the twelfth century displayed a great deal of dynamism that does not accord well with stereotypical images of India's changeless tradition. The very cultural assimilation of influences emanating from a succession of new arrivals — Aryans, Greeks, Scythians, Parthians, Shakas and Huns before the eighth century, as well as Arabs, Persians, Turks, Afghans and Mongols between the eighth and the twelfth centuries — was a vital and dynamic process. Indigenous tribal groups also played a creative role in processes of state formation. Politically, phases of imperial consolidation were followed by periods of decentralization. But even the empires, far from being centralized despotisms, were typically loosely structured suzerainties. Economically, instead of closed and static village communities, there was mobility and commercial exchange. For long stretches of time the subcontinent played a central role in a vast network of Indian Ocean trade and culture. Socially, there were unique institutions such as caste; but — contrary to the stereotypes of hierarchy propagated by scholars trapped in the rigid mould of caste — there was much in Indian society that emphasized equality as a value and in practice. Buddhism, and after the eighth century Islam, represented, at least in part, egalitarian challenges, but even within Hinduism the high Brahmanical tradition was more than counterbalanced by the popular Shramanik one. There were undoubtedly many instances of conflict and even internal colonization. But it was the ability to accommodate, if not assimilate, an immense diversity within a very broadly and loosely defined framework of unity which has given Indian cultural tradition its durability and appearance of unbroken continuity. It is to the greatest and most challenging of the many creative accommodations forged in the subcontinent's long history — the fashioning of an Indo-Islamic social and political universe — that we turn in the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Pre-Modern Accommodations of Difference: The Making of Indo-Islamic Cultures

It was in the seventh century, AD 610 to be precise, that Muhammad, a Meccan merchant, given to austere tastes and solitary meditation had a grand vision which led to the founding of a new world religion in the Arabian peninsula. The first person to accept Muhammad's message as prophetic revelation was his wife, Khadija, giving her a position of pre-eminence in what was to soon become a very large community of the Faithful. The role of women in the construction of the community of Islam is quite crucial, but scholars are only now turning their attention to uncovering that veiled reality. The historical spotlight has remained on the spread of the Islamic doctrine through a dramatic expansion of Muslim political power. By the fifteenth century Muslims either ruled or lived in all known corners of the world, presenting one of the greatest challenges to earlier established religions and cultures. But contrary to stereotypical distortions of Islam as a religion of the sword and of Muslims as unbending fanatics thriving on hatred and violence against non-believers, the Prophet Muhammad's teachings allowed for tolerance and assimilation of regional and local cultures. One of the most spectacular of these processes of accommodation was the fashioning of an Indo-Islamic cultural tradition in the South Asian subcontinent. Both military conquest and religious conversion in the medieval period need to be understood in historical context.

The first wave of Arab political expansion reached the subcontinent when the Makran coast in north-western India was invaded in 644, towards the end of the caliphate of Umar. Although this and a second raid during the reign of Ali (656–61) were repulsed,
Makran was finally subjugated under the first Ummayid caliph Muawiya (661–80). The eastern frontier of early Islam was reached when Muhammad bin Qasim conquered Sind in 712. So the Islamic belief in one God and in Muhammad as the final prophet struck very early roots in at least one region of north-western India. From the eighth century onwards Arab traders also settled on the western coast of India, but they were primarily interested in profit and did not engage in attempts to bring about any large-scale conversions to Islam. There was no further expansion, political or economic, by peoples professing Islam until the Turkish and Afghan invasions from the turn of the eleventh century onwards.

Between the seventh and eleventh centuries, in politically decentralized northern India, the high Brahmanic and more popular Shramanik traditions continued to coexist, with the latter being more pervasive. Far from being a dark age, this was another period in Indian history that saw the consolidation of regional kingdoms presiding over new economic initiatives and cultural achievements. The Tomaras, formerly feudatories of the Pratihara overlords, founded the city of Delhi in 736. The magnificent architecture and sculpture of the Khajuraho temples were executed under the patronage of the Chandellas in the tenth century.

The great Central Asian scholar Alberuni, who visited India in 1030, wrote: "The Hindus believe with regard to God that He is One, Eternal . . . this is what educated people believe about God . . . if we now pass from the ideas of the educated people to those of the common people, we must say that they present a great variety. Some of them are simply abominable, but similar errors also occur in other religions." In making this comment Alberuni was not simply giving a Muslim view but echoing the Hindu elite's position on monotheism and polytheism. There is little agreement among historians of medieval India about the extent to which the coming of Islam to the subcontinent fomented new processes of cultural accommodation and assimilation. At one extreme is the view that there was a clear distinguishing line between Islamic civilization and the pre-existing corpus of "Hindu tradition". This argument is dented not just by the sheer scale of the conversions to Islam among lower-caste Hindus, but also the contiguity of peoples belonging to different religious faiths — which meant that Islam in the subcontinent could not but develop local Indian roots.

