better understanding of the mentality and world view of Sufi authors but, also, of the making and unmaking of the medieval sultanates of South Asia.

John Richards of Duke University, sought to refine Kolff's famous concept of the military labour market by suggesting

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Dirk Kolff became Emeritus Professor of Leiden University on 1 March 2003. The above seminar to celebrate Kolff's contribution to the field of South Asian Studies received financial support from the IAS and CNWS (Research School of Asian, African and Amerindian Studies). During the seminar, Kolff was presented with a Festschrift containing essays by Jan Heesterman, Hans van Santen, Simon Digby, Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, Dietmar Rothermund, and many other friends, former colleagues, and students. At the end of 2004 the papers of the seminar, together with a contribution by Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, will be published in a special theme issue in the Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient.

Dirk Kolff in the Kern
Institute's library

three sub-categories of armed men, consisting of seasonal peasant soldiers, armed retainers serving the local gentry, and full-time professional soldiers. According to Richards, these local and regional men were much more reliable sources of imperial soldiery than the broadly undifferentiated military labour market that operated across the Indo-Gangetic plain. Compared to other areas such as Tokugawa Japan or early modern England and France, the constant confrontations of the Mughal state with sharp-edged rural resistance, rooted in a common martial ethos widely shared by both peasant-cultivators and rural aristocrats, suggests that the militarized society of North India under the Mughals was an outlier in world historical terms and, consequently, that state building and administrative consolidation in early modern India faced unusually difficult obstacles. It was only in the nineteenth century that the British colonial regime succeeded where the Mughals had ultimately failed. In conclusion, Richards suggested that we reconsider Kolff's observations, and assemble and analyse the hundreds of discrete accounts of endless minor wars occurring between 1757 and 1857, which still lie buried in district gazetteers, regimental histories, and military dispatches and have yet to be examined. Only through such research will we be able to correct the current impression that British conquest was somehow benign and bloodless.

Reprising the seminar's theme by taking a fresh look at India's maritime merchants as a social category, Om Prakash of the Delhi School of Economics proposed three sub-categories in 'his' social group: the maritime merchant engaged in coastal and high-seas trade, the broker and the intermediary merchant providing goods to and buying goods from the maritime merchant, and the money merchant. There was a certain amount of overlap, particularly between the first two categories. The intermediary and the money merchants were almost exclusively Hindu, with the Bania merchants dominating the latter two groups. It was not so much the greed of state officials but the value system of the Banias itself that prescribed a relatively frugal lifestyle, when compared to the more opulent behaviour of influential Muslim merchants and shipowners like Mulla Abdul Ghafur at Surat. Although Muslims were more visible as high-seas maritime merchants, there were significant regional variations; commercial involvement of state officials and army commanders also varied regionally. For example, the composition of the maritime trading community on the Coromandel coast, which included a fair number of so-called portfolio capitalists involved in coastal and high-seas trade, was very different from that in Gujarat, which lacked the substantive role of 'official' merchants in maritime trade, not counting the involvement of members of royalty in running a pilgrim service to the Red Sea.

Seventeenth-century Bengal was different yet again; its trade with Southeast Asia was entirely dominated by primarily Muslim state officials. This goes to show that, in all these



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regional cases, indigenous explanations for the eighteenth-century decline of Indian commercial participation may be as important as the, in this respect, often overrated influence of the European Companies. Even in the context of growing European dominance, Indian merchants continued to show a great deal of adaptability and resilience.

It needs to be said that Kolff's work, in particular his *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, goes well beyond the Mughal and early modern fields. To demonstrate this point, Walter Hauser of the University of Virginia compared Kolff's Purabi armed peasants with his own study of twentieth-century militant peasant activism in the very same region, nowadays called western Bihar. In his concluding remarks, Dirk Kolff expanded on Hauser's observation by highlighting the continuity from the medieval into the modern. As will be shown in his forthcoming monograph, Kolff may have retired but his ongoing fascination with the wonder that is India will continue. <

- Gommans, Jos and Om Prakash (eds), *Circumambulations in South Asian History: Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff*, Leiden: Brill (2003), pp.370, ISBN 90 04 13155 8

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