On the other hand, recent research on Islam in a variety of regional
settings has emphasized variants of an argument about 'syncretism' which tends to obscure the issue of religiously informed identity. For example, Richard Eaton's portrayal of Bengali peasants as a 'single undifferentiated mass' with a uniform 'folk culture' neatly erases the problem of difference. With the major historiographical challenge conveniently out of the way, a fanciful cultural argument can then be erected on quacksand-like material evidence from Bengal's agrarian frontier. Any historical interpretation of the spread of Islam in the subcontinent needs to be attentive to regional specificities in the domains of economy and culture as well as the great variety of Muslims — Turks, Mongols, Persians, Arabs, Afghan, and so on — who came from abroad. Taken together, these factors not only explode the myth of a monolithic Islamic community in India but call into question any general model of Muslim conversions based on a poor understanding of rather scanty evidence from one regional economy and culture. What the available sources do permit is a plausible argument to be advanced, to the effect that not only were creative Indo-Islamic accommodations of difference worked out at various levels of society and culture but that India, or al-Hind, became the metropolitan centre of an Indian ocean world with a distinctive historical identity that stretched from the Mediterranean to the Indonesian archipelago.

The emergence of India as the hub of an integrated Indian ocean economy and culture by the eleventh century preceded the fashioning of Indo-Islamic accommodations within the subcontinent's society and polity in the fourteenth century. Early conversions to Islam were more gradual than sudden, a process carried over a period of time but generally facilitated in regions where a weak Brahmanical superstructure overlaid a much stronger Buddhist substratum, as was the case in Sind in the eighth century and in Bengal after the eleventh century. While military action undoubtedly took place in the conquest of these regions, capitulation and submission were the usual norm, followed by the laying down of terms of loyalty and dependence. This was in accordance with the overall theory and practice of conquests in India at the time, and explains why wars did not lead to significant political change. In the words of the ninth century merchant-traveller Sulaiman: 'The Indians sometimes go to war for conquest, but the occasions are rare... When a king subdues a neighbouring state, he places over it a man belonging to the family of the fallen prince, who carries on the government in the name of the conqueror. The inhabitants would not suffer it otherwise.'

Eighth-century Sind was a typical Indian polity in which sovereignty was shared by different layers of kingly authority. The Chachnama, the principal source of our information on the Muslim conquest of Sind, elaborates a royal code which demands sensitivity to the fluidity and shifting nature of the real world of politics. This is in contrast to Kautilya's 'classical' and largely theoretical text Arthashastra, which advises princes on ways to avoid the dilution of absolute and centralized power. The pardoning of a fallen enemy, described by the Chachnama, provided a quick route to legitimacy by renegotiating a balance between different hierarchically arranged layers of sovereignty. The Arab conquest of Sind, instead of representing a sharp disjunction, can be seen as a form of adaptation to pre-existing political conditions in India.

Although there were no further military conquests in India from the north-west until the eleventh century, the India trade became vital to the Islamic world during the eighth and ninth centuries. India's export surplus attracted a steady flow of precious bullion and made it the centre of an Indian ocean world-economy, with West Asia and China as its two poles. It was the productivity in India and the relative decline in West Asia which provided the context for the next wave of Ghaznavid invasions into the subcontinent, beginning in 997. The accumulated treasure in the palaces and temples of northern India was a prime target of a series of raids (997–1030) by Mahmud of Ghazni into north-western India, which, interestingly enough, were roughly coterminous with and not too dissimilar from Rajendra Chola's northern campaigns from his south Indian base. On one of his raids Mahmud of Ghazni looted and demolished the famous temple at Somnath in Gujarat. The looting raids of this period were motivated less by an iconoclastic zeal fired by religion than by more hard-headed economic and political motives. In Mahmud's case, it was a need to finance his imperial ambitions in Central Asia that led him to devastate well-endowed religious places of worship.

It was a similar combination of economic and political imperatives which led Muhammad Ghuri, a Turk, to invade India a century and a half later, in 1192. His defeat of Prithviraj Chauhan, a Rajput chieftain, in the strategic battle of Tarain in northern
India paved the way for the establishment of the first Muslim sultanate, with its capital in Delhi, by Qutubuddin Aibak. The Delhi Sultanate lasted from 1206 to 1526 under the leadership of four major dynasties — the Mamluks, Khaljis, Tughlaqs and Lodis. These Turkish and Afghan rulers exercised their sway primarily over northern India, but the more powerful sultans, like Alauddin Khalji (1296-1316) and Muhammad bin Tughlaq (1325-51), made incursions into the Deccan. Southern India in this period boasted two powerful kingdoms — the Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara founded in 1336, and the Bahmani kingdom founded by a Muslim governor who revolted against the sultan in 1345.

The Turkish, Persian and Afghan invasions of northern India from the eleventh century onwards injected the Turk-Persian content into the formation of an Indo-Islamic culture. The roots of this variant of the emerging Indo-Islamic accommodations actually preceded the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate and can be traced to the occupation of the Punjab by the Ghaznavids between 1001 and 1186. Lahore was the first centre of the Persianized Indo-Islamic culture until Delhi rose to political pre-eminence and almost became a replica of the ancient Sassanid court of Persia. The symbols of sovereignty, which had been wholly absent in the far more austere Arab Islam of the preceding centuries, became much more ceremonial and ornate. Persian cultural influence was balanced by a strong Turkish slave element in the composition of the nobility and the ruling classes during the first century of the Sultanate. Slavery went into decline in India in the fourteenth century. From the beginning of the fourteenth century the Turkish Mamluks, or slave aristocracy, were steadily replaced by a new aristocracy of Indian Muslims and Hindus as well as foreign immigrant Muslims of high status. So it was in the fourteenth century that a true Indo-Muslim culture was forged, based on Hindu-Muslim alliance-building and reciprocity. While northern India witnessed accommodations with the Turkish-Persian variant of Islam, the Arab imprint continued to be indelible in the Malabar coast of western India as well as in coastal southern India and Sri Lanka. So we find at least two different variants of the Indo-Islamic accommodations in the subcontinent, one straddling the overland belt from Turkey, Persia and northern India to the Deccan, and the other bridging the ocean from the Arabian peninsula to coastal southern India and stretching across the Bay of Bengal to Java and Sumatra.

The state structure constructed by the Delhi sultans was based on experiments carried out in West Asia but also elaborated on pre-existing forms in India. While upholding the supremacy of the Islamic sharia, the rulers desisted from imposing it on a predominantly non-Muslim population, which was allowed to retain its customary and religious laws. A series of imperial edicts complementing the sharia underpinned the day-to-day administration of justice, especially in the domains of criminal and civil law. Modelled on Ummayad and Abbasid rule, the intermeshing of religious and secular law was an intrinsic feature of the pact of dominance established by Muslim sovereigns in India. It had the merit of keeping the ulema (Muslim theologians) at bay without straining the legitimacy of Muslim rule among non-believers.

The Delhi Sultanate drew its revenues primarily from the land, and its many flourishing towns depended to a large extent on the agrarian surplus. Some of the land revenue was paid directly into the state coffers, but most of it was channelled through iqatab or land-grant holders. The iqta was a non-hereditary prebendal assignment of revenue devised especially to suit the imperative of paying relatively stable state salaries in the highly monetized and fluctuating economic context of the Indian ocean world-economy. Generally, iqatabs and provincial governors, known as mans, enjoyed a fair amount of autonomy from the Delhi sultan. A few sultans attempted a greater degree of centralized control for brief spells. Alauddin Khalji, for instance, made drastic changes to existing iqatabs with a view to reordering the bonds of loyalty between the centre and the provincial peripheries.

The southern kingdom of Vijayanagara drew revenues from land, but was also closely integrated with the broader economy and civilization of the Indian ocean. Merchants from the Vijayanagara domains engaged in profitable trade with both West Asia and South East Asia. The Vijayanagara centre was the repository of considerable wealth and glory, but, according to Burton Stein, the state structure was segmented to provide for a substantial division and devolution of powers. After going through a number of vicissitudes the Vijayanagara kingdom recovered its glory under the great ruler Krishnadeva Raya (1509-29), whose reign saw impressive achievements in temple architecture and Telugu literature. In addition to
in India have sought to underplay this dimension on grounds that Muslim conversions were more numerous where inequalities within the social structure were not as great as elsewhere. Yet this hardly invalidates the case for Islam's egalitarian appeal, since it is entirely logical that societies with a history of valuing equality would be more amenable to its attractions. The egalitarianism of Islam did not, however, extend equally to women. Both Muslim and Hindu women of the upper social strata were largely restricted in this period to the private domain and were expected to be in purdah or behind a veil. One early Delhi sultan of the Mamluk dynasty — Razia Sultana — succeeded in becoming the first Muslim woman ruler in the subcontinent. Acknowledged to have been a capable ruler, she was assassinated by male rivals.

The Sunni and Shia sectarian division, which had occurred over differences of opinion on Muhammad's successor to the Khilafat, was reflected in Indian Muslim society. A great majority of Indian Muslims were Sunnis. In parts of Sind and southern Punjab, Multan in particular, Shias had become influential. But they seemed to be at a disadvantage in northern India during the period of the Sunni Delhi Sultanate. Yet in a sense the most influential of Muslims in India were the Sufis, who represented the mystical branch of Islam — which had achieved prominence in Persia since the tenth century. Indeed many of the conversions to Islam after 1290 were carried out by members of the Chishti and Suhrawardy orders. The Chishti order made its mark in the environs of Delhi and the Ganga-Yamuna Doab, while the Suhrawardy order developed a strong following in Sind. It was in the Islamic mystical tradition that women played a decisive role. One of the first mystics of Islam was a woman, the chaste and pure lover of God, Rabia, who lived in Basra during the eighth century and won the admiration of fellow male Sufis. The names of famous women Sufis are to be found throughout the Islamic world. In all the Muslim-majority regions of the subcontinent, especially Sind and the Punjab, there are shrines of women Sufi saints. So the feminine dimension in Islam, closely associated with spirituality, played a part in the peaceful spread of Muhammad's message. Evidence of the Sufi role in facilitating Islam's accommodation with its Indian environment can be seen in the very special mystical appreciation of the feminine in their poetry. While in Persian, and also Arabic, the metaphor of mystical poetry is predominantly
and Arabic vocabulary, developed into something of a lingua franca only in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The cultural fusion on which Indo-Islamic civilization was coming to be based was frowned upon by certain social groups. Muslim ulema, who often advised the sultans on issues pertaining to Islamic law, tended to be cultural exclusivists, especially in a scenario where the majority of the populace were non-believers. The Brahmanical tradition on the Hindu side could be equally exclusivist when it could not absorb and dominate and, consequently, was averse to accommodation. One Nrisinghacharya was reputed to have told a congregation of high-caste Hindus at a Kumbha Mela — a great religious fair held at the confluence of the Ganga and the Jamuna — to adopt kamathabritti or the habit of a tortoise, in other words withdraw into a shell in order to be impervious to Islamic influences. Indeed, if one reads the Dhr-

mastra or Hindu law books of this period, to the exclusion of other sources, one would not even begin to suspect that there were Muslims in India. Not all upper-caste Hindus, of course, could become tortoises. Some Rajput princes made alliances with the Sultanate and a few converted to Islam. These Rajput Muslims could not quite aspire to the ashraf (honourable, noble) status of the aristocracy of West Asian origin, but they still enjoyed much higher status than the large numbers of artisans and peasants who became aqlaf (commoner) Muslims. Islam, in adapting to the Indian environment, could not, despite its strong egalitarianism, avoid the social imprint of caste. According to one view, the Arab variant of Indo-Islamic culture in the coastal south was less of a hybrid than the fusion which took place in the hinterlands. While it is undeniable that the coastal towns of the Coromandel retained more of a purist Arab imprint than the Indo-Islamic culture of continental India, Hindus, Muslims and Christians of the south came to share, as Susan Bayly has demonstrated, some common religious and social idioms. Many southern mosques contained Hindu decorative features such as lotus columns, replicating the Indo-Islamic accommodations in architectural designs in northern India — where the Turkish-Persian variant of Islam was stronger.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries witnessed both a powerful current towards cultural accommodation as well as pockets of stubborn resistance to it. By around 1500 Indo-Islamic cultures, with their creativity and ambiguity, accommodations and tensions,
had struck deep root in the subcontinent. It was at this juncture that a new empire was established in northern India by a ruler of Turkish-Mongol descent. The next chapter turns to this empire, and to further developments within an Indo-Islamic social and political universe under its aegis.

Chapter 4

The Mughal Empire: State, Economy and Society

While unravelling the complex weave of India’s pre-modern history we could hardly not have noticed two recurring themes. First, the infusion of new peoples and ideas, sometimes in the form of an invasion from the northwest, and second, temporal cycles of imperial consolidation and decentralization. Invasions were not sharp disjunctures, and were most commonly followed by fresh processes of accommodation, assimilation and cultural fusions. The high points of great imperial epochs were often characterized by political cohesion, social vitality, economic prosperity and cultural glory. But it was also abundantly clear that periods of political decentralization were not necessarily accompanied by social and economic decay. These general observations drawn from a thematic survey of the long term in Indian history can be investigated more closely with reference to the Mughal empire which was established in 1526, enjoyed expansion and consolidation until about 1707, and survived, even if in drastically attenuated form, until 1857.

Empires in pre-modern India, we have seen, were not based on rigid centralized domination. This has been established by the most insightful of recent historical research, and runs counter to the misperceptions of many nineteenth-century historians and twentieth-century comparative sociologists. Few polities have been subjected to greater misinterpretation by Western comparatists than the Mughal empire, which has been seen as a prime example of ‘oriental despotism’. Reading backwards from the twentieth-century experience of European totalitarianism, pre-modern Asian states were seen to be all-powerful revenue-extracting machines presiding over passive and pulverized societies lacking not only in dynamism but also processes of relatively autonomous social group formation.
The historiography of the Mughal era has been only recently freeing itself from the despotism of orientalist scholarship. While differences remain on the extent of centralization actually achieved, the Mughal empire is beginning to be viewed as a complex, nuanced and loose form of hegemony over a diverse, differentiated and dynamic economy and society.

The founder of the Mughal empire could not have been aware of the enduring legacy that he was to leave in India. Having set up a small kingdom in Farghana in Central Asia at the turn of the sixteenth century, Zahiruddin Babur was initially more interested in conquering Samarkand. After several futile attempts to expand in a northerly direction, Babur settled down to rule the environs of Kabul in modern-day Afghanistan. From there he made a raid into the Punjab, and then in 1526 defeated Ibrahim Lodí, the last of the Delhi sultans, in the first battle of Panipat. Babur’s use of Turkish cannon in this battle led some historians to include the empire he founded in the category of ‘gun-powder empires’. It is now clear that this sort of technological definition of empires is neither very accurate nor very appropriate. The Mughals in any case were more reliant on cavalry in making their conquests, although artillery was also used in an innovative way for selective purposes. Babur was descended from Timur (the great Turkish empire builder in Central Asia) on his father’s side, and from Genghis Khan (the great Mongol war-leader) on his mother’s side. Contemporaries referred to the empire he founded as the Timurid empire. The choice of the term Mughal, derived from Mongol, appears to have been a nineteenth-century preference. Babur was not particularly attracted to the heat and dust of the plains of northern India where he established his political power. In his introspective and evocative autobiography, the Baburnama, he expresses a longing to return to the cool valley of Kabul:

Hindustan is a country that has few pleasures to recommend it. The people are not handsome. They have no idea of the charms of friendly society, of frankly mixing together, or of familiar intercourse. They have no genius, no comprehension of mind, no politeness of manner, no kindness or fellow-feeling, no ingenuity or mechanical invention in planning or executing their handicraft works, no skill or knowledge in design or architecture; they have no horses, no good flesh, no grapes or musk melons, no good fruits, no ice or cold water, no good food or bread in their bazaars, no baths or colleges, no candles, no torches, not a candlestick.

But there are also passages in the Baburnama more appreciative of the charms of Hind:

The one nice aspect of Hindustan is that it is a large country with lots of gold and money. The weather turns very nice during the monsoon. Sometimes it rains ten, fifteen, or twenty times a day; torrents are formed in an instant, and water flows in places that normally have no water . . . Another nice thing is the unlimited numbers of craftsmen and practitioners of every trade. For every labour and every produce there is an established group who have been practising their craft or professing that trade for generations . . . In Agra alone there were 680 Agra stonemasons at work on my building every day.

Before he could expand or consolidate his Indian domain Babur died suddenly in 1530. His short reign might have been remarkably uncontroversial were it not for an accusation that surfaced in the late nineteenth century and achieved political prominence in the late twentieth — that one of his generals, Mir Baqi, had destroyed a Ram temple to build a mosque in Ayodhya, the Babri Masjid, named after Babur. There is no sixteenth-century evidence that any temple had been destroyed to construct this particular mosque. The newly founded Turkish dynasty’s control over north India remained very shaky and tenuous under Babur’s son, Humayun. An Afghan challenge from eastern India led by Sher Shah Suri forced Humayun to flee the country and take refuge in the court of Safavid Iran. Sher Shah (1530–45) brought about an imperial unification of much of northern India and set up an administrative framework which was to be further developed by Akbar later in the century. The weakening of the Suri dynasty (1530–55) after Sher Shah’s death enabled Humayun to return in 1555 to reclaim his Indian patrimony, but he had not been back in Delhi for more than a few months before he took a fatal tumble down his library stairs. On his assumption of the imperial mantle his son Akbar (1556–1605) faced an immediate challenge from an Afghan and Rajput Hindu military coalition, which he defeated at the second battle of Panipat. Akbar, undoubtedly the greatest of the Mughal emperors, was an able leader of military campaigns, an astute administrator, and a patron of culture. In 1572 he launched a major campaign against Gujarat, and the following year made a triumphant entry into the Gujarati port city of Surat. In 1574 Akbar’s army conquered Bengal, which had more often than not been independent of Delhi during the period of the Sultanate. The
conquests of Gujarat and Bengal gave the Mughals control over the agriculturally and commercially richest parts of the subcontinent. Among Akbar's other notable military successes were the conquests of Kabul in 1581, Kashmir in 1586, Orissa in 1592, and Baluchistan in 1595. The territorial expanse of the Mughal empire grew during the reigns of Akbar’s successors, Jahangir (1605–27), Shah Jahan (1627–58), and Aurangzeb (1658–1707). Although Jahangir managed to lose Kandahar and Shah Jahan sent an abortive expedition to Balkh and Badakshan in Central Asia, all three of Akbar’s successors made territorial gains in the Deccan and further south, eventually defeating the powerful kingdoms of Bijapur and Golkonda. The Mughal empire reached its territorial apogee under Aurangzeb in the 1690s. But Aurangzeb’s Deccan adventures were fiercely resisted by the redoubtable Maratha leader Shivaji, who refused to be co-opted into the Mughal system. The economic costs of the Deccan wars made sure that Aurangzeb’s final successes would turn out to be pyrrhic victories.

The expansion and consolidation of the Mughal empire was roughly coterminous with that of two other great Muslim empires—the Safavid empire in Iran and the Ottoman empire based in Turkey but controlling much of West Asia and North Africa. While there was much in common with these three formidable land-based empires, the Mughal empire was different in one important respect. In India the Mughals established an empire in which a majority of the subjects were non-Muslims. Akbar, who gave shape and form to the Mughal state, was acutely aware of this demographic fact and devised his policies accordingly. Although most of the nobility in Akbar’s court consisted of Turks, Afghans and Persians, Akbar set about building a network of alliances with Hindus, especially through the regional Rajput rulers. The Mughals under Akbar drew the nobility into the tasks of defending and administering the empire through the mansabdar system. Mansab literally means rank, and a mansabdar was the holder of a rank of anything from 10 to 5000 and occasionally 10,000. Theoretically, mansabdars of various ranks were supposed to supply the specified number of cavalry to the imperial army when needed. A mansabdar of ten was, therefore, expected to have ten men under his command, and so on. In practice, not all mansabdars were expected to perform military duties. Civilian administrators were also given ranks or mansabs by the Mughal emperor, and were paid salaries in cash equivalent to the amount that would be needed for the upkeep of a certain number of cavalry. Cash income from jagirs, literally land grants, was designated for various mansabdars. Mansabs were open to talent, and the jagirs from which mansabdars were paid were not meant to be heritable. It was only in a later period of crisis that some mansabdars could not be paid in cash and tended to hold on to hereditary jagirs. Although the mansabdar system was the main framework of the Mughal administration, the imperial domains had territorial divisions known as subahs or provinces, ruled by subadars or governors, who usually held high mansabs or ranks. Below the level of the subadars there would be jagirdars below the mansabdar rank, as well as zamindars, literally landlords, whose main task was to collect revenue from the locality.

Akbar included several Hindus in the ranks of the highest mansabdars. For instance, his top-ranking military general was Raja Mansingh of Amber, a Rajput, and his revenue minister...
was Raja Todar Mal, a Khatri, who supervised a detailed cadastral survey of the far-flung Mughal territories. Akbar displayed impartiality towards his subjects, regardless of religious affiliation, by abolishing the jizya — a tax imposed on non-believers in Muslim states. He also showed a pragmatic streak and a determination to adapt to the Indian environment by replacing the Muslim lunar calendar with the solar calendar, which he thought made more sense in an agricultural country like India. Akbar's public tolerance and efforts to build a truly Indo-Islamic empire were matched by his flexibility in private beliefs and practices.

In 1582 he announced his adherence to a new set of beliefs, drawing on elements from the mystical strains in both Islam and Hinduism and deeply influenced by Zoroastrianism, which he called Din-e-Ilahi or the Divine Faith. He did not, however, try to impose Din-e-Ilahi as a state religion. An amalgamation of diverse beliefs, it was in effect a cult centred on the emperor's personality and, even in its heyday, had only eighteen followers at the royal court. The Ibadakhana or place of worship in Akbar's red sandstone capital at Fatehpur Sikri became the venue for free and lively theological and philosophical debates attended by Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Jains, Jesuit Christians and Jews. His policies of public tolerance and private eclectism were continued by his son and grandson, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Indeed the mother of Jahangir was a Hindu Rajput princess, Jodhabai.

The breadth of Akbar's outlook was frowned upon by some sections of the ulema. But during Akbar's reign the supremacy of temporal over religious authority was clearly maintained. Some ulema attempted to persecute Akbar's famous freethinking friend and courtier Abul Fazl and found themselves behind prison bars. The most prominent orthodox critic of Mughal religious accommodations in the early seventeenth century was Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564–1624), who was the leading light of the Naqshbandi order and looked forward to a rejuvenation of the original purity of Islam at the turn of its second millennium. Sirhindi rejoiced at the death of Akbar, in whose reign 'the sun of guidance was hidden behind the veil of error', and was imprisoned by Akbar's son and successor Jahangir.

The followers of Sirhindi were fiercely opposed to the innovative mystical blendings of Upanishadic philosophy and Sufism of which Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Shah Jahan, was a major proponent.

Influenced initially by his eldest sister Jahanara, who had a deep understanding of Islamic mysticism, he was later drawn into the Qadiriyya Sufi order. Better versed in mysticism than in worldly matters, Dara Shikoh lost out in a bitter succession struggle to his younger brother Aurangzeb in 1658. Aurangzeb's reign saw a partial reversal of the politics of alliance building and religious flexibility under a mounting set of economic and political pressures. The jizya was reimposed, not necessarily for religious reasons but as a means of taxing the commercial wealth of Hindus and Jains within the empire. The switch back from the solar to the lunar calendar owed perhaps more to Aurangzeb's ideological rigidity, even though he did not make this change until some twenty years into his reign. Yet even at the end of Aurangzeb's supposedly puritanical reign nearly a quarter of the mansabdars were Hindus. Aurangzeb's doctrinal rigidity does not appear to have pervaded the female quarters of the royal palace. One of his daughters thought better of the mystical dimensions of Islam and became a...
patron of Sufic activities, gifting an entire complex of buildings in Delhi to the famous eighteenth-century mystical poet Mir Dard.

The early views of Mughal despotism emphasized material factors as much as ideological ones. The Mughal state was said to extract huge amounts of revenue from the agrarian sector. The proportion most commonly mentioned by generations of economic historians until very recently was forty per cent, or the entire moveable surplus. There can be little doubt that, as in other contemporary agrarian empires, the revenue demand on the peasantry was high, perhaps as much as a third of the product. But recent research suggests that the Mughals did not deploy a centralized bureaucratic administration as an engine to pump out revenues from villages. The Mughal state typically entered into accommodations with the clan power of zamindars in the countryside, not only in the peripheral regions but also in the environs of the capital. The agrarian surplus was distributed among various layers of appropriators, with the imperial household and the mansabdari nobility receiving only the final, albeit substantial, cut. Despite the elaborate details about revenue administration laid out in Abu Fazl’s manual Ain-e-Akbari (compiled circa 1590s), many prosperous parts of the empire were never rigorously surveyed. There is a palpable lack of statistical data at the all-India level between the late sixteenth and nineteenth century, but recent studies of particular regions have shown that the seventeenth century was a period of vibrant agricultural growth which would hardly have been possible if a centralized state had been draining away most of the local resources. The picture of an emaciated and oppressed peasantry, mercilessly exploited by the emperor and his nobility, is being seriously altered in the light of new interpretations of the evidence. The agrarian revolts that began to undermine the power of the Mughal empire from the later years of Aurangzeb’s reign were not typically prompted by absolute poverty, but paradoxically occurred in regions which had enjoyed relative prosperity under Mughal auspices and were now minded to preserve their gains.

Primarily an agrarian empire, the Mughal state was also linked to long-distance overland and oceanic trade. From the mid seventeenth century onwards the empire became more heavily engaged with the international economy and may have turned more mercantilist in character, relying for its economic viability as much on textile exports as on land revenues. The Mughals, however, unlike the Ottomans, did not possess a navy which enabled European powers to command the sea-lanes of the Indian ocean. Even before the establishment of the Mughal empire the Portuguese, led by Vasco da Gama, had landed on the south-western coast of India in 1498 and, by 1510, had set up a major settlement in Goa. But the Portuguese never came close to achieving their professed aim of establishing a monopoly over sea trade in the Indian ocean. Arab and Gujarati merchants in particular were resourceful enough to meet the Portuguese economic challenge.

In the latter half of the sixteenth century, hailed by some Western writers as the Portuguese century, the trading outpost of Goa was economically less important than the Mughal port city of Surat. The Ottoman navy made certain that the Portuguese, even at the height of their power, were never able to close the Red Sea to Turkish, Persian, Arab, and Indian trade. The Portuguese presence and influence was limited to a few Indian coastal enclaves. As Ashin Dasgupta has argued, ‘after the first violent overture’ the
Portuguese in the sixteenth century 'settled within the structure and were, in a way, swallowed by it.' The English, who succeeded the Portuguese as the leading European traders in India in the seventeenth century, were also suppliants of the Mughals and simply sought permission from the emperor to carry on quiet trade. The English East India Company, founded in 1600, first obtained permission to trade in India from Jahangir in 1619. But their political and military power remained limited to a few factory forts in coastal areas. The English and also the Dutch in the seventeenth century worked, according to Dasgupta, 'within the indigenous structure' and were 'one more strand in the weave of the [Indian] ocean's trade'. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been characterized by Blair B. Kling and M.N. Pearson as 'an age of partnership' between Europeans and Asians, while Sanjay Subrahmanyam, in his work on southern India, has dubbed it 'an age of contained conflict'.

To Indian merchants the Mughal state allowed a certain measure of autonomy in important trading towns and cities. At the same time, the Mughals were not directly dependent for their state finances on the services of these merchant groups. The empire could simply accrue benefits from the credit and insurance facilities provided by bankers and traders which linked processes of inland trade and urbanization to wider networks of the Indian ocean economy. Bankers and merchants helped achieve a degree of economic integration which matched the political integration sought by the Mughal empire. Since European traders were primarily interested in Asian goods, especially Indian textiles, to sell in European markets, the Mughal domains received large inflows of precious metals, particularly silver. Mughal India was, therefore, a great metropolitan magnet of wealth in the context of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century international trade. Mughal power, far from having despotic roots, rested on arrangements based on a large measure of political and economic flexibility.

In their administration of justice the Mughals followed the pattern established by the Delhi sultans. Given the limited scope of the sharia, especially in providing for effective and speedy public justice, Muslim sovereigns everywhere had set up mechanisms to strengthen the judicial administration. Anxious to preserve law and order, the Mughals created a parallel system of courts alongside the specifically Islamic ones. Imperial edicts, or qanun-e-shahi, supplementing the Islamic sharia, allowed the Mughal rulers and officials considerable room for administrative innovation. Muslim law officers, such as qazis and muftis, enforced the Islamic sharia, less as a rigid legal code and more as a set of moral injunctions to be invoked in the light of circumstances. The goal was to assure the result of equity and justice rather than strictly apply the letter of the law. While brought under the purview of the Mughal system of criminal law in certain parts of India, non-Muslims had recourse to their own customary and religious law in matters to do with marriage and inheritance.

Although the Mughal empire on the whole made no distinctive contribution to improving gender relations, it is important to note the very considerable influence which the women of the zenana could exercise upon the royal throne. The close interplay between the private and the public domain became particularly pronounced once Akbar began contracting marriages with Hindu Rajput princesses. Jahangir's religious tolerance can be traced to his rearing under the direction of his Hindu mother, Jodhabai, while his highly refined artistic tastes are at least partly attributable to his wife, Nur Jahan, who established herself as a formidable member of the royal household, enjoying strong political influence over the emperor. Mumtaz Mahal, sadly, was not a historical agent in Nur Jahan's league. She had to die trying to bear Shah Jahan's fifteenth child and her death became the inspiration behind the emperor's patronage of the Taj Mahal, one of the finest architectural forms ever constructed in the world. Shah Jahan's eldest daughter Jahanara established herself as a scholar of Islamic mysticism, winning accolades from her Sufi mentor Molla Shah. The women of the Mughal household were of course hardly representative of the typical Indian woman, Hindu or Muslim. But there can be no denying their role in the making of the majesty that was the Mughal empire.

Both the grandeur and the syncretism of the Mughal empire were reflected in the very considerable cultural achievements over which they presided. Persian was the court language of this Turkish dynasty. But at a more popular level Urdu became the language of Indo-Islamic culture in northern India, especially in the seventeenth century. Regional vernaculars continued to flourish in the provinces outside the Mughal heartland. Some of the finest literary and artistic achievements of the Mughals were their
illustrated manuscripts. The autobiographies and chronicles of the Mughal emperors were written in flowing Persian, and were brilliant examples of calligraphy and visual illustration. Among the more famous of these manuscripts is Abul Fazl's history of Akbar's reign, the Akbarnama, and Abdul Hamid Lahori's Padshahnama. Mughal scribes and artists not only chose Islamic subjects but also illustrated the famous Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Humayun had brought back with him from Persia two leading painters of the Safavid court, Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad. They were joined in Akbar's royal studio by talented Hindus. Together they created a new Indo-Persian style of painting, lighter and more colourful than the formal ornamentation of the pure Persian. In music the basic grammar of north Indian classical music with its thirty-six raga and ragini was composed under Mughal patronage. The most famous of music composers of this era was Tan Sen, one of the 'nine gems' at Akbar's court. Legend has it that Tan Sen could bring on torrential monsoon rains by his rendition of Raga Meghamalhar. A distinctive style of vocal music, dhrupad, was developed during Shah Jahan's reign. The most famous treatise on the ragas, the Raga Darpana, was written in 1666 by Faqir Allah during the reign of Aurangzeb — the emperor being, ironically, a man not particularly fond of music.

Yet the greatest and most lasting cultural achievements of the Mughals were made in the field of architecture. The buildings in Akbar's capital Fatehpur Sikri were based on a fusion of classical Islamic and Rajput styles. The buland darwaza, or great gateway, with its imposing arch had a strong West Asian influence, while the balconies were adorned with Rajput decorative arts. The greatest of the Mughal builders, of course, was Shah Jahan, justly famous for having built the exquisite marble monument in memory of his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, in Agra. But he would have been remembered as a great builder even if he had not built the Taj Mahal. In Delhi, Shah Jahan constructed a magnificent capital. The towering mosque called the Jama Masjid in Old Delhi commanded the inhabitants of the capital and continues to be a focal point of Muslim religion and culture in India. The centrepiece of the new capital, Shahjahanabad, was the famous Lal Qila or the Red Fort, which came to be recognized as the most important symbol of sovereignty in India.

Mughal sovereignty was not wholly undermined until the British tried the last of the Mughal emperors, Bahadur Shah Zafar, in the Red Fort after the 1857 mutiny-rebellion. Bahadur Shah was sentenced to deportation for life and died in exile in Burma, while a British military officer exterminated the Mughal imperial line. It would be clear to the populace that British sovereignty in India had been undermined when, after another trial at the Red Fort in 1945, the British were unable to carry out their life sentence on three Hindu, Muslim and Sikh rebels in the face of intense public pressure. To this day Indian prime ministers make a ritual of addressing the nation on Independence Day from the ramparts of the Red Fort, even if by now they are no more than mere shadows of even the lesser Mughals